

Diplomacy in the Middle East: The Art of Delaying the Inevitable¹

A joke was extremely fashionable in Palestinian circles at another stagnating moment in the Middle East Peace Process: Yasser Arafat went to see God and told Him, "God Almighty, will there ever be peace in Palestine?" Apparently, God looked at him melancholically and said, "Yes, yes, of course, but not during my lifetime." Accredited also to the Holy See, I have it from reliable sources that God would not mind being proven wrong, at least in this case.

In the last ten months, the Palestinians have been blamed in certain influential circles for having missed a historical opportunity by rejecting the most generous offer by the most dovish Israeli Government and it has been claimed that our *Intifada* allowed Likud and Sharon back to power. This perception stemmed from the undeserved good reputation that the Israeli Labor Party enjoys in the West and from statements made by former President Clinton that Ehud Barak was bold, courageous, audacious, generous, magnanimous, constructive, creative, imaginative, and innovative. English is not my first language, it is not even my second, but I have never seen those concepts used in such a questionable manner. As for the favorable prejudice that Labor benefits from, I keep telling my numerous Israeli interlocutors that historically, it was Labor that made Palestine unlivable for the Palestinians. What Likud does also makes Israel uninhabitable for many Jews. As a result of this misperception, unlike in the 1970s when European governmental positions were far better informed when compared to their

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respective public opinions, today public opinion is more sympathetic towards Palestinian suffering and more supportive of Palestinian aspirations than European official positions.

It was General Sharon's visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque that inflamed the situation and triggered the second *Intifada*. It was only the straw that broke the camel's back. We had warned Barak and Clinton not to permit this. In retrospect, there were obvious Machiavellian calculations that allowed that visit to occur. This coincided with the day that the Israeli Attorney General cleared Binyamin Netanyahu in an investigation he was conducting because of insufficient evidence. Every commentator foresaw that Netanyahu would be able to capitalize politically from this decision and stage his comeback in the political arena. At the time, it was in Barak's interest that Sharon remained the leader of Likud precisely because he thought he was beatable in a national election while Netanyahu's flashy and charismatic character was seen as a more formidable challenge to Barak's reelection efforts. Barak wanted to provide Sharon with an advantage over Netanyahu by not allowing the latter to steal the limelight. Once again, however, Barak, a supposedly excellent chess player, miscalculated. As it turned out, even Sharon beat him electorally.

In my opinion, the *Intifada* has three explanatory factors. First, the Palestinians have witnessed 53 years of forced diasporization and 34 years of endless occupation. Forced diasporization does not only include the Palestinian refugees who happen to be in Lebanon, Syria, or Jordan. Two out of every three inhabitants of the Gaza Strip are refugees in refugee camps and one out of every three inhabitants of the West Bank is a refugee in a refugee camp, so it's not an external phenomenon, it's also an internal factor. One also has to bear in mind that the occupation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem is the longest military occupation in modern history with humiliation and harassment of an entire people on a daily basis.

The second factor is the ten years of an unconvincing peace process. When we went to Madrid in 1991, I qualified our attitude as being 'unreasonably reason-able.' We then accepted to function as half a delegation representing half the people and seeking half a solution just because we wanted to give peace a chance. In Oslo in 1993, we were promised a five-year transi-

tional period for the accords to be implemented. By 1998, we were supposed to have achieved final status. It is useful to recall Yitzhak Rabin's maxim that "there are no sacred dates" yet if there was anything precise in the Oslo Agreement, it was precisely the timetable for its implementation. There was no need for an unnecessarily protracted peace process. A territory that was occupied in 1967 in less than six days can also be evacuated in six days so that we can all rest on the seventh.

After ten years of negotiations and agreements, we have received only 65 percent of the Gaza Strip with 35 percent still under Israeli exclusive total control since there are 20 illegal settlements and 5,000 illegal settlers in the area. In the West Bank, arrangements are even more complex. At present, we have three zones: A, B, and C. We control totally or partially 40 percent (Zones A and B) whereas 60 percent remain under Israel's exclusive control. What we have witnessed during the last ten years can only be described as an accelerated expansion of the settlements, hence an expansion of the occupation rather than real withdrawal. This was more real during Labor governments including Barak's than during the Netanyahu years. The total number of illegal settlers rocketed up to 400,000. In a way, throughout those years of 'theoretical' peacemaking there was an *Intifada* in the making.

The third factor is the failed nature and the content of the Camp David talks that took place in July 2000 – talks that undoubtedly poisoned the diplomatic and political environments in which we are currently operating.

