

Taba Mythchief

David Makovsky

AFTER THE U.S.-led coalition routed Iraq in Operation Desert Storm in 1991, President George H.W. Bush told Congress that he would vigorously pursue the Arab-Israeli peace process. Indeed, a landmark Middle East peace conference in Madrid followed in short order, which for the first time brought Israel to the same table with all its immediate neighbors. A second U.S.-led war against Iraq will also likely be followed by a focus on the Arab-Israeli arena, for the same twin logic applies to both cases. The first part of this logic reasons that such a focus will improve America's standing with the Arabs, who believe, rightly or wrongly, that the United States has a double standard in which it seeks to redress Arab, but not Israeli, wrongdoing. But it is also driven by a judgment that an American victory will alter the regional equation, emboldening moderates and weakening extremists, and thus improve the prospects for peace.

This American impulse is likely to be strongly reinforced by other actors. In the summer of 2002 the European Union, Russia, the UN and the United States formed a "Quartet" dedicated to moving the Israeli-Palestinian process forward,

and they developed a "road map" for that purpose. They have been active, too, in promoting Palestinian political reform, identified by the Bush Administration as a key to peace. They will strongly encourage at least the first rationale that argues for a more active American role to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

If such a push should come, it would be tragic were it plagued by a misleading mythology—that Israelis and Palestinians were at the verge of peace in January 2001 as they met at Taba, a tiny Egyptian resort adjoining the Israeli port city of Eilat. According to this myth, both sides had essentially agreed on the critical and difficult issues of land, refugees and the status of Jerusalem, and it was only Ariel Sharon's rise to power that prevented these discussions from coming to fruition.

This myth has wide currency in both the Arab world and in Europe. The diplomatic advisor to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdallah, Adel Al-Jubeir, claims that at Taba "the Israelis and the Palestinians came very close to an agreement."¹ Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak says that the talks

could have led to a settlement, had an additional chance of a few more months been made available for negotiations. These proposals only needed some clarifications and

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¹"Meet the Press", NBC, April 21, 2002.

some mutual concessions in order to crystallize a final settlement had the Israeli government had the intention to start serious negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.²

France's former Foreign Minister, Hubert Védrine, notes that a viable Palestinian state needs to be created "not on the basis of the Camp David accords, which were not specific enough, but by using the terms of the subsequent negotiations at Sharm al-Sheikh and Taba."³ Even some Americans are taken by the myth of Taba: thus Michael Lind writes that, in contrast to earlier negotiations, the Israelis and the Palestinians at Taba "came close to agreeing on a different plan acceptable in its broad outlines to moderates on both sides."⁴

This is just not so.

First of all, the Israeli delegation at Taba did not have the moral authority to negotiate two weeks before an election in which Prime Minister Ehud Barak was widely expected to lose in a landslide; and Israel's delegation was led by a government that had the support of only 42 of Israel's 120-member parliament. Noting the oddity of a minority government holding the most sensitive negotiations in the country's 52-year history, Israel's Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein wrote Barak a letter questioning the legitimacy of such a step. Even had a deal been reached, therefore, it is very unlikely that the Knesset would have ratified it.

But no deal was ever in prospect. Palestinian negotiators made only conditional and tactical concessions at Taba, and even these were never agreed to by the Palestinian leader, Yasir Arafat. While some key Palestinian negotiators wanted a deal, no evidence suggests that Arafat himself was willing to make any concessions of real significance. Even the diplomat who has put forth the rosier assessment of the Taba negotiations—EU Middle East peace envoy Miguel Moratinos—wrote in a doc-

ument summarizing those talks (published in the February 14, 2001 *Ha'aretz*) that "serious gaps remain."

It is important not only to avoid misreading what happened at Taba, but to examine carefully what did and did not occur in the period just before and after it. Doing so will constitute good preparation for the next round of serious Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

After Camp David

THE ISRAELI political landscape in the aftermath of the Camp David summit in the summer of 2000 featured a mix of stunned acquiescence and dizzy disbelief. Every Israeli leader since June 1967 had declared that no part of a reunited Jerusalem would be ceded to the Palestinians (or any other form of Arab sovereignty), and no one believed that any mainstream Israeli leader would offer to yield 90 percent of the West Bank to the Palestinians. Barak proposed both—and more, for Barak's Jerusalem concession included Israeli willingness to yield part of the Old City. Nonetheless, polls at the time demonstrated that about half of the Israeli public supported such concessions if they would end the decades-old conflict. Barak could consider offering such concessions because he had conditioned the public in the months leading up to Camp David that "painful compromises" would be required for peace. As a result, much of the Israeli public was simply astonished by the Palestinian refusal to accept them, or even to negotiate about them.

