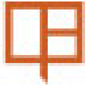

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Special Documents

The Palestinian-Israeli Camp David Negotiations and Beyond

It was not until a year after the collapse of the Camp David talks in July 2000 that authoritative voices in the U.S. press began to challenge what had become virtual dogma: that Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat had rejected the unprecedentedly "generous offer" of Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, which reportedly involved the return of the quasi-totality of Palestinian territory. Among the consequences of this dogma is the widespread notion of Palestinian responsibility for the al-Aqsa intifada that erupted a month later.

Foremost among the new challenges to these perceptions in the U.S. mainstream press are the two articles reproduced below. The first, published in the 9 August 2001 issue of the New York Review of Books*, is by Robert Malley, who participated in the Camp David summit as President Bill Clinton's special assistant for Arab-Israeli affairs at the National Security Council, and Hussein Agha, an editor of* JPS*'s sister publication,* Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, with close ties to the Palestinian negotiators. The second, published in the* New York Times *on 26 July 2001, is by Deborah Sontag, the newspaper's correspondent in Jerusalem.*

"Camp David: Tragedy of Errors," by Robert Malley and Hussein Agha, *New York Review of Books*, 9 August 2001

In accounts of what happened at the July 2000 Camp David summit and the following months of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, we often hear about Ehud Barak's unprecedented offer and Yasser Arafat's uncompromising no. Israel is said to have made a historic, generous proposal, which the Palestinians, once again seizing the opportunity to miss an opportunity, turned down. In short, the failure to reach a final agreement is attributed, without notable dissent, to Yasser Arafat.

As orthodoxies go, this is a dangerous one. For it has larger ripple effects. Broader conclusions take hold. That there is no peace partner is one. That there is no possible end to the conflict with Arafat is another.

For a process of such complexity, the diagnosis is remarkably shallow. It ignores history, the dynamics of the negotiations, and the relationships among the three parties. In so doing, it fails to capture why what so many viewed as a generous Israeli offer, the Palestinians viewed as neither generous, nor Israeli, nor, indeed, as an offer. Worse, it acts as a harmful constraint on American policy by offering up a single, convenient culprit—Arafat—rather than a more nuanced and realistic analysis.

1.

Each side came to Camp David with very different perspectives, which led, in turn, to highly divergent approaches to the talks.

Journal of Palestine Studies XXXI, no. 1 (Autumn 2001), pp. 62-85.

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Ehud Barak was guided by three principles. First was a deep antipathy toward the concept of gradual steps that lay at the heart of the 1993 Oslo agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. In his view, the withdrawals of Israeli forces from parts of Gaza and the West Bank during the preceding seven years had forced Israel to pay a heavy price without getting anything tangible in return and without knowing the scope of the Palestinians' final demands. A second axiom for Barak was that the Palestinian leadership would make a historic compromise—if at all—only after it had explored and found unappealing all other possibilities.

An analysis of Israeli politics led to Barak's third principle. Barak's team was convinced that the Israeli public would ratify an agreement with the Palestinians, even one that entailed far-reaching concessions, so long as it was final and brought quiet and normalcy to the country. But Barak and his associates also felt that the best way to bring the agreement before the Israeli public was to minimize any political friction along the way. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had paid a tremendous political (and physical) price by alienating the Israeli right wing and failing to bring its members along during the Oslo process. Barak was determined not to repeat that mistake. Paradoxically, a government that believed it enjoyed considerable latitude concerning the terms of the ultimate deal felt remarkably constrained on the steps it could take to get there. Bearing these principles in mind helps us to make sense of the Israeli government's actions during this period.

To begin, Barak discarded a number of interim steps, even those to which Israel was formally committed by various agreements—including a third partial redeployment of troops from the West Bank, the transfer to Palestinian control of three villages abutting Jerusalem, and the release of Palestinians imprisoned for acts committed before the Oslo agreement. He did not want to estrange the Right prematurely or be (or appear to be) a "sucker" by handing over assets, only to be rebuffed on the permanent status deal. In Barak's binary cost-benefit analysis, such steps did not add up: on the one hand, if Israelis and Palestinians reached a final agreement, all these minor steps (and then some) would be taken; on the other hand, if the parties failed to reach a final agreement, those steps would have been wasted. What is more, concessions to the Palestinians would cost Barak precious political capital he was determined to husband until the final, climactic moment.

The better route, he thought, was to present all concessions and all rewards in one comprehensive package that the Israeli public would be asked to accept in a national referendum. Oslo was being turned on its head. It had been a wager on success—a blank check signed by two sides willing to take difficult preliminary steps in the expectation that they would reach an agreement. Barak's approach was a hedge against failure—a reluctance to make preliminary concessions out of fear that they might not.

Much the same can be said about Israel's expansion of the West Bank settlements, which proceeded at a rapid pace. Barak saw no reason to needlessly alienate the settler constituency. Moreover, insofar as new housing units were being established on land that Israel ultimately would annex under a permanent deal—at least any permanent deal Barak would sign—he saw no harm to the Palestinians in permitting such construction. In other words, Barak's single-minded focus on the big picture only magnified in his eyes the significance—and cost—of the small steps. Precisely because he was willing to move a great distance in a final agreement (on territory or on Jerusalem, for example), he was unwilling to move an inch in the preamble (prisoners, settlements, troop redeployment, Jerusalem villages).