Why is this the case? Because for the first time since we reached the moment of truth, Palestinian public opinion discovered what was the ceiling of the possible and the permissible in this particular peace process. Barak, with Clinton's help, succeeded in projecting the image that Israel offered us 95 percent plus one or plus two in the territorial swap. It was never the case; the Israeli maps offered at Camp David excluded four areas: expanded East Jerusalem; the Latroun Salient; the no man's land around the West Bank between 1948 and 1967, and the shores of the Dead Sea. What Barak was offering was 95 percent of 90 percent, which is close to 85 percent.

Barak recently published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times/International Herald Tribune* where he explicitly stated that Israel should keep 15 percent of Judea and Samaria plus a security zone in the Jordan Valley. In spite of that, prominent commentators like Thomas Friedman continue to write with a vengeance about the ungrateful Arafat who rejected 95 percent as though Barak's article was never written or published.

What was the Israeli offer at the Camp David talks? Israel wanted to keep a security zone in the Jordan Valley and the settlements that are scattered in this valley although some serious Israeli generals noted that this would give Israel only one additional second of earlier warning in case of a missile attack. This is an insignificant advantage. The same generals have also made it clear that these settlements, in the case of belligerency, would become a military burden and a liability. At Camp David, Barak asked for major territorial rectifications to absorb and annex to Israel 80 percent of the settlers and since the settlements in which they lived were deliberately built on the water aquifers in the area they would, *en passant*, swallow our rare hydraulic resources. The West Bank would end up as several dislocated, disconnected Bantustans.

Thirdly, in the Camp David talks, Israel refused to acknowledge any historical, moral, or legal responsibility with regard to the refugee issue. During informal talks, the Israelis were only accepting back a maximum of 100,000 refugees and in installments of 1,000-5,000. We would have needed the entire Third Millennium to bring back a significant number of refugees.

Anything dealing with Jerusalem can hardly be seen as a minor territorial rectification. Last but not least, Barak explored the possibility of returning one out of every three neighborhoods in occupied East Jerusalem, maintaining control of almost half of the Old City of Jerusalem - the Jewish Quarter, the Armenian Quarter (I wonder why), the Wailing Wall (50 meters), and/or the entire Western Wall (450 meters) - and wanted shared sovereignty over the Islamic shrines. This came as a shock to the Palestinian leadership and society. The Palestinian state will neither have control of its airspace nor of its frontiers.

A word on the Taba talks that occurred two weeks before the Israeli elections. The Israeli proposals were undeniably more advanced than in Camp David but everybody knew that it was, by now, too late. The Israeli negotiating team did not have any legitimacy to speak on behalf of a government that was deserted by most of its coalition components and which, it was predicted by all opinion polls, was going to perform lamentably in the forthcoming elections.

Often the Israeli territorial appetite is disguised in terms of security needs and requirements even though we, and others, have told the Israelis repeatedly that security comes from regional acceptance and not from territorial aggrandizement and that we are the key to Israel's regional acceptance. Israel's doctrine towards its regional environment is better described by the concept of 'compellence' than deterrence. Deterrence is a policy aiming to dissuade a neighbor from undertaking policies seen as detrimental or damaging to one's national interests. On the other hand, 'compellence,' an under-exploited concept of Thomas Schelling, is a policy that tends to coerce, compel, and reorder the environment in a way that is seen to suit better one's own national interest. In spite of that, some commentators still write as though it is Palestine that occupies Israel and not the other way around.

What kinds of lessons can be drawn from ten years of diplomatic failures? The major flaw in the Peace Process is the fact that the local belligerent parties and negotiating partners were left to fend for themselves. The international community only played the role of facilitating the dialogue and financing the process. We need a decisive input from third parties. If we are left to 'sort it out' by ourselves, we will not achieve an acceptable peace. We will continue to have talks about talks and engage in negotiations *ad nauseam*. An acceptable peace with durability, without external support, is not achievable. What is democratically acceptable to the Israeli people is simply unacceptable for the Palestinian people and *vice versa*. In matters of war and peace, the international will should have primacy and should prevail over the national whim.

