



Camp David, One Year Later: Old Myths and New

Sophie Claudet

It took almost a year for well meaning Americans and Israelis to emerge from Camp David's dark and secretive closet. The international and Israeli press is now replete with quasi-apologetic re-assessments of the U.S.-brokered summit held in Camp David on July 11-25, 2000, the details of its unfolding, and the reasons behind its failure.

The conclusion is invariably the same: the Palestinian negotiating team cannot be singled out for the summit collapse. More important, Barak's offer at Camp David ultimately was not that generous, especially when placed in the context of Palestinian historical and legitimate claims.

Where does this leave us?

While it is commendable that some American and Israeli negotiators acknowledge their mistakes at last, it is too

little, too late. To date, the former Israeli premier Ehud Barak has managed to convince most of the world that Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat did not want peace - and therefore refused the unprecedented Israeli offer at Camp David.

This PR ploy fits well with Israel's subsequent media war during the second Palestinian Intifada, which started on September 28, 2000. The widely accepted depiction of Palestinians as violent and uncompromising coincides with Barak's claim that peace was never to be found at Camp David - and nowhere else for the matter - simply because, in his view, the current Palestinian leadership, and its followers, consist of warmongers. It is unlikely that the revisionist reading of Camp David will change this deep-seated stereotype.

Second, those "enlightened" Americans and Israelis providing us with a more pragmatic version of the Camp David negotiations are no longer in a position of power. This is certainly the case with Robert Malley, a member of the U.S. peace team at Camp David and Special Assistant for Arab-Israeli Affairs to President Bill Clinton, from 1998 to 2001. It is also the case with Meron Benvenisti or Uri Avnery, both politically to the left of the Labor party, who unfortunately have little voice and no representation in Israeli politics today.

Yet, for the record - and in the hope that more equitable negotiations will resume one day - it is important to understand the reasons behind Camp David's failure. Adding to the list of myths that have been debunked so far, this paper will also emphasize the issue of

Jerusalem, to show that it cannot be claimed as the main reason for the summit's collapse - as was often the case in the aftermath of Camp David.

While some Americans and Israelis took almost a year to publicly react to Barak's PR ploys and finger pointing, Palestinians had, on the other hand, long denounced what they perceived as the Israeli team's arrogance and inflexible negotiating style at Camp David. Until recently, Akram Haniyyeh's *Camp David Papers* was the sole comprehensive document released after the failed summit, from a Palestinian perspective.¹ This collection of seven articles, originally serialized in the Palestinian newspaper *Al-Ayyam*, which Haniyyeh heads, provides the reader with a detailed account of what happened at the presidential resort. Besides being a prominent Palestinian journalist, Haniyyeh is also one of Arafat's long-serving advisers, although not on the PLO payroll since 1994. Like most Palestinian analysts, Haniyyeh denounces Israel's intractable negotiating style, that led Barak to falsely believe Palestinians would accept a deal on Israeli terms.

The collusion of Israeli and American interests is also criticized throughout the booklet. The uniqueness of Haniyyeh's rendition lies his description of President Clinton's dilemma, between the pro-Israeli agenda, as dictated by the U.S. administration, and his sincere understanding of Palestinian rights. Haniyyeh unveils deep contradictions between Clinton's appreciation of the Palestinian narrative and

¹ Haniyyeh, Akram. *The Camp David Papers*. Ramallah: al-Ayyam Publishers, 2000.

the disdain and shortsightedness of his advisers.

Dennis Ross, Sandy Berger, and Madeleine Albright come under particular attack for acting systematically as Israel's mouthpiece and thinking that they could solve the conflict, without ever grasping the unique nature of the Palestinian question. The author believes that, one week into the summit, Clinton realized he had been ill-advised: "At some moments Clinton seemed to recognize the size of the predicament he was led into by his aides," but, continues Haniyyeh, "he was unable to back out, as he had at the end to adopt and defend the positions of the American establishment, which expressed unequivocal support for Israel" (Haniyyeh: 78).

Yet, to the author, who intimately shares Arafat's assessment that a peace deal would not be finalized during the summit, Camp David was a success - in that it prepared the ground for serious negotiations and provided an exceptional forum for both parties to fully, and unambiguously, present their position and assess their differences. The latter endeavor came to an end at the Israeli-Palestinian talks in January 2001 in the Egyptian town of Taba.

Given Arafat's assessment that the Camp David summit would not bear fruit, it is important to underline that the Palestinian negotiating team was taken by surprise when President Clinton extended his invitation for a trilateral summit on July 3, 2000. Arafat insisted that it be postponed since he felt that neither side had reached a point where final issues could be tackled and resolved.