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Barak's principles also shed light on his all-or-nothing approach. In Barak's mind, Arafat had to be made to understand that there was no "third way," no "reversion to the interim approach," but rather a corridor leading either to an agreement or to confrontation. Seeking to enlist the support of the U.S. and European nations for this plan, he asked them to threaten Arafat with the consequences of his obstinacy: the blame would be laid on the Palestinians and relations with them would be downgraded. Likewise, and throughout Camp David, Barak repeatedly urged the U.S. to avoid mention of any fallback options or of the possibility of continued negotiations in the event the summit failed.

In Barak's mind, Arafat had to be made to understand that there was no "third way," but rather a corridor leading either to an agreement or to confrontation.

The prime minister's insistence on holding a summit and the timing of the Camp David talks followed naturally. Barak was prepared to have his negotiators engage in preliminary discussions, which in fact took place for several months prior to Camp David. But for him, these were not the channels in which real progress could be made. Only by insisting on a single, high-level summit could all the necessary ingredients of success be present: the drama of a stark, all-or-nothing proposal; the prospect that Arafat might lose U.S. support; the exposure of the ineffectiveness of Palestinian salami-tactics (pocketing Israeli concessions that become the starting point at the next round); and, ultimately, the capacity to unveil to the Israeli people all the achievements and concessions of the deal in one fell swoop.

2.

In Gaza and the West Bank, Barak's election was greeted with mixed emotions. Benjamin Netanyahu, his immediate predecessor, had failed to implement several of Israel's signed obligations and, for that reason alone, his defeat was welcome. But during his campaign, Barak had given no indication that he was prepared for major compromises with the Palestinians. Labor back in power also meant Tel Aviv back in Washington's good graces; Netanyahu's tenure, by contrast, had seen a gradual cooling of America's relations with Israel and a concomitant warming of its relations with the Palestinian Authority.

Palestinians were looking for early reassuring signs from Barak; his first moves were anything but. His broad government coalition (an assortment of peace advocates and hard-liners), his tough positions on issues like Jerusalem, and his reluctance to confront the settlers all contributed to an early atmosphere of distrust. Delays in addressing core Palestinian concerns—such as implementing the 1998 Wye Agreement (which Barak chose to renegotiate) or beginning permanent status talks (which Barak postponed by waiting to name a lead negotiator)—were particularly irksome given the impatient mood that prevailed in the territories. Seen from Gaza and the West Bank, Oslo's legacy read like a litany of promises deferred or unfulfilled. Six years after the agreement, there were more Israeli settlements, less freedom of movement, and worse economic conditions. Powerful Palestinian constituencies—the intellectuals, security establishment, media, business community, "state" bureaucrats, political activists—whose support was vital for any peace effort were disillusioned with the results of the peace process, doubtful of Israel's willingness to implement signed agreements, and, now, disenchanted with Barak's rhetoric and actions.

Perhaps most disturbing was Barak's early decision to concentrate on reaching a deal with Syria rather than with the Palestinians, a decision that Arafat experienced as

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a triple blow. The Palestinians saw it as an instrument of pressure, designed to isolate them; as a delaying tactic that would waste precious months; and as a public humiliation, intended to put them in their place. Over the years, Syria had done nothing to address Israeli concerns. There was no recognition, no bilateral contacts, not even a suspension of assistance to groups intent on fighting Israel. During that time, the PLO had recognized Israel, countless face-to-face negotiations had taken place, and Israeli and Palestinian security services had worked hand in hand. In spite of all this, Hafiz al-Asad—not Arafat—was the first leader to be courted by the new Israeli government.

In March 2000, after the failed Geneva summit between Clinton and President Asad made clear that the Syrian track had run its course, Barak chose to proceed full steam ahead with the Palestinians, setting a deadline of only a few months to reach a permanent agreement. But by then, the frame of mind on the other side was anything but receptive. It was Barak's timetable, imposed after his Syrian gambit had failed, and designed with his own strategy in mind. Arafat was not about to oblige.

Indeed, behind almost all of Barak's moves, Arafat believed he could discern the objective of either forcing him to swallow an unconscionable deal or mobilizing the world to isolate and weaken the Palestinians if they refused to yield. Barak's stated view that the alternative to an agreement would be a situation far grimmer than the status quo created an atmosphere of pressure that only confirmed Arafat's suspicions—and the greater the pressure, the more stubborn the belief among Palestinians that Barak was trying to dupe them.

Moreover, the steps Barak undertook to husband his resources while negotiating a historical final deal were interpreted by the Palestinians as efforts to weaken them while imposing an unfair one. Particularly troubling from this perspective was Barak's attitude toward the interim commitments, based on the Oslo, Wye, and later agreements. Those who claim that Arafat lacked interest in a permanent deal miss the point. Like Barak, the Palestinian leader felt that permanent status negotiations were long overdue; unlike Barak, he did not think that this justified doing away with the interim obligations.

