

Box: Generosity or Deception?

The Myth of Camp David

Could the Mideast Conflict Have Been Resolved?

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Nearly two years ago, decisive negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians collapsed at Camp David, in the USA. A little later came the start of the unprecedented wave of violence in the Middle East which continues to this day. The author of this article believes that the main reason for the failure of Camp David lay in the negotiating tactics of then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. - Ludwig Watzal is an editor of a German Journal. His most recent publication is "Feinde des Friedens: Der endlose Konflikt zwischen Israel und den Palästinensern" (Enemies of Peace: The Endless Conflict between Israel and the Palestinians); Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2002.

Israel, the Palestinians, the USA and the European Union are now confronted with the ruins of the Middle East peace process which they favored and encouraged. Had that process been more realistically judged from the outset, the final result would have surprised no one and the level of disappointment would have been less extreme. It is not our purpose here to enter into all the details of the peace process and show the reasons for its failure. We shall limit ourselves to examining the ostensibly generous offer made by then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, an offer which was refused by Yasir Arafat, the PLO chief and Chairman of the Palestinian Authority. That "generous offer" by Barak never existed; it is a legend which has become a myth. The so-called generous offer has since been hauled out at every opportunity; its staging for the media was - and remains - perfect, but no one bothers to speak about its details. They are, in fact, sobering.

Differing Expectations

After the end of the Camp David summit, President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Barak placed the blame for its collapse entirely on Arafat, although both the American and Israeli leaders were also responsible. Now that the legend of Barak's "generous offer" has been demystified by some of his own colleagues, the former Israeli prime minister is trying to justify his position. His most recent attempt was in an interview with historian Benny Morris which appeared in the June 13 issue of the "New York Review of Books." In it, however, Barak also includes the more far-reaching results of subsequent talks at Taba in Egypt in January-February 2001, by which time Barak's imminent election defeat by Ariel Sharon was already foreseeable. These belated attempts at justification, however, have nothing in common with Barak's original position at Camp David.

The convening of the Camp David summit did not occur under a favorable star. The expectations of the two sides could not have been more different: Arafat did not feel that the time had come for negotiations, and his advisers signaled the Americans that the PLO Chief would not sign any final agreement which did not embrace a certain minimum of Palestinian rights. It was only under extreme pressure from U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Clinton's security adviser Samuel Berger and the American Middle East mediator Denis Ross, that Arafat let himself be persuaded to participate in the meeting. Barak, for his part, indicated to Albright that he would make a "generous offer." Shortly before, he had declared the negotiations in Stockholm over, because he wanted to make his offer only at a summit in the

USA. Barak was hoping to achieve a 100 percent Israeli peace at Camp David. The ideas put forward by Israel, which were presented by the American side during the several days of the meeting, showed that they completely ignored the hopes and expectations of the Palestinians and took account only of Israeli security concerns. Moreover, Barak's position back home was already weak, as he had lost his parliamentary majority.

The Language of the Victor

The diplomatic climate was frosty. In July 2000, there could no longer be serious talk of a peace process. The expansion of settlements and the fragmentation of Palestinian land through construction of bypass roads continued even under the Barak government. Barak had cancelled the third phase of the troop withdrawal which he himself had negotiated in the Sharm ash-Sheikh Agreement of September 1999, and wanted to move directly to final-status negotiations. This put the Palestinians in the position of having to conduct final-status talks from only 42 percent of the territory of the West Bank, of which 18 percent were under their exclusive control and more than 24 percent under shared control with Israel. They had no voice at all in the remaining 58 percent. Even during the period of the "peace process," the autonomous Palestinian territories had been repeatedly sealed off.

Barak had not been a strong advocate of the Oslo peace process. This is made clear by the fact that, back when he was interior minister in the government of Yitzhak Rabin, he had voted against the Oslo agreements at the very moment when the euphoria of peace was at its height. Barak's political home is in the right wing of the Labor Zionist movement Achdut Ha'avoda, which has advocated a Greater Israel since 1948.

The negotiating climate at Camp David was frosty from the very outset. The formulation of a "generous offer" seemed more like the language of a victorious party which expected the defeated side to accept the suggestions of the stronger. Throughout the Camp David summit, Barak insisted that his proposals could be taken only on an all-or-nothing basis. The Israeli undertakings took no account of the various UN resolutions on the conflict. Yet the peace process was originally intended to bring Resolution 242 to fruition on the basis of "land for peace." To see it in terms of "generosity" at all, one must look at Barak's position in comparison with the prevailing attitude among Israel's political Class at the time. In contrast to that attitude, Barak's proposals did indeed seem far-reaching. He expected Arafat to bow to Joint U.S.-Israeli pressure, as he had consistently done in the prior partial agreements. At Camp David, the Israelis were so convinced of their own superior position that they refused to comprehend Arafat's. His flat refusal was doubtless a disappointment.