This particular point is also acknowledged

by Robert Malley in a *New York Times* opinion piece² and a later *New York Review of Books* article, co-authored with Lebanese researcher Hussein Agha.³ The former American peace team member explains how Arafat repeatedly told the Americans that he was not prepared for such a summit.

Moreover, Malley adds, Arafat's relationship with Barak was at a low point, due to several promises broken by Israel to fulfill a number of overdue interim steps. These included a third partial redeployment of Israeli troops from the West Bank; the transfer to Palestinian control of three villages nearby Jerusalem - approved three months by Barak's government before the summit and personally conveyed to Arafat by Clinton; and the release of some 1,500 Palestinian prisoners. As for the U.S. determination to convene the summit despite Arafat's plea, Malley and Agha report that Clinton sincerely believed in the Israeli premier's intention to achieve "a historical deal;" Barak had also warned the U.S. "that without a summit, his government would be gone within a few weeks."

Ultimately, it was the issue of sovereignty over Jerusalem's al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount that dealt the final blow to the summit: the Israeli team asked that Jews also be allowed to pray on the Muslim part of the site, while still retaining control over the whole area. Prophetically, Haniyyeh warns against "adding a religious character to the conflict in a manner that would lead to an inevitable conflagration" (Haniyyeh: 48).

² Robert Malley, "Fictions about the Failure at Camp David," *New York Times*, 8 July, 2001, Opinion Piece.

³ Robert Malley and Hussein Agha, "Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors", *The New York Review of Books*, 9 August, 2001.

This particular Israeli request, which was put on the table at a late stage in the negotiations and wholeheartedly supported by Sandy Berger, deserves some further analysis - especially since, in contrast to Barak's rendition of the talks and as noted by Malley and Agha, the Palestinian team had, in fact, made significant concessions on Jerusalem, including renouncing parts of occupied East Jerusalem to accommodate the annexation of Israeli settlements created since 1967.

However, Palestinian negotiators could not accept that only some Arab quarters in East Jerusalem and in the Old City would be transferred to Palestinian sovereignty; or that they would only be granted custody - rather than sovereignty - over al-Haram al-Sharif, Islam's third holiest site. Referring to Barak's proposal on Jerusalem, which may have been unprecedented in Israeli history, Malley comments: "How could Mr. Arafat have justified to his people that Israel would retain sovereignty over some Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, let alone over al-Haram al-Sharif?"

More revealing is the history of Jewish claims over al-Haram al-Sharif - magnificently related by the Israeli-French journalist and writer Marius Schattner. In an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique's* November 2000 issue "Jérusalem, mythe et réalités," Schattner shows how the 3,000-year long Jewish spiritual attachment to the holy site evolved into a political and temporal claim only in the late 1920s - and then only for a minority of zealous right-wing Jews.

Schattner does not discount the religious symbolism of the Temple's remains, the

Western Wall (or HaKotel in Hebrew), which has acquired an increasing religious significance over the past four centuries. [Six centuries after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, Muslims took over the city and built al-Haram al-Sharif. Jews were then allowed to pray next to the Western Wall but not on the esplanade itself, where al-Haram stands.] However, Schattner explains: "Even religious Jews did not ask [to pray there] for fear of committing a terrible sacrilege by setting foot on the holy site without having been purified." None of the religious Jews who came to the Holy Land before Zionism emerged wanted to create a state there or establish a capital in Jerusalem.

In fact, Schattner clarifies that even the founding fathers of Zionism, whether Theodor Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, or even David Ben Gurion, never contemplated annexing Jerusalem's holy sites. Herzl promised "a form of extra-territoriality" to Christians. Quoting the Israeli historian Tom Segev, Schattner writes that Weizmann felt that Jerusalem "incarnated the opposite of the Zionist dream and symbolized obsolete Judaism."⁴ As for Ben Gurion (whom, Schattner notes, "General Ehud Barak takes as example"),

...if he may have wanted to have the whole of Jerusalem as the capital of a Jewish state, he was first and foremost working towards the creation of that state, an objective infinitely more important than the historical and religious claim over the holy city.

⁴ Segev, Tom. *C'était en Palestine au temps des coquelicots*. Paris: Lianna Lévi, 2000

Hence Ben Gurion's preoccupations were devoted to West Jerusalem, which, according to the first Prime Minister of Israel, was to become "a Jewish city" separated from the Old City, which was destined to become a "spiritual and religious museum for all religions."

