

# The Oslo Peace Process\*

And

# The Arab-Israeli Conflict

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About four years ago, most Middle East experts and politicians thought that peace between Israelis and Palestinians had been within reach. But as expectations were rising, the Oslo process collapsed almost unexpectedly, and violence and despair replaced hope and optimism. As violence increases today, more victims lose their lives daily on both sides of the conflict and peace becomes harder to perceive, not just to achieve. The international community, meanwhile, seems unable to revive the peace process or even calm the situation and restore hope. Such a development raises several basic questions, noted among them:

1. What was wrong with the Oslo peace process, and why did it collapse?
2. What are the current dynamics of the conflict, and what are the options that concerned parties have at this time?
3. What should the great powers and the UN do to reverse the cycle of violence and renew hope for peace and security in the Middle East?

## The Collapse of the Oslo Peace Process

Middle East observers seem to agree today that the Oslo process is dead. In fact, some people felt back in 1993 when the Oslo process was launched that it was incapable of achieving peace; it was badly conceived and the Declaration of Principles (DOP) it produced was flawed. They thought that it produced neither a solid basis for negotiations nor a realistic outline for a

mutually acceptable peace settlement. Some even felt that the Oslo process had failed to define its point of departure and, more importantly, its destination.

My first reaction to the Oslo agreement, after reading it in the *New York Times* weeks before the September 13 signing ceremony at the White House, was, "This agreement as is will only lead to creating a Palestinian administration for continued Israeli occupation." Consequently, I wrote an article that people considered at the time very pessimistic. The article was published in many Arabic newspapers in the Arab world as well as in Europe and the United States. "Farewell my Dream" was the title of the article in which I argued that the Oslo agreement had virtually assassinated the Palestinian dream of self-determination, freedom and return. The dream, I argued further, was buried in the White House and millions of people throughout the world witnessed its funeral and burial on September 13, 1993.

Despite this judgment, I wrote few articles subsequently suggesting certain modifications to make the Oslo process work. However, the signing of the agreement in the White House and the handshake Arafat and Rabin had created an atmosphere of euphoria and that, in turn, made it difficult for most people on both sides of the conflict to think rationally and listen to what I had to say.

When the Palestinians agreed in 1993 to postpone addressing the core issues of the conflict to the final stage of negotiation, they implicitly and unwittingly agreed to consider those issues negotiable. Such issues included, the borders of the Palestinian entity that was supposed to emerge at the end of the peace process, the rights of the Palestinian refugees who were evicted from their homes and towns in 1948, the future political status of Jerusalem, the fate of the many Jewish colonies built in the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 1967, and the Palestinian right to self-determination. These issues constitute the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and therefore are largely non-negotiable.

This Palestinian failure to include these issues in the Oslo Accords has given successive Israeli governments the impression that Israel controls the peace process and, therefore, is able to determine its final outcome. Shimon Peres, emphasizing Israel's disregard for international

law and UN resolutions, said, “We are not negotiating with the Palestinians; we are negotiating with ourselves. The question is how much are we willing to give them. They have no leverage over us.” The Israelis, employing their military force and the sheer power of occupation, have since then used every opportunity to buy more time, confiscate more Palestinian land and expand Jewish colonies, tighten Jewish control over Palestinian life, and delay the implementation of every interim agreement they signed with the Palestinian Authority. In fact, no Israeli government has honored a single agreement it signed with the Palestinians, not even the Jericho-Gaza First, which the DOT provided for back in 1993.

For example, instead of implementing the DOT regarding Gaza and Jericho in 1994, Israel increased the Palestinian land it had confiscated in the Gaza Strip by 40% before turning the rest over to the Palestinian National Authority. As for Jericho, Israel manipulated official maps to limit the size of the ancient city to that of a little town, while keeping the water resource on which the whole economy and community of Jericho depends under full Israeli control.

