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SPECIAL DOCUMENT

EHUD BARAK ON CAMP DAVID: “I DID NOT GIVE AWAY A THING”

In a wide-ranging article published in Yedi'ot Aharonot on 29 August 2003 (translated in Mideast Mirror the same day), the former prime minister discusses Ariel Sharon's policies, the Oslo process, Camp David, and Israel's future. Perhaps the most historically significant component of this extraordinarily frank and forthright article is his unequivocal acknowledgment of the real meaning of Israel's offer at Camp David.

As the New Year 5764 approaches, Israel is at a junction that requires a clear vision, a change of direction and determined action (and if possible, a little less declarations and talk). The *budna's* corpse is at our feet (some will say, as expected), the road map has been moved to intensive care, and it's still not clear what will come of it.

Nearly three years after the start of the intifada, despite stubborn fighting by the security forces and the entire people's equally stubborn stand, after quite a few statements about victory and premature and somewhat pretentious remarks about the collapse of the other side, our leaders now tell us to expect escalation, new record high numbers of terror alerts and offer a prognosis for another, graver, round of suicide bombings and violence.

Two and a half years ago, six months after the start of the intifada, when we had 39 deaths and the Palestinians had 400, Sharon rose to power on the promise (“let the army win”) to bring peace and security. Nearly 800 deaths later after innumerable cabinet decisions (along the lines of “we won't allow,” “we'll cut off,” “we'll smash”) about hollow declarations and endless chatter, the Israeli government appears to be lost amid the trees, unable to see the forest.

In another month it will be the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the time of soul searching. It's a good time to ask, And now where? The simple truth is that we don't have a partner for agreements and peace making and not even for eradicating terror (as we said three years ago, after Camp David). And those responsible for the terror and ultimately for the Palestinian casualties as a result of Israel's self-defense are [Hamas leader] Ahmad Yasin and [Palestinian Authority head] Yasir Arafat, and not Ariel Sharon and his government.

Sharon should be praised for what is praiseworthy. He is correct in his position that there should be no movement on any significant issue until the Palestinian government smashes all the terrorist infrastructures. Sharon is also correct in his determined refusal to free prisoners with blood on their hands. That should be insisted on, even against the entire world. In general, Sharon is a practiced and skilled tactician. But tactics are only part of the picture. An overall strategy is needed for the campaign, and broad political understanding is necessary. Without them, the entire effort will continue wallowing on the paths of bloodshed into more dead ends.

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We don't have a partner. Frustrating or not, that's a fact. Peace and agreements are like a tango. They take two. In war, all it takes is the will of one side. The fact that there is no partner on the other side does not mean Israel should be paralyzed from seeking to guarantee its security and future.

We need—immediately—a strategy based on three legs: one exists and two are missing. The first leg is determined fighting against terror: Everywhere (including inside the PA), always, no matter how close to Chairman Arafat, and with all means. That has been the policy of all Israeli governments, and the Sharon government is doing it well.

The second leg is separation. The government should immediately decide that without a partner Israel must unilaterally disengage from the Palestinians. The center of that decision would be an emergency plan (24/7 without budgetary limitations) to build a security fence around Israel, including the settlement blocs and Ariel, and inside those blocs that hold 80 percent of the settlers. The absence of such a fence is the central, most costly—in blood—failure of this government and its predecessor. Hundreds of people would have been among us today if the fence had been built two years ago.

The third leg is an open door for renewing political negotiations on the basis of the principles of Camp David, with one condition: that there is no violence and the terror is dismantled. Without such a plan, there's a vacuum, and plans much worse than this for Israel will be sucked into that vacuum: the Saudi plan and the "provisional Palestinian state."

In the absence of such a plan, building a fence will appear to be an attempt to unilaterally dictate a border, and raise opposition—including from the U.S. president. With such a plan, any route for the fence, including around Ariel, is a logical security step by Israel. As long as there is no partner—and it is clear that if and when there is a partner and an agreement is achieved, the fence will be moved to the agreed-upon border—the responsibility for all the difficulties resulting from the establishment of the fence and operating it will move to the Palestinian side.

Is all this new? No. Two and a half years ago, when we had 39 dead, I presented the same conclusion. I said then, "We tried to disengage by agreement. As of now, we don't have a partner. That should not paralyze us. We must put up a border for Israel that includes the large settlement blocs, which will guarantee a Jewish majority for generations to come." The way to do this, I said then, was "unilateral separation. Us here, them there."

We decided to start implementation with the end of the Clinton administration. When it would be clear to the leading governments in the world, and not only us that there indeed was no partner for peace. The Arab public, in the wake of the October [2000] riots, and the Israeli Left, some of which found it difficult to digest these painful truths, handed over the government to Sharon. I respected that then and respect it now. But it is difficult through the perspective of time not to see that the plan then was the right thing to do and is still relevant, in all its details, now.

Not only the absence of separation but the lack of a political plan is a serious failure of the Sharon government. The cost of the foot-dragging tactics on the fence is clear—and buried. The cost of the foot-dragging tactics on postponing the presentation of

an Israeli political plan is no less serious, and its price is only beginning to surface now.

