

# Israel and Palestine:

## What's Gone Wrong?

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Articles & Testimony

**A**n exchange between Ahmad Samih Khalidi, Palestinian writer and peace negotiator, and David Makovsky, senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a former editor of the Jerusalem Post.

AHMAD SAMIH KHALIDI 6th November 2000

Dear David,

Surveying the wreckage of the Oslo agreement, I am struck by the vast gap in perceptions between our two peoples. We are all in danger of falling into this abyss. What many Israelis see as mindless Palestinian violence contradicting repeated professions of peaceful intent, we see as a long-delayed and justifiable expression of anger against an occupation that has lasted far too long and a peace process that has delivered far too little. Thirty-three years after UN resolution 242 set up the "land for peace" formula, nine years after the Madrid conference launched the search for a final settlement, seven years after the Oslo agreement and the Arafat-Rabin handshake, and a full 18 months after Oslo should have delivered a final end to occupation, the erosion of Palestinian faith in the peace process is now complete.

The reasons for this are evident. In the period 1993-2000, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) has been grudgingly handed out parcels of territorially discontinuous areas punctuated by Israeli settlements and lacerated by security zones, military roads and checkpoints. On the ground, the net result of the Oslo process has been full Palestinian control of less than 18 per cent of the West Bank, representing under 5 per cent of Palestine as it was under the British mandate. East Jerusalem, the largest and most vital of Arab cities, has been closed off to the people of the West Bank since 1992. The population of Gaza (one third of the total Palestinian population in the territories) remains severed from their brethren in the West Bank. The ghettoised Gazans are subject to endless Israeli constraints, while 20 per cent of Gaza's 360 sq kms has been allocated to a few thousand Jews coddled in separate security zones amongst 1 million indigenous Arabs.

For most Palestinians, daily life under occupation was easier prior to the Oslo agreement — with greater freedom of movement for work, hospitalisation and education, and easier access between Gaza and the West Bank. But most galling of all has been the relentless expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian soil. Between the signing of the

Oslo deal in September 1993 and late 2000, the number of settlers in the West Bank and Gaza doubled, rising to around 200,000 in 200 settlements in the former and 6,500 in 16 settlements in the latter. The total number of settlers in Israeli "neighbour-hoods" built on Arab lands in East Jerusalem also doubled, reaching 200,000. Between 1967 and 1999, 40,000 housing units for Jews were built in East Jerusalem. None were built for Arabs. Each Israeli government, of left or right, has simply inherited and implemented the settlement programmes of its predecessor. And with the settlements, has come a complex structure of Israeli military and legal presence: the army to protect the settlers, roads to allow settlers access to Israel proper, land confiscations to ensure future settlement growth and security, and restrictions on water use for the Palestinians (with few constraints on settlers). An apartheid system has been established, with one set of laws and rules for the settlers and another for the natives. As the Palestinians sought to negotiate the future of their land, its very contours were being determined by Israeli "fact-creating" on the ground. Ultimately, dear David, we began to think that the Israelis were taking us for a ride.

With some honourable exceptions, most Israelis neither saw nor cared to see the impact of the harassments and humiliations inflicted on Palestinians. For most Israelis "peace" has been equated with "quiet" or Palestinian quiescence. Meanwhile, to accommodate the settler minority (on the fringes of politics), successive Israeli governments fed the settler virus and ignored the deepening alienation of the Palestinian people and leaders alike.

The last round of violence has uncovered genuine anguish on both sides. The Israelis may have been shocked by what they saw, and may not like or trust the Palestinian leadership. There is little love lost in the other direction too, as you know. But to repeat a platitude: we are not trying to make peace between friends.

There can, however, be no real equivalence between occupier and occupied. Nothing justifies the use of massive Israeli force against Palestinian teenagers — a tradition that did not start with the current intifada. By 1994, according to Yitzhak Rabin, 1,045 Palestinians had been shot dead by Israeli troops and settlers in the previous intifada (1987-93) and some 25,000 wounded. Another 300 were killed before the latest violence. Since 1967, at least 950,000 Palestinians have passed through Israeli jails. And a full seven years after the Oslo agreement, hundreds of Arafat's own men still languish in these jails.