According to the interim agreements signed by both parties since 1993, 60% of the West Bank area was supposed to have been transferred to the Palestinian National Authority by May 1999. By April 2002, only 20% of the West Bank had been turned over to the PA. In fact, no redeployment of Israeli forces has been initiated since 1998 and all promises made by successive Israeli governments regarding military redeployment were not fulfilled. Meanwhile, instead of freezing the expansion of Jewish colonies after signing the DOP, successive Israeli governments have accelerated the pace of expansion, causing the number of Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza to increase from about 250,000 in 1993 to more than 480,000 by the end of 2003. The final stage of negotiations, which was supposed to have been completed in 1998, was never started. Consequently, the Oslo process was transformed, through Israeli manipulation and American acquiescence, from a supposedly conflict resolution process into a conflict management scheme. In June and July 2002 Israeli forces moved back into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, occupied all Palestinian towns and cities that were under the administration of the PA and thus canceled all previously signed agreements, practically ending the Oslo process and, with it, Palestinians hopes for peace.

When former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak made the so-called “generous” offer to the Palestinian Authority at Camp David in July 2000, the offer fell short of Palestinian expectations and hopes for freedom and independence. The offer also violated UN resolutions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rights of the Palestinian refugees who were subjected to ethnic cleansing by the Israeli forces in 1948. The offer, which was not made by Mr. Barak in writing, included continued Israeli control of the Palestinian borders with both Egypt and Jordan; annexing at least 80% of the Jewish colonies built in the West Bank in violation of international law; keeping control of Jerusalem; and giving the Palestinian Authority control over some 70% of the land of the West Bank and Gaza, divided and scattered into small cantons that lack contiguity. As for the rights of the Palestinian refugees that call for return and compensation under international law and UN resolution 194, Barak declared, “There are no rights and there is no return.” Mr. Barak, in fact, was so serious about negotiating a peace agreement with the Palestinians that he, during 17 days of intense negotiations at Camp David, was able to spare 15 minutes of his time to meet with Arafat.

In fact, neither Mr. Barak nor any other Israeli prime minister before or after him has ever made a written offer to the Palestinians to settle the conflict with them and achieve peace; Israeli officials have only expressed ideas to test and gauge Palestinian reactions. Likewise, neither the PLO nor the PA has ever made a written offer to the Israelis to settle the conflict with them and achieve peace until Mr. Arafat published a short article in the New York Times in February 2002. In that article Arafat dealt with three of the five core issues of the conflict. However, none of the ideas Arafat presented broke new grounds and, therefore, Arafat’s offer failed to provoke interest or have an impact on the prospects for peace.

Both Israeli and Palestinian officials know that the maximum they could offer under current circumstances would not be acceptable to the other side. And no matter how little each side may offer his adversary, the offer is certain to face strong opposition from the radicals and extremists on its own side. And since no Israeli or Palestinian politician would want to be accused of treason for a lost cause, neither party has made a written offer to settle the conflict and address its many aspects. Israeli claims to the contrary are mere fabrications meant to

deceive the world public opinion and make the Palestinian Authority look like a radical organization not interested in peace. Abba Eban, the late Israeli foreign minister once said, "Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity." But before his death, however, he admitted to Israeli journalist Akiva Eldar of Haaretz that "Israelis never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity" as well.

On July 19, 2001 Mr. Barak gave a speech at the Washington Institute in which he outlined some of his ideas regarding the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations. He said that Israeli leaders should be "tough enough and determined enough to shape a border for Israel within which we will have a solid Jewish majority for generations to come, in a way that will secure and assure Israelis about their direction, their identity." Israeli leaders, he declared, should be willing "to announce that we are going to shape the future borders of Israel in a way that will include more than 80% of the settlers, a certain strip along the Jordan River that will be needed as a basic security zone, and certain sites on the mountainous ridge for communication and intelligence. But all of these together should not cover more than, at most, 20% of the whole territory." And by not mentioning Jerusalem, Barak assumed that Israeli sovereignty over the holy city, which has been expanded to encompass more than 20% of the West Bank area, would continue, making Jerusalem an integral part of the Jewish state. In light of this "generous" offer, hopes for peace and freedom began to disappear and be replaced by Palestinian despair and anger.

