

# FROM PEACE TO WAR: RELIGHTING THE FLAMES OF THE ISRAEL – PALESTINE CONFLICT

David Newman

## INTRODUCTION

In the space of twelve months, the hopes of reaching a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict have undergone a major downturn, from the near agreement reached at Camp David to a renewal of violence and the deterioration of the situation to one which has not been experienced in over thirty years of West Bank and Gaza occupation. The renewal in terrorism, roadside explosions, suicide bombers – not just in the West Bank and Gaza but inside sovereign Israel, even Tel Aviv, itself – and the hard-line retaliation of the right-wing Israeli government, including the use of helicopter raids and sophisticated missile attacks on Palestinian targets, have created a situation that is the closest to full out war between Israel and the Palestinians that has been experienced so far.

## Camp David – Why Did it Fail?

The summer 2000 Camp David summit was perceived, at the time, as being the opportunity to reach a final agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The Agreement would provide for the establishment of an independent Palestinian State on approximately 90-95% of the area of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; the removal of most Israeli settlements in the West Bank, thus allowing for territorial integrity and compactness for the Palestinian State; and, ensuring a declaration to the effect that this would signal the end to the century-old conflict between the two peoples. The active participation of the leaders themselves, Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel, Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority and President Bill Clinton of the United States, was a clear indication that this was the final stage in the long process, which had begun in Madrid (1991) and Oslo (1993). The symbolism of the location at the Camp David retreat where, twenty years earlier Prime Minister Begin, President Sadat and President Carter had hammered out the details of the *Israel-Egypt Peace Agreement*, was not lost on the participants. This was a place where final, not interim, deals were done.

**...all the issues which had previously been avoided because of their high sensitivity, and in particular the two issues of Jerusalem and the fate of the Palestinian refugees, were on the table.**

Another factor which led the world to believe that this would be the final stages of seven years of laborious negotiations and interim agreements, was the fact that all the issues which had previously been avoided because of their high sensitivity, and in particular the two issues of Jerusalem and the fate of the Palestinian refugees, were on the table. It was clear that no final agreement could ever be reached without every single issue – however sensitive and difficult – being put on the table. The proposal, later to be developed by President Clinton in his last attempt to reach a solution in the dying weeks of his administration in December 2000, focused around a mutual compromise, with Israel agreeing to relinquish their claims to total and eternal sovereignty over Jerusalem and the holy sites, with the Palestinians being prepared to back down from their ultimate demands for total refugee repatriation. Each would have to make do with partial implementation of their aspirations – the old City of Jerusalem would have some sort of shared or decentralised rule, while the number of Palestinian refugees allowed to return to Israel proper would be limited to a minimum, although there would be no limits on the number of returnees to the area of the Palestinian State.

The Camp David summit did not end in the signing of an agreement, and both leaders returned home with a clear sense of failure. The main fault for the

failure of the summit was the inability of Arafat to agree to a proposal which was more far reaching than any previous Israeli government had ever offered and which, to the surprise of many, even included a Palestinian foothold in parts of Jerusalem. It was argued that despite this offer, an offer which – if implemented – was expected to be met by much opposition from within Israel itself, Arafat was unable to relinquish the repatriation claims on behalf of the Palestinian refugees – unacceptable in the eyes of the general Palestinian public.

***It was a classic case of a peace being made by the political elites and negotiators, without giving enough thought to the need of preparing the public and grass roots for the concessions which each side would have to make.***

The domestic constituencies of both Barak and Arafat were unprepared for such a far-reaching agreement, not least because it had been sprung on them at the last moment. It was a classic case of a peace being made by the political elites and negotiators, without giving enough thought to the need of preparing the public and grass roots for the concessions which each side would have to make. This was admitted, as much, by the chief United States negotiator, Dennis Ross, in a recent lecture given at Ben Gurion University in Israel, in which he argued that were he to start the whole process over again, he would insist on less secrecy and more public disclosures concerning the issues which were being discussed, so that the public would become used to the idea of compromise over two issues – each of which represented the very heart of the conflict to the two sides respectively. The leaders mistakenly believed that, just as the *Oslo Accords* had been greeted with much euphoria amongst the general public, despite the fact that the talks leading up to them had been held in the utmost secrecy in Norway, this too would be the case at Camp David.

