

Peace in the Middle East: From Camp David to Geneva

Yossi Beilin

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Just under four years ago, Israelis and Palestinians met at Camp David. The weeks leading to the summit were full of expectation. There was a sense that an agreement was within reach. It was the last summer of the Clinton administration, and everyone thought that the president of the United States would not convene a summit that would lead to anything short of an historic triumph. So determined, it seemed, was everyone to succeed, that success almost seemed predetermined. And indeed, some even believed that an agreement had already been secretly reached—that it was, in fact, a done deal. That peace was at hand.

But this, as it turned out, was not the case. Instead, the Camp David summit of July 2000 came to be one of the most tragic milestones of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. It was a particularly ironic tragedy, for the gap between expectations and results could not have been greater.

In hindsight, of course, we also understood how deep were the gaps in the expectations of both sides. Prime Minister Barak pushed the Palestinians to come to the summit, which, he believed, would truly be the summit, or the peak, of the process. Yet Chairman Arafat was in no hurry, not to say reluctant to come. He wanted to postpone the summit, to hold a preparatory meeting before the summit, to turn this summit one of a series of summits, etc. But he was pushed to come. Thus, Barak succeeded in bringing Arafat to Camp David. But he clearly did himself, and all of us, no favor.

Now the reasons for the failure of the Camp David summit are much more complex, and will probably remain forever in dispute. But the failure was real, and the frustration was felt by everyone. It was felt by us, members of Barak's government, who despite being the most moderate negotiating team in Israel's history, felt rebuffed and betrayed. And it was felt by the Palestinians, who, in reaction to the disturbances that followed the visit of the head of the opposition at that time, Ariel Sharon, to Temple Mount, or Haram al Sharif, found themselves facing surprising levels of Israeli retaliation.

And yet, despite the frustration and eruption of violence, the Barak government decided to continue negotiations. It was a strange round of negotiations in many ways, and to many of us it seemed as if it was taken out of a Fellini movie. On the one hand, we all felt that agreement—that is, a comprehensive and permanent status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians—was around the corner, tangible, within reach. On the other hand, election for prime minister was nearing, and it was clear that Barak—and with him, his government—will be ousted.

And when we failed to conclude an agreement by the deadline we had set for ourselves, which was just days before election day, our failure was interpreted as a sign that the very conflict was insoluble. After all, our critics pointed out, even the most moderate representatives on both sides were unable to reach agreement.

And I have to say that, sadly, Prime Minister Barak contributed to this perception. For instead of admitting failure, even as limited as the failure of having reached agreement within the timeframe we had set for ourselves, he decided to claim for himself a very dubious kind of success: that success, that is, of having “exposed the true face of Arafat.” It was not, as he decided to tell it, that we had come close to an agreement. Nor that we had reached agreement on many issues and still needed some time to resolve others. Arafat, in his account, was simply incapable of agreement. And Israel, it turned out, never really had a partner.

I need not tell you that such a claim amounted to a major crisis for the Israeli left, whose political mandate has always rested on the assumption that our conflict with the Palestinians can be resolved. And it reassured those on the Israeli right, who had always claimed that the Arabs did not want peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, someone had to prove that this was not the case. In a meeting with Yasser Abed Rabbo several weeks after Sharon defeated Barak in the election for prime minister, I suggested to him that we continue the work that was interrupted in Taba until we conclude an agreement.

And so we set out to work, and quickly expanded our base. On the Israeli side, we brought in a number of individuals from the heart of the establishment, including the former military establishment.

And succeed we did. Last October, after almost three years of hard work, our two teams concluded the detailed draft agreement that has since been named the Geneva Initiative. Our work was hard not only because of the essence of what we had set out to do, but also because of the conditions under which we worked. The violence that erupted in the wake of the failed Camp David summit led to roadblocks and closures and restrictions on travel that made meeting itself nearly impossible. Sometimes we had to meet abroad because meeting at home was not possible. Other times we could only meet at a checkpoint and held our discussions in a car. The contrast between the backdrop to our work (violence and crisis) and the center of our work (a comprehensive permanent status peace agreement) could not have been greater.

Now why did we succeed? Were we extreme in our views or so radical in the solutions we offered? No. We succeeded not because we were extreme in any way—save, perhaps, in our commitment to succeed. We succeeded, rather, because we brought into our work the most reasonable minds from both sides, and because we opted for the most reasonable solutions even to those long-held taboos of Jerusalem and the refugees.

We did not set out to reinvent the wheel. Nor did we. We were simply ready to draft solutions that were, generally speaking, already known to everyone. And the key to our success was not in the specific solution to each and every issue—although there was also a lot of creative thinking there too—but rather in the composition of the issues, the concurrence of the solutions we offered. In short, we drafted an “accord” that, true to its name, became an accord not only between the two parties but also among all the outstanding issues between the two sides. It was comprehensive and conclusive.

And the response to our success was overwhelming. We immediately won the support of about 40% of the population, on both sides. The international community extended its support. And the Israeli right—and the extremists on the Palestinian side—found themselves facing a very problematic prospect: that a peaceful agreement between two sides was possible.

On the Israeli side, the political developments of the past six months cannot be explained apart from the success of our initiative. Even Prime Minister Sharon himself admits, as he did only two weeks ago in an interview for the *New York Times*, that his plan for unilateral withdrawal from Gaza is a direct response to the Geneva Initiative: faced with Geneva and other peace plans, Sharon said, he felt he had to come up with a plan of his own.

Now Sharon’s plan is very problematic because it is unilateral. And acting unilaterally is both unnecessary and unwise. It is unnecessary, because, as we proved, there is a partner. And it is unwise because acting unilaterally is to turn your back on the pragmatists and therefore to strengthen the extremists.

But if the unilateral part of Sharon’s plan is mistaken, the prospect of ending the Israeli occupation over Gaza is obviously welcome. What we must work to ensure is that Sharon does not use the withdrawal from Gaza to strengthen his hold elsewhere. We must work so that the withdrawal from Gaza will lead to further withdrawal from other parts of the future state of Palestine. That Gaza first does not become, in other words, Gaza last. That this withdrawal eventually leads to agreement between the sides. A permanent status agreement.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing unique about Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is made up of all the usual ingredients of conflicts that we see, and have seen, throughout history. And like so many other conflicts, this too can be resolved. It must be resolved. We will gain nothing from sticking to our belief—so tempting to many—that somehow we are exceptional, that our conflict is exceptional, that our enemies are exceptional, that our fate is exceptional. We will only perpetuate the conflict, and ensure continued misery to both nations.

Geneva rests on the assumption that we are no better nor worse than other people. That our enemies are no better nor worse than other enemies. I can think of nothing more reasonable than this assumption.

It is encouraging to realize that our work has already become a reference point for normalcy and peace.

Our challenge now is to turn Geneva into reality.

Thank you very much.

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