## What is wrong with the Oslo Process?

The Oslo peace process started in 1993 at a time when both the Israeli government of Yitzhak Rabin and the PLO leadership under Yasser Arafat were facing serious problems that threatened their political survival. Although the problems had affected the Israeli and Palestinian sides differently, both parties realized that they needed each other to survive, and that there was no military solution to their conflict. The Oslo process gave both antagonists an excuse to recognize each other and a timely opportunity to start a process of negotiation to

settle their differences. The major problems, which forced both Israelis and Palestinians to accept the principle of compromise and seek mutual recognition, included:

1. The eruption and intensification of the first Palestinian uprising, or *Intifada*, which began in December 1987 and continued through 1993. The *Intifada*, while exposing the cruelty of Israeli occupation, especially in light of Rabin's policy of "beating Palestinian children and breaking their bones," helped the Palestinian people regain self-confidence and resolve to end the Jewish occupation and colonization of their land.
2. The United States recognition of the PLO and the opening of a dialogue with it in 1989. US recognition of the PLO signaled to all parties concerned, especially to Israel, that the US considers the PLO the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and an indispensable partner in the search for Middle East peace. Consequently, Israel felt that it had no choice but to follow the US lead, recognize the PLO, and seek accommodation and negotiation with it.
3. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. During the war, Iraqi missiles were able to fly over Jordan and hit their targets inside Israel, exposing the limits of territory as a guarantee for security. This led enlightened Israeli politicians to realize that territorial compromise and peace, not territorial expansion and war, is the way to enhance Israeli security. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who lost their jobs in the Arab Gulf states were forced to return to their homes in Jordan and Palestine. And this, in turn, led many Israeli Jews to realize that most Palestinians had no place to go besides their own Palestinian homeland, and that no alternative Palestinian homeland existed or was possible outside the historic borders of Palestine.
4. The failure of the Madrid peace conference and the working groups it created to make meaningful progress towards resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

On the other hand, the PLO failure to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the sympathy expressed by many ordinary Palestinians for the Iraqi leader during the Gulf crisis

caused Mr. Arafat and his organization to lose the sympathy and financial support of the Arab Gulf states. By the end of 1992, the PLO was on the verge of collapse while the *Intifada* was getting weaker and its leadership was slowly losing control. This led the PLO to accept the Oslo framework as a possible solution to its own dilemma, and as a way to translate the human and economic sacrifices of the Palestinian people into tangible political gains on the ground. Israel, meanwhile, saw in a much-weakened PLO a disoriented player to manipulate and lead to accept most Israeli conditions for compromise. The Oslo agreement, moreover, provided Israel with the means to monitor PLO movements and put its leadership under constant Israeli control and surveillance.

The Oslo process, therefore, was a framework to facilitate mutual recognition and negotiations, which the circumstances had forced upon both Israelis and Palestinians alike, but not a framework for a political solution to the conflict. Both the PLO and the Israeli government needed the Oslo process to weather the storm of the *Intifada* and the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. And while the Israelis saw the Oslo agreement as an experiment in peacemaking, the Palestinians saw it as a foundation to end Israeli occupation and colonization of their land, regain long confiscated rights and freedom, and build an independent Palestinian state.

The Israeli negotiators, who negotiated the Oslo accords and the interim agreements that were to follow, were able to outsmart the Palestinian negotiators; the Israelis had more knowledge and experience, more information, and much better legal advice than their Palestinian counterparts did. The Israelis also had the American mediators on their side, constantly intimidating and pressuring the Palestinians to make one compromise after the other. Consequently, the Israelis managed, to their detriment, to ignore UN resolutions, overlook the principles of conflict resolution, and manipulate the Oslo process to the extent possible. But by manipulating the peace process the way they did, the Israelis outsmarted not only the Palestinian negotiators, but themselves as well. And while forcing the Palestinians to postpone the settlement issue, American acquiescence to the illegal Israeli settlement policy had emboldened Israelis to ignore every other Palestinian complaint and right.

As successive Israeli governments continued to confiscate more Palestinian land and build new Jewish colonies, the settler population grew and so did Palestinian radicalism and Israeli insecurity. During Mr. Barak's short tenure in office, for example, the settler population increased by 13,000, while no land was transferred to the PNA, not even 1%. Today, no Israeli government seems capable of abandoning the Jewish colonies in the West Bank, even for the sake of peace; and no peaceful settlement with the Palestinians is possible without dismantling, at the very least, the majority of the Jewish colonies in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. On June 1, 2001 the *Economist* of London criticized the Israeli settlement policy saying, "The settlements negate all chances of Israeli-Palestinian peaceful co-existence." Thomas Friedman argued more than once in the New York Times that the Israeli settlement policy does not serve Israel, the Palestinians or the cause of peace and security. He wrote in September 2003, "the longer Israelis continue to settle in the West Bank and Gaza, the harder it will be to cleanly divide the land between two nations with separate identities. Talk of two states will end. Two options will emerge [for Israel]: an apartheid state run by a heavily armed Jewish minority, or a new political minority without Jewish identity."