When Palestinian towns are encircled by Israeli tanks, when Israeli soldiers stand at every Palestinian crossroads, when Israeli air force sorties into Palestinian areas are commonplace, it is extraordinary that it is the Israelis who claim to feel besieged. But before we slide back into the perceptual abyss, I want to say that there can be a way forward. The vast majority of Palestinians want to live a normal life in a nation of their own. They are reconciled to the fact that the boundaries of what is feasible fall along the 1967 borders. What befell us in 1948 will continue to haunt us and inspire nostalgia for a golden past, like other peoples who have suffered similar fates. But at the heart of any reconciliation between our peoples there has to be full and final closure of the 1948 file. We want to move on. The Israelis, our inevitable partners in peace, cannot have it both ways: they cannot expect us to abandon our dreams of the past, and relinquish our hopes for a better future as well, by demanding 77 per cent of Mandate Palestine. If you can understand or accept any of this, we have a lot to talk about.

Warm regards Ahmad

DAVID MAKOVSKY 7th November 2000

Dear Ahmad,

I share your concern about the perceptual abyss. And I was hoping that you — someone who has been closely involved in negotiations — could see both sides of the crisis. I am therefore disappointed at your letter. Of course the occupation has created frustration on the Palestinian side. But this is just part of the story.

Another part of the story is that Israel went to Camp David in July to end the occupation for ever. As you know, this is an occupation that Israel did not seek. It was inspired by Arab rejectionism. On the day it was born in 1948, Israel

was invaded by the surrounding Arab states and attacked by Palestinian nationalists. The Arabs rejected a UN resolution establishing two states a few months earlier, believing the Jewish state could be wiped out. Then after the 1967 war, the Israeli government voted to yield the captured West Bank and Gaza. But this overture was met with the Arab League's famous "three no's": no to peace, no to recognition, and no to negotiations. Israeli statesman Abba Eban famously despaired that the Palestinians "never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity."

It is misleading to say that Israel has been foot-dragging on Oslo. The structure of the deal required that the toughest issues — the final land deal, refugees and Jerusalem — be deferred until the end; indeed, the prevailing Palestinian view now is that Camp David was premature, not overdue. In the interim, the Palestinians have gained full or partial control of 40 per cent of the land (where 99 per cent of Palestinians live), preceding Barak's "final status" offer of 90 per cent.

Moreover, while you point out that Israel has not met Oslo timetables, you do not mention Palestinian violations of the accords. Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists have been routinely released from Palestinian prisons and the Palestinian Authority has done little to prevent their deadly attacks which have killed scores of Israelis. Despite the rock-throwing image, the Israel Defence Force says there have been 700 incidents during the last month of Palestinians using live fire. The Palestinian security services periodically withhold cooperation and the membership of these forces is much higher than the accords permit. Above all, instead of adhering to Oslo obligations not to incite violence, the Palestinian media has been vitriolic toward Israel. Arafat even praised a suicide bomber as a "martyr."

By contrast, Ehud Barak put his political future and life on the line by going to Camp David to resolve all outstanding issues. The ensuing violence is not a coincidence. It is part of a decision by the PLO to seek peace terms more to its liking. Yasser Abd Rabbo, a Palestinian cabinet minister, made this clear last week, when he said, "Israel has taught us that pressure is the only way," adding that he hoped the violence would now ensure the success of the negotiations.

For Israelis who are ready to trade land for peace (and who hope that Rabin did not die in vain) this has been the great disappointment: that the Palestinians have resorted to force. If Oslo was about anything, it was that, as Arafat agreed in 1993, "all outstanding issues relating to permanent status will be resolved through negotiations." Arafat's conspicuous absence from the Palestinian media — which have exhorted people to join the current confrontation — can only be seen as part of the plan.

