

## **THE PEACE PROCESS AND THE MANY INTERPRETATIONS**

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The peace process since the Madrid conference in 1991 was an international attempt to create a “culture of peace,” in which all Middle East societies would open a new chapter of relations characterized by mutual recognition, reconciliation and cooperation and, in the case of Palestine/Israel, the formula of land-for-peace as a base of coexistence in harmony and security.

The prelude to the current violent and bloody crisis that erupted in the Palestinian territories in late September 2000 was the Camp David summit two months earlier, which opened the files of the final status issues for the first time in such a painful manner. At Camp David the different interpretations and readings into the peace process or the culture of peace confronted heads-on, although they have existed from the very outset of the peace process. Examples are manifold; for example, when the Israelis entered the secret talks in Oslo in 1993, they envisioned the implementation of the old autonomy plan as outlined in the 1978 Camp David Accords between Begin, Sadat and Carter, and using the PLO as the ‘agent’ commissioned to realize this plan. The aspirations of the Palestinians (and the PLO), meanwhile, had never changed: they saw in Oslo the hope to finally bring an end to decades of Israeli occupation and to establish their long-awaited and longed for independent state.

The secret Oslo talks led to what is commonly referred to as a historical breakthrough, manifested in the mutual recognition of the two parties as the base for building a culture of peace and coexistence. For the Palestinians, this recognition was mainly an expression for their acknowledgment and acceptance of a two-state-solution. Their historic concession was to limit the Palestinian right to only 22% of Mandatory Palestine, i.e., the territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, as referred to in UN Resolution 242. This, by the way, although the Israelis only recognized a movement – the PLO – as the representative of the Palestinian people, while the latter recognized Israel’s right to exist.

The Israeli interpretation for this recognition as well as for the Oslo formula was the consolidation of previous Zionist achievements, i.e., the political reality of the Jewish state, and a readiness to negotiate with the Palestinians the sharing of the territories occupied by military force in 1967. To ensure the biggest possible grip on additional Palestinian land, a whole process was initiated, disguised in the cover of a five-year transitional or interim phase of staged transfers of land and authority to the Palestinians. It was at Camp David 2000 that even the last Palestinian realized the Israeli intentions and the Palestinians’ eventual deceit!

The third party, in their mediator role, had yet another interpretation for the culture of peace to develop and be nurtured during the transitional phase, envisioning the building of bridges and contacts, ongoing dialogue and negotiations, as well as the facilitation of confidence-building security arrangements between the two sides, all to be financially backed by international support.

However, this was far from the reality that unfolded on the ground. The reluctance, if not refusal, of Israeli leaders to implement what had been agreed upon became very quickly obvious. In harsh contradiction to the notion of building a culture of peace, the

four consecutive Israeli governments, though using different rhetoric, all continued to pursue the old policies of building and expanding settlements, containing the Palestinian people in a limited space politically, economically and geographically, threatening and endangering their holy sites, especially in Jerusalem, and denying their basic rights, including the right to worship. All these denials of dignity and self-determination have slowly but gradually built up to what eventually turned into a second Intifada, a desperate uprising against the ongoing occupation and for freedom and justice.

Amidst all this, the Palestinian leadership failed to create a credible strategy that would balance between passing the message of a culture of peace to the people - even under the unsatisfying formula of Oslo – and meeting their national aspirations.

The marathon negotiations at Camp David II revealed the true meaning the Israeli assigned to the 'culture of peace' concept, when their negotiators kept insisting that the occupied territories be shared, based on Israeli political, economic and security priorities and on the condition that the Palestinians would declare an official end to the conflict. The Israeli-American proposal - introduced as a major concession – "offered" the Palestinians 95% of the occupied lands (in reality it was closer to 80%), while the major settlement blocs would be annexed to Israel, and Israel would maintain a military presence in the Jordan Valley (not least to secure control over the West Bank's aquifers and ground water resources) as well as military control on the borders, at the sea and in the air. From a Palestinian perspective, however, this was not an offer of 95% but a demand on an extra 5% of their land, and this after their major concession of not demanding territories in what is today Israel proper!