Professor James Ron of The Johns Hopkins University criticized the Israeli settlement policy warning that it might lead to civil war; he wrote, "If Israel is ever to dismantle settlements, withdraw from East Jerusalem and relinquish its grip over Palestine, it must first undergo a traumatic internal upheaval." The Israelis, by adopting and diligently pursuing an expansionist, colonialist policy in the occupied Palestinian territories, have created a frightening ghost whose very existence drives the Israeli public toward more radicalism and polarization as it deepens its fear and sense of insecurity. It is this very policy that serves today to revive and legitimate calls by certain Palestinians for a fight to the end

Jewish colonies in the West Bank and Gaza are the most difficult problem that will face the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in the future if peace efforts were to be revived. They complicate the search for peace; encourage extremism on both sides of the conflict; and give the Israeli army an excuse to harass and constantly punish the Palestinian people for loving their land and defending their homes. In the name of security and the need to protect Jewish

settlers, the Israeli army continues to restrict the movement of Palestinians, confiscate more of their land and build new roads on it for the exclusive use of Jewish settlers, and, in so doing, Israel vastly undermines the capacity of the Palestinian economy to grow. Jewish settlers, meanwhile, have been allowed to carry arms, intimidate Palestinians and disturb their lives, and rampage freely through Palestinian villages and neighborhoods, smashing windows and setting fire to Palestinian shops, cars, crops and trees. Thomas Friedman asked rhetorically on October 2, 2003 in the New York Times, “will Israeli idealism be defined by more settlements for a fanatical minority or by the quality of the society it builds for a sane majority?”

Building a security wall around Israel that encloses the many Jewish settlements has furthermore made matters worse. This security fence is expected when completed to confiscate about 60% of the West Bank, separate Palestinian farmers from their farmland and divide Palestinians in what would be left of their homeland into several tiny cantons lacking contiguity. On October 3, 2003 the New York Times criticized Israeli settlement policy and the building of the “security fence on both political and economic grounds” and, quoting Israeli press reports, estimated the cost of the building of the settlements since 1967 at more than \$10 billion.

As a result, the suffering of the Palestinian people has continued to increase and intensify, causing their hatred of occupation and mistrust of Israelis in general to grow and deepen. Professor Shlomo Avineri of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem said on November 28, 2000, “The Oslo process was aimed at creating confidence-building measures. We now have less confidence than we had the first day after Oslo.” On August 10, 2001, Avineri was quoted in the *Washington Post* saying; “We remain in a neocolonial relationship with the Palestinians, which forces us to do things that are incompatible with being a democracy. It coarsens Israeli life, making us all racists. Every time we see an Arab, we assume he’s a terrorist. And it is utterly demeaning for the Palestinians, who are lined up and searched like cattle every day.

Mistakes made since the start of the Oslo peace process were not committed by Israel only; the Palestinians and Americans have also made serious mistakes and share the blame for its collapse. The Palestinian Authority, for example, accepted interim agreements, such as the

Hebron agreement, that should have never been accepted. For the sake of some 50 Jewish families living as settlers in the heart of the city, one-third of the population of Hebron was put under Israeli military control and denied the freedom and dignity they are entitled to. The PA, moreover, has, out of sheer ignorance, largely ignored the Israeli and world public opinions by failing to address their concerns and explain the Palestinian case and commitment to peace. The PA has even failed to expose the failure of successive Israeli governments to honor their political commitments as stated in the Oslo accords and the subsequent interim agreements signed by both parties. And when it became obvious that the American team of mediators was biased and could not be trusted, the PA could not muster enough courage to ask former President Bill Clinton to appoint a different team. I personally tried to convince Abu Mazin to have the PLO take such a step but without success.