Arafat did make some concessions at Camp David, but as Clinton noted, he did not match Barak's flexibility. Instead, he raised expectations and was then boxed in by them. Above all he failed to convey to the Palestinian public that Oslo is a negotiation, where neither side gets all. Israel was never going to yield 100 per cent of the West Bank. Even Israeli doves believe that Israel has Jewish biblical claims in the West Bank. It was utterly irresponsible for Arafat to tell his public in advance of Camp David that it would receive 100 per cent of the West Bank and obtain a right of return for refugees. He knew that Israelis would not commit demographic suicide. To speak of the return of 1948 refugees is to call for the destruction of Israel — 5 million Jews would be matched by almost the same number of Palestinians.

For Barak at Camp David to yield 90 per cent of the West Bank and make taboo-breaking concessions on Jerusalem was to tread where no Israeli has been before in search of a solution. Barak's ideas of sharing the Old City would end the dream of an undivided city articulated by all recent Israeli prime ministers. (Israeli concern is rooted in memories of the partitioned city from 1949-1967, when Jews were forbidden access to Jewish places, Arab promises notwithstanding.)

You claim that Israel retains 77 per cent of Mandate Palestine. How so? The original Mandate referred to establishing a Jewish home on both sides of the Jordan, including today's nation of Jordan. The only sensible way to count now is

according to the terms of Madrid and Oslo — the position after the 1967 war. This brings us back to Israel yielding 90 per cent of the West Bank, which means Israel would be keeping only an extra 2.2 per cent of Mandate Palestine.

The Jewish settlement issue also needs to be placed in its geographic context. I am no fan of settlement expansion, but Palestinian negotiators at Camp David said that the entire enterprise is only about 2 per cent of the West Bank land mass, (itself less than half the size of Wales). I am aware that access roads take up extra space, but any peace deal would involve Israel dismantling dozens of settlements and consolidating the remaining ones into four blocs. Barak believed such blocs equalled 10 per cent of the West Bank, and the Palestinians said at Camp David that Israeli objectives could be accomplished by annexing somewhat less. Either way, we are talking about slivers of land.

To return to my main point, Arafat is not a peacetime leader. I am aware of no speech that Arafat has given in Arabic to his people that stresses the theme of reconciliation between peoples. Remember that the width of Israel at its narrowest point is the distance between Paddington station and the Tower of London. In the absence of reconciliation, many Israelis have felt each land transfer made them more vulnerable. When Arafat refers to "so-called" Jewish Temples on Jerusalem's Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, it is part of the same syndrome: the inability to admit Jewish permanence in the region. No Israeli would deny the sacredness of the Haram to Muslims. (The Temple Mount is Judaism's holiest site; the Haram is Islam's third holiest.) Arafat does not want to acknowledge such historic roots because to do so would challenge the view held by many Arabs that Israel is just a post-Holocaust phenomenon, without a deeper claim. Accepting the permanence of the other side can take many forms — Israeli education minister Yossi Sarid is right that Israelis should study Palestinian nationalist poet Mahmoud Darwish, but Palestinians need to study Theodor Herzl.

Arafat is no Mandela. He does not speak the language of inclusion, let alone reconciliation. Barak's approval ratings collapsed after Camp David to all-time lows (27 per cent two weeks ago), because of Israeli scepticism about Palestinian intentions. Arafat, meanwhile, saw his approval rating shoot up to 64 per cent as a result of stoking up a new wave of violence. This lack of leadership is the curse of Palestinians and Israelis alike. Each side has its own narrative of the past, and grievances about the present, but neither side should allow the past to bury the future.