Notwithstanding the euphoria, since the first *Oslo Agreement* in 1993, the ups and downs of the interim period had brought about a great deal of scepticism amongst the public, with Israelis seeing the continuation of terror as an indication that the Palestinians are not serious, and the Palestinians seeing the continuation of settlement activity as an indication that Israel is not serious. The significance of signing and implementing a final agreement, as contrasted with the interim nature of all previous agreements which could still be changed and modified according to the changing political circumstances, was not lost on the public. The grass roots, public, had not been adequately prepared for the sort of concessions which would have to be made if a final agreement was to be signed and implemented. Moreover, both Israelis and Palestinians continued to believe that their side was being forced into making all the major concessions (enabling the establishment of a Palestinian State and the evacuation of settlements, or giving up on the right of total refugee repatriation), and continued to demand that the ‘other’ side be more forthcoming in the negotiation process.

## **A Tale of Two Intifadas**

The failure of the Camp David summit resulted in a return to violence, only this time of a much more deadly nature than on previous occasions. The renewed outbreak was put down to the visit, in September 2000, of then opposition Minister, now Prime Minister, and right-wing hawk, Ariel (Arik) Sharon, to the Temple Mount – El Aqsa Mosque in a demonstrative show of Israeli control over this site, sacred to both Judaism and Islam. It is probably too simplistic to blame the current violence just on this visit, but there is little doubt that in the highly sensitive situation which existed in the wake of the Camp David failure, it only needed someone on either side to finally light the match to ignite the pent up feelings of frustration and despair which had been accumulating on both sides, especially amongst the Palestinians who saw their hopes of a Palestinian State and an end to Occupation disappearing from before their eyes.

The El Aqsa Intifada – as it has since become known – was very different from the previous Intifada which had taken place between 1987-1991, and which had been a major factor (together with the Gulf War) in bringing about the Madrid

**...the present Intifada reflects the end of organised peace negotiations, at least for the present.**

peace talks of 1991. While that first Intifada took place against the background of a Palestinian civil uprising against continued Israeli occupation that had continued unchallenged for twenty years, the present Intifada has taken place against the background of failed peace talks. Furthermore, while the first Intifada was a major factor bringing about the US brokered Madrid peace talks in 1991, the present Intifada reflects the end of organised peace negotiations, at least for the present. And while the first Intifada was characterised by the Palestinian use of stones and Israeli retaliation with tear gas and rubber bullets, the present Intifada is characterized by the Palestinian use of sophisticated weaponry and suicide bombs and Israeli retaliation with missiles and, in some cases, tanks. In short, the present violence is, in reality, a mini war rather than a grass roots uprising, destroying, in its wake, any beginnings of mutual trust which may have been built up during the seven long years of negotiations and interim agreements since the first *Oslo Agreement* in 1993.

**Settlement Activity Continues**

Israelis and Palestinians, respectively, desire specific goals to be met if they are to declare the peace process as having been successful. Israelis desire a sense of security, both individual and collective, and the removal of the sense of threat every time they walk in the street, go on a bus or visit a crowded shopping mall. For them, the *Oslo Agreement* should have brought about, beyond any other specific objective, an end to violence and fear for their lives.

For Palestinians, the single most important objective was the end of Israeli occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian State on a clearly defined and contiguous piece of territory equivalent to, if not exactly the same, as the area of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

**...it is the impact of each of these activities – violence against Israelis, settlement expansion on Palestinian land – which symbolises, for each side, the inability to attain the ultimate objectives of conflict resolution.**

The inability of the Oslo process to meet either of these objectives was the major failure of the process to date. During the past year Israelis have been subject to a bout of violence, terrorism and suicide bombings against civilians to an extent which has probably not been witnessed during fifty years of Statehood, and a hundred long years of ethnic conflict. Equally, the Palestinians have been subject to a process of continued settlement expansion which, more than any other single activity on the part of Israel, symbolises for the Palestinians the continuation of occupation on land which should be part of a Palestinian State. As such, while the loss of a human life cannot be quantitatively equated with the expropriation of one dunam of land, it is the impact of each of these activities – violence against Israelis, settlement expansion on Palestinian land – which symbolises, for each side, the inability to attain the ultimate objectives of conflict resolution.