Two months later, with the outbreak of the so-called Al-Aqsa *intifada*, Israeli

²Speech by Mubarak in Spain, November 2, 2001.

³*Washington Post*, June 17, 2002.

⁴Lind, *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 137.

public opinion began to change dramatically: either the Palestinians were using violence as a tool in negotiations, or Arafat did not want peace at all. Either possibility represented a depressing revision of the hopes nurtured by the Oslo accords, but the former at least held out some hope that a deal was still possible. But which was it? It was not clear, nor was Arafat's role in the onset of the violence.

The Barak government boldly assumed the former, more optimistic assessment of Palestinian strategy and maintained its intention to negotiate despite the violence. But the latter view was strengthened when the Palestinian Authority released dozens of convicted terrorists from jail after the outbreak of violence, and when Arafat refused to publicly call a halt to that violence.

Then came the "Clinton parameters", put forward on December 23, 2000, which the Barak cabinet accepted. In other words, Israel now agreed to give up 97 percent of the West Bank, yield all but the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and concede that virtually all the Temple Mount would be exclusively Palestinian. Barak's acceptance of such terms amid continuing violence was the final blow to his political standing in Israel. But Arafat still demurred. At a meeting with Clinton on January 2, 2001, Arafat emptied the Clinton parameters of any meaning. U.S. peace envoy Dennis Ross characterized Arafat's reply as follows: "He said yes, and then he added reservations that basically meant he rejected every single one of the things that he was supposed to give." As Arafat himself said in the first sentence of his letter to Clinton, published in the Palestinian daily *Al-Ayyam* on the day of his meeting, the President's proposals "do not meet the required conditions for a lasting peace."

Hopes for peace seemed to have gone up in smoke. Arafat turned down the President who had opened the Oval Office

to him on twelve occasions, making him his most frequent foreign guest. Now this President was leaving office. Like most observers, Barak believed that, in the wake of Arafat's rejection of the Clinton parameters, any further talks were pointless. Barak was also being trounced in polls by 15–20 percent margins by a man heretofore deemed unelectable, Ariel Sharon. Even had he believed a deal possible, Barak was running out of time.

The Road to Taba

YET THE doves in the Barak cabinet, led by Shimon Peres, did not relent. Because of the Palestinian violence and the Israeli public's reaction to it, Barak was entirely dependent on the doves and on the frail hope that following their counsel would provide a last-minute breakthrough to rescue his tenure. The doves, too, threatened to desert him before election day if he did not enable a peace delegation to hold eleventh-hour talks at Taba. As Barak's own foreign minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami, later portrayed it in an October 17, 2002 *Ha'aretz* interview, alluding to Peres,

there was a pistol on the table. The elections were a month away, and there was a minister who told Ehud that if he did not go to Taba they would denounce him in public for evading his duty to make peace. He had no choice but to go to a meeting for something he himself no longer believed in.

It is unclear if the doves really believed they could reach a deal at Taba, or if they were more concerned about establishing a concessionary baseline for the widely anticipated next Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon. In any event, the fact that the Palestinians did not accept the deal saved the Knesset the acute embarrassment of voting it down.

For the Palestinians, Israel's Taba

negotiators were a sort of dream team. Hawks like Rubinstein and the centrist Dan Meridor were absent; in their places were Israel's three arch-doves: Peres, Yossi Beilin and Yossi Sarid, who headed the Meretz Party to Barak's Left. Even had Peres, Beilin and Sarid not told them as much—and they did—the Palestinians knew that Israel had never before and might never again put forward such a tractable negotiating team. Yet the Palestinians *still* refused key reciprocal concessions at Taba.