Nevertheless, the most damaging mistake the PA has so far made is its failure to take the initiative and offer a visionary proposal to settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the basis of international legitimacy. By limiting its actions to mere reactions to vague Israeli offers and rejecting almost all of them, the PA appeared to the outside world as a force of rejectionism not interested in peace. Moreover, the PA allowed itself to drown in political and economic corruption, causing the Palestinian image to be badly tarnished. As a consequence, the PA lost support of most Palestinians and confidence of many Arab and non-Arab donors.

While the Oslo peace process allowed the Israeli government to buy more time and create new facts on the ground, it gave the American administration a veil to hide behind and cover its real face. While the Clinton and Bush administrations have continued to claim that the US is an honest broker, they have continued to support Israeli actions and inhumane policies in the occupied Palestinian territories and defend the Jewish state against international criticism. The Clinton administration in particular committed several mistakes in dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, noted among them:

1. It abandoned previous American pronouncements as it ignored the US-coined "land for peace" formula and stopped referring to UN resolutions 242 and 338 as the proper frame of reference for negotiations and peacemaking;

2. It accepted the pace of negotiations dictated by Israeli leaders, particularly Ehud Barak, and refused to apply pressure on the Jewish state to honor its commitments regarding the interim agreements it signed with the PA;
3. It refused to condemn the Israeli settlement policy; it even stopped calling Jewish settlements illegal or even an obstacle to peace;
4. It provided no new ideas to help bridge the gaps that separated the Israeli and Palestinian positions, and refused to allow other parties to lend their experience, particularly the Europeans; and
5. It entrusted the entire peacemaking process to a biased Jewish-American team that lacked stature and never hid its commitment to defending every Israeli policy.

The first American team to meet with the PLO leadership in Tunisia following the signing of the DOP in 1993 included, among other Jewish-Americans, Dennis Ross, who was later appointed head of the American mediating team, and Martin Indyk, who was later appointed US ambassador to Israel. Because of their unyielding commitment to the Jewish state and its expansionist policy, the PLO was unable to have a rational dialogue with either Ross or Indyk. Instead of asking the American team to help facilitate negotiations with the Israelis, the PLO had to ask its friends in the Israeli Labor party for help to negotiate with the supposedly unbiased American team. Former president Jimmy Carter criticized his country's support and protection of the Israeli settlement policy. On September 24, 2003, president Carter wrote, "no matter what leaders Palestinians choose, how fervent American interest might be or how great the hatred and bloodshed might become, there remains one basic choice, and only the Israelis can make it. Do we want permanent peace with our neighbors, or do we want to retain our settlements in the occupied territories of the Palestinians? America's worst betrayal of Israel would be to support the second choice."

## The Dynamics of the Conflict

When Sharon became prime minister in March 2001, he demanded a total cessation of violence as a precondition for resuming negotiation with the Palestinians. But instead of giving a good

example for others to follow, he ordered the Israeli killing machine to hit the Palestinians as hard as possible and thus killed all chances of resuming the search for peace. In an editorial published August 2, 2001, the *Washington Post* noted that Sharon's "government has never stopped its assassination operations---making its own condition impossible to meet." And as violence continued, the economic, political and security conditions on both sides of the conflict worsened. For example, the Israeli economy has stagnated, causing unemployment to rise above 10% and tourism to decline dramatically. Israeli exports have dropped by more than 60% since September 2000, and foreign investment in Israel, a sign of international confidence in Israel's economy and political stability, has declined substantially. The Israeli economy today is experiencing its worst recession ever causing poverty to spread, while the military and settlement budgets continue to rise.

Mr. Barak's misguided policies regarding the peace process on the one hand, and the ascendance of Mr. Sharon to power on the other, have led to the disintegration of the Israeli peace camp. Consequently, political and ideological polarization within Israel has deepened. In light of the second *Intifada*, which is now into its fourth year, and Israeli attacks and Palestinian counterattacks, security on both sides has worsened, and fear among Israelis and despair among Palestinians have spread. The loss of Jewish self-confidence is probably the worst damage the Israeli society has suffered so far. No Israeli man or woman today feels secure enough and confident enough to lead a normal life and entertain long-term dreams. Meanwhile, continued Israeli assassinations of Palestinian activists and Islamic radicals and destruction of homes and confiscation of land have hardened feelings of all Palestinians.