The good old "Sharon plan," which everyone has known for more than a decade, is not acceptable to anyone in the world, including the president of the United States and half the Israeli public. Discussing it behind closed doors is a smoke curtain or a ceremony for treading water.

The practical plan, meaning "a provisional Palestinian state" in 2005 is bad for Israel. Its original logic was faulty. It was born to the road map in vitro. Sharon justifiably demanded eradication of the terror infrastructures. The president said, "the Palestinians have to be guaranteed something." Sharon demanded that the state be born many years hence and the president—aware of the composition of the national unity government and the "ostrich" thinking about a "temporary Palestinian state" in the circle around Shimon Peres—threw out the challenge. Sharon, who believed he could maneuver and prevaricate around anything, accepted it.

But the situation is different and worrisome. According to international law, a provisional state is a state with all the innate rights of a state. And it assumes those rights. It doesn't need to ask for them. The only thing temporary about it are its borders. But that's the rub. On the matter of borders, the entire world is with the Palestinians and not with us. Moreover, if we're dealing with borders, Israel is also sort of "temporary." We also don't have permanent, agreed-upon and recognized borders.

Accepting the "provisional Palestinian state," with Israel's agreement, will be a colossal diplomatic defeat for Israel. Sharon ends up giving away everything and not getting anything in return. A Palestinian state will be established and we won't know what will happen to Jerusalem. Have they given up the right of return? And what about the borders? The settlement blocs, the security arrangements, what about all that? And how, with what assets, and from which bargaining point, will we discuss the permanent agreement down the line. Luckily it seems we won't get there because there's no Palestinian partner on the horizon ready to eradicate the terror infrastructure. Which brings us back to the unilateral separation.

The Israeli Right, which blindly supports the temporary Palestinian state, are the same people who need the political lie they disseminate, that "Barak gave away everything." Here's the truth: Barak did not give away a thing. I did not give away a thing. I made clear and I am proud of it, that in exchange for an end to the conflict and giving up the right of return, 80 percent of the settlers under Israeli sovereignty, recognition of the security needs of Israel and of Israel's affinity to the holy places, we will be ready for painful, defined concessions that lead to a Palestinian state.

In other words, I stopped a one-sided process that had developed since the Oslo accords were signed, a process in which Israel gave up tangible assets in exchange for vague promises about the nature of relations in the future. When I was still a new minister in the Rabin government, I campaigned in government votes against that pattern of behavior. The Netanyahu government, with Sharon as foreign minister, continued to sign agreements that transferred assets for promises (Hebron and the Wye River agreement) and even handed over assets (Hebron).

Essentially, I insisted that despite our desire to try every chance for an agreement, and perhaps because of it, if we reached the last leg of an agreement, it was vital that

we know if we had a partner before we continued to hand over assets. That would be impossible to know—and it would have been impossible to convince the world of the justice of our position and win its support and backing for the resulting unilateral separation—without putting on the table our readiness to make difficult decisions in exchange for an end to the conflict and a concession of the right of return.

That is the essence of my position as prime minister. Fundamentally, it has remained correct to this day. Anyone trying to postpone the difficult decisions will be forced to swallow even bigger frogs in the future, under worse conditions, losing the position of moral superiority and internal unity necessary for the unilateral steps that have to be taken until a partner shows up on the other side.

But beyond the failure of the provisional state, the even greater risk resulting from the Sharon government's strategy of postponement is that as a result of the political vacuum, a Palestinian demand will move into the center stage—and it is already beginning to appear there—a demand not for two states for two peoples but for one state west of the Jordan River. But, as the Palestinians will demand, that single state will have to be in the spirit of the twenty-first century: democratic, secular, one man one vote. That position could win broad international support as long as there is no acceptable Israeli plan on the table.

One man one vote? Remind you of something? Yes. South Africa. And that's no accident. It's precisely their intention. And that's their long-term plan. So, we have to say honestly today: the strategic blindness of the Israeli Right and the Sharon government's effort to grab more than it can hold, indeed endanger the future of the Zionist enterprise, as the most thoughtful and far-seeing (though least manipulative) of the Likud's princes, Dan Meridor, has seen.

The Right's alternative plan, in the form of the plans proposed by Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairman Dr. Yuval Steinitz—to occupy the entire West Bank and Gaza, dismantle the Palestinian Authority and hold free elections under international supervisions—is a sure-fire recipe to put Hamas into government on the Palestinian side and establish a state under its leadership (since if it's not to create a state, why are the elections being held?), before we have an agreement with it and any understandings with it. It's a recipe for a bloodbath.

For Israel to achieve its strategic goals and guarantee its security, future, and identity, it is vital to return to the roots and come together around a national action plan based on the three legs; fighting terror, unilateral separation, and an open door to negotiations in the spirit of Camp David. Negotiations would resume if—and only if—another Palestinian leadership emerges that dismantles the terror infrastructure and puts an end to the violence and incitement. That's the only way to guarantee that Israel moves properly, enabling it to build on American backing and possibly international backing for its positions and enjoy the internal unity that is so vital for our steadfastness.