The Palestinians had wanted Taba to begin after Clinton left office so they could flout his parameters without insulting the president of the United States at the same time. Some Palestinians also imagined that George H.W. Bush's son, George W., might reflect some of the lack of empathy toward Israel that his father sometimes appeared to project while in office. The Palestinians thought they were about to reap a political windfall. American Jews were known to be political supporters of the Democrats, and thus losers in a Bush Administration, especially given the Texan's oil industry connections. At the opening plenary session of the Taba talks on January 20, 2001, according to participants, Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala'a) said what he subsequently told *Al-Ayyam* on January 29, after Taba broke up: "We refused to accept the Clinton initiative as a basis for the negotiations. The Israelis said that the Clinton proposals should be the basis, but we rejected it." Nabil Sha'ath was even more blunt at the start of the negotiations: "Clinton is a dead horse." As such, there was no agreed upon starting point for the talks.⁵

Retrogression on the Red Sea

THE NEGOTIATIONS at Taba were split up into working groups in a bid to resolve the remaining differences. These

primarily concerned land and borders, security, refugees and the status of Jerusalem.

The committee on security hardly convened. Shlomo Yanai, a general who headed Israel's negotiating team at Camp David and Taba, told me that "on security issues, we not only made no progress, but there was retrogression. The Palestinians . . . retreated from understandings with us and President Clinton at the summit."

On the territorial issue, Ben-Ami insisted on remaining within the Clinton parameters, but quickly moved toward the upper end of the 95–97 percent zone at Palestinian insistence. He said that Israel should withdraw from 94.5 percent of the West Bank, but once one factored in swapped border areas that Israel would cede within sovereign Israel, he was approaching Clinton's upper limit. Ben-Ami's plan involved the displacement of about 45,000 Jewish settlers living in the West Bank. When Barak heard about the Ben-Ami map, he insisted that Ben-Ami rescind it, for this was a figure that exceeded what Barak and Clinton had thought the Israeli public could bear without major upheaval. The Palestinian team also drew up a map—a real accomplishment—since this was only the second such map they presented since negotiations with Israel began in earnest the previous spring. According to this map, Israel was to evacuate 130 out of 146 settlements, which would displace 100,000 to 120,000 of the 180,000 West Bank settlers—three to four times the number contemplated by Clinton and Barak.

This proposal came as a shock to the Israelis. At Camp David, the Palestinians

⁵Abu Ala'a confirmed this to me at his home in Abu Dis on June 11, 2001. See also the memoir of Barak's top negotiator, Gilead Sher, *B'Merchak Negia (Within Touch)* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot Publishers, 2001), p. 398.



Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami and Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qurei shake hands on January 21, 2001 at Taba.

had agreed that Israel could retain two settlement blocs that would contain the highest concentration of settlements, as well as Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. One would be Gush Etzion, an area adjacent to Bethlehem that had been inhabited by Israelis until the eve of the 1948 war, when they were wiped out by the Arab Legion and Arab irregulars. The second was Ariel, located not far from the Tel Aviv suburbs. Regarding a third settlement area adjacent to Jerusalem called Maaleh Adumim, the largest settlement in the West Bank, Palestinian negotiators had been divided. Some were prepared to view Maaleh Adumim as included in those Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem that would become Israeli, while others disagreed.⁶

At Taba, the Palestinians had a change of heart about all this, but one that *widened* the gaps. They agreed that Israel could annex the settlements in these blocs but not the blocs themselves, since they did not want to include a single interspersed Palestinian village inside of Israel. In other words, Israel would have to uproot at least 100,000 people, but the Palestinians would not allow even a single Palestinian to become an Israeli citizen,

let alone be forced to move. As Ben-Ami later told *Ha'aretz*,

they presented a counter-map that totally eroded the three already shrunken [settlement] blocs and effectively voided the whole bloc concept of content. According to their map, only a few isolated settlements would remain, which would be dependent on thin strings of narrow access roads.

The Palestinians also retrogressed in a second manner. They argued that Efrat, Gush Etzion's main population area

with several thousand inhabitants, should be eliminated. So instead of moving toward the Israelis at Taba, the Palestinians pulled back from their stated position at Camp David, as two settlement blocs became a cluster and a half.

Furthermore, the Palestinians insisted on getting Latrun—a small “no-man’s land” along the armistice lines from the 1948 war. Latrun was the site of a critical battle when Jerusalem was under siege, isolated and without access to food and other essential supplies. The battle at Latrun re-opened the supply lines to the city. Today the area virtually sits on the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway, and near the rail line linking the two cities.

