

Israeli-Palestinian Relations in the Bush/Sharon Era (Part II)

Apr 27, 2001



In-Depth Reports

I hope that I will be able to contribute a little bit to the ongoing learning process that has been taking place at this symposium. This will be a difficult task, though, because there is a great deal of misinformation here regarding what has been happening in our region and why. Everybody is entitled to an independent attitude, position, or view. Yet, we should all make more of an effort to understand recent events in the region in a more balanced way. In addition, we should look at all peoples as human beings. When certain individuals speak of the Palestinians, one gets the impression that they are talking about a lower class of people. Yet, the Palestinians are equal to all other peoples. They are part of the human race. They have peaceful aspirations, and they want to live. Like the rest of humankind, though, they want to live with dignity and with the rights that other people in the world have achieved: basically, freedom, self-determination, end of occupation, and the other privileges that come with citizenship in an independent state.

Before getting into the main subject that I was asked to talk about -- namely, the past seven difficult months, including Palestinian public opinion, the mindset of the Palestinian leadership, and the prospects for peace -- I just want to say one word about how the Palestinians have perceived this peace process. I happened to be part of the first Palestinian delegation to the Madrid negotiations and later to the bilateral negotiations in Washington after the Oslo breakthrough, and I can say that the Palestinian people in general were extremely supportive of the idea of making peace by negotiations. I saw this both in my personal observations and in the results of public-opinion polls.

The Palestinians did not reach this position suddenly or easily, however. Historically speaking, they believe that they have rights to all of Palestine, and that they are entitled to struggle in whatever way possible to achieve these rights. During the 1960s and 1970s, friends of the Palestinian people -- mostly from Europe, and sometimes from the United States -- managed to convince the political elites among the Palestinians that violent struggle did not make sense and would not take us anywhere. There was a new world order; there was international law; there was a reality called Israel. So if we wanted to get somewhere, we had to change our political position and move from demanding absolute, historical rights to demanding rights that are not only achievable, but also in harmony with relevant international law and legitimacy: that is, United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which implies specific borders.

The Palestinians undertook serious internal discussions and debates until they reached a situation whereby a majority of them supported the new strategy. This was not an easy process, but after about twenty years, the Palestinians had moved into a new political mentality, one based on demanding that which is allotted to them under Resolution 242.

Eventually, the Palestinians received an invitation from the American government to a peace conference based on the principle of land for peace and on Resolution 242. When the Palestinians were asked whether they would take part, there were a lot of internal debates, but the leadership finally accepted, and the people supported that peace process, which culminated in the Oslo agreement. Public opinion polls showed that 70 percent of Palestinians supported the Oslo agreement when it was signed. Yet, when those Palestinians were asked why they supported it,

most of them said that they saw it as a feasible way to end the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. So Palestinian support for the Oslo agreement was qualified in a way, which is only logical because agreements are not objectives in of themselves, but rather means by which people reach certain goals. The objective of the Palestinian people was to end the occupation, and in return they were willing to give whatever it took. That is why the equation was "land for peace," because what the Palestinians wanted from this process was the establishment of an independent Palestinian state that could live in peace with Israel. The Israelis wanted security, stability, recognition, and integration in the region, and hopefully economic prosperity as well, which is everybody's objective.

After the Oslo agreement, however, the Palestinians saw only an ongoing Israeli settlement-expansion policy, which had the effect of shaking their belief in the peace process. Rather than ending the occupation, Israeli settlement policies and practices seemed to be consolidating it. The peace process and settlement expansion were completely incompatible, not only on the ground, but also in the minds of the Palestinian public and leadership. The Palestinian people understood and conveyed this problem to many friends, especially to the Americans, saying that there could not be peace without an independent Palestinian state, and that the continuity of the Israeli settlement policy allowed no practical possibilities for an integral state. We once raised this issue with former Secretary of State James Baker, and he kept saying that the negotiations, once started, would create a dynamic that would bring this settlement policy to an end. And we believed that.