Menahem Klein of the Jerusalem Institute Israel Studies corroborates the same findings for in his book, *Doves in Jerusalem's Skies*. In Ben-Gurion's view, sovereignty over Mount Scopus was more important than sovereignty over the Temple Mount. "The symbols of Zionism, its culture, and the desire to establish a Jewish state took precedence over the Jewish symbols in Jerusalem," writes Klein.

Quoting Klein, Israeli journalist Akiva Eldar wrote, during the Camp David summit, that:

Klein reminds his readers that the capture of the route leading to the Jewish enclave on Mount Scopus, and not the capture of the Old City of Jerusalem, was the central element in Israeli military strategies of the 1960s. Indeed, the capture of the road to Mount Scopus was the Israel Defense Forces' first act in the Six-Day War of June 1967. Had King Hussein of Jordan heeded Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban's pleas that Jordan not join Egypt and Syria in the fighting, Israel would have continued to exist without the Western Wall.⁵

Schattner adds that, after 1948 and until 1967, Israeli leaders did not seek to reunify Jerusalem: "that is conquering East Jerusalem... the Eastern part of the city seems to be forgotten by the Israelis." On June 5, 1967, then Prime Minister Levy Eshkol and General Moshe Dayan hesitated to take over the Old City. But, he writes: "Temptation prevails... the mystical-nationalist fever wins over large segments of the Jewish population... the way is open to the rise of the extreme religious right." However,

...the authorities are careful not to alienate Muslims worldwide by touching the Temple Mount. When it is occupied, Moshe Dayan orders that the flag hoisted by soldiers be pulled down. On June 17 in the evening, he confirms to the Waqf its control over the Haram al-Sharif. On August 20, the government forbids Jews to pray on the esplanade.

Since then, this policy, based on national security concerns and on religious grounds pertaining to the sanctity of the site, has remained in place.

Was Barak's request that Jews be allowed to pray on al-Haram pure provocation or a display of a previously unknown religious fervor on the part of the former prime minister?

His demand may have well been dictated by pressure at home. Barak lost his coalition government, parliamentary majority, and some of his constituency even before going to Camp David. Shas, the National Religious

⁵ Akiva Eldar, "The Jerusalem Syndrome", *Ha'aretz*, 19 July 2000.

Party, and Natan Sharansky's Yisrael b'Aliyah party had defected from Barak's fragile coalition in protest of his attending the summit - and for fear he would give up too much territory and discuss Jerusalem, which they viewed as "the eternal and undivided" capital of the Jewish state. In addition, on Monday July 10, 2000, Barak barely survived a Likud-initiated no-confidence motion in the Israeli Knesset. The opposition, also apprehensive of concessions to Arafat on territory and Jerusalem, out-pollled the government (54-52), but could not gather the 61 votes necessary to dissolve Barak's government.

Furthermore, the Israeli public opinion did not overwhelmingly support Barak's decision to go to Camp David. A poll published on July 9 by the Israeli newspaper *Yediot* revealed that 52 percent of Israelis said Barak should go to the summit, while 45 percent said he should stay home. Another poll, conducted on July 14 by the popular, pluralist *Maariv* newspaper, showed that Israelis were split 47 to 47 percent on whether the collapse of Barak's coalition left him with a mandate to conduct the Camp David negotiations. As to holding new elections at that moment, 56 percent approved and 40 percent opposed this idea.

Finally, a July 14 Channel 2 TV poll showed that 49 percent of Israelis were ready to accept any permanent agreement Barak brought back from Camp David, versus 32 percent who would oppose any such agreement. However, a full 60 percent opposed letting the Palestinians run their municipal services in East Jerusalem.

Domestic pressure on Barak not to

negotiate a deal in line with the land for peace framework of 1993 Oslo Accords was compounded by a series of right-wing and settler demonstrations throughout the summit. Therefore, it was Barak's own concerns to remain in power - rather than the issue of Jerusalem alone or the Palestinian negotiating team's so-called inflexibility - that had more to do with the summit's collapse.

Barak's domestic preoccupations were also behind President Clinton's decision to implicitly assign the blame to Arafat when the summit collapsed. In his July 25, 2000 press conference on the peace talks at Camp David, the former US president clearly credited Barak, who in his own sense "moved forward more from his initial position than Chairman Arafat, particularly surrounding the question of Jerusalem." Barak's "particular courage, vision and understanding of the historical important of this moment" were extolled, while Arafat was merely quoted as being committed to peace.