Finally, the divergence between the sides reflected itself in overall territorial ratios. As noted, the Palestinians refused to be bound by the Clinton parameters. The map they presented has been described as one in which Israel would keep 2.34 percent or 3.1 percent of the territories. Yet even this miniscule amount was not a compromise, since the Palestinians insisted that the number to be retained by Israel add to zero, with swaps of territory inside sovereign Israel

⁶Interview with Dennis Ross, January 3, 2003.

making up the difference. The Palestinians justified the insistence on their getting 100 percent by citing Israel's full withdrawal from Sinai in a peace treaty with Egypt. The Barak government had agreed to the idea of providing land "swaps" inside pre-1967 Israel to boost the Palestinian percentage, but it also wanted Palestinian consideration of long-term leasing arrangements of very limited land, since it would otherwise be impossible to consolidate a Jewish settlement bloc without including Palestinian villages within it. The Palestinian response was, "yield the land first, and then we will consider."

DISAGREEMENTS over land were joined by disagreements over Jerusalem. Arafat had rejected the idea at Camp David that Israel and the Palestinians would share the Temple Mount—known as *Haram al-Sharif* ("The Noble Sanctuary") to Muslims—and insisted on full Palestinian sovereignty. Despite this, everyone knew that dealing with the question of holy sites in Jerusalem required a creative formula. Ideas abounded during and after Camp David, including reserving sovereignty only for God. Finally, in contravention of the policy of every Israeli government since 1967 and, at the time, even in contravention of Barak, Foreign Minister Ben-Ami said he would be content if the Palestinians would merely acknowledge the Temple Mount as a site holy to Jews. He even asked Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat during talks at Bolling Air Force Base in December 2000 if he would agree to language that there would be no unilateral Palestinian archeological excavations since this place is holy to Jews. Erekat refused. Ben-Ami recalled, "Erekat said we won't excavate, but we won't write anything about the area being holy to the Jews."⁷

Taba did not produce any documents, so exactly what happened there regarding Jerusalem is not entirely clear. The transcript drawn up by Europe's Middle East peace envoy, Miguel Moratinos, is based on subsequent talks with a few Israeli and Palestinian participants. The best Moratinos could get was that "the Israeli side understood" they had a Palestinian concession, such as sovereignty over the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. It is not stated by the Palestinian side, however. Even with the widest stretch of the Moratinos document, key explosive issues like Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem holy sites remained unresolved. As noted above, even the optimist Moratinos wrote that, overall, "serious gaps remain."⁸

⁷Conversation with Shlomo Ben-Ami, June 12, 2001.

⁸The Moratinos document matters because a previous document, drafted by Beilin and Abu Mazen on November 1, 1995 without authorization (at least on the Israeli side), was heralded as a blueprint for peace that "proved" that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was solvable. But Abu Mazen and Arafat immediately disavowed it, and when senior Clinton Administration officials urged in advance of Camp David that the summit be based on it, they were rebuffed by the Palestinian side. Yet the Beilin-Abu Mazen document did have utility for the Palestinians. As Hassan Abdel Rahman, PLO representative in Washington, explained to me: "We used 'Beilin-Abu Mazen' as our guide in understanding what the Israelis would put forward at Camp David. When the Israelis raised the idea of the Temple Mount as being important to them at Camp David, one of the reasons we rejected it was because it did not appear in Beilin-Abu Mazen. If this idea that there was once a Jewish Temple was so important, why didn't it appear? We figured it could not be so important to Israelis." In other words, Israeli concessions in past negotiations formed a baseline for future negotiations, but the Palestinians themselves were not bound by

The Palestinians also rejected the idea that Israel would have sovereignty over the 480-meter Western Wall, but hinted that Israel could have sovereignty over the exposed part—about a sixth of it—which is the smaller area that the Palestinians have misdefined as the Wailing Wall. Yet this figure never made it into Moratinos' summary of the talks: "The Palestinian side acknowledged that Israel has requested to establish an affiliation to the holy parts of the Western Wall." It continues to distinguish between this and the Wailing Wall.

Finally, on the issue of Jerusalem, the basis at Camp David for negotiations regarding the Old City and the surrounding areas such as the Mount of Olives was that all this area would be a "Holy Basin" where a special regime would be enforced, and where no side would have full sovereignty. The Palestinians rejected this idea outright at Taba. Emboldened by earlier Israeli concessions, they now insisted that the entire area be under exclusive Palestinian sovereignty except for the Jewish Quarter and parts of the Wall. In a speech in Gaza three months later, Arafat declared that the Palestinians were justified in not accepting Taba since, among other factors, the Palestinians would not hold a "century of struggle" and still not obtain exclusive sovereignty over the Temple Mount area.⁹