The expansion of settlements has been a constant factor throughout the past decade, regardless of the peace negotiations. Even during the left-wing Rabin and Barak administrations, the settler population continued to grow, partly as a result of natural growth in communities which are both religious and young and, as such, are often characterised by large families, as well as by continued, albeit limited, inflow of new settlers. While there had been talk of settlement evacuation, particularly during the latter period of the Barak administration and the move towards a final peace agreement including Israeli withdrawal from over 90% of the West Bank and Gaza, this had relatively little impact on the process of settlement growth.

Even after a year, during which the settlements have been the major target for Palestinian violence and during which there have been many settler fatalities – including women and children – the overall settler population are demonstrating a strong resistance to any attempts to move them out, if only for their own

safety. This is partly attributable to their ideological fundamentalist belief that it is their duty to retain as much territory as possible for Israeli sovereignty, even if their original dreams of a Greater Israel stretching from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Jordan River in the east, have been shattered and the fact that they, too, are aware that eventually the West Bank and Gaza Strip will constitute the territorial area of a Palestinian State in which they will have no place. The fact that those political leaders, such as Yitzchak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak, have all been removed from power by the right-wing administrations of Netanyahu (1996) and Ariel Sharon (2001) just when deals were about to be struck is, for the settlers and their supporters, a sign of Divine intervention which ensures their retention of the ancient Land of Israel under their control, through the agency of land colonisation and settlement.

***From being a population that set out to demonstrate its control in the name of the State that sent them, the settler population have now become completely controlled by their environment.***

At the same time, the lives of the settler population have become, during the past year, extremely unsafe. From being a population that set out to demonstrate its control in the name of the State that sent them, the settler population have now become completely controlled by their environment. The main targets for Palestinian attacks are the cars leaving and entering the Israeli settlements. Many residents will only travel in convoys, while children have to be transported to their schools on armoured buses and with army protection. In the Gaza Strip, the settlements have become subject to roadside bombs and mortar attacks, making daily life impossible.

There were individuals who stated their intention of leaving the settlements in return for adequate government compensation, but this reflected a small minority, mainly those who had arrived in the settlements for economic gain rather than ideological irredentism or, in a minority of cases, people whose lives had been so affected by the renewed insecurity on the roads and the possibility of terrorist attacks on their families, that they were prepared to leave and return to their former homes inside Israel.

For their part, no Israeli government – even the left wing governments which favour eventual settlement evacuation, have been prepared – at this stage – to offer adequate compensation packages to those settlers who have expressed a readiness to leave. Israeli governments understand the essential pawn nature of the settlements and, to the extent that they are prepared to implement some form of settlement evacuation, will only do so as part of a final agreement and not before. As long as the settlements remain *in situ*, they constitute a powerful counter bargaining pawn to Palestinian claims – the ‘concession’ which will have to be made in return for concessions on the Palestinian side.

Within the settlements too, those who are prepared to state publicly that they are prepared to leave are shunned by the larger, and more ideologically oriented, settler population, such that the intense social pressure within the communities themselves prevents more settlers from declaring their readiness to evacuate. Neither are they helped inside Israel by the left-wing population favouring settlement evacuation, as they are perceived as people who should never have moved to the West Bank in the first place and who are now only ready to return if, and when, an adequate financial package is worked out which will work in their favour during the process of relocation.

***The continued attacks on settler families have created a paradoxical feeling amongst most Israelis.***

The continued attacks on settler families have created a paradoxical feeling amongst most Israelis. On the one hand, there is a great deal of sympathy for the individuals, especially the children, who are affected by the violence on a daily basis. At the same time, the insecurity of the settlements, especially in the isolated settlement exclaves linked to Israel through a complex system of security and bypass roads patrolled by the army, have served to strengthen the

***The public does not buy the oft-quoted settler argument that they constitute Israel's outer line of defence...***

general feeling held by the Israeli public that no future peace negotiations can take place without an *a priori* recognition that all, or most, settlements must eventually be evacuated if there is to be any chance of a successful resolution of the conflict. This is a pragmatic, rather than ideological, position on the part of many – namely, that settlements simply cannot continue to exist under the present conditions – but it is, nevertheless, an important indication of public opinion which requires nurturing if, and when, any form of negotiations are ever to take place again. The public does not buy the oft-quoted settler argument that they constitute Israel's outer line of defence, particularly as terrorism has also struck inside Israel proper, in the heart of Tel Aviv, Netanya and Jerusalem, regardless of the existence of settlements in the periphery.