The Goals of the Negotiating Partners

What was the starting position on each side? The PLO wanted to achieve the following:

1. a right of return - or "appropriate compensation" - for Palestinian refugees, in keeping with UN Resolution 194;
2. complete Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in keeping with UN Resolutions 242 and 338;
3. evacuation of all Israeli settlements;
4. recognition of East Jerusalem as the Capital of a future Palestinian state.

Israel's position was staked out by five "red lines" which Barak was unwilling to overstep. They were:

1. no Israeli withdrawal to pre-1967 borders;
2. Jerusalem to remain undivided and under Israeli sovereignty;
3. no other power to be established west of the Jordan River;
4. most Jewish settlers to remain under Israeli sovereignty even after a final agreement;
5. Israel to accept no moral or legal responsibility for the problem of Palestinian refugees.

What, specifically, comprised Barak's generous offer?" The Palestinian state on the West Bank was to consist of three chunks of territory, linked by land corridors, with control of these corridors, as well as of external borders, remaining in Israeli hands (thus keeping the Palestinian populace still subjected to the authoritarian dictates of an occupying power on a day-to-day basis); 10 percent of the West Bank was to be annexed by Israel to accommodate its settlements, in exchange for which the Palestinians were to be compensated with a Strip of desert; another 10-12 percent, comprising the Jordan Basin, would be leased to Israel for 100 years.

The Difficult Status of Jerusalem

Israel was prepared to make no concessions on the refugee question. The Israelis spoke of Palestinian demands in this regard as though the 3.7 million Palestinian refugees were already waiting with their bags packed. In his book "Diary of a Wounded Dove", Yossi Beilin, then Israel's minister of justice, writes that Arafat made it clear to Clinton at Camp David that the Palestinians would take account of Israel's demographic concerns in finding a solution to the refugee question. In other words, this point was not one of the Palestinians' non-negotiable demands; they were prepared for a compromise and insisted only on acknowledgement of the principle of a right of return.

The Status of Jerusalem was an especially ticklish point. Israel's attitude with regard to the Temple Mount, in particular, aroused Palestinian mistrust. The Israelis' sudden insistence that Jews be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount evoked sharp rejection from the Palestinian side. American legal experts suggested the following solution: an international committee consisting of the UN Security Council and Morocco would assign oversight of the Temple Mount to the Palestinians, while sovereignty would remain in Israeli hands; Jerusalem would be divided, with different Systems applying to different sections of the city. All in all, under this plan, Palestinian sovereignty would be restricted to those parts of East Jerusalem which had not been included within the city limits back in 1967. This meant that the Palestinians' "capital" in East Jerusalem would have consisted of three villages: Abu Dis, Al-Aisaria and Sauwahra. Later, a special procedure would be applied to the Old City, where Arafat's administrative headquarters would be situated within a sovereign, fenced area. This is the solution which the USA and Israel wanted to impose upon the Palestinians, complete with the signatures which would seal the end of the conflict.

One Hour of Talks in 15 Days

With how little trust the opposing sides treated one another at Camp David is shown by the following: During 15 days at Camp David, Barak and Arafat were face to face for only one hour, and even then they talked mainly about the weather and the food. In his book, Yossi Beilin blames his former boss for failing to develop a personal line to Arafat despite the latter's approaches. Beilin reports that, on Barak's orders, the Israeli negotiating team never submitted anything in writing to the Palestinians, who were always faced only with the black-and-white choice of accepting the proposals or rejecting them. Also, Beilin writes, American proposals were invariably discussed with the Israeli delegation before being submitted to the

Palestinians. Barak may have been an outstanding military man, but as a politician he was a failure. And for that he was solely responsible. His attempt to forcibly impose a settlement on the Palestinians at Camp David, and his exploitation of the fears of the Israeli people, paved the way for Ariel Sharon. Ultimately, there can only be a negotiated settlement to the Middle East conflict. The results achieved at Taba in January and February of the year 2001 provided a far better basis for that than Camp David. That is the point at which talks should be resumed.

Generosity or Deception?

The offer to settle the Middle East conflict made by Israel's then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak to the Palestinian negotiating delegation headed by Yasir Arafat at Camp David in July 2000 is still regularly cited today in analyses of the failed peace process. Both parties to the conflict frequently bring up Barak's offer to prove their own arguments. Many Israelis regard it as the most generous possible concession in the long history of the conflict, and its rejection by Arafat is often given as evidence that the Palestinians are really interested not in a constructive solution but in the destruction of Israel. But to many Palestinians the offer seemed like mockery. They felt deceived in their hopes for a viable state both by its contents and by Barak's tactics.

Aside from all the mutual recriminations, it is doubtful whether Barak's proposals could ever have been implemented on a lasting basis. The result would have been a fragmented, economically dependent Palestinian state, somewhat larger than Switzerland's Canton Grisons but with 16 times the population. Further information on this subject may be found on the website of the Israeli organization Gush Shalom: www.gush-shalom.org/media/barak_eng.swf

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