A THIRD REASON Taba failed was the highly-charged issue of refugees. Yossi Beilin, who headed the Israeli side of the refugee talks at Taba, likes to say that Taba represented progress because the refugee issue was the one issue on which actual drafting was done. But that drafting did not resolve the future of the refugees; it dealt only with the past. This is an important and sensitive issue, for the Palestinians see the question of historic responsibility for the birth of the refugee issue in 1948 as vital to their national narrative. The focus of

the drafting was the loaded question of who was responsible for triggering the Palestinian refugee problem over fifty years ago. Beilin subsequently wrote that "we were very close to an agreement concerning the story of the creation of the refugee problem, which described the Israeli approach and the Palestinian approach to the issue, and their common denominator."¹⁰

Beilin has not divulged this "common denominator" formula, but his Palestinian counterpart, Nabil Sha'ath, said progress at Taba involved Israel accepting partial responsibility for the birth of the refugee problem, an assessment that Beilin has denied. But the Moratinos document notes that the Israeli side did put forward "a suggested joint narrative for the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees." This suggestion was apparently deemed insufficient by Palestinian standards, since the Moratinos document says that "no agreement was reached in an attempt to develop a historical narrative in the general text."¹¹

Harder than dealing with the past was

their own concessions. The Palestinians were thus very careful about what they told Moratinos regarding Taba.

⁹Arafat's remarks in Gaza, Wafa/Palestine News Agency, May 20, 2001.

¹⁰Beilin in Bitterlemons.org, December 31, 2001.

¹¹Interestingly, Israeli "new historian" Benny Morris believes Israel should be unyielding on this issue. Morris was pilloried by members of the Israeli academic establishment when he questioned the classic Zionist narrative that all the Palestinians fled, noting that many were indeed expelled during the heat of battle. Yet, it is the same Morris who said about this issue in an interview with *Yediot Ahranot* on November 23, 2001, "I revealed to the Israelis the truth of what happened in 1948, the historic facts. But the Arabs are the ones who started the fighting. They started the shooting. So why should I take responsibility? The Arabs started the war, they are responsible."

the future. Unrestricted immigration of Palestinian refugees to the new state of Palestine was agreed at Camp David; the main issue at Taba was whether refugees were entitled to live in *two* states: Israel as well as Palestine. Palestinian moderate Sari Nusseibeh told an academic audience in Jerusalem in the fall of 2002 that it would be “crazy” for Israel to allow the Palestinians to immigrate to *two* countries. But the Palestinians usually argue that they seek only a symbolic return of Palestinian refugees to sovereign Israel. The majority would be settled in the new state of Palestine, in third countries or in the country of current residence through a variety of procedures that would minimize in practice the number of refugees. Yet this is not what the Palestinians proposed at Taba. Even Beilin admitted that no deal was reached:

Specific sums of [compensation] money were not agreed upon, nor was the actual number of refugees which would be permitted to come to Israel. However, the distance under dispute between the parties was narrowed substantially, and the Palestinian side agreed that the number of refugees must be such that it would not damage Israel’s character as a Jewish country.¹²

It is telling that Beilin’s optimistic sense that a deal over the refugee issue was near has not been echoed by Arafat, Sha’ath or Moratinos. The Israeli position entering the talks was that Israel could admit 25,000 refugees as a symbolic gesture. This was not acceptable to the Palestinians.¹³ Beilin has written that he offered to admit 25,000 refugees during the first three years of a 15-year period, thereby hinting the figure could increase fivefold in the subsequent dozen years. Beilin subsequently admitted that the 15 year idea was not suggested by Barak or reached in consultation with him. Sha’ath hinted to Beilin that he wanted to bring

“six figures” to Arafat, but there is no evidence to suggest that even this would have been acceptable to the “old man.” A Western diplomat added: “Sha’ath told me that Abu Mazen would accept 100,000 refugees, but he said there is no indication that Arafat would accept it at all. There was no deal.” Palestinian negotiating documents from Taba say that there was no modification of the Palestinian position.¹⁴

As always, the key remained with Arafat, who declared: “Return is a sacred right. People are fooling themselves if they think that can be renounced in exchange for a handful of dollars”, alluding to a \$30 billion package. This is not just rhetoric. Arafat’s struggle for Palestine predates Israel’s winning the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, and his comrades-in-arms and main constituency have always been the 1948 refugees. Even a year later when interviewed on this topic, Arafat said publicly what he has said

¹²Beilin in Bitterlemons; author’s interview with Beilin in Tel Aviv, June 2001.