Warmly David

AHMAD SAMIH KHALIDI 8th November 2000

Dear David,

It would be futile to attempt a point-by-point rebuttal of your historical account. The best we can do is to try and illuminate the background to our respective positions. When we, the Palestinians, think of a historic settlement we think in terms both of our lost homeland in 1948 and of our occupation since 1967. True, we rejected partition of Palestine in 1947 because the Arab majority was understandably unwilling to hand over 55 per cent of its land to the one-third Jewish minority who owned no more than 6 per cent. Subsequently, it was the Jewish side that struck first in order to establish a new reality on the ground. This included the "transfer" of as many of the Arabs as possible outside the borders of the nascent Jewish state. Israel's New Historians have confirmed this and have also confirmed that after 1948, the Israeli leadership was chafing at the bit to expand into the West Bank, as happened in 1967.

But this is not the issue now. Implicitly, since the mid-1970s and explicitly since the late 1980s, the PLO has formally accepted partition along the 1967 lines and has surrendered sovereign claims over the lands taken in 1948. The historical deal is clear: the Israelis get the vast majority of the land of Palestine and we get the remainder — and yes, we do use post-1922 Mandate Palestine as our point of reference because there is no other common framework between us. This division may not be just from a Palestinian point of view; but it is something we can live with because we want to get on with our national life. Most Israelis still cannot think in these terms. For them, any compromise has to be over the lands occupied in 1967; in effect, having swallowed 77 per cent of Palestine in 1948,

the Israelis now want to haggle over the remaining 93 per cent. The Palestinians cannot compromise over a compromise. It's as simple as that.

True, we agreed to defer the hard "final status" issues but we did not agree to defer them indefinitely. We did not agree that each understanding would be renegotiated as every new Israeli leader sought to leave his mark on the process. We agreed that final status talks should begin and end in May 1999, but they had not even begun by late summer 2000. For us, deliverance seemed neither imminent nor certain. As people looked around them, they did not see the West Bank under Palestinian rule; they saw unabated Israeli harassment at every level. It is in this context that we should consider Barak's "generous" offers at Camp David.

Barak's style of negotiating has been perplexing. Unlike his self-declared mentor Rabin, Barak came to power in May 1999 with a record of opposition to Oslo and empathy for the settlers in the West Bank. For a year Barak dissipated Palestinian goodwill by lack of engagement on final status. Then, with extraordinary presumption, he decided that a 50-year-old conflict could be resolved in a few days' seclusion in Maryland. Suddenly it was a "do or die" summit. Barak's ploy was to put Arafat in a corner: either you take my offer or you are blamed for refusing peace. And what was this generous offer?

Well, the truth is nobody knows. The Israeli side hinted that Barak may or may not accept certain things, should Arafat respond positively to them. Contrary to popular belief, and as far as the Palestinian side could make out, there was no clear offer to return 90 per cent of the West Bank. Rather Barak sought to hold on to around 20 per cent through a mixture of annexation and long-term security control. The offer to redivide East Jerusalem turns out to have been little more than a suggestion that some symbolic Palestinian presence would be acceptable within the one square km of the Old City, while Israel remained in effective control of the other 70 sq kms of the occupied Arab city. On the issues of the 1948 refugees and the fate of the Holy sites, the positions of the two sides seem only to have hardened.

Tragically mismanaged, Camp David was a disaster. Instead of quietly mending the fences between the two sides Clinton chose to publicly brand Arafat an obstacle to peace. For his part Barak sought to remind his public that that it was Benjamin Netanyahu who had agreed to hand over territory to the Palestinians unlike Barak himself.

Before Camp David, little had been done to prepare the ground for a settlement. What we then heard did not meet the criteria for a fair and sustainable peace. We Palestinians can make do with an agreement that is based on the 1967 lines. But we will not take crumbs for comfort.

Yours with respect Ahmad

DAVID MAKOVSKY 9th November 2000

Dear Ahmad,

The outcome desired by this Israeli government is no different from what you ostensibly support: the establishment of two viable and contiguous states — Israel and Palestine — with security and dignity for each side. There is disagreement on details, but not on the broad approach.

However, the debate is not just about the shape of a fair deal. You still do not seem to recognise the need for Palestinians to articulate a programme for reconciliation once a solution is reached. The Oslo process has been too much government-to-government and too little people-to-people. Peacemaking is about forging new relationships as well as the technicalities of negotiations. It is, from my perspective, about proving to Israel that the peace it is agreeing to is as tangible as the land it is yielding to an adversary perched on the edge of its cities. The settlement must not be the point of departure for further demands and even violence.