For Arafat, interim and permanent issues are inextricably linked—"part and parcel of each other," he told the president—precisely because they must be kept scrupulously separate. Unfulfilled interim obligations did more than cast doubt on Israel's intent to deliver; in Arafat's eyes, they directly affected the balance of power that was to prevail once permanent status negotiations commenced.

To take the simplest example: if Israel still held on to land that was supposed to be turned over during the interim phase, then the Palestinians would have to negotiate over *that* land as well during permanent status negotiations. And while Barak claimed that unfulfilled interim obligations would be quickly forgotten in the event that the summit succeeded, Arafat feared that they might just as quickly be ignored in the event that it failed. In other words, Barak's seemed a take-it-or-leave-it proposition in which leaving it meant forsaking not only the permanent status proposal, but also a further withdrawal of Israeli forces, the Jerusalem villages, the prisoner releases, and other interim commitments. Worse, it meant being confronted with the new settlement units in areas that Barak self-confidently assumed would be annexed to Israel under a permanent status deal.

In many ways, Barak's actions led to a classic case of misaddressed messages: the intended recipients of his tough statements—the domestic constituency he was seeking to carry with him—barely listened, while their unintended recipients—the Palestinians he would sway with his final offer—listened only too well. Never convinced

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that Barak was ready to go far at all, the Palestinians were not about to believe that he was holding on to his assets in order to go far enough. For them, his goals were to pressure the Palestinians, lower their expectations, and worsen their alternatives. In short, everything Barak saw as evidence that he was serious, the Palestinians considered to be evidence that he was not.

For these reasons, Camp David seemed to Arafat to encapsulate his worst nightmares. It was high-wire summitry, designed to increase the pressure on the Palestinians to reach a quick agreement while heightening the political and symbolic costs if they did not. And it clearly was a Clinton-Barak idea both in concept and timing, and for that reason alone highly suspect. That the U.S. issued the invitations despite Israel's refusal to carry out its earlier commitments and despite Arafat's plea for additional time to prepare only reinforced in his mind the sense of a U.S.-Israeli conspiracy.

On 15 June, during his final meeting with Clinton before Camp David, Arafat set forth his case: Barak had not implemented prior agreements, there had been no progress in the negotiations, and the prime minister was holding all the cards. The only conceivable outcome of going to a summit, he told Secretary [of State Madeleine] Albright, was to have everything explode in the president's face. If there is no summit, at least there will still be hope. The summit is our last card, Arafat said—do you really want to burn it? In the end, Arafat went to Camp David, for not to do so would have been to incur America's anger; but he went intent more on surviving than on benefiting from it.

3.

Given both the mistrust and tactical clumsiness that characterized the two sides, the United States faced a formidable challenge. At the time, though, administration officials believed there was a historic opportunity for an agreement. Barak was eager for a deal, wanted it achieved during Clinton's term in office, and had surrounded himself with some of Israel's most peace-minded politicians. For his part, Arafat had the opportunity to preside over the first Palestinian state, and he enjoyed a special bond with Clinton, the first U.S. president to have met and dealt with him. As for Clinton, he was prepared to devote as much of his presidency as it took to make the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations succeed. A decision *not* to seize the opportunity would have produced as many regrets as the decision to seize it produced recriminations.

Neither the president nor his advisers were blind to the growing distrust between the two sides or to Barak's tactical missteps. They had been troubled by his decision to favor negotiations with the "other woman," the Syrian president, who distracted him from his legitimate, albeit less appealing, Palestinian bride-to-be. Barak's inability to create a working relationship with Arafat was bemoaned in the administration; his entreaties to the Americans to "expose" and "unmask" Arafat to the world were largely ignored.

When Barak reneged on his commitment to transfer the three Jerusalem villages to the Palestinians—a commitment the prime minister had specifically authorized Clinton to convey, in the president's name, to Arafat—Clinton was furious. As he put it, this was the first time that he had been made out to be a "false prophet" to a foreign leader. And, in an extraordinary moment at Camp David, when Barak retracted some of his positions, the president confronted him, expressing all his accumulated frustra-

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tions. "I can't go see Arafat with a retrenchment! You can sell it; there is no way I can. This is not real. This is not serious. I went to Shepherdstown [for the Israeli-Syrian negotiations] and was told nothing by you for four days. I went to Geneva [for the summit with Asad] and felt like a wooden Indian doing your bidding. I will not let it happen here!"

In the end, though, and on almost all these questionable tactical judgments, the U.S. either gave up or gave in, reluctantly acquiescing in the way Barak did things out of respect for the things he was trying to do. For there was a higher good, which was Barak's determination to reach peace agreements with Syria and the Palestinians. As early as July 1999, during their first meeting, Barak had outlined to Clinton his vision of a comprehensive peace. He provided details regarding his strategy, a timetable, even the (astronomical) U.S. funding that would be required for Israel's security, Palestinian and Syrian economic assistance, and refugee resettlement. These were not the words of a man with a ploy but of a man with a mission.

The relationship between Clinton and Barak escapes easy classification. The president, a political pro, was full of empathy, warmth, and personal charm; the prime minister, a self-proclaimed political novice, was mainly at ease with cool, logical argument. Where the president's tactics were fluid, infinitely adaptable to the reactions of others, Barak's every move seemed to have been conceived and then frozen in his own mind. At Camp David, Clinton offered Barak some advice: "You are smarter and more experienced than I am in war. But I am older in politics. And I have learned from my mistakes."

Yet in their political relations, the two men were genuine intimates. For all his complicated personality traits, Barak was deemed a privileged partner because of his determination to reach a final deal and the risks he was prepared to take to get there. When these were stacked against Arafat's perceived inflexibility and emphasis on interim commitments, the administration found it hard not to accommodate Barak's requests. As the president told Arafat three weeks before Camp David began, he largely agreed with the chairman's depiction of Barak—politically maladroit, frustrating, lacking in personal touch. But he differed with Arafat on a crucial point: he was convinced that Barak genuinely wanted a historic deal.

The president's decision to hold the Camp David summit despite Arafat's protestations illuminates much about U.S. policy during this period. In June, Barak—who for some time had been urging that a summit be rapidly convened—told the president and Secretary Albright that Palestinian negotiators had not moved an inch and that his negotiators had reached the end of their compromises; anything more would have to await a summit. He also warned that without a summit, his government (at least in its current form) would be gone within a few weeks.

At the same time, Arafat posed several conditions for agreeing to go to a summit. First, he sought additional preparatory talks to ensure that Camp David would not fail. Second, he requested that the third Israeli territorial withdrawal be implemented before Camp David—a demand that, when rebuffed by the U.S., turned into a request that the U.S. "guarantee" the withdrawal even if Camp David did not yield an agreement (what he called a "safety net"). A third Palestinian request—volunteered by Clinton, rather than being demanded by Arafat—was that the U.S. remain neutral in the event the summit failed and not blame the Palestinians.

The administration by and large shared Arafat's views. The Palestinians' most legitimate concern, in American eyes, was that without additional preparatory work the risk of failure was too great. In June, speaking of a possible summit, Clinton told

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Barak, "I want to do this, but not under circumstances that will kill Oslo." Clinton also agreed with Arafat on the need for action on the interim issues. He extracted a commitment from Barak that the third Israeli withdrawal would take place with or without a final deal, and, in June, he privately told the chairman he would support a "substantial" withdrawal were Camp David to fail. Describing all the reasons for Arafat's misgivings, he urged Barak to put himself "in Arafat's shoes" and to open the summit with a series of goodwill gestures toward the Palestinians. Finally, Clinton assured Arafat on the eve of the summit that he would not be blamed if the summit did not succeed. "There will be," he pledged, "no finger-pointing."

Clinton assured Arafat on the eve of the summit that he would not be blamed if the summit did not succeed. "There will be," he pledged, "no finger-pointing."

Yet, having concurred with the Palestinians' contentions on the merits, the U.S. immediately proceeded to disregard them. Ultimately, there was neither additional preparation before the summit, nor a third redeployment of Israeli troops, nor any action on interim issues. And Arafat got blamed in no uncertain terms.

Why this discrepancy between promise and performance? Most importantly, because Barak's reasoning—and his timetable—had an irresistible logic to them. If nothing was going to happen at presummit negotiations—and nothing was—if his government was on the brink of collapse, and if he would put on Camp David's table concessions he had not made before, how could the president say no? What would be gained by waiting? Certainly not the prospect offered by Arafat—another interminable negotiation over a modest territorial withdrawal. And most probably, as many analysts predicted, an imminent confrontation, if Arafat proceeded with his plan to unilaterally announce a state on 13 September 2000, or if the frustration among the Palestinians—of which the world had had a glimpse during the May 2000 upheaval—were to reach boiling point once again.

As for the interim issues, U.S. officials believed that whatever Palestinian anger resulted from Israeli lapses would evaporate in the face of an appealing final deal. As a corollary, from the president on down, U.S. officials chose to use their leverage with the Israelis to obtain movement on the issues that had to be dealt with in a permanent agreement rather than expend it on interim ones.

The president's decision to ignore his commitment to Arafat and blame the Palestinians after the summit points to another factor, which is how the two sides were perceived during the negotiations. As seen from Washington, Camp David exemplified Barak's political courage and Arafat's political passivity, risk-taking on the one hand, risk-aversion on the other. The first thing on the president's mind after Camp David was thus to help the prime minister, whose concessions had jeopardized his political standing at home. Hence the finger-pointing. And the last thing on Clinton's mind was to insist on a further Israeli withdrawal. Hence the absence of a safety net. This brings us to the heart of the matter—the substance of the negotiations themselves, and the reality behind the prevailing perception that a generous Israeli offer met an unyielding Palestinian response.

4.

Was there a generous Israeli offer and, if so, was it peremptorily rejected by Arafat?

If there is one issue that Israelis agree on, it is that Barak broke every conceivable taboo and went as far as any Israeli prime minister had gone or could go. Coming into

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office on a pledge to retain Jerusalem as Israel's "eternal and undivided capital," he ended up appearing to agree to Palestinian sovereignty—first over some, then over all, of the Arab sectors of East Jerusalem. Originally adamant in rejecting the argument that Israel should swap some of the occupied West Bank territory for land within its 1967 borders, he finally came around to that view. After initially speaking of a Palestinian state covering roughly 80 percent of the West Bank, he gradually moved up to the low 90s before acquiescing to the mid-90s range.

