

The Brink of Peace?

An Inside Look from Camp David to Taba

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Brief Analysis

Why Negotiations Did Not Lead to Agreement Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat is responsible for the collapse of the peace process and for the extreme violence of the last seven months. In the year and a half of negotiations with the Palestinians under the leadership of former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, the objective was a permanent peace settlement: Israel would withdraw from a large part of the occupied territories, and, in return, there would be an official end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The intention was to fashion an alternative to occupation, since this situation was not only untenable, but was also a strategic burden to Israel. Arafat, however, would only accept an agreement in which all of his demands were met; failing this, he would and did resort to imposing an arrangement through violent confrontation. Consequently, the peace process collapsed. Arafat was never ready mentally, personally, or historically, at Camp David or afterwards to conclude a deal; he is a leader of a national movement and not a statesman.

Arafat is fully responsible for the PA's stance. He makes unilateral decisions at the top of a pyramid; he is not beholden to the decisions of his associates, not even the decisions of the most senior Palestinian leadership. This is in stark contrast to Israeli politics, where even a statement by a backbench member of parliament can be binding on the prime minister. Members of the second tier of Palestinian leadership below Arafat may negotiate, but they do not make decisions there is only one man at the top. This second tier of leadership is rife with internal rivalries and intergenerational conflict.

To be sure, problems in the negotiations went beyond Arafat's stance. Israelis, Palestinians, and the United States all underestimated the impact of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. Also underestimated was the importance of Arab governments' support for the peace talks.

The Barak government made some mistakes in its approaches as well. The exclusive focus on negotiations with Syria between December 1999 and April 2000, at the expense of the Palestinian track, came as a real blow to the trust between the Israelis and Palestinians and probably hardened the Palestinian position. Israel should have continued some kind of negotiations with the Palestinians throughout this period in order to avoid any sense of neglect on the Palestinians' part. In addition, the Barak government may have tread too close to the fire by attempting to resolve the difficult core issues at stake. There was a gap between the internal political support required to strike such a fundamental deal and the deal itself.

From Camp David to Taba The Palestinians did not negotiate in good faith to conclude an agreement at Camp David. They returned to their original fixed positions, instead of moving forward. They continued to raise new claims even at very advanced stages of the negotiations. They rejected Bill Clinton's proposals, but refused to make any proposals or counterproposals of their own.

In the two months after Camp David and before the current Palestinian uprising began, there were thirty-eight negotiating sessions between the two parties to map out what had been achieved at Camp David. During these

negotiations, the Palestinians went back on nearly all of the new positions that they had adopted at Camp David. At the end of September, the two parties were invited to Washington to hear a proposed American package, and were working on it when the violence erupted.

Arafat was not satisfied with the American understanding of Camp David and the developments that followed. By the end of September, the Israeli team understood that he would put aside the negotiations and try to achieve political objectives through violence. The violent confrontation between the two sides was intentionally planned and initiated by the Palestinians. The visit by then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount provided the Palestinians with a pretext; it was not the cause of the violence. While among the Palestinians there was certainly popular discontent, frustration, and now lack of hope for a final solution, the Palestinian leadership did very little, if anything, to contain the uprising.

In December, following another intensive round of negotiations at Bolling Air Force Base, Clinton presented his ideas for the parameters of a possible peace agreement. This was the first time that the core of an agreement was officially presented to the two sides. Israel was willing to explore these ideas as a basis for further negotiations, but the Palestinians gave their so-called "positive" answer, which was negative for all intents and purposes.

The Taba negotiations did not cover much more than what had been discussed after Camp David, although there was an impression of a positive atmosphere, especially from the Palestinians. Some progress was made on the refugee issue. However, the rule in the negotiations was that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." Therefore, because there was no signed document at the end of Taba, all ideas discussed became null and void.

Future Negotiations The Barak government came within inches of achieving a package deal for permanent settlement. The issues and the spectrum of possible solutions will not change in the future, and when the two sides finally conclude a permanent agreement, it will be almost identical to the one that was formulated recently. Compromise is inescapable. Israel must give up land to ensure the Jewish and democratic character of the country, as well as its security. Furthermore, Arafat now seems to understand that the Camp David package is what he will get at the end even after this round of violence because Israel's vital interests will not change. He saw how the violence crushed the Israeli peace camp and affected the subsequent election results.

There will be no let-up in the violence unless there is some movement in the political process. Therefore, any Israeli government should work with the PA on two tracks: to stabilize the situation with a measurable reduction in violence and incitement, and to return to the political negotiations with a final status deal in mind. Israel should continue to seek a final status agreement with the Palestinians. The return to a process of interim agreements would reduce what little genuine leverage Israel has to secure a true peace and would only achieve short-term gains. To be sure, circumstances may require that the final status agreement be reached in phases.

Public opinion on all sides must be properly prepared in advance for a possible final agreement. The purpose of the Camp David compromise was not explained to the peoples affected. To secure public support, the fruits of peace as opposed to what each side would have to give up have to be emphasized. Public support is needed not only from the Palestinians but also from the broader Arab and Muslim world, given that the confrontation has taken on a religious element.

Despite the fact that the United States has played a major and important role in the peace process over the last decade, direct negotiations are preferable. Whenever the United States is an active intermediary, bilateral Israeli-American issues tend to become linked with the status of the negotiations. However, the U.S. government should reassess its relations with the PLO and PA in light of the participation of the Palestinian security establishment in the recent hostilities.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Liat Radcliffe.

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