The issue of democracy in Israel is often mentioned and used as an argument to improve Israel's public image abroad. I adhere

to the school of thought that argues that Israel is a democracy for its Jewish component but I also maintain that the fact that Israel is a democratic state is not an extenuating factor but an aggravating one. There is nothing more morally disturbing than a democratic oppression supported by the informed consent of the voter and the citizen. At present, negotiations in the Middle East are taking place in a total imbalance of forces. Peace is too important to be left for the Israelis alone to decide upon yet we are constantly told that we should always rally the Israelis to any pursuit of peace. Israeli public opinion will always maintain that Israel needs to withdraw as little as possible I was in London when Saddam Hussein invaded and occupied Kuwait and was unequivocally vocal in condemning his occupation of Kuwait. At the time, nobody argued for a referendum in Baghdad to see if the Iraqis wanted to withdraw and if, yes, how far; Saddam Hussein was simply asked to withdraw. International Law and oil were both invoked then as an explanation for external intervention. I have news for you. We too happen to have oil: olive oil. The Palestinians crave for international intervention and have appealed for it on numerous occasions. There is a need for international protection and constructive intervention on the part of external actors. At the moment, we are negotiating and suffocating at the mercy of a balance of power that is not favorable to achieving our recognized legitimate aspirations.

Israel has three military and strategic advantages over the Palestinians. First, the Israelis maintain an unclear monopoly in the region. Secondly, they have an overwhelming conventional military superiority *vis-à-vis* any possible coalition of Arab forces. Thirdly, Israel maintains an unwritten alliance with the only remaining superpower, the United States. An unwritten alliance with the only remaining superpower is even more important than a formal alliance since it allows Israel to benefit from all the advantages such an alliance can offer without having the responsibility and the restraint that alliances imply for the junior partner. An unwritten alliance also allows the senior partner to look unaccountable *vis-à-vis* the behavior of its *protégé* and its *protégé* can act as a sort of 'undisciplined ally.'

The Israeli political establishment - left, right, and center - was hoping for a diplomatic outcome that would reflect Israeli intransigence, American alignment on the Israeli preference, Rus-

sian decline, European abdication, Arab impotence, and what they hoped would be Palestinian resignation.

This is the framework within which we are operating. Where do we stand today? Today, Israel is incapable of suppressing the *Intifada* but the *Intifada* by itself is incapable of terminating the occupation. We have a deadlock that can only be solved by bold diplomatic initiatives. Until now, we have witnessed the failure of diplomacy, specifically preventive diplomacy, in achieving a breakthrough in our negotiations with the Israelis.

Now is the time for a major diplomatic initiative. If not now, I wonder when. I often joke with my Norwegian friends by telling them if the Oslo back channel has not yet put Palestine fully on the map it has put Norway on the map. I usually offer this thought as an incentive to European interlocutors by telling them that Europe is still perceived as an actor in search of a role and that we in the Middle East have a role in search of an actor. A merger of the two would be beneficial for all concerned. We share the desire in Europe to transform the European role from merely being a 'payer' into becoming a 'decisive player.'

The US remains a decisive player and I for one believe that the battle for Washington is winnable. A serious strategic debate will inevitably soon surface in Washington on the nature of the American-Israeli relationship. Is Israel still a strategic asset or is it gradually becoming a strategic burden and a liability? Today, after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of Arab militant regimes, the Arab regional system is profoundly conservative and pro-Western. Israel, with its insatiably territorial appetite, is defying, de-legitimizing, and destabilizing the network of friendship America enjoys in the region. Arab public opinion, from Morocco to Muscat, is boiling. Islamic public opinion, from Nigeria to Malaysia, is angry at the perceived American complacency over and complicity with Israel's endless occupation of Palestinian territory. Israeli regional expansion, if perpetuated, can disrupt and endanger American global interests.

In this era of mediocrity, I often remember the late Dr Nahum Goldmann, for decades the leader of the World Jewish Congress and an enlightened Zionist. In the middle of the 1970s, he published at least two books and several articles in the American

journal *Foreign Affairs* where he commented, critically, on the step-by-step shuttle diplomacy of Henry Kissinger. Three points are as relevant today as they were pertinent then. First, watching, at close range, the deployment of Kissinger's genius in dismantling the Arab alliance of 1973 by decoupling the tracks and marginalizing the Palestinian dimension, Goldmann wrote that he believed in the centrality of the Palestinian problem and the inevitability of addressing the Palestinian dimension. He then offered what I believe is an accurate definition of the way diplomacy is still practiced when dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Diplomacy in the Middle East, he wrote, is the art of delaying the inevitable as long as possible.