At a recent press conference, held in Ramallah on July 27, 2001, senior Palestinian negotiator Sa'eb Erekat told journalists that, at 3 am on July 24, 2000, Clinton told Arafat that he wanted to prepare a closing statement for the end of the summit and emphasized to him: "You have to take the high ground, don't engage in finger-pointing, don't put the blame on anyone." The three parties agreed to highlight the progress achieved, rather than the failures, and continue the negotiations. "But," said Erekat, "on July 25, Clinton held a press conference and we saw him finger pointing at us. I asked him why and he said he'd done it for the sake of Barak, whose

domestic situation was very fragile."

As mentioned earlier, the failure to reach an agreement at Camp David also had to do with a lack of preparation on both sides to negotiate the crucial issues of Jerusalem, the refugees, or the extent of the Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. As for the equally vital questions of water and economic relations between Israel and the future Palestinian state, they were relegated to low-level sub-committees, negotiating outside the presidential resort. Other reasons included Barak's arrogance - or naiveté - in thinking that a deal on his terms would be accepted by the Palestinian side.

At the July 27, 2001 press conference, Erekat complained about Barak's upfront request to the Palestinian side to declare an end to conflict and to their claims - regardless of the proposals advanced by the Israeli side, including the ever-changing percentages of the Israeli withdrawal. Malley and Agha also note Barak's all-or-nothing approach. Moreover, to them,

...strictly speaking, there [was] never an Israeli offer... Determined to preserve Israel's position in the event of failure, and resolved not to let the Palestinians take advantage of one-sided compromises, the Israelis always stopped one, if not several, steps short of a proposal. The ideas put forward at Camp David were never stated in writing, but orally conveyed. They generally were presented as US concepts, not Israeli ones; indeed, despite having demanded the opportunity to negotiate face to face with Arafat,

Barak refused to hold any substantive meeting with him at Camp David out of fear that the Palestinian leader would seek to put Israeli concessions on the record. Nor were the proposals detailed.

Maps based on the Israeli oral proposals for a Palestinian state were compiled by Faisal Husseini's office and reproduced in various media last November. They do indeed show that the Palestinian state offered at Camp David was simply not viable: it would be cut into three non-contiguous Bantustans to accommodate the annexation of two large Israeli settlement blocs around Jerusalem and on the western part of the West Bank. The Gaza Strip would continue to be separated from the West Bank. Moreover, Israel wanted to keep a relatively wide security zone on the eastern side of the West Bank, as well as entrust the security of the future Palestinian state's eastern and western borders to a third party - both for an extended period of time.

Not once in their essay do Malley and Agha single out Jerusalem as the root cause for the failure of the talks.⁶ Underlining that Barak went further than any Israeli leader had gone before - an assessment that is, incidentally, not contested by the Palestinian negotiating team - they concede that Arafat could not easily have made his people accept nine percent land annexation, in exchange for a one-ninth land swap within the Green Line. To them, the same applies to Jerusalem, where Israel would maintain sovereignty over al-Haram al-Sharif and several parts of East Jerusalem. As for the refugee question,

⁶ Malley and Agha, *The New York Review of Books*.

Israeli talk of a "satisfactory solution" was simply too vague.

Another myth that Malley seeks to debunk is that the Palestinians themselves made no concessions. Palestinians did offer counter-proposals, contrary to Barak's claims. Malley concurs with Eureka's statement at the July 27, 2001 press conference:

We did accept swaps of land, in equal size and value, for settlement annexation. We did accept that our national security be in the hands of a third party. We did take into account their concern over the Jewish quarter in the Old city, the Wailing Wall and cemeteries. We did express our understanding that the refugee question could not upset the demographic balance in Israel but not at the price of giving up the right of return.

In Malley's view, Palestinians made more concessions than any of the other Arab countries that have negotiated with Israel.⁷ He revises this assessment somewhat in his co-authored article with Agha, owing to the Palestinian team's failure to properly articulate these counter-proposals - perhaps because, according to the authors, Palestinians felt they had already compromised so much by agreeing to Oslo. By signing the 1993 agreement, Arafat conceded 78 percent of Mandate Palestine to Israel and thus could not contend with the fact that Israel was generously offering land that it had occupied since 1967 and that should merely be given back.

Taking this revisionist and more realistic reading of Camp David into account, one hopes that the chance will arise again when Palestinians and Israelis can resume negotiating. Whether based on the flawed Oslo agreement or not, land for peace must be at the core of any viable peace deal. Moreover, negotiations cannot happen in a vacuum; rather, both sides should build on the progress reportedly achieved at Camp David and in the subsequent discussions that led to the January 2001 Taba Talks. For, if Camp David failed - by all Israeli, Palestinian, and American accounts - subsequent negotiations, held until Sharon replaced Barak, yielded great progress.