¹³A *Le Monde Diplomatique* text makes clear that the Palestinians wanted no limits on the right of return to sovereign Israel. The Palestinian position paper states, “All refugees who currently reside in Lebanon and choose to exercise the right of return shall be enabled to return to Israel within two years of the signing of this agreement. Without prejudice to the right of every refugee to return to Israel, a minimum of XX [*sic*] refugees will be allowed to return to Israel annually. The exercise of the right of return subsequent to such declaration shall not be limited in time.”

¹⁴Sha’ath told *Al-Quds* on January 26, just after Taba broke up: “The Palestinian side did not discuss the Israeli proposal to hand out questionnaires to the refugees in which they would be given the opportunity to choose between return and compensation. The Israelis can say whatever they want, but the starting point of all of our discussions is the refugees’ absolute and sacred Right of Return.”

many times since Taba, that he wanted to “begin with my brothers and beloved refugees of Lebanon”, making it clear that it would not end there.¹⁵

Chasm

THE IDEA that the parties were on the verge of a deal at Taba is fantasy. After the talks concluded, Abu Ala‘a told *Al-Ayyam* that “there has never before been a clearer gap in the positions of the two sides.” Saeb Erekat concurred, telling the Palestinian daily *Al-Quds* that Taba “emphasized the size of the gap between the positions of the two sides and the depth of the disagreements, primarily on the subjects of Jerusalem and the refugees.” (During Taba, Arafat’s top security aide for Gaza, Mohammed Dahlan, told the media the talks were “*barta barta*”, a very derisive Arabic slang expression; he subsequently apologized for his language.)

In the two years since Taba, countless diplomatic entourage, including those from members of the Quartet, have pleaded with Arafat to compromise on several key thorny issues. He has not done so. Indeed, Arafat’s own words refute the revisionism surrounding Taba, and his actions ever since confirm those words. In remarks made in Gaza three months after Taba, he rhetorically asked, “Did we miss the chance given to us in Camp David and Taba?” After ticking off possible compromise ideas floated around at the time, Arafat declared, “we didn’t and will not accept such things.”¹⁶ If Arafat had wanted to conclude a deal comparable to terms discussed at Taba in the subsequent two years, he could have stolen world attention (and won a second Nobel Peace Prize?), set in motion the collapse of the Sharon government, driven a wedge between the United States and Israel, and ended his own *persona non grata* status in the Oval Office. His silence speaks volumes.

As suggested above, there are two ways to view Arafat’s behavior since Camp David. One is that his refusal to compromise is a bid to gain the best possible deal from Israel, and it follows that he ultimately would agree to end the conflict if the terms were right. In the meantime, his refusal to compromise on core issues is a survival mechanism at a time when intramural Palestinian politics, as usual, are fractious and potentially bloody. Many observers are sure that this view is correct, and this includes most European and many professional American diplomats. Because they are sure that this is so, these observers can, rightfully in their own minds, blame the present Israeli government for not being sufficiently accommodating in order to achieve peace.

The other way to interpret Arafat’s behavior is through the prism of ideology, or, put a bit differently, by taking Arafat’s professed worldview seriously. In this view, it is not accidental that Arafat never prepared his public for compromise in key areas throughout the Oslo period; it was because he never intended any real compromise. He genuinely believes in the Palestinian right of exclusive control over Jerusalem’s holy sites and the right of as many refugees as wish to do so to live in Israel. He is in no hurry to end the conflict short of achieving these goals. He does not define success by what he can obtain territorially and economically, but by what he has not yielded ideologically.

In this view, therefore, the peace process has failed not because of problems of communication or misjudgment, but due to irreconcilable visions. That process has never been about classic conflict resolution, dominated by a mix of pragmatism and bargaining. From Arafat’s point of

¹⁵Arafat interview with Beirut-based LBC Satellite Television Network, December 31, 2001.

¹⁶Arafat’s remarks in Gaza, Wafa/Palestine News Agency, May 20, 2001.

view, these negotiations have functioned as a tool of a revolutionary who views the idea of splitting the difference on issues of core principle as a sin unpardonable by his ultimate judge—history. Indeed, as this point of view insists, Arafat believes that to compromise in areas such as Jerusalem and refugees would mean accepting Israel's moral legitimacy. This he will never do, and this is why Camp David and Taba had to fail.