In reality, though, this policy was not only continued, but increased, which was an affront to the rights of the Palestinian people on their land, and also to the future prospects for peace. This was also the view of almost every country in the world, including the United States, though it did nothing to stop this very dangerous Israeli practice. If there is one factor that contributed more than any other to the failure of the peace process, it is this continuity of the Israeli settlement-expansion policy in the occupied territories, which created a feeling among the Palestinians that Israel had said "no" to the idea of an independent Palestinian state.

Another important point is that the Palestinian people and leadership took seriously those aspects of the agreements regarding security concerns. Of course, for us, "security" means security for Israel as well as security for Palestine. The efforts that the PA made to stop all kinds of violence against the Israelis, in accordance with the signed agreements, should be appreciated by everybody. For example, Ha'aretz writer Danny Rubinstein recently reminded all of us that prior to this latest wave of violence, there had been no attacks by Palestinians against Israeli civilians for some four years. This was not an easy task, but as a result of cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli security forces, there were significant achievements along this line, and we managed to live with the results. Of course, we have to understand that this security cooperation is just one part of a deal that has several other components. The interim agreement calls for cooperation against violence and terror, but it also calls for other actions.

In order to understand the dramatic change in the situation that occurred later, it is important to look at the decisions made by former Prime Minister Barak. He made no secret of the fact that he disliked the interim nature of the Oslo agreement, and thus he decided unilaterally, and before Camp David, to invalidate the entire agreement by violating certain articles, basically by stopping the further redeployment of Israeli forces out of the Palestinian territories. He also decided unilaterally that the time was right to begin final-status negotiations. Invalidating the interim agreement was a major strategic mistake, particularly since we were not sure that we could reach a final agreement. A valid interim agreement would have played the role of a safety net, whereby if we failed to reach a final agreement, we could always fall back on the interim one, which would allow us to continue satisfying Palestinian needs, such as further redeployment, and Israeli needs such as security cooperation. Unfortunately, the American administration did not prevent Barak from invalidating the interim agreement and accepted his demand of beginning final-status negotiations at Camp David. There, of course, things did not work out, but it is unfair to say that the process did not work because the Palestinians rejected the deal; the Palestinians do have the negotiator's

right to reject certain offers with which they disagree. It is also incorrect to say that Arafat is not prepared to make a deal for peace. He was not prepared for the particular deal that was offered, but it was not supposed to be the only possible deal. That was an Israeli position which was adopted by the American administration, and it was rejected by the Palestinian side.

Now, why did the Palestinians reject that deal? The Palestinians took seriously the letter and the spirit of the American invitation, which said that the peace process is about the exchange of land for peace in accordance with the stipulations of Resolution 242. So we expect this process to end the occupation. Yet, these Palestinian territories cannot be dealt with in terms of percentages and numbers of hectares or dunams. They constitute a homeland that is under belligerent military occupation, and the question is whether or not Israel is willing to end this occupation completely. At Camp David, Israel was not willing to do so, which is why the negotiations did not succeed, although they moved us closer toward achieving a true peace agreement.

Our understanding of the eruption of violence on September 29 of last year is quite simple. When Israel failed to impose on our leadership the peace deal that they wanted, they resorted to putting pressure on the Palestinian people as a way of forcing us to accept the kind of political deal that we refused at Camp David. If we look carefully at how the violence started, we find that it was basically Israeli-initiated violence. On the first day after Sharon's visit to the mosque in Jerusalem, the Palestinians organized protests against this visit in and around the mosque. The protesters were neither violent nor armed; these were not military-type activities. The protests were the typical kind that take place from time to time. Yet, Israel responded to this protest in the Old City of Jerusalem by killing seven Palestinians in and around the mosque. The next day, as a result of the shock at Israel's actions, there were several demonstrations and funerals in and around Jerusalem, which ended with the Israeli army killing nine Palestinians, mostly civilians. On the third day, thirteen more Palestinian civilians were killed, again in protests, and on the fourth day, nineteen more.