Moreover, the Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation of Palestinian towns and cities in April 2002 and the killing of hundreds of innocent Palestinians, particularly in Jenin and Nablus, have practically destroyed all chances for Arab- Israeli reconciliation at this time. Meanwhile, the Israeli destruction of Palestinian institutions, especially the security institutions, has vastly weakened the capacity of the PA to control Islamic radicals even if it wanted to. If the current dynamics of the conflict were to continue unchanged, and if American support of Israeli policies

and acquiescence to its crimes were to persist, the Arab-Israeli conflict could soon become an existential one, leaving no room for compromise.

As for the Palestinians, the conditions under which they live today are extremely worse than those prevalent in Israel. Palestinians are governed by a cruel military occupation that makes hell look attractive to most of them. Since September 2000, the Palestinian economy has contracted by more than 60% and unemployment has risen to over 60% in the Gaza Strip and to more than 40% in the West Bank. Poverty, malnutrition and starvation, as a result, have spread and deepened, creating conditions conducive to crime and lawlessness. In fact, about 70% of all Palestinians live today under the poverty line. And to end their misery and avenge humiliation, many Palestinians are being driven to kill themselves and their Israeli torturers.

In light of these developments, all parties to the conflict, including the United States, seem to have lost the options they may have had in the past. While Mr. Arafat may be able to reduce the level of violence, it is doubtful that he can stop the *Intifada*. Even if he could, ending the *Intifada* would mean losing the last and only bargaining chip he currently has to pressure the Israeli government and hope to extract some concessions from it.

Mr. Sharon seems to be driven by the “Greater” Israel idea that calls for expanding, not freezing, Jewish colonies in the occupied Palestinian territories, especially in the West Bank, and for using ethnic cleansing tactics to force Palestinians to leave their Palestinian homeland. Nevertheless, Sharon’s harsh military and human policies towards the Palestinian people have proven counterproductive. “It seems increasingly obvious that Israel’s long-term policy toward the Palestinians isn’t working,” wrote David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* on December 8, 2001. “The Palestinians aren’t intimidated by the threat of retaliation, and they aren’t encouraged by the promise of peace. Instead, they grow bolder and more desperate year by year. And Israel grows less secure.”

Mr. Sharon, as the tragic events of the last a few years have demonstrated, is neither capable of providing the Israeli public with the security he had promised, nor can he entice as many Jews to settle in the occupied territories as he wishes. In its December 3, 2001 editorial,

the *Washington Post* referred to Sharon's policies and concluded that his "tactics such as the invasion of Palestinian cities and the assassination of Palestinian militants, while weakening Mr. Arafat, do not stop terrorism or make Israelis more secure." Professor Stephen P. Cohen in October 2003, "Israel can't force the Palestinians to be reasonable, to pursue their interests and not their passions, but it can create a context where they are more likely to do so than not. But with its relentless settlement activity, and responding to every Hamas provocation by smashing the Palestinian Authority, Israel has not done that (The New York Times, October 2, 2003).

The only option that a growing number of Israelis and Palestinians seem to think they have today is to commit more violence and cause the other to pay a heavier price. But in pursuing such a strategy, both parties have found themselves marching further and deeper in the dark alleys of radicalism and fatalism. Prince El Hassan Bin Talal said recently, "We have moved from a peace process, interrupted from time to time by surges of violence, to a state of endless violence that has gained an unexpected momentum."

The United States under President Bush has also lost its options; in fact, Mr. Bush came to power determined not to have an option. The US administration's apparent decision to limit its involvement in Arab-Israeli peacemaking on the one hand, and to increase the level of its support of Israel on the other, have led to the widest and deepest anti-American feelings in the Arab world. Such a feeling was further deepened with the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. A panel of experts chosen by the Bush administration to identify the causes of Arab and Muslim antagonism concluded on October 1, 2003, "Hostility toward America has reached shocking levels." David Ignatius wrote on May 2004, "In 25 years of covering the Middle East, I have rarely seen anti-American feeling so intense." (The Washington Post, May 18, 2004).

The United States does not only supply the Jewish state with the weapons to kill, maim and starve Palestinian children, it also supplies the armored bulldozers Israelis use regularly to destroy Palestinian homes and unearth their trees and crops. The United States gives Israel today, as it has for the last 25 years, an average of \$10,000 per minute, \$600,000 per hour, and almost \$14 million a day. