



Awakening Sleeping Horses And What Lies Ahead....

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The State of the Negotiations

Throughout the seven years that have passed since the signing of the Oslo agreement Palestinians and Israelis, at leadership level, have been engaged in negotiation. During the course of this time Palestinians have had to contend with four consecutive Israeli governments, each with its own different leadership and political agendas. The peace process has increased deep-lying divisions among Israel's main political parties and still suffers from a lack of Israeli public support -less than 35% being prepared to accept the existence of a Palestinian state and even then sharing no clear vision on what shape such a state should take. This lack of understanding or refusal to accept reality is but one element of a larger existential problem in modern Israeli society. In recent years it has become obvious that there is growing crisis in Israel regarding the realization of what lies beyond the achievements of political Zionism as they have been represented by the state of Israel over the last 50 years. Palestinian public support for an envisaged future political settlement with Israel has also begun to rapidly decline, while the consensus commitment to bringing an end to the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state within the 1967 'lines' with Jerusalem as its capital has remained unshaken.

Ehud Barak, coming to power under the banner of a 'unified Israel' and with the bold claim of being able "to end 100 years of conflict," illustrated at once the parity between both left-wing Labor and right-wing Likud agendas vis-à-vis the Palestinians when he formulated and declared his 'unifying' four 'Nos': "no" to a return to the 1967 borders -as required by UN Resolution 242; "no" to the return of Palestinian refugees -as required by UN Resolution 194; "no" to any withdrawal from East Jerusalem and to accepting any Palestinian sovereignty over it - as required by UN Resolution 194 and 242; and "no" to the dismantling or 'freezing' of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories -in line with UN resolutions and international calls for them to be ceased, as illegal "obstacles to peace." Thus, from the outset, those who had seen in the ascendance of a new Israeli leadership a hope for change were immediately disappointed. Nevertheless, indications emerged from various analysts, suggesting that these constraints were intended primarily for 'domestic consumption' and were aimed at countering the efforts of Barak's opponents. The insinuation was that these 'pledges' should not necessarily be taken as the final word.

The Palestinians, in accordance with the timetable of the interim accords and the various re-negotiated versions had insisted upon the implementation of their numerous stipulations - the framework intended to govern the transitional phase - prior to entering the final phase of

permanent status negotiations. The Palestinians would have been reluctant to agree to defer to the final status phase, core negotiation issues such as refugees, water and Jerusalem if they had known that it would be seven years before they were to be discussed - a fact in itself in direct contravention of the Declaration of Principles (Art.V, Pt.II).

One might well note that it would have been highly unlikely that Egyptian President Sadat would have signed the Camp David Accords 22 years ago if he had anticipated a seemingly endless process of re-negotiation and postponement.

Palestinian frustration with Israeli refusal to implement the interim accords and their apparent lack of commitment to the Oslo Agreement was quickly leading to popular anger, disillusionment and mistrust. Israeli failure to redeploy as agreed, to open the safe passages between Gaza and the West Bank, to cease settlement expansions and to release Palestinian prisoners was leading people to the conclusion that their partner in the process was less than committed to the agreements signed. The Palestinians, despite international law being strongly on their side, were finding themselves helpless in the face of this Israeli intransigence and the apparent unwillingness of world leaders, including Arabs, to place the Israelis under any pressure to comply with either the agreements or international laws and conventions.

Leadership and Crisis

The General

From the outset Barak appeared to fear being seen as a lesser shadow of Yitzhak Rabin or even Menachem Begin and so went out of his way to emphasize his intention to go beyond their peace agreements (with Jordan in 1994 and Egypt in 1978 respectively). In his election campaign Barak promised to withdraw from southern Lebanon, sign a peace treaty with Syria and to secure a Palestinian agreement on ending the conflict. Upon forming his fragile coalition, simultaneously dependant on both secular leftist and religious orthodox parties, Barak approached these objectives from a number of angles. Early talks with Syria appeared to be an Israeli ploy to open the door for 'normalization' with Arab states at the expense of the Palestinians and to thereby place added pressure on the Palestinians to increase their "flexibility." These talks came to a dead end however, when the Israeli PM indicated his unwillingness to implement the agreed principle of "full withdrawal for full peace" and instead insisted on retaining a 10-meter strip on the Syrian side of Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee).

Barak's first serious attempt to resume direct negotiations with the Palestinians took place at Sharm Esh-Sheikh in September 1999, where he abrogated his predecessor Netanyahu's Wye River Agreement pledges and pushed through new accords to replace them. These effectively 'contained' Arafat's political will to unilaterally declare a state upon reaching the end of the transitional phase as prescribed in the Oslo timetable, while rescheduling the Israeli withdrawal and redefining its scale.

With successive Israeli administrations continuing to shift the 'Oslo goal-posts', the accords embodied in the interim agreements remain unimplemented to this day. Yet, as these vital issues have faded from Israel's immediate official agenda, the Palestinian leadership has found itself involved in both formal and secret channels of final status negotiation. This has happened in the face of a population becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the peace

'dividends' are essentially only for the Israelis and a newly emergent Palestinian elite as well as the fact that the so-called 'co-sponsor' of the peace process (the US) seemed willing to, if not intent on turning a blind eye towards the outstanding issues and unimplemented agreements.

The Old Man

It should be noted that since the arrival of the PLO establishment in the West Bank and Gaza a gap has emerged, slowly but seriously, between the 'returnees' - representing the 'old guard' of the PLO leadership (also referred to as the outsiders, *Muqawameh* or resistance generation) - and the 'insiders', mainly representing local institutions, NGOs, colleges, universities, professionals, academics and young activists who had earned reputation and popularity due to their role during the Intifada and through keeping Palestinian civil society functioning while resisting Israeli occupation. A part of these 'insiders' have their roots in the *shabiba* movement (Fateh Youth) and some are now members of the so-called *Tanzim*. Alongside them are the secular-leftists (e.g., PFLP, DFLP and Peoples' (communist) party supporters) as well as members of the Islamist movements. It is this generation of the Intifada, who, over the past seven years increasingly have discovered that they are to be the main losers in the evolution of a new Palestinian society. Having been denied educational opportunities, training or professional experience, they have found themselves too often forced into menial work and out of the effective strata of society.

It is these groups of 'insiders' who have been the most clear and vocal in their criticism of and opposition toward the negotiations- both in terms of content and in terms of the ability and knowledge of the negotiators. In addition, they have been increasingly disappointed with and critical of the emerging corrupt and undemocratic political system established and run by the PLO veterans, now operating under the banner of the *sulta* (Palestinian Authority, PA). It has been these 'insiders' along with some elements from within the 'returnees', considered to be that group's second 'layer' or 'outer circle', who have pointed to the abuse of authority, lack of transparency and respect for human rights on the part of the new authority; in doing so risking arrest and humiliation at the hands of their own people. The attempts to raise this voice of opposition and call for reform and change have been limited to certain groups or figures unable to mobilize the support of the masses needed to alter the PLO agenda. Even the elected Palestinian Legislative Council has failed to democratize the society or effect reform. Some individuals who dared to challenge this state of affairs met with strong threats (often of vicious smear campaigns) incarceration or worse. The 'Old Man' Yasser Arafat has been known to declare in private that he is, like any other Arab leader, the 'boss', the 'head' and the absolute authority.

The inner circle of the 'returnees'-being the old-guard of the PLO leadership, meanwhile, monopolized the negotiations, in spite - or maybe because - of their detachment from the realities on the ground, and soon showed an eager appetite for achieving all and any transitional agreement at the expense of the major issues upon which Palestinian independence depends. Motives ranging from personal profit, nepotism, political ambition or even simply resulting from a fear of democratic resistance to the established hierarchy meant that these 'self-declared leaders of the people' neither cared to represent the will of Palestinians nor to question the wisdom of the decisions being taken by and around them as long as they remained within the protected circle of beneficiaries; the new Palestinian VIPs.

One of the first revealing examples of this combination of political inability and disregard for the realities on the ground was given following the Hebron massacre in February 1994, when

a Jewish settler opened fire on Muslim worshippers in the Ibrahimi Mosque, killing 29. The 'insiders' had gained domestic, regional and international support for their demand to full evacuation of the Jewish settlers in the city prior to any contact or resumption of negotiation with the Israelis. The 'insiders' were then shocked when, although the Rabin government was seriously considering withdrawing the settlers, the PLO negotiators met their Israeli counterparts in Cairo, undermining the near achievement of what would have set a pivotal precedent by effecting the removal of settlers from the Occupied Territories.

Thus the 'returnees' allowed themselves to be pushed forward with a process which only added to the annoyance of the 'insiders' and showed no sign of redressing the problems of implementation, trust and integrity which were steadily turning the Palestinian people against both the negotiations and the negotiators.

Camp David II

Some time in May 2000, Barak and Clinton decided that by shifting secret talks which were being held between Ben-Ami and Abu Ala in Stockholm to a summit at Camp David they might be able to conclude a final framework agreement reflecting their own interests in return for fulfilling Arafat's lifelong goal of declaring a state (the most recent anticipated target date for this being 13/09/00). They also hoped to resuscitate the Barak government in the face of a divided society and Knesset (to reconvene 29/10/00) and to meet Clinton's ambition to leave the presidency with a Nobel Peace Prize nomination and a place in world history (US elections having been scheduled for 07/11/00).

Camp David spanned two weeks of July and carried with it the historical significance of the famous Sadat-Begin-Carter negotiations of 1978, and with them a reminder of the historical interest of the US in playing a prime role in securing Middle East peace. The Israelis arrived in Camp David with what they termed "historical political concessions," which, they emphasized, no other Israeli leadership would dare to consider offering.

A fact which neither the Israeli team nor the world's media mentioned was that whatever agreement Barak might have made with the Palestinian leadership would have been subject to the approval of the Knesset - where Barak was outnumbered and facing no-confidence votes. This important point did not escape the Palestinian negotiators, who were well aware of the paradox and the fact that the more generous Barak claimed to be, the less likely a significant agreement being reached became. One day before the Camp David summit, Cabinet Minister Yossi Sarid met Arafat in Gaza in order to assure the Palestinian leader of the sincerity of the Israeli government's efforts to seek an agreement with him. Sarid tried to 'water down' Arafat's suspicions regarding Barak's famous four nos.

Media leaks revealed that the framework upon which these secret talks had been based was taken from what is known as the 'Abu Mazen-Beilin document' of 1995. The Palestinian 'insiders', as well as the wider regional public condemned and opposed the rumored contents of such a document, the existence of which was denied repeatedly by Abu Mazen. This failed to convince the public on both sides and their feeling of mistrust proved right when on 22 September 2000 the magazine *Newsweek* surprisingly and suddenly published the text of the five-year old document.

When the Camp David summit convened in July it was clear to all parties that the discussions and proposals would revolve around the core issues thus far deferred for final status talks. Arafat had yielded to Washington pressure to meet at Camp David despite his conviction that "it [was] too early" to assess the prospects emerging from the secret 'back-channel' talks which had been underway. His delegation was made up of members of the old PLO political elite, all but one of them 'returnees'. Most strikingly, the two PLO Executive Committee members responsible for the refugee and Jerusalem portfolios were absent, once again adding to the state of mistrust and fuelling suspicions of a pre-arranged deal. Despite this, none of those who were ignored or excluded from the Camp David talks had the courage or political will to show their resentment or disapproval by resigning or even issuing a public statement. This silence was yet another disappointment for the wider public and led to further disillusionment with the Palestinian negotiators who were appearing ever more like a group of obedient employees and less and less like a forum for partnership and responsible representation.

In the first days of the Camp David summit Arafat invited some additional PLO members, representing the secular opposition, in what was interpreted as an attempt to broaden his support on the final status negotiations and spread the responsibility of the possibly impending decisions. Others perceived this move as a message to the Israelis and Americans that, regardless of the pressure they imposed upon him, Arafat and his PLO colleagues were in un-flinching agreement regarding his position, thereby reinforcing his position in the negotiations. Once these invited representatives became aware of the fact that they were to be so used rather than consulted, their fears of possible repercussions and criticisms from amongst their own supporters led them to depart for the territories immediately.

Refugees

The Israeli team refused to acknowledge any moral or legal responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem, merely offering a willingness to point out their 'sorrow' for what "happened" to the Palestinians during the first Arab-Israeli War. They simply refused to accept the 'right of return' equating it with a "war for the destruction of Israel," and therefore rejecting the notion of creating any kind of timetable or program for the implementation of that right.

Instead, the Israelis expressed their readiness to 'discuss' the issue of compensation for the Palestinian refugees, not, they insisted, from their pocket, but from that of the international community, in the form of a proposed new international body, to which they might contribute. At the same time they stressed that any such compensation should not go only to Palestinian refugees but also to those Jews who came to Israel from Arab countries - thus underlining the Israelis long-standing denial of the refugee problem.

The new element, or the 'surprise', which failed to impress and persuade the Palestinian negotiators, was an Israeli commitment to allow the return of some (unspecified) thousands of Palestinian refugees over a ten-year period through an Israeli screening program of 'family re-unification' and 'humanitarian relief'.

The Palestinian position on refugees-founded in and supported by international law, UN Resolutions and human rights conventions-has always been very clear. Every Palestinian refugee has the inalienable right of return and to compensation for losses arising from his or her dispossession and displacement (as required by UN Resolution 194 of 1948). An

admission on the part of Israel of their role in the creation of the refugee problem-something denied for more than 50 years-has been seen by the Palestinians as an integral component of any resolution of the issue and as a potentially highly significant signal of Israeli willingness to address with seriousness and respect the responsibilities which it faces.

At Camp David Israel again approached the issue as if it was of little consequence and returned to their tactic of stubbornly refusing to admit any historical, moral or legal responsibility for the Palestinian displacement.

Land, Borders and Security

The Israeli team laid two maps on the negotiating table (one emphasizing the annexation of 10% of the West Bank and the other 13.5%), in which there would be three expanded settlement blocs (one each in the north, the center and the south), interconnected by a network of bypass roads dividing and consuming Palestinian territory and, at the same time, enabling them to retain their absolute control over the West Bank aquifers.

Barak rejected any consideration of implementing UN Resolution 242 with his absolute refusal to return to the pre-1967 borders and insisted upon provisions obliging any future Palestinian state to accommodate Israeli early-warning stations in the West Bank and a military presence in the Jordan Valley. These demands were leveled in conjunction with the insistence that the Palestinians themselves were to be prevented from developing any form of military force.

According to Akram Hanieh, a member of the Palestinian negotiating team at Camp David, the Arafat had been prepared to accept 95% of the West Bank and an exchange of territories linked to the Israeli annexation of some settlement blocs and their continued military presence in the Jordan Valley. The Palestinian people were told repeatedly that this simply was not true but, in the absence of any Palestinian maps to counter those of the Israelis, the negotiators were unable to convince their critics of their having held any more solid position.

Jerusalem

The Palestinians, after seven years negotiating and struggling to express their position, were shocked by the thoughts put forward by the US and the scenarios envisaged by the Israelis for the future of the city.

The first of these shocks came in the form of an Israeli request for Jews to be able to enter and pray in the Al-Aqsa compound. This had, it should be noted, been hinted at in 'back-channel' talks in the past but had never been officially requested. In Camp David it became the request of Israeli secular officials supported by the US and linked to Israeli insistence on imposing their sovereignty over the holy site (Israeli negotiators claiming that, "the Temple is under the mosque").

Yasser Arafat rejected the notion of Israeli control over Al-Haram Ash-Sharif. In later rounds of talks the US proposed the formation of an international committee made up of the UN Security Council and Morocco (head and host nation of the Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of Islamic Conference, OIC), giving the future Palestinian state "custody" over the holy site, while affording Israeli sovereignty. This peculiar notion, as American legal experts explained, meant that Palestinian administration would be on the 'land' of the site while Israeli sovereignty

would be beneath it (so-called 'vertical sovereignty'). This sweeping disregard for the nature and holiness of the site only served to heighten the sense of injury felt by the Palestinians.

The American/Israeli ideas set out several systems for the future of East Jerusalem, including a special regime for the Old City whereby it would be divided, placing Muslim and Christian quarters under Palestinian administration and leaving Jewish and Armenian quarters under Israeli sovereignty. There would also be a special arrangement to grant the Palestinians a so-called 'sovereign compound' in the Al-Haram compound. As one member of the Palestinian delegation at Camp David put it, "When you draw a map of Jerusalem out of all these proposals you get a fragmented city falling under Israeli control, that would expel its Arab residents; and a city that is ruled by tension."

It should be stressed that these discussions did not cover the whole question of Jerusalem in terms of its geography (East and West) nor did it cover the UN 'Corpus Separatum' Resolution of 1947, but was instead limited to East Jerusalem, occupied since 1967.

Leaving Camp David

If one considers that the terms of reference guiding the Palestinian leadership in these negotiations were, as they should have been, international legitimacy, UN resolutions and the 'land-for-peace' formula, and not the accommodation of Zionist imperatives, then it is clear that any Palestinian leadership that would consider the proposals outlined above would have been committing political suicide. From the Israeli side, with Zionist ideological commitments as the sole frame of reference and as the ceiling limit in their negotiations, what Barak was presenting could be seen, and was presented as an Israeli concession.

Arafat had the vision and awareness at Camp David and afterwards to express his strong rejection of such proposals; describing these ideas as, "explosives which will set off massive fires in the region and the whole world." He warned that Israel's arguments were, "dangerous and destructive," and expressed his fear that such ideas could, "throw the region into an age of new religious conflict." At a press conference during the summit Arafat told his host and negotiating partner that, "The Arab leader who would surrender Jerusalem is not born yet."

The Camp David summit opened the negotiators' files on Jerusalem, with no more hidden agendas or taboos, and the political messages rebounded around the world's media, spreading awareness of the state of negotiations and proposals worldwide. The man in the street, coffee shop and home discussed these issues in detail. The religious component of the Jerusalem Question rose to the surface and, in the Arab-Palestinian consciousness, a wound was exposed.

Reports and Consultations

Following the summit Arafat embarked on an international tour, especially focusing on Muslim nations, in an attempt to expound upon and drum up support for the Palestinian position on Jerusalem. Upon his return to the Middle East Arafat attended two regional meetings of special relevance to the Jerusalem issue. The first of these was the Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo (20-21 August), which was followed a week later by the meeting in Agadir, Morocco, of the Jerusalem Committee of the OIC (28 August). Both resulted in unified statements endorsing the Palestinian position.

Arafat, accompanied for the first time by a Jerusalemite Muslim-Christian delegation, put on record before the foreign ministers and Arab media at the first of these events specific Israeli quotations regarding their proposal on Jerusalem at Camp David in July. Dispelling any previously held notions that the Israeli threat was solely directed toward 'indigenous' Palestinian issues, Arafat stressed that the message coming from Israel was one directly threatening Jerusalem and the holy sites. Adding that he would never make a compromise over this issue and that no such price could be paid for any form of statehood, the Palestinian leader repeated the argument he had repeatedly made at Camp David, i.e., that the responsibility of protecting Jerusalem and Islam's third most holy site was not a Palestinian duty, but that of the entire Arab and Muslim world.

The message, which the Palestinians carried with them from Camp David in relation to Israel's plans for Jerusalem, brought about a return on the part of the Arabs to the Holy City. It led to an Arab re-awakening, not least over the issue of legitimizing Israeli control over the Old City and Al-Haram - a notion that was never going to fade with geographical distance, or become more palatable once generous US aid programs were remembered.

By far the most relevant message to be understood from within these contexts was that which was directed toward the Israeli leadership. Having gathered around himself evidence of the wider Arab view that the Palestinians had conceded too much already and could not possibly be expected to make sacrifices concerning the holy city, and that nor should they be placed under further pressure to do so by America and Europe, Arafat met Barak at the latter's home near Tel Aviv. He came with a clear message, signaling his reticence to engage in further 'public relations'-style summits or talks, but instead inviting the Israeli leader to reconsider the Palestinian demand that the issue of East Jerusalem be resolved through the observance and implementation of UN Resolution 242.

On the Brink of War

The Sharon Episode

Then, in the early hours on 28 September 2000, Likud leader Ariel Sharon, accompanied by an escort of some 1,000 soldiers, and under the wider protection of some 3,000 troops deployed in the Old City, entered the Al-Haram Ash-Sharif compound and, in doing so, delivered four clear messages. The first - intended for the wider Israeli community - that the holy site should be open to any Jew. The second - to Prime Minister Barak - that the proposals at Camp David are not only ideas on paper but must be implemented on the ground. The third - to the Israeli Likud constituency - that he is still the only leader, not Netanyahu, who had just been acquitted of the charges against him and was likely to return to politics, where he would have held the better odds of securing the Likud leadership. The fourth message and the one which exceeded in importance the others was directed toward the Palestinians and took the form of a 'testing' of Palestinian and Arab reactions to the challenge of sharing the holy site under Israeli control and claimed sovereignty.

The Palestinian leadership, through various contacts, had warned Barak and his closest ministers of the consequences such a provocative visit would have. Unfortunately, their warning was underestimated and ignored. Sharon's tour on the Al-Aqsa compound lasted less than an hour but sparked Palestinian anger and frustration and led to a massacre of

Palestinian worshippers by Israeli soldiers after Friday prayers the following day, at the same site, enflaming the rest of the Palestinian territories and spreading unprecedented levels of popular fury throughout the wider region.

The Al-Aqsa Intifada

Barak, acting instinctively as a military general, ordered his chief of staff Gen. Mofaz, to rush to implement the long-prepared and widely publicized military plan originally drawn up in order to abort any Palestinian unilateral declaration of statehood. Barak had initially threatened Arafat with this Israeli military display of superiority in the week preceding the 13th of September (Arafat's most recently expired deadline for declaring a state according to the Oslo timetable). Tanks, helicopter gunships and heavy armaments were deployed at the entrances of major Palestinian population centers; Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip were isolated and sealed. Within two weeks over 100 Palestinians were dead and more than 3,000 injured - a frightening number of them blinded or paralyzed, leading to accusations of a shoot-to-kill policy. As the death toll mounted human rights groups, both internationally and locally, spoke out in disgust at the "excessive use of force" and "inappropriate and dangerous methods" employed by the Israeli occupation forces. The UN General Assembly led the way as the international community joined in expressing their outrage at Israeli actions on the ground, while Israeli commentators and media figures discussed the failings of the government PR operatives and Army spokesmen- as if dealing with a simple matter of 'presentation'.

The rising outrage expressed in the wake of such bloodshed came soon to be known as the '*Al-Aqsa Intifada*' and led to the awakening of the 'sleeping horses' of the Arab and Islamic worlds. It also found its immediate echo among the one million Palestinians living in Israel - shaking deeply all pretences of Arab-Israeli coexistence within the Jewish state. The Arab minority was treated as an enemy of the state; their demonstrations brutally crushed; their homes and property damaged and 13 of them killed (at least three by civilian Jewish Israelis). The extent of Arab anger within the 'Green Line' surprised the Israeli establishment and contradicted their attempts to describe the Intifada as an orchestrated Palestinian Authority attack on Israel. Their surprise came in spite of the fact that only 13 days before the Sharon 'visit' some 70,000 Israeli Arabs took to the streets of Um Al-Fahm pledging to defend Al-Aqsa and vowing not to "betray even one stone" of the holy site. Israel's reaction should thus be seen as, at least in part, further evidence of their insensitivity towards and unwillingness to represent their Arab minority.

Regional and international media reported unprecedented levels of public demonstrations of solidarity and fury in all Arab and Islamic capitals and major cities, the like of which had not even been seen during the Intifada of 1987. Arab hospitals in various countries opened their doors to hundreds of the injured Palestinian youths of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, bringing at once the pain, blood and suffering as well as the call for continued resistance into their own 'house'. This added to the popular solidarity of the street and found its reflection in enormous medical, financial and moral support for the Palestinians. Reacting to the pressure of such popular rage and in the face of incensed religious sentiments, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced the rescheduling of an urgent Arab summit, the first in four years, from its original date of January next year to 21 October 2000.

In the midst of this environment Hizbullah, in Southern Lebanon, captured three Israeli soldiers, adding a new factor to the Israeli crisis and causing waves of triumphant defiance to pass through the Palestinian territories. Barak responded with two ultimatums - the first, issued to the Palestinian leadership, demanded a halt to the 'Intifada' within 48 hours and the second, directed to the Syrian, Lebanese and the Hizbullah leaderships, calling for the immediate release of their soldiers, "or else..."

The new Syrian leader Bashar Assad was not intimidated by these threats. However, he accepted the advice of the Egyptians and Jordanians and restrained himself from involvement with the Israelis, instead allowing the focus of attention to be directed to the Palestinian issue as the core of the conflict.

The Mediators

Previous crises in the region have shown that a third party, whether government or international organization will intervene as soon as events appear to be out of the hands of the concerned parties. In the case of Barak, the world witnessed a display which confirmed his lack of a long-term political strategy and reliance on short-term tactics of force when he launched a military ultimatum to the leader whom he had, the day before, referred to as "the only partner for the peace process."

This stands as a clear indication of the Israeli emphasis placed upon the exertion of this long standing power-dynamic as an integral part of any dealings with the Palestinians and, for that matter throughout the region. Barak's was an attempt not only to weaken or humiliate his 'partner' before the Palestinian people and the wider Arab nation but, by dictating military orders, to show that he will be the victor in any war and all its battles, while the other side would sooner or later be forced to surrender to Israeli military might.

American and European mediators (as well as their allies in the area) are aware that war in the region cannot be allowed to break out and, therefore moved to contain the crisis before it was too late. Initiatives from international mediators began to arrive on the doorsteps of the region's leaders with the aim of containing this crisis of Israel's own making and preventing the outbreak of war in the region.

Urgent talks were held in Paris at the request of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wherein Arafat, after consulting with President Jacques Chirac, declared that he would not consider any agreement with Barak which did not include a commitment to establish an accountable international inquiry into Israel's use of force and role in starting as well as escalating the crisis. While the Israelis announced that a 'security achievement' had been reached-a claim denied by the US and Palestinian parties-the Americans announced that the talks were to be moved to Sharm Esh-Sheikh and an agreement 'finalized' in the presence of Egyptian President Mubarak. Barak, however, refused to join Albright and Arafat in Egypt, declaring that there was no need for an international inquiry into Israeli actions and rejecting the notion outright. Like the Sharm Esh-Sheikh talks that followed, the Paris talks failed.

Nonetheless we then saw the Egyptian Foreign Minister going to and from Damascus twice in twenty four hours, the UN's Sec. Gen. Kofi Anan, the EU's Javier Solana as well as the Russian and British foreign ministers (as Ben-Ami put it "everyone and their sister"), rush to

the region twelve days after the first Palestinian civilians were killed, but, perhaps coincidentally, only one day after three Israeli soldiers were kidnapped.

Yet Another Summit

After various attempts to mediate directly between Arafat and Barak failed, world leaders called for an emergency summit to take place in Sharm Esh-Sheikh. The Palestinian street demanded that their leadership not attend the summit, seeing it only as a means of containing their uprising and weakening, if not aborting, the Arab Summit planned for 21 October. Emphasizing the fact that their blood still lay fresh in the street and that Israeli tanks and troops had re-occupied Palestinian territory, enforcing a state of siege upon the people, Palestinians predicted the creation of an 'empty paper' falling well short of their demands.

There were three different political agendas at Sharm Esh-Sheikh. The US aimed at achieving a cessation of hostilities and a lessening of tension between the two sides in the hope of formulating a new timetable for the resumption of final status negotiations. President Clinton, in the realization that if he may have failed in his eight-year administration to bring about a historical reconciliation in the Middle East, he should not leave the White House with the peace process dead and anti-US hostility prevailing in the region, because of the impending US elections and the risk of fuelling there George W. Bush's Republican campaign. Opening the summit President Clinton was keen to emphasize his conviction that "We cannot afford to fail."

Arafat-Mubarak consultations have been ongoing and intensive since the outset of the peace process- serving Arafat's need to illustrate that he is not alone in facing the numerous crises. Mubarak, by continually hosting Arafat, has attempted to emphasize the fact that Egypt plays a vital part in the peace process, while simultaneously indicating to his people that he is representing and supporting the Palestinian cause. True to this pattern Arafat consulted with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak one day before the summit, accepting the challenge inherent in the risk of failure and saying that he would do whatever he could to prevent the killing of his people and to further the achievement of their aims. At the top of the Palestinian leadership's agenda were: the formation of an international commission of enquiry into the violence of the past weeks; the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Palestinian autonomous areas and the lifting, thereby, of the siege. The Palestinian 'insiders' were asking, in addition, for an international body to ensure the protection of the Palestinian people. The attendance, under US pressure, of the Palestinian leadership at the summit flew in the face of popular opinion and went ahead while angry demonstrations in the Palestinian territories and throughout the Arab world carried on.

Barak's weak coalition faced numerous domestic threats and already appeared highly unlikely to survive the imminent reconvening of the divided Knesset, not least because all 10 Arab Knesset members had withdrawn their support for Barak in the light of Israeli military and police excesses and in support of the Palestinian Intifada. For this reason the Israeli team went to Egypt with a bold military agenda formulated after intensive consultation with both Labor and Likud parties and overshadowed by talks aimed at forming an 'emergency coalition' government with Likud leader Ariel Sharon. Prior to their departure for the summit, the Israeli leadership made it quite clear that in their view any peace talks were, at the time, out of the question and that the Oslo process was "over". A careful reading of the Israeli conditions reveals their ongoing and long-standing dictation to the Palestinians by virtue of

their military power and occupation. This 'vanity of power' and underestimation of the Palestinian will to resist the injustices imposed upon them, as well as their apparent lack of concern for the serious impact on the region, characterized their demands: an end to the 'incitement against Israel'; the arrest of all Islamic activists (especially those released recently from jail); the containment and disarming of the Fateh Tanzim; the cessation of all violence and demonstrations.

The Israeli establishment, headed by Barak, concluded their pre-summit statements with a direct threat to Arafat, whom, they told the media, they no longer considered a partner for peace. Barak, declared that, "the real problem lies with Arafat and the Palestinian leadership," and clarified his stance toward the peace process and the Palestinian position when he reminded Arafat that "a leadership can be replaced by its own people ... with this leadership ... we cannot make peace." Thus, it was Barak, rather than Arafat, who was the first to clearly express a belief that the peace process was dead.

American pressure bore out. Yet after 20 hours of continuous persuasion both parties conceded on 17 October merely to listen to a statement by US President Clinton announcing a vague declaration purporting to indicate the reaching of an arrangement on several key points, starting with and based on a truce. Accordingly both sides "have agreed to issue public statements unequivocally calling for an end of violence," and to "take immediate concrete measures to end the current confrontations." A second point was the appointment of a US-led 'fact-finding' mission (as opposed to an international committee of inquiry as demanded by the Palestinians) to investigate the causes and course of the recent events. The third point was to find a way back to negotiations towards a final status, for which the US will consult with both sides in the coming two weeks.

While the Israeli side expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the summit, back in the territories, protest marches took place and voices were raised demanding as well as predicting that "the Al-Aqsa Intifada will continue." For the average Palestinian the summit had, as suspected, produced nothing but a vague verbal statement falling far short of their demands. Palestinian negotiators stressed that all that had happened at the summit had been to please President Clinton's desire not to leave empty handed once again. Clinton himself admitted that hope for the future lay only with the good will and intentions of the two parties to implement the "agreed" measures, thus acknowledging the ambiguous and unbinding nature of the summit's outcome.

What Lies Ahead

At present a continuation of the status quo (Israeli military superiority defining a state of tension, frustration and 'apartheid' as it has done up to now) but with a new inflammatory element appears likely. On the Israeli level, if Barak, in order to secure his leadership brings Likud leader Sharon into government the Palestinians will be set to face a combination of political principles based on Barak's plan for "unilateral separation from the Palestinians" and Sharon's plan of devising a "long-term interim agreement between the two sides." Both would, therefore, be anticipating a post-Arafat era preceding any resolution of Israel's final status objectives. Their envisaged military scenario aims to create a true separation between Israel and the Palestinians by military means, with the Jordan Valley becoming an Israeli 'security zone', settlement blocs being unilaterally annexed to Israel and Jerusalem being

isolated from the rest of Palestinian territory, of course under exclusive Israeli control. Only one day after the Sharm Esh-Sheikh summit the Israeli government announced its initiation of unilateral military separation.

Another possibility is early elections in Israel which will, almost certainly, bring the right-wing back to power. Whether led by Sharon or Netanyahu a Likud-based leadership (failing the last minute emergence of a new contender) would represent the total freezing of any peace process and the intensification of settlement activity, together with Israeli military excesses. Sharon, especially, will always remind Palestinians of one of the region's most notorious and disturbing incidents, the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres, for which he is held chiefly responsible.

Despite these potential variations of leadership, the Knesset will, one way or another (be it Barak-Likud/Sharon coalition or Likud-led Sharon or Netanyahu government), reflect a deepened reticence on the part of the Israeli public to work in any way toward the idea of a Palestinian state; this being the overriding existential and political necessity of the Palestinian people and, as many have pointed out, of the region as a whole. Thus, the future looks grim not only in the short term, but, if one considers the Israeli right-wing policy of effecting maximum changes on the ground in order to obstruct any future reversal of their agendas, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict looks set to descend into a whole new dangerous era.