Both of us want to focus on the future. But it is hard to divorce the past from the future, so I must contest some of

your history, using the same New Historians that you praise. You justify Arab opposition to the 1947 partition by saying the Arabs were unwilling to hand over about half the land to a Jewish minority which owned just 6 per cent of the land. But it should be recalled that, despite the Holocaust, the British imposed strict limits on Jewish immigration and property rights in this period. Baruch Kimmerling points out (Zionism and Territory) that the British land laws of 1940 forbade Jews from acquiring 65 per cent of the land and placed restrictions on another 30 per cent. Despite the restrictions, the Jews were a majority — 520,000 to 350,000 — in the area that constituted the Jewish state as planned by the UN partition, (Benny Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem). You say, "it was the Jewish side that struck first in order to establish a new reality on the ground." According to Morris, the Palestinian exodus began with "voluntary" flight in December 1947. Morris says this trend accelerated in the months ahead, and notes the lack of any overarching policy of transfer. Once the May 1948 war began there were expulsions by individual Israeli commanders, who made their decisions in the heat of battle, believing that Israel's existence was at stake. (Close to 200,000 Palestinians stayed behind, proving that there was no government policy.) Without an Arab invasion there would have been no refugee problem.

Back to the present: I am dismayed by your perception of Barak. Having known him since his days in uniform, I know that he has been a consistent believer in the idea of territorial partition. Like many, he has questioned its incrementalist nature of the Oslo process, but this is only because he has wanted to get to the final status.

Barak tried to secure broad support for a deal by bringing religious groups, including settler sympathisers, into government. He was motivated by a sense that for all of Rabin's greatness, he alienated most of Israel's large religious sector. In turn, the religious authorities questioned the legitimacy of yielding biblical patrimony. The religious parties did desert him before Camp David, but their opposition has been less aggressive than in the past.

If it took several months for Barak to engage the Palestinians on final status, it is not because he was twiddling his thumbs. Rather, he was trying to reach a historic peace treaty with Syria's Hafez Assad amid reports of the Syrian president's failing health. He offered more unprecedented concessions, including yielding the Golan Heights. But Assad could not take yes for an answer.

You lament that Barak was in too much of a rush to get a final deal. But there was good reason for the rush — his coalition had disintegrated once the scope of his concessions became evident. Unlike Arafat, he informed the public in advance about the concessions ahead, and thereby lowered rather than raised expectations. The coalition would not have collapsed if the public had had more confidence that this was indeed the end of the conflict. Lacking such confidence, there was a fear that land concessions would make Israel more vulnerable.

I am also surprised that you are so negative about the summit. Speaking just after it, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said, "We are on much firmer ground to reach an agreement — more than any time in the last nine years of negotiations." When asked how much agreement there was at Camp David, he said, "above 80 per cent."

Finally, you also question whether Barak really was willing to yield 90 per cent of the West Bank. Palestinian, Israeli, and U.S. officials knowledgeable about Camp David, are not in doubt. I refer you to Arafat's adviser, Akram Haniya, who said he was shown Israeli maps of a 90 per cent withdrawal. Haniya also delineated some of the 28 Palestinian neighbourhoods inside the Jerusalem municipal boundary that Israel offered at Camp David. This, coupled with shared sovereignty over the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif special arrangements for the Old City and Arab neighbourhoods outside the walls, all suggest that his was indeed a taboo-shattering offer. You complain that 90 per cent is not 100 per cent, yet the Palestinian reply has been no compromise at all — a new intifada dealing a body blow to those Israelis seeking accommodation.