Second, Goldmann was not in favor of a gradual approach, with advances of small steps towards nowhere. He explained the risks and found that instead of building confidence they increased the mistrust. Being a sophisticated leader with his finger on the pulse of the Israeli national mood, Goldmann explained that each Israeli partial withdrawal - be it in the Sinai, in the Golan, or in the West Bank - would be extremely problematic, with many Israelis denouncing 'the rape of Israel,' the policy of 'national suicide' and so on. Goldmann explained why he preferred a quick process of implementing an agreed upon final status and thus having to deal once and for all with such a predictable collective outcry.

Third, there is a need for a more assertive American role. Goldmann writes in one of his books about a discussion he had with Moshe Dayan. He says that he told him, "Moshe, America gives you a lot of aid and some advice. Up to now, you take all the aid and you leave the advice aside. What would happen if ever America were to tell you: 'You can have the aid only if you also take the advice?'" Goldmann says that Moshe Dayan, with resignation, answered, "Then we would have to take the advice, too."

I am in favor of a policy of linkages and hope that one day the Americans will be converted to this idea of linking aid and advice since I believe this policy has worked twice in the last decades, once, in 1957, when Eisenhower asked the Israelis to withdraw from the Sinai after the Suez War and once for six months in 1991 during the tenure of Bush senior and former Secretary of State James Baker when they linked the issue of the loan guarantees to

the freezing of settlement activity. Consequently, the Israeli leadership went reluctantly to Madrid and enforced a six-month freeze on building or expanding settlements. Establishing the link between American advice and aid is critical.

We are witnessing a new phenomenon in international relations: global tribes. The Jews are the global tribe *par excellence* but so are the English, the Irish, the Scots, the Indians, the Chinese, and also the Armenians, the Palestinians, and the Arabs. Today, the Palestinians are no longer the 'small kid on the block' but because we are the Jews of the Jews, we were scattered to the periphery of Palestine and beyond. The Palestinians are not only a local phenomenon but also a regional factor and an international actor. One encounters Palestinians all over the world. The same applies to Arab communities. I believe that in any future strategic thinking these diasporas will function as important actors in international politics. We should concentrate on maintaining the links between these communities and their countries of origin and in a parallel manner help and encourage their further integration in their countries of adoption. This is a source of political empowerment that we have somewhat neglected.

I am very encouraged by the fact that the Arab- and Muslim-American communities in the United States are becoming better integrated and better equipped with political institutions to express aspirations and preferences. In the past, many of our failures were attributed to our pattern of tribal behaviors. Tomorrow the challenge for us is to behave like a global and a modern tribe – a challenge for all Arab communities scattered mainly in Western societies.

During the last 34 years, we Arabs have reduced our levels of expectation and have aligned ourselves with what was called the international consensus in the UN, which was mainly formulated by European states and favored the adoption of a two-state solution and the implementation of relevant UN resolutions. Years ago, it was Kissinger who dwarfed a potential European role by stating that Europe would be unhelpful in any peace process because "it would raise Arab expectations." Europe has not aligned itself with Arab preferences. On the contrary, it is the Arab World that has aligned itself with the way Europe and the international community want to see the

conflict resolved. The responsibilities of the international community have increased. We have respected our commitments to the international community and it is now up to the international community to respect its commitments to us. The Israelis need to be made aware of what is expected from them in the Peace Process. If this is achieved in the near future, the Israelis will vote for their leadership not in function of how much territory they are ready to condescendingly concede. Instead, they will frame their choices based on how much experience or inexperience a candidate enjoys, charisma or its absence, and the nature of their economic policies. With the absence of such an unequivocal message, the Israeli voter believes that he or she has the ability to choose a leader whose program for the future coincides with their preference on how much they are ready to tolerate in terms of territorial concessions.

I am politically very nostalgic of De Gaulle. After the War of 1967, President de Gaulle suggested *'laconcertation à quatre'*: the coordination of the major four countries (China was not yet in the Security Council) to help solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. The idea never really got off the ground because the Americans seemed comfortable with the Israeli victory of 1967 that compensated for their humiliations in Vietnam. The Soviets, shortsightedly, were unenthusiastic because they preferred a bi-polar international system and did not see why they should recognize equal status to lesser countries like Britain and France. The British were not supportive because it was initially a French initiative. A few meetings of the permanent representatives at the UN in New York took place, the idea then vanished into historical oblivion. Thirty-four years later the conflict remains unresolved. Rather than leaving both societies 'to sort it out' in search of an elusive 'mutually acceptable solution' maybe an elegantly imposed solution by the international community - 'a mutually unacceptable formula' - would have been the only way out of this vicious circle. In the meantime, instead of a durable peace, we now have a permanent peace process.