The main debate between and within the two major political parties in Israel will now revolve around whether or not to recognize a Palestinian state, and if so whether on 50% or 85% of the territory occupied in 1967, or create a 10-15-year interim arrangement instead. The enforced total military separation, continued occupation and the "no-state"-options, seemingly representative of the prevailing political consensus in Israel today, appear to be inevitable and to represent, unfortunately, a unified Israeli will to exit from what was acknowledged as being the peace process.

The outcome of these political machinations is an Israeli political movement towards separation and eventual departure from all attempts at coexistence and normalization, instead leading to a new process wherein the two sides will be drawn into an escalation of hostilities. Deep wounds will heal slowly - each party will continue to feel betrayed by the other, the already open dictionary of hatred will become the common language of the street and media, while clashes will fill both parties with fear and mistrust leading to the solidification of an 'enemy'-type relationship. Israeli military roadblocks and the on-off siege situation-part of Palestinian life for well over seven years now - as well as the militarization of the settlers will go hand in hand with new episodes of kidnapping and the trading of human life. Normal citizens will live in fear of snipers and armed groups, which will emerge on both sides, prepared to take the conflict to new and more dangerous levels. All this risks dragging the two people down the road towards a 'Lebanonization' of the conflict.

In Palestinian society there is already a national consensus and a strong will not to give in to Israel's ultimatums and military threats and the replacement of Barak with a Sharon or Netanyahu type leader will do nothing but exacerbate this feeling of defiant resistance. There is also a possibility that the local Palestinian activists will emerge as effective leaders regardless of political allegiance - mainstream, left-wing, right-wing and Islamist - and if these are to become the new targets for Israeli attacks the explosion will worsen markedly. If such leaders do survive and emerge politically they could represent a possible window of hope in

terms of being able to strengthen and assist in maintaining a normal and effective civil society. In this respect we may witness interesting alliances amongst the various groups, going beyond the traditional tribal factionalism of the PLO.

Palestinians have shown continued commitment to, and sacrifice for, their right to independent statehood and sovereignty including East Jerusalem. It is quite clear that they will not yield to oppression and occupation forever. The Al-Aqsa Intifada underlines and reinforces the rights, principles and convictions fuelling the long-standing Palestinian struggle to end occupation. With every further humiliation, injustice and death suffered by the people at the hands of internationally condemned Israeli forces the Palestinians are reminded of the way the Israeli establishment has conducted itself throughout the years of occupation. Settlements, military installations and their incumbent networks of bypass roads and checkpoints have multiplied and expanded around a suffocating Palestinian community. The same community has been expected to deny this ever-present daily reality and, like the international community to whom they are addressed, believe Israeli claims of "creative compromises" and "generous concessions".

Rather than a minor, though bloody event in the history of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation, the past weeks and those that shall doubtless follow will eventually be seen as a pivotal point in the conflict. What we are witnessing in the present Intifada signals the beginning of the end for Israel's policies regarding settlements in the Occupied Territories-which can no longer be dismissed as a lesser issue that Palestinians will eventually "just have to live with". Popular actions have been repeatedly directed toward the settlements and have emphasized just how much of an "obstacle to peace" they will be as long as they remain.

In terms of Jerusalem, the Palestinians seem to have made the point in blood that the Israelis refused to take in words. Jerusalem's significance as the capital of the future Palestinian state, the 'red-line' that the holy sites represent and the popular solidarity with the Palestinian cause that the Israelis fuelled by turning the Al-Aqsa Compound into a scene of atrocities have all served to reinforce and underline in blood the Palestinian position-that the Al-Harem Ash-Sharif must remain under Muslim sovereignty and that the Palestinian state is meaningless without Jerusalem as its capital.

Israel's internationally condemned use of extreme force, both against unarmed civilians and by way of inflicting some form of collective punishment-property have inflicted horrific and painful injury upon the Palestinian people. Never before in the history of the conflict has Israel killed and wounded so many Palestinians in so short a time in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. And yet, the spirit of resistance has only risen. The shock and anger that has accompanied Israeli military tactics has fuelled an increasingly firm will to maintain a course toward independence and statehood in defiance of Israeli dictates and in the knowledge that this course alone leads to deliverance from such oppression.

The fact is that if there had been a process that showed any sign of meeting Palestinian needs, statehood, dignity and freedom from intimidation, this latest explosion would never have escalated so rapidly and world leaders would not have rushed to the area warning of regional and global disaster. Seven years of erosion have been inflicted on the patience of a people who have long suffered and now the realization that their purported partner seeks an

'Apartheid' solution and not one of equality and dignity has served all the rhetoric and paper of those years their final notice.

What lies ahead is, inevitably, a new round of initiatives aimed at bringing a new framework to the fore and eventually a new timetable and set of understandings. Like the violence and defiance that led to the Madrid process, the current Intifada will lead to a new chapter in the history of Palestinian-Israeli relations. What form the new era will take and how much more promising than the last it turns out to be will depend in no small part on the lessons learnt from the last seven years.