Even so, it is hard to state with confidence how far Barak was actually prepared to go. His strategy was predicated on the belief that Israel ought not to reveal its final positions—not even to the United States—unless and until the endgame was in sight. Had any member of the U.S. peace team been asked to describe Barak's true positions before or even during Camp David—indeed, were any asked that question today—they would be hard-pressed to answer. Barak's worst fear was that he would put forward Israeli concessions and pay the price domestically, only to see the Palestinians using the concessions as a new point of departure. And his trust in the Americans went only so far, fearing that they might reveal to the Palestinians what he was determined to conceal.

As a consequence, each Israeli position was presented as unmovable, a red line that approached "the bone" of Israeli interests; this served as a means of both forcing the Palestinians to make concessions and preserving Israel's bargaining positions in the event they did not. On the eve of Camp David, Israeli negotiators described their purported red lines to their American counterparts: the annexation of more than 10 percent of the West Bank, sovereignty over parts of the strip along the Jordan River, and rejection of any territorial swaps. At the opening of Camp David, Barak warned the Americans that he could not accept Palestinian sovereignty over any part of East Jerusalem other than a purely symbolic "foothold." Earlier, he had claimed that if Arafat asked for 95 percent of the West Bank, there would be no deal. Yet, at the same time, he gave clear hints that Israel was willing to show more flexibility if Arafat was prepared to "contemplate" the endgame. Bottom lines and false bottoms: the tension, and the ambiguity, were always there.

Gradual shifts in Barak's positions also can be explained by the fact that each proposal seemed to be based less on a firm estimate of what Israel had to hold on to and more on a changing appraisal of what it could obtain. Barak apparently took the view that, faced with a sufficiently attractive proposal and an appropriately unattractive alternative, the Palestinians would have no choice but to say yes. In effect, each successive Palestinian "no" led to the next best Israeli assessment of what, in their right minds, the Palestinians couldn't turn down.

The final and largely unnoticed consequence of Barak's approach is that, strictly speaking, there never was an Israeli offer. Determined to preserve Israel's position in the event of failure, and resolved not to let the Palestinians take advantage of one-sided compromises, the Israelis always stopped one, if not several, steps short of a proposal. The ideas put forward at Camp David were never stated in writing, but orally conveyed. They generally were presented as U.S. concepts, not Israeli ones; indeed, despite having demanded the opportunity to negotiate face to face with Arafat, Barak refused to hold any substantive meeting with him at Camp David out of fear that the Palestinian leader would seek to put Israeli concessions on the record. Nor were the proposals detailed. If written down, the American ideas at Camp David would have covered no more than a few pages. Barak and the Americans insisted that

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Arafat accept them as general "bases for negotiations" before launching into more rigorous negotiations.

According to those "bases," Palestine would have sovereignty over 91 percent of the West Bank; Israel would annex 9 percent of the West Bank and, in exchange, Palestine would have sovereignty over parts of pre-1967 Israel equivalent to 1 percent of the West Bank, but with no indication of where either would be. On the highly sensitive issue of refugees, the proposal spoke only of a "satisfactory solution." Even on Jerusalem, where the most detail was provided, many blanks remained to be filled in. Arafat was told that Palestine would have sovereignty over the Muslim and Christian Quarters of the Old City, but only a loosely defined "permanent custodianship" over the Haram al-Sharif, the third holiest site in Islam. The status of the rest of the city would fluctuate between Palestinian sovereignty and functional autonomy. Finally, Barak was careful not to accept anything. His statements about positions he could support were conditional, couched as a willingness to negotiate on the basis of the U.S. proposals so long as Arafat did the same.

5.

Much as they tried, the Palestinian leaders have proved utterly unable to make their case. In Israel and the U.S., they are consistently depicted as uncompromising and incapable of responding to Barak's supreme effort. Yet, in their own eyes, they were the ones who made the principal concessions.

For all the talk about peace and reconciliation, most Palestinians were more resigned to the two-state solution than they were willing to embrace it; they were prepared to accept Israel's existence, but not its moral legitimacy. The war for the whole of Palestine was over because it had been lost. Oslo, as they saw it, was not about negotiating peace terms but terms of surrender. Bearing this perspective in mind explains the Palestinians' view that Oslo itself is the historic compromise—an agreement to concede 78 percent of mandatory Palestine to Israel. And it explains why they were so sensitive to the Israelis' use of language. The notion that Israel was "offering" land, being "generous," or "making concessions" seemed to them doubly wrong—in a single stroke both affirming Israel's right and denying the Palestinians'. For the Palestinians, land was not given but given back.

Even during the period following the Oslo agreement, the Palestinians considered that they were the ones who had come up with creative ideas to address Israeli concerns. While denouncing Israeli settlements as illegal, they accepted the principle that Israel would annex some of the West Bank settlements in exchange for an equivalent amount of Israeli land being transferred to the Palestinians. While insisting on the Palestinian refugees' right to return to homes lost in 1948, they were prepared to tie this right to a mechanism of implementation providing alternative choices for the refugees while limiting the numbers returning to Israel proper. Despite their insistence on Israel's withdrawal from all lands occupied in 1967, they were open to a division of East Jerusalem granting Israel sovereignty over its Jewish areas (the Jewish Quarter, the Wailing Wall, and the Jewish neighborhoods) in clear contravention of this principle.

