Barak's Separate Peace

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Jul 16, 2000

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We may not know exactly what compromises will be made in the peace talks, but we can be fairly sure about Yasser Arafat's goal at Camp David: to move as far and as fast as possible toward an independent Palestinian state. We can also assume we know President Clinton's goals--a more peaceful world, and presumably whatever luster a Mideast settlement would leave on his place in history.

That leaves Ehud Barak. The goals and vision of the future that the Israeli prime minister brings to the peace talks are less obvious and less understood than those of his two negotiating partners. That's because Barak's quest is not so much about peace in the broad, fuzzy sense of the word. It is about strategy, about borders, about freeing Israel from constant conflict and tensions to lead the life of a normal, democratic society. It is about avoiding a Bosnia-like disaster in the West Bank and minimizing dangers from elsewhere in the Middle East.

Among the three leaders at Camp David, Barak is the one under the greatest political pressure. He is being savaged at home by those who fear he will give away the store. His "big tent" coalition is in tatters and he now heads a minority government that survived a no-confidence vote by the slimmest of margins on the very day he left Israel for the United States. For Barak, achieving a treaty will only be half the job. An agreement, however historic, will only be the prologue to a grueling debate in Israel and the unprecedented national referendum he has promised on whatever pact he negotiates--or possibly new national elections.

Alternatively, if the Camp David talks fail, the Mideast will likely teeter between attempts to salvage peace efforts and the unraveling that would occur if Arafat makes good on his threat to declare statehood unilaterally in September. Whatever the outcome at Camp David, it will be crucial for Barak to articulate to his own people what he stands for. To accomplish that, he will have to do what he has not done until now: explain his own vision for peace, a fundamental issue that has been lost amid the chaos in his coalition.

Barak's hope can best be summarized, as he recently told me in his Tel Aviv Defense Ministry office, as "peace without illusions."

For Barak, Israel's most decorated soldier during his 35 years of military service and a protege of the security-minded Yitzhak Rabin, peace is a matter of calculation, not sentiment. He shuns the vision of two rivals: former prime minister Shimon Peres, whom he deposed as head of the Labor Party (and who is now a member of the Barak

government), and Natan Sharansky, the famed former Soviet dissident who led his party out of the government the same day President Clinton announced the Camp David summit.

Peres speaks of a "new Middle East," where a peace settlement will transform erstwhile enemies into partners and economic helpmates, just as former enemies have combined to form the European Union. Sharansky falls at the opposite end of the spectrum, believing that peace will be possible only when the Palestinian Authority functions as a Western democracy.

Unlike Peres, Barak does not believe that a new Middle East is around the corner. When I asked him if he differentiates a peace between governments from a peace between peoples, the voluble premier answered with a vigorous nod. "There is an urgent need for a peace between governments," he said. "Peace between peoples--genuine reconciliation--could take three to four generations."

Nor does Barak believe that peace has to wait on a transformation of the Palestinian Authority. In a recent interview with the newspaper Ha'aretz, Barak criticized his predecessor, Binyamin Netanyahu, for having "operated under the assumption that there was no point in trying to talk with our neighbors until they became Jeffersonian democracies committed to [Immanuel] Kant's 'perpetual peace.'... I take the opposite approach. I believe that the role of leadership is to act within this not-so-simple reality in order to influence it. I don't think that we can afford to wait until we are surrounded by liberal democracies teeming with McDonald's restaurants."

Barak's assessment of Arab attitudes is not so different from that of his right-wing critics, but he reaches a radically different conclusion. He argues that it is precisely because Israel lives in the Old Middle East that it must act quickly. Peace may not bring nirvana, but failure to reach a deal is likely to maximize, not minimize, the dangers ahead.

Timing is of the essence, as Barak sees it, on two counts. First, the balance of power in the Middle East will not permanently remain in Israel's favor. In many ways, the region is still experiencing the afterglow of both the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War, which left the United States as the only remaining superpower and Arab radicalism in disarray. But those conditions are not likely to last indefinitely. Like his mentor, Rabin, Barak sees Israel's current relative strength as the key to successful negotiations. Israel needs to prepare now for a rainy day, even if it means taking some risks. It should lock in agreements with its immediate neighbors before--as seems increasingly likely--a nuclear Iran and a sanctions-free Iraq reappear on the Middle Eastern scene and pose even greater risks.

If the regional balance of power shifts against Israel while its relations with the Palestinians are still unsettled, the Israelis could be forced to make more dramatic concessions under worse conditions than they face today. Israel is better off making deals now, argues Barak, so the West Bank and Gaza are not still a festering sore when the regional balance changes.

Barak is also concerned about dangers that could erupt closer to home. On the day Clinton announced the Camp David II summit, Barak publicly warned of a violent eruption in the West Bank if peace is not achieved. Without an agreement, there would be a countdown to conflict, Barak told Ha'aretz, "for which there would also be a price to be paid in blood and after which our successors will have to discuss the exact same things--at best. At worst, we will be like Belfast or Bosnia."

Proximity, too, dictates that Israel cannot wait to make peace with its neighbors. Israelis and Palestinians are not distant enemies, as the United States and the Soviet Union were in the Cold War. They live cheek by jowl, each nursing their grievances, in a volatile part of the world. Therefore, Barak argues, Israel does not have the luxury to pause indefinitely from peacemaking while waiting for the Palestinians to become "Jeffersonian democrats."

Barak does not share Peres' optimistic belief that after a treaty, the next thing the world will see is reconciled Israelis and Palestinians settling down to make microchips together. His vision of peace is predicated on the establishment of a border between the two. The Oslo accords of 1993 that launched the Israeli-Palestinian peace effort on its

present path envisioned a web of cooperation agreements, particularly in the area of economics. Barak has recast the Oslo agreement as more of a divorce settlement than a marriage contract.

Barak loves to cite Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall " which contains the famous line, "Good fences make good neighbors." The Israeli leader's concept is not an impregnable Great Wall of China, but it is definitely a clear political and geographic border, which Barak insists would promote a "healthier relationship." As he told me during our Tel Aviv interview, "there will be a generation in which separation will include a fence. Not a fence to ensure that no one ever gets through, but rather one that people pass through according to certain regulations and not one that allows every madman to come in with explosives. When there are fences, we can also close them sometimes when necessary."

A word Barak uses frequently is hafrada--separation. "They are there and we are here," he has said on many occasions. The implication is that disentanglement, rather than peace as it might be more loftily defined outside the region, is Israel's best hope for being able to maintain a vibrant Western democracy and a high-tech economy. The alternative is for Israel to continue exhausting its energies as its army and settlers remain intertwined with a hostile Palestinian population. For their part, the Palestinians would be foolish to miss the Barak moment, as there will not be a more forthcoming Israeli government. They will have to do their part to make Barak's message credible, by making clear that an agreement will be permanent and their renunciation of violence will be irreversible.

Barak's concept of a peace grounded in the old Middle East might not seem inspiring to Americans, but to Israelis skeptical of Palestinian intentions, this pragmatic sense of peace may ring truer than either Peres' regional community of nations or the potentially endless wait for Palestinian democracy favored by Sharansky. Barak's is a vision that could win acceptance among his constituents, but he needs to make the case. If he does, Israelis, who know their region's rocky character and understand that the world does not usually offer ideal solutions, may accept that Barak's unsentimental, realistic peace may be as benevolent an outcome as they can expect.

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