In the first two weeks of violence, then, we had an average of ten casualties on a daily basis, mostly civilians, with almost no casualties on the other side. This is how the problems started. Whether we like it or not, these are the hard facts on the ground. These facts offer a message to the Palestinian public, to the Palestinian leadership, to anybody: Israel launched this vicious campaign of killing in addition to their economic sanctions in order to force the Palestinian people to accept the deal that was refused in the negotiations at Camp David. Granted, the future was not very promising after this refusal, because we were approaching Israeli elections and the end of the Clinton administration. Yet, the Palestinians were left with no choice, because they cannot accept a political deal which they believe to be unfair or wrong, let alone under the pressure that the Israeli government has been exerting on them. As a result of this Israeli-initiated violence, the situation got out of hand, and the Palestinians found themselves in a major fight, at the public level and at many other levels. Then, a chain of actions and reactions between the two sides brought us to where we are now.

I do not know whether people here today appreciate the level of damage that has been done to the prospects for peace in the Middle East, not only between Palestinians and Israelis, but also between Israelis and Arabs in general. Contrary to what we heard yesterday, the Palestinian people and leadership were preparing the future generations for an era of peace. Until this intifada, we had a new Palestinian generation that was completely out of the conflict. Youths like my own children -- seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen years old -- were completely out of the circle of hatred because they had never been involved in any phase of the confrontations. They had completely different feelings than their elders, and they were prepared to be a part of a future peace. Yet, this current wave of violence took them back to the hatred, to the hostility, to the spirit of revenge as a result of all the atrocities that have been happening.

Similarly, as a result of the peace process and ten years of relative peace between Arabs and Israelis, most of the Arab

public was prepared for peace and for what peace requires. U.S. policy in the Middle East had made very significant achievements among Arabs. We no longer saw the typical Arab Summit conferences; instead, there were Middle East/North Africa summits about economic integration in the region, including Israel. We no longer saw regimes that the United States considered extreme -- like Saddam Husayn's -- being treated as part of the Arab family. We started to see new Israeli-Arab relations, with Israeli offices opened in several Arab capitals. We also started to see economic commerce and joint projects happening between Israel and many Arab states.

So the peace process was bringing some changes to the region that were related not only to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also to the prospects for a new Middle East in general; that is, until this eruption of violence, which caused tremendous changes in Arab public opinion and in the ability of Arab regimes to continue with the kinds of cooperative activities that were initiated during the peace process.

One of the major lessons that we all have to learn -- Israel especially -- is that we cannot have our cake and eat it, too. If this peace process is about the exchange of land for peace, then Israel has the right to demand serious, genuine, comprehensive peace. Yet, Israel also has to be willing to give up completely and fully any control it has on any part of the Palestinian territories. Another very important lesson is that the U.S. government has to be more sensitive to the Palestinian side. From our experiences, the United States was very sensitive to Israeli demands and requirements and vision, and much less sensitive to the needs, rights, understanding, and circumstances of the Palestinians. I hope that the new administration will be able to show more sensitivity, not only to our side, but also to international law. We are amazed, actually, because we feel that the United States, as the world's superpower, is supposed to be the guardian of international law, and that its activities and peace proposals have to be based on the requirements of this law. That is why we were shocked when the American administration presented proposals at Camp David which violated the international laws that constituted the letter and spirit of its peace invitation to both sides.

Although the current state of affairs seems to be gloomy, there are reasons to be hopeful. For one thing, we must recognize that we have moved ahead in terms of the requirements for real peace. Furthermore, the current Israeli government, which represents a setback to the short-term prospects for peace, can actually be useful in a strange way. The Israeli people thought that their objectives of peace and security could be achieved if they exerted more pressure on the Palestinian people. Thus, when they saw the failure of the Washington negotiations and the subsequent violence, they elected Sharon, who represents the ultimate possible use of force by the Israelis against the Palestinians. Perhaps once this government fails -- and it is going to fail -- in achieving the objectives of peace and security, the Israeli people will realize that there might be a shortcut to peace: namely, recognizing the legitimate rights of the other side by simply ending the Israeli occupation. In return, Israel can ask for any kind of peace, because the Palestinians -- and, I think, the Arabs -- are also interested in peace.

Ze'ev Schiff addressed the conference on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=91\)](#) ❖

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