These compromises notwithstanding, the Palestinians never managed to rid themselves of their intransigent image. Indeed, the Palestinians' principal failing is that from the beginning of the Camp David summit onward they were unable either to say yes to the American ideas or to present a cogent and specific counterproposal of their

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own. In failing to do either, the Palestinians denied the U.S. the leverage it felt it needed to test Barak's stated willingness to go the extra mile and thereby provoked the president's anger. When Abu Ala' [Ahmad Qurai'], a leading Palestinian negotiator, refused to work on a map to negotiate a possible solution, arguing that Israel first had to concede that any territorial agreement must be based on the line of June 4, 1967, the president burst out, "Don't simply say to the Israelis that their map is no good. Give me something better!" When Abu Ala' again balked, the president stormed out: "This is a fraud. It is not a summit. I won't have the United States covering for negotiations in bad faith. Let's quit!" Toward the end of the summit, an irate Clinton would tell Arafat: "If the Israelis can make compromises and you can't, I should go home. You have been here fourteen days and said no to everything. These things have consequences; failure will mean the end of the peace process. . . . Let's let hell break loose and live with the consequences."

How is one to explain the Palestinians' behavior? As has been mentioned earlier, Arafat was persuaded that the Israelis were setting a trap. His primary objective thus became to cut his losses rather than maximize his gains. That did not mean that he ruled out reaching a final deal, but that goal seemed far less attainable than others. Beyond that, much has to do with the political climate that prevailed within Palestinian society. Unlike the situation during and after Oslo, there was no coalition of powerful Palestinian constituencies committed to the success of Camp David. Groups whose support was necessary to sell any agreement had become disbelievers, convinced that Israel would neither sign a fair agreement nor implement what it signed. Palestinian negotiators, with one eye on the summit and another back home, went to Camp David almost apologetically, determined to demonstrate that this time they would not be duped. More prone to caution than to creativity, they viewed any U.S. or Israeli idea with suspicion. They could not accept the ambiguous formulations that had served to bridge differences between the parties in the past and that later, in their view, had been interpreted to Israel's advantage; this time around, only clear and unequivocal understandings would do.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of what is known as the Haram al-Sharif to Palestinians and the Temple Mount to Jews. The Americans spent countless hours seeking imaginative formulations to finesse the issue of which party would enjoy sovereignty over this sacred place—a coalition of nations, the United Nations Security Council, even God himself was proposed. In the end, the Palestinians would have nothing of it: the agreement had to give them sovereignty, or there would be no agreement at all.

Domestic hostility toward the summit also exacerbated tensions among the dozen or so Palestinian negotiators, which, never far from the surface, had grown as the stakes rose, with the possibility of a final deal and the coming struggle for succession. The negotiators looked over their shoulders, fearful of adopting positions that would undermine them back home. Appearing to act disparately and without a central purpose, each Palestinian negotiator gave preeminence to a particular issue, making virtually impossible the kinds of trade-offs that, inevitably, a compromise would entail. Ultimately, most chose to go through the motions rather than go for a deal. Ironically, Barak the democrat had far more individual leeway than Arafat the supposed autocrat. Lacking internal cohesion, Palestinian negotiators were unable to treat Camp David as a decisive, let alone a historic, gathering.

The Palestinians saw acceptance of the U.S. ideas, even as "bases for further negotiations," as presenting dangers of its own. The Camp David proposals were viewed

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as inadequate: they were silent on the question of refugees, the land exchange was unbalanced, and both the Haram and much of Arab East Jerusalem were to remain under Israeli sovereignty. To accept these proposals in the hope that Barak would then move further risked diluting the Palestinian position in a fundamental way: by shifting the terms of debate from the international legitimacy of United Nations resolutions on Israeli withdrawal and on refugee return to the imprecise ideas suggested by the U.S. Without the guarantee of a deal, this was tantamount to gambling with what the Palestinians considered their most valuable currency, international legality. The Palestinians' reluctance to do anything that might undercut the role of UN resolutions that applied to them was reinforced by Israel's decision to scrupulously implement those that applied to Lebanon and unilaterally withdraw from that country in the months preceding Camp David. Full withdrawal, which had been obtained by Egypt and basically offered to Syria, was now being granted to Lebanon. If Hizballah, an armed militia that still considered itself at war with Israel, had achieved such an outcome, surely a national movement that had been negotiating peacefully with Israel for years should expect no less.

The Palestinians' overall behavior, when coupled with Barak's conviction that Arafat merely wanted to extract Israeli concessions, led to disastrous results. The mutual and by then deeply entrenched suspicion meant that Barak would conceal his final proposals, the "endgame," until Arafat had moved, and that Arafat would not move until he could see the endgame. Barak's strategy was predicated on the idea that his firmness would lead to some Palestinian flexibility, which in turn would justify Israel's making further concessions. Instead, Barak's piecemeal negotiation style, combined with Arafat's unwillingness to budge, produced a paradoxical result. By presenting early positions as bottom lines, the Israelis provoked the Palestinians' mistrust; by subsequently shifting them, they whetted the Palestinians' appetite. By the end of the process, it was hard to tell which bottom lines were for real, and which were not.