Best regards David

AHMAD SAMIH KHALIDI 10th November 2000

Dear David,

I'm not sure whether we are arguing about the past, the present or the future. Perhaps all three. And perhaps this is legitimate. I don't want to retread the arguments about 1948 ad nauseam — I doubt we will ever agree. Whatever the circumstances, do the Palestinians think that the loss of our homeland was fair? No, of course not. But this does not prevent us from looking forward to peace, not because we have learnt to love our enemies but because we cannot escape the need to get on with our lives and deliver a better future for our children. Here we come to the heart of things; of course the Palestinians should "articulate a programme for reconciliation once a solution is reached." Yes David, so should we all once a solution is reached.

This is where the past, the present and the future intersect; ending the 1967 occupation and addressing the "file" of 1948 will create a credible basis for a settlement that can be justified on the Palestinian side. With this, the poison can be extracted from our relationship, and Israel's relations with the rest of the Arab world can be transformed. The existential fears that you point to are rooted in Israel's continuing alienation from its political environment. The key to assuage these fears is to change this environment via a truly honourable and historic deal based on equality, dignity and mutual respect.

We have not reached this point yet. We can continue to quibble about what was on offer at Camp David and I maintain that Barak was less generous than we have been led to believe: he wanted to retain large land wedges on the West Bank that would trisect Palestine, dominate its lines of communication and include the annexation to Israel of 100,000 Arabs. Hardly the mother of all compromises. At the same time, it is true that Barak did make the first serious attempt to resolve the conflict since 1993. It was not enough. You are right that we do not seem to differ in "broad approach." But the devil lurks in those "details" on the hilltops of the West Bank and in Israel's continued insensitivity to Palestinian life.

The sad truth is that it may be that violence — abhorrent as it is — is part of the historic process of painful separation on the land of Palestine. Maybe we presumed too much to the contrary in 1993; all real moves towards peace in the middle east (and with few exceptions elsewhere) have been preceded by major acts of violence. For my part, I continue to believe that this was tragically avoidable. And nothing has made me change my mind about the need to keep trying until we get it right.

Yours with hope Ahmad

DAVID MAKOVSKY 10th November 2000

Dear Ahmad,

There are big differences between us, but the common ground seems to be bigger still. We both believe in a two-state solution and that such a deal should be an "honourable and historic deal based on equality, dignity and mutual respect." We also agree that Barak has made the "first serious attempt to solve the conflict since 1993." He came to Camp David to cure the disease of occupation, and not deal with its symptoms.

I don't think we'll ever agree on history. I just wish the Palestinians could acquire their own version of Israel's New Historians. This would enable them to rethink the shibboleths of their own 1948 narrative. We also disagree about what makes a fair and equitable deal, but this can be sorted out through negotiations. What is more dismaying is your sense that violence — even though you don't favour it — is required for a diplomatic breakthrough. This is counter to the whole logic of Oslo. And when Hamas suicide bombs explode in Israel, political moderates lose out.

I think we disagree on the order of events — on whether the Palestinians should first hold out a genuine vision for peace and then resolve the territorial question. A successful model of peacemaking is Egypt 1977, when the "transformational" preceded the "transactional." The unsuccessful model of peace is Syria. Assad's approach was so

purely transactional that he did not have the decency to send condolences to (the late) Leah Rabin. In Amos Oz's words, Assad wanted all of Golan, but when it came to peace, was only willing to "send a receipt by fax." The result: the Syria talks collapsed. I don't think you fully understand what it means to yield land when your enemy lives in your backyard.

Finally, I think the Palestinians need to think now about what sort of society they want after peace. Do they want Palestine to be just another despotic Arab regime? Routinely 65 per cent of Palestinians tell Palestinian pollsters that the Palestinian Authority is corrupt, while 70 per cent say Israel is more democratic than the U.S. and Britain.

As it is now, I don't think many Palestinians living in the west will want to live in Palestine at the turn of the 21st century. Yet, there are so many talented Palestinians living abroad who could help shape this nascent state, ensuring that it focuses on political pluralism, education and economic development. When it comes to these tasks ahead, Israel is not the Palestinians' enemy, but its ally. Ahmad, let us keep in touch.

With hopes for better times, David

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