If this second view of Arafat is correct, then peace is clearly not possible as long as he remains the leader of the Palestinians. This is the view shared by the present Israeli prime minister and the White House, and the evidence suggests that this second view is the correct one. Arafat evidently cannot bring himself to accept the Jewish right to national self-determination. He has *never* spoken of legitimate Jewish national rights, and he has never admitted that there ever was a Temple in Jerusalem, since doing so would admit that there are deep historic Jewish roots in the land, and that Israel is not merely a Western-concocted post-Holocaust phenomenon. It is telling that in a speech to the UN Racism conference in Durban, South Africa in September 2001, Arafat blasted Israel for practicing "apartheid" and then broadly hinted that Israel's existence was not legitimate, but the "result of the rivalry and conspiracies of the colonialist forces in the region at that time." This is why Arafat seems to think that history is his ally. In a post-Camp David whirlwind diplomatic tour, Arafat stopped in Jakarta on August 16, 2000, where Indonesia's former president, Abdurrahman Wahid, urged him to end the conflict with Israel. The reply? "Arafat confessed to me that in a hundred years, Israel will disappear. So why hurry to recognize it?"¹⁷

The issue of the moral legitimacy of a Jewish state is not just a theoretical issue but a central practical one, since any deal reached will require the Palestinian main-

stream to engage in an ongoing confrontation with irredentist rejectionists among them in order for peace and stability to be maintained. If Israel lacks moral legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian leadership, true moderates can never win an internal Palestinian struggle.

IN LIGHT OF all this, it is curious how the Taba myth has taken hold among Arab, European and some American elites. Perhaps diplomats needed to present Taba as a success, or as merely a "process problem" that could easily be overcome, since alternative conclusions were too painful to countenance. If Arafat could not accept even a very generous peace deal, further negotiations would be futile, confrontation inevitable, and the need to find alternative Palestinian leadership as daunting as it was inescapable.

There is also a less charitable explanation. Taba represents the most concessionary of all Israeli proposals tabled so far, so to say that it nearly succeeded works as a means to establish Taba as a baseline for the next round. In other words, those not positively disposed toward Israel may well see the myth of Taba as a way to increase pressure against it, whether or not there is ever a final status agreement. Indeed, for some unreconstructed Nasserites in the Arab world, an insistence on Taba is an assurance that no peace deal will ever be signed, except one that it is utterly unworkable. If one believes, as Arafat seems to, that time works against Israeli survival, than pretending that Taba was a close call makes perfect sense. It precludes the end of the conflict and makes it look like Israel is the obstacle to peace.

In the wake of President Bush's June 24, 2002 call for Arafat's removal almost two years after Taba, and amid growing

¹⁷Wahid interview, *Yediot Ahrnot*, May 10, 2002.

calls from Palestinians for reform, history may nevertheless get a reprieve. Most Israelis and Palestinians know that a two-state solution is inevitable, and it will probably come close in the end to the Clinton parameters. Specifically, it must be clear that Palestinian refugees can go to Palestine, not Israel, lest Israel lose its Jewish character. Moreover, there must be agreement on a formula that avoids exclusive sovereignty over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem so that the religious sensitivities of both sides are preserved. Finally, it must be clear that this deal ends the conflict between these two peoples and that each respects the moral legitimacy of the other's national project.

Unlike Arafat, many Palestinian negotiators have privately supported an honorable compromise with Israel. For

its part, the Israeli public has repeatedly demonstrated that when there is hope for peace, it will support far-reaching concessions—and it will elect a new government to make those concessions if that is what is required. Getting there will be harder now thanks to the mistrust that has accrued during the past two years of violence. Nonetheless, new leadership among the Palestinians in the wake of a successful campaign against Iraq might well bring us to a tipping point—but that tipping point will fall the wrong way if the Taba myth is not dispelled. It does not represent a tragically missed model for a stable and sustainable peace. Properly understood, it reveals the roots of failure, and the motives of those who see failure in much too positive a light. □

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Duties generally include research, writing, and administrative support. Interns typically work 15-20 hours per week; scheduling is flexible within normal office hours (9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.). For further information, please contact Katrina Hochstetler at 202-887-1000. To apply, please send a résumé and cover letter specifying the program(s) of your interest to Ms. Hochstetler by email to khochstetler@nixoncenter.org, by fax to 202-887-5222, or by mail to *The Nixon Center*, 1615 L Street, NW, Suite 1250, Washington, DC 20036.