Similarly on the question of Jerusalem, the Israelis excluded any possibility to discuss sharing the Western part of the city and made it clear from the beginning that only East Jerusalem was to be discussed. And again, instead of simply implementing international law – first and foremost UN Resolution 242 – and returning the occupied part of Jerusalem to the Palestinians, the new formula now proposed limited Palestinian civil administration over the Old City and the Haram Ash-Sharif compound, a little greater administrative power or possible sovereignty over more remote Arab neighborhoods within the municipal boundaries, while Israel's overall sovereignty in all parts of the city was taken for granted.

As for the Palestinian refugees' right to return to their homes and properties, the Israeli side rejected any responsibility and only agreed to discuss the return of a very limited number of refugees to Israel proper for "humanitarian reasons." In addition, financial compensation - through a newly to be formed international body to which Israel would then contribute financially along with other countries – was proposed as was the re-settlement of Palestinian refugees in countries such as Canada, Australia etc.

The alternative to this US-backed Israeli package of proposals was clear and a blunt threat: if the Palestinians were not to accept it, the 1995 unilateral separation plan would be revived and implemented, implying new boundaries, more movement restrictions on people and goods, continued suffocation of Palestinian economic development, more annexation of Palestinian land (especially around Jerusalem and of Israeli settlements along the 'Green Line'), the cantonization of the Palestinian territories, i.e., the creation of isolated islands with no geographic integrity, and an end to President Arafat's 7-year-old political regime.

One trend among the Palestinian leadership considered accommodating the political agenda with some of the ideas raised at Camp David II in order to overcome the

crisis in the talks as well as the Israeli threats and then to work on a change in Israeli public opinion, followed by more acceptable offers on the part of the Israeli leadership. However, the majority of the decision-makers realized that this would be yet another historical deception and that there was currently neither an Israeli government majority that could endorse any agreement reached nor any credible commitment from any third party (US, Europe or else) to guarantee and oversee the implementation. In addition to this, it has become very clear that the Israeli society was more painfully divided than ever and lacked a leadership with a vision for a just and long-term viable peace.

With rejecting the Camp David II formula the Palestinian leadership has not only survived political suicide but its refusal to sell out the remainder of Palestine and the basic inalienable rights of the Palestinian people has also boosted its general reputation – both at home and in the region - and made the rest of the world understand that and why Palestinians have red lines, too.

None of the new attempts to reach a final peace deal launched after Camp David came even close to being a success and the region has meanwhile gone through a period of unprecedented violence and unrest. The Palestinian Authority is facing Barak's heavy military machinery, political assassination, major cities and towns on the West Bank and Gaza Strip are surrounded by tanks and military checkpoints, their Palestinian inhabitants threatened by rampaging Jewish settlers, and the siege of Jerusalem continues unabated. The culture of peace has turned into a culture of fear, which dominates every sphere of life in the Palestinian territories today.

Under these circumstances, the Palestinian leadership is left with three main options:

1. Improve the negotiation conditions and reach out to the Israeli public in order to convince the people and leadership of its readiness to conclude a historical compromise, but on the basis of international resolutions and in no less than the pre-1967 borderline.
2. Consider a new approach combining a Palestinian-Arab peace formula towards another international Madrid Conference. This would mean to Arabize and internationalize the peace process and require a new understanding and refreshed partnership with the new American administration or another powerful mediator.
3. Accept another transitional arrangement but with an international force deployed in the territories to protect the Palestinian people and monitor the situation. This would certainly bring more hardship and extended waiting to the Palestinian people and is likely to lead to the fall of the PA.

As for Israel, Barak's favored option, as clearly stated, is a unilateral military separation or disengagement along with US-controlled security arrangements, which include means to stop the current violence, and later to impose his version of a final peace deal on a weakened, contained Palestinian leadership.

On a regional level, the current crisis/Palestinian Intifada could easily spill over into other countries in the region, mainly Egypt and Jordan, where the street is already boiling. Should such a regional conflict ensue, its settlement would eventually require a new multilateral approach to the peace process, involving also Lebanon, Syria, and maybe Iraq and Iran.