6.

The United States had several different roles in the negotiations, complex and often contradictory: as principal broker of the putative peace deal; as guardian of the peace process; as Israel's strategic ally; and as its cultural and political partner. The ideas it put forward throughout the process bore the imprint of each.

As the broker of the agreement, the president was expected to present a final deal that Arafat could not refuse. Indeed, that notion was the premise of Barak's attraction to a summit. But the United States' ability to play the part was hamstrung by two of its other roles. First, America's political and cultural affinity with Israel translated into an acute sensitivity to Israeli domestic concerns and an exaggerated appreciation of Israel's substantive moves. American officials initially were taken aback when Barak indicated he could accept a division of the Old City or Palestinian sovereignty over many of Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods—a reaction that reflected less an assessment of what a "fair solution" ought to be than a sense of what the Israeli public could stomach. The U.S. team often pondered whether Barak could sell a given proposal to his people, including some he himself had made. The question rarely, if ever, was asked about Arafat.

A second constraint on the U.S. derived from its strategic relationship with Israel. One consequence of this was the "no-surprise rule," an American commitment, if not

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to clear, at least to share in advance, each of its ideas with Israel. Because Barak's strategy precluded early exposure of his bottom lines to anyone (the president included), he would invoke the "no-surprise rule" to argue against U.S. substantive proposals he felt went too far. The U.S. ended up (often unwittingly) presenting Israeli negotiating positions and couching them as rock-bottom red lines beyond which Israel could not go. Faced with Arafat's rejection, Clinton would obtain Barak's acquiescence in a somewhat improved proposal, and present it to the Palestinians as, once again, the best any Israeli could be expected to do. With the U.S. playing an endgame strategy ("this is it!") in what was in fact the middle of the game ("well, perhaps not"), the result was to depreciate the assets Barak most counted on for the *real* finale: the Palestinians' confidence in Clinton, U.S. credibility, and America's ability to exercise effective pressure. Nor was the U.S. tendency to justify its ideas by referring to Israeli domestic concerns the most effective way to persuade the Palestinians to make concessions. In short, the "no-surprise rule" held a few surprises of its own. In a curious, boomerang-like effect, it helped convince the Palestinians that any U.S. idea, no matter how forthcoming, was an Israeli one, and therefore both immediately suspect and eminently negotiable.

Seven years of fostering the peace process, often against difficult odds, further eroded the United States' effectiveness at this critical stage. The deeper Washington's investment in the process, the greater the stake in its success, and the quicker the tendency to indulge either side's whims and destructive behavior for the sake of salvaging it. U.S. threats and deadlines too often were ignored as Israelis and Palestinians appeared confident that the Americans were too busy running after the parties to think seriously of walking away.

Yet for all that, the United States had an important role in shaping the content of the proposals. One of the more debilitating effects of the visible alignment between Israel and the United States was that it obscured the real differences between them. Time and again, and usually without the Palestinians being aware of it, the president sought to convince the prime minister to accept what until then he had refused—among them the principle of land swaps, Palestinian sovereignty over at least part of Arab East Jerusalem, and, after Camp David, over the Haram al-Sharif, as well as a significantly reduced area of Israeli annexation. This led Barak to comment to the president that, on matters of substance, the U.S. was much closer to the Palestinians' position than to Israel's. This was only one reflection of a far wider pattern of divergence between Israeli and American positions—yet one that has systematically been ignored by Palestinians and other Arabs alike.

This inability to grasp the complex relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv cost Arafat dearly. By failing to put forward clear proposals, the Palestinians deprived the Americans of the instrument they felt they needed to further press the Israelis, and it led them to question both the seriousness of the Palestinians and their genuine desire for a deal. As the president repeatedly told Arafat during Camp David, he was not expecting him to agree to U.S. or Israeli proposals, but he was counting on him to say something he could take back to Barak to get him to move some more. "I need something to tell him," he implored. "So far, I have nothing."

Ultimately, the path of negotiation imagined by the Americans—get a position that was close to Israel's genuine bottom line; present it to the Palestinians; get a counterproposal from them; bring it back to the Israelis—took more than one wrong turn. It started without a real bottom line, continued without a counterproposal, and ended without a deal.

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7.

Beneath the superficial snapshot—Barak's offer, Arafat's rejection—lies a picture that is both complex and confusing. Designed to preserve his assets for the "moment of truth," Barak's tactics helped to ensure that the parties never got there. His decision to view everything through the prism of an all-or-nothing negotiation over a comprehensive deal led him to see every step as a test of wills, any confidence-building measure as a weakness-displaying one. Obsessed with Barak's tactics, Arafat spent far less time worrying about the substance of a deal than he did fretting about a possible ploy. Fixated on potential traps, he could not see potential opportunities. He never quite realized how far the prime minister was prepared to go, how much the U.S. was prepared to push, how strong a hand he had been dealt. Having spent a decade building a relationship with Washington, he proved incapable of using it when he needed it most. As for the United States, it never fully took control of the situation. Pulled in various and inconsistent directions, it never quite figured out which way to go, too often allowing itself to be used rather than using its authority.