### **The Collapse of the Israeli Peace Movement**

Since 1994, the Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University has conducted a monthly survey aimed at gauging Israeli public opinion relating to the peace process. Over a period of seven years, with the single exception of the period immediately after the assassination of former Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, the data has shown a constant support for the peace process of around 60-65% of the population (in the two months after the assassination this increased considerably but eventually moved back to the long term average). This support assumes an end to the conflict and a feeling of public safety and security, in return for which the public were prepared to make concessions in terms of substantial territorial withdrawal.

***...not enough was done by the leaders and negotiators during seven long years of interim agreements to inculcate a support for the basic tenets of the peace process amongst the grass roots population – both Israelis and Palestinians.***

Since the outburst of the El Aqsa Intifada and the accompanying violence, especially the suicide bombs inside the Israeli cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem resulting in substantial civilian casualties, the peace index has shown, for the first time, a significant falling off of public support for, or belief in, any form of peace process which can bring about the desired objectives. It has already been argued that not enough was done by the leaders and negotiators during seven long years of interim agreements to inculcate a support for the basic tenets of the peace process amongst the grass roots population – both Israelis and Palestinians. Nowhere was this clearer than in the period surrounding the Camp David negotiations last year, when Jerusalem and the refugees were put on the table – with each side expected to make compromises to the other over these issues – both of which touch the very heart of the conflict over and beyond pragmatic considerations of territorial exchange and boundary demarcation – which had, until then, been left off the negotiating agenda.

***In turn, it has been argued that Palestinian grass roots opposition to any concessions on the issue of refugee return was the major reason why Arafat backed away from signing the Camp David proposals...***

It soon became very clear that even if an agreement had been reached, neither Barak nor Arafat could have ensured that their respective domestic constituencies would have supported the nature of the concessions, as they touched upon such deeply rooted symbolic issues. Barak had promised a referendum on any final agreement as part of his election campaign. He believed that the Israeli public would not turn down an agreement once it had been signed, however difficult it was to swallow. However, the public opposition to concessions over Jerusalem raised questions concerning his ability to obtain the necessary majority. In turn, it has been argued that Palestinian grass roots opposition to any concessions on the issue of refugee return was the major reason why Arafat backed away from signing the Camp David proposals, despite the fact that this was the most far reaching proposals which had ever been offered to the Palestinians since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

The failure of the Camp David negotiations and the return to violence, in turn, brought about significant changes in Israeli public opinion. During the past year the Israeli peace movement has almost completely disappeared, with opinion

**...there is no new generation of peace movement activists and leaders...**

moving from the left to the centre, from the centre to the right, and from the right to the extreme right. This explains Sharon's victory at the polls, as well as the inability of the peace movement, over and beyond a few poorly attended demonstrations or adverts in the national press, to continue their campaign. While the right-wing continue to create an effective public lobby for an end to all negotiations while violence continues and bring pressure to bear on the Sharon government for heavier military reprisals, the left-wing have become silenced. Unlike the settlers, there is no new generation of peace movement activists and leaders and it is left to the tired leaders of the 1970s peace movements to vainly attempt to rally their troops once again, an almost impossible task in the face of daily shootings and roadside bombs.

If public opinion was not sufficiently prepared for the Camp David compromises, then it is clearly even less prepared for any return to the negotiation table, over and beyond negotiations which will bring about a ceasefire and an immediate end to violence on the one hand, and settlement activity on the other – pretty much along the lines of the recommendations of the Mitchell Commission which were drawn up by Senator George Mitchell (of Northern Ireland fame) on behalf of the United States administration earlier this year but which have not been implemented, despite many attempts to do so.

