

Camp David Collapse:

A Behind-the-Scenes Assessment by a Participant

Jul 26, 2000



Brief Analysis

Achievements Although the failure of the Camp David II summit to reach a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is certainly sad, it is important to emphasize that this two-week meeting was not a waste of time. For the first time, Israelis and Palestinians sat together in an official setting and thoroughly discussed previously deferred matters like Jerusalem and the refugees. Although unsuccessful in reaching a full resolution, a "basic and very deep clarification of the positions" was achieved at Camp David. A partial agreement was not the preferred alternative of either the Israelis or the Palestinians.

U.S. Role The U.S. administration, and U.S. president Bill Clinton in particular, are to be commended for their efforts at Camp David. The U.S. administration invested a lot of time and effort in the process. President Clinton himself extended "extraordinary effort" to bridge the gaps between the two sides; he barely slept since he returned from Okinawa, Japan.

Israeli Efforts As Clinton confirmed in his remarks to the press after the summit collapsed, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak went the extra mile to probe the issues with the clear goal of reaching a final status agreement that would ensure Israel's security. The entire Israeli delegation went as far as they could, trying their best while protecting "our very basic roots and the foundations of our national existence."

Israeli Disappointment However, the Israeli delegation was discouraged by what was seen as Palestinian unwillingness to make difficult decisions. A week ago, when the talks threatened to break down, participants felt that the issues had not yet been exhausted, and the two sides remained at Camp David. But by the end of the day, it became clear that the Palestinians were not willing to deviate from their historical position. They appeared "unripe" to make real decisions, especially with regard to Jerusalem. An "opportunity was missed this time—all of us could have gained from an agreement."

Major Issues Although Jerusalem was the major sticking point, other key issues such as borders and refugees were not fully resolved. Long nights were spent on the border question. Working personally on the refugee issue, it became evident that the historical "narrative" of Israelis differs greatly from that of the Palestinians. For instance, Israelis see the refugee issue as perpetuated by the surrounding Arab countries that have kept the Palestinians as poverty-stricken refugees; in contrast, after 1948, when Jews from the Arab countries had to leave their homes, Israel took them in "as brethren" and assimilated them into her society. This doesn't mean, however, that Israel does not have empathy for the Palestinian plight. Israel is seeking to resolve this issue fairly as an essential part of the ultimate solution to the overarching conflict; this kind of resolution would include monetary compensation funded by the international community with an Israeli contribution. Therefore, on this important issue of refugees, while the gap was not eliminated at the summit, there was progress toward ultimate solutions.

Personal Relations Unlike meetings with the Syrians that were always very formal, personal relations between the Israelis and Palestinians at Camp David were good, and negotiations were conducted in a very civilized manner. After

all, many of the negotiators have known each other for a while.

Future Prospects Although the coming weeks and months will probably not be easy, it is clear that negotiations are the only possible course; after all, "we are not going away and our Palestinian counterparts . . . are not going away." In the meantime, the responsibility lies on everyone's shoulders to avoid unilateral actions and decisions that may exacerbate the situation. Specifically, a unilateral declaration of statehood by the Palestinians would be "quite problematic." For future negotiations to be fruitful, the Palestinian side must make tough decisions. Nevertheless, there was an understanding reached at the summit that "nothing is agreed upon until everything is agreed," and therefore all ideas considered at Camp David became invalid with the summit's end. In other words, contrary to comments made by chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, nothing discussed in the past is binding in future negotiations.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Liat Radcliffe.

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