Clinton's December 23, 2000 written proposal was more acceptable than any Israeli oral offers, even if both the Israelis and Palestinians voiced serious reservations over its substance and framework.

According to that proposal, the Palestinian state would cover 95 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza (excluding Jerusalem) and 1 to 3 percent of pre-1967 land to compensate for Israel's annexation of several settlements blocks; Palestinian refugees would settle in the new state but abandon their right of return to Israel, except for a few cases based on family reunification; and the Palestinians would be granted sovereignty over al-Haram and Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem. On the other hand, the Israelis would control the Western Wall and Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem. Jerusalem would be the capital of both states; and the international community would help implement the agreement.

⁷ Malley, *New York Times*

Neither the Palestinian leadership, now having to contend with a popular uprising in response to a seven-year peace process without any tangible gains, nor the Israeli government, with Barak facing a comprehensive defeat in a prime-ministerial election, had the wherewithal to bridge remaining gaps. These gaps mainly concerned security arrangements, with Israel demanding that the Palestinian state be demilitarized and that it be able to temporarily keep a military force in the Jordan Valley and conduct air force training over Palestinian territory. On the issue of Jerusalem, the Palestinians accepted Clinton's proposal; Israel insisted on also having sovereignty beneath al-Haram only to later change its position and demand sovereignty over the entire site.

The Palestinians were not ready to forego the refugees' choice between the right of return or compensation, as stipulated in UN resolution 194. Israel maintained its former position that the right of return was non-negotiable; it refused to accept responsibility for the refugee crisis, while accepting to participate in financial compensation and permit entry to a limited number of refugees, which varied between 10,000 and 100,000 refugees. [There are currently some 3.7 million refugees registered with UNWRA.]

With respect to an end to the conflict, the Palestinians were willing to sign a formal commitment to this effect only after the implementation of a final peace treaty. Meanwhile, Israel demanded that a formal agreement to an end to the conflict be included in the context of a framework agreement based on Clinton's ideas. In their essay, Malley and Agha note,

As at Camp David, Clinton was not presenting the terms of a final deal, but rather 'parameters' within which accelerated, final negotiations were to take place. As at Camp David, Arafat felt under pressure, with both Clinton and Barak announcing that the ideas would be off the table - would 'depart with the President' - unless both sides accepted them. With only thirty days left in Clinton's presidency and hardly more in Barak's premiership, the likelihood of reaching a deal was remote at best; if no deal could be made, the Palestinians feared they would be left with principles that were detailed enough to supersede international resolutions yet too fuzzy to constitute an agreement.

However, the authors forget to mention that, based on these parameters, a contiguous and thus viable Palestinian state was unlikely to emerge.

The prospect of the election of the hard-line Ariel Sharon as Israeli premier did motivate both sides to seek a final round of talks - this time without Clinton's mediation. The Taba talks concluded on January 27, 2001 with a joint statement: "The sides declare that they have never been closer to reaching an agreement and it is thus our shared belief that the remaining gaps could be bridged with the resumption of negotiations following the Israeli elections."

At the July 27, 2001 press conference, Erekat stated that, on the first day of the talks, Israeli negotiator Gilad Sher had shared with him a draft of the closing communiqué -

indicating that, from the Israeli perspective, the outcome of the negotiations had been pre-determined. At any rate, the window of opportunity had passed. Clinton's term was coming to an end and Sharon was about to become Israel's next premier.

However, the lost momentum must be found again, bearing in mind that, just as it takes two to tango, it takes two to make peace or - not to make peace.

Sophie Claudet is a Ramallah-based journalist.



Listed below are references for further critical discussions of Camp David and its aftermath that appeared during and after the writing of this article.

Ben-Ami, Shlomo. "We Must Understand that the Blame Does Not Always Lie with Us." *Ha'aretz*, Friday, September 14, 2001

Eldar, Akiva. "Camp David and Subsequent Negotiations: While They Were Sleeping." *Ha'aretz*, Monday, September 17, 2001.

Feldner, Yotam. "The (Revised) Palestinian Account of Camp David Part II - Jerusalem and Territorial Withdrawal." MEMRI - No. 69, email, September 7, 2001.

————— "The (Revised) Palestinian Account of Camp David, Part I: The Refugee Issue." MEMRI - No. 68, email, September 6, 2001.

Khoury, Rami G. "A View from the Arab World," email, Wednesday, August 1, 2001.

Palestinian Negotiating Team. "Camp David Peace Proposal of July, 2000: Frequently Asked Questions," email, July 23, 2001.

Sontag, Deborah. "Quest for Mideast Peace: How and Why it Failed," *New York Times*, July 26, 2001.