Many of those inclined to blame Arafat alone for the collapse of the negotiations point to his inability to accept the ideas for a settlement put forward by Clinton on 23 December, five months after the Camp David talks ended. During these months additional talks had taken place between Israelis and Palestinians, and furious violence had broken out between the two sides. The president's proposal showed that the distance traveled since Camp David was indeed considerable, and almost all in the Palestinians' direction. Under the settlement outlined by the president, Palestine would have sovereignty over 94 to 96 percent of the West Bank and it would as well have land belonging to pre-1967 Israel equivalent to another 1 to 3 percent of West Bank territory. Palestinian refugees would have the right to return to their homeland in historic Palestine, a right that would guarantee their unrestricted ability to live in Palestine while subjecting their absorption into Israel to Israel's sovereign decision. In Jerusalem, all that is Arab would be Palestinian, all that is Jewish would be Israeli. Palestine would exercise sovereignty over the Haram and Israel over the Western Wall, through which it would preserve a connection to the location of the ancient Jewish Temple.

Unlike at Camp David, and as shown both by the time it took him to react and by the ambiguity of his reactions, Arafat thought hard before providing his response. But in the end, many of the features that troubled him in July came back to haunt him in December. As at Camp David, Clinton was not presenting the terms of a final deal, but rather "parameters" within which accelerated, final negotiations were to take place. As at Camp David, Arafat felt under pressure, with both Clinton and Barak announcing that the ideas would be off the table—would "depart with the president"—unless they were accepted by both sides. With only thirty days left in Clinton's presidency and hardly more in Barak's premiership, the likelihood of reaching a deal was remote at best; if no deal could be made, the Palestinians feared they would be left with principles that were detailed enough to supersede international resolutions yet too fuzzy to constitute an agreement.

Besides, and given the history of the negotiations, they were unable to escape the conclusion that these were warmed-over Israeli positions and that a better proposal may still have been forthcoming. In this instance, in fact, the United States had resisted last-minute Israeli attempts to water down the proposals on two key items—Palestinian sovereignty over the Haram and the extent of the territory of the Palestinian state. All told, Arafat preferred to continue negotiating under the comforting umbrella of

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international resolutions rather than within the confines of America's uncertain proposals. In January, a final effort between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in the Egyptian town of Taba (without the Americans) produced more progress and some hope. But it was, by then, at least to some of the negotiators, too late. On 20 January, Clinton had packed his bags and was on his way out. In Israel, meanwhile, Sharon was on his way in.

Had there been, in hindsight, a generous Israeli offer? Ask a member of the American team, and an honest answer might be that there was a moving target of ideas, fluctuating impressions of the deal the U.S. could sell to the two sides, a work in progress that reacted (and therefore was vulnerable) to the pressures and persuasion of both. Ask Barak, and he might volunteer that there was no Israeli offer and, besides, Arafat rejected it. Ask Arafat, and the response you might hear is that there was no offer; besides, it was unacceptable; that said, it had better remain on the table.

Offer or no offer, the negotiations that took place between July 2000 and February 2001 make up an indelible chapter in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This may be hard to discern today, amid the continuing violence and accumulated mistrust. But taboos were shattered, the unspoken got spoken, and, during that period, Israelis and Palestinians reached an unprecedented level of understanding of what it will take to end their struggle. When the two sides resume their path toward a permanent agreement—and eventually, they will—they will come to it with the memory of those remarkable eight months, the experience of how far they had come and how far they had yet to go, and with the sobering wisdom of an opportunity that was missed by all, less by design than by mistake, more through miscalculation than through mischief.

"QUEST FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE: HOW AND WHY IT FAILED," BY DEBORAH SONTAG, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 26 JULY 2001

Days before the Palestinian uprising erupted in September, Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Yasir Arafat held an unusually congenial dinner meeting in the Israeli's private home in Kochav Yair.

At one point, Mr. Barak even called President Clinton and, two months after the Camp David peace talks had failed, proclaimed that he and Mr. Arafat would become the ultimate Israeli-Palestinian peace partners. Within earshot of the Palestinian leader, according to an Israeli participant, Mr. Barak theatrically announced, "I'm going to be the partner of this man even more so than Rabin was," referring to Yitzhak Rabin, the late Israeli prime minister.

It was a moment that seems incredible in retrospect, now that Mr. Barak talks of having revealed "Arafat's true face" and Ariel Sharon, the present prime minister, routinely describes the Palestinian leader as a terrorist overlord.

But during the largely ineffectual cease-fire effort now under way in the Middle East, peace advocates, academics, and diplomats have begun excavating such moments to see what can be learned from the diplomacy right before and after the outbreak of violence. Their premise is that any renewal of peace talks, however remote that seems right now, would have to use the Barak-Clinton era as a point of departure or as an object lesson—or both.

In the tumble of the all-consuming violence, much has not been revealed or examined. Rather, a potent, simplistic narrative has taken hold in Israel and to some extent in the United States. It says: Mr. Barak offered Mr. Arafat the moon at Camp

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