**A Return to Negotiations?**

At the time of writing, mutual mistrust and the inability to bring about even a short-term ceasefire would suggest that any return to meaningful negotiations is a long long way off, if at all possible in the foreseeable future. The present 'national unity' government, in which right-wing hawk Ariel Sharon is moderated by dovish Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, spends much of its time debating whether Peres should be allowed to meet with Arafat while violence continues to take place on the streets. Sharon's right-wing backers believe that all negotiations should totally cease and that the Israeli army should upgrade the level of their military actions inside the West Bank and against such organisations as the Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and the Tanzin. The Peres backers, from the Labour party, believe that negotiations should continue regardless, not least because a ceasefire will only ever be implemented through such negotiations. As such, the present government, despite its right-wing orientations, is paralysed and is unable to take any significant action on the peace front. Should Sharon refuse to make way for Peres, the Labour Party would leave the government coalition, and the government would lose much of the public support it has gained by showing a unified front during this period of crisis.

**...the basic territorial issues have all but been resolved.**

And yet, if and when negotiations do get going again, the basic territorial issues have all but been resolved. This will consist of the establishment of a Palestinian State on most of the West Bank – Gaza territory, necessitating the removal, in turn, of most of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. There are likely to be boundary modifications from those which existed prior to 1967, but any such modification – probably in Israel's favour – is likely to be compensated for by territorial exchange from inside Israel. There are a number of serious proposals to this effect, ranging from territorial additions along and around the 'green line' boundary, especially in areas of Arab-Palestinian settlements inside Israel (although the vast majority of Arab citizens, while supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, are less than eager to actually be incorporated within this state, at least for as long as they are uncertain of its democratic nature) and/or a larger area of land in the Negev desert (the Halutza sands) along the Egyptian border, allowing for the territorial expansion of the densely overpopulated Gaza Strip.

***The major issue at stake is not so much the territorial configuration of the boundaries...but the basic trust which no longer exists between the two sides and their leaders.***

The major issue at stake is not so much the territorial configuration of the boundaries and the amount of land to be exchanged, but the basic trust which no longer exists between the two sides and their leaders. Israelis do not believe that Arafat will ever be able to undergo the transformation from terrorist/guerrilla fighter to peace maker, while the Palestinians see the election of Sharon as an indication that they have no one to talk to. The fact that the Israeli government uses Shimon Peres as their main go between with the Palestinian Authority is, for the Palestinians, an indication that the ultimate decision maker – the Prime Minister – is not interested in seeking a way back to serious negotiations.

### **11 September and the Israel-Palestine Peace Process**

The bombing of the World Trade Center on 11 September has had, even at this early stage, a major effect on the Israel-Palestine peace process. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Israel declared its intention to join arms with the United States in its fight against world terrorism. The United States has not, however, included Israel in its international war on terrorism, nor has it included the major Palestinian organisations – such as Hezbollah and Hamas – in the list of groups to be eradicated.

Both American President George Bush and British premier Tony Blair have recognised that no resolution between the west and the Islamic world as a whole has any long-term chance of success for as long as there is no resolution of the key Middle East conflict. While it does not serve as any excuse for worldwide fundamentalist terrorism of the sort seen in New York, the messages emanating from the Islamic world have been very clear, namely that their perception of the USA as a backer of Israel constitutes a major stumbling block on the path to creating a true anti-terrorist coalition.

***David Newman chairs the Department of Politics and Government at Ben Gurion University of the Negev and is editor of the international journal Geopolitics. He commentates on the Israel-Palestine conflict in a weekly column in the Jerusalem Post.***

In their speeches, both leaders have made constant reference to the Israel-Palestine conflict, both of them reiterating the need for the Islamic world to finally accept the existence and the security of the State of Israel while, at the same time, for Israel to recognise the inevitability and the justice of the creation of a Palestinian State. Just as the USA put pressure on Israel and her neighbours to attend the Madrid Peace talks in the aftermath of the Gulf War of 1991, so it is likely that similar pressure will be placed on both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to work out an agreement, one which will be equally unsatisfactory to both sides, but which will supply the basic objectives of security for one and independence for the other, if only because it serves the interests of the new international coalition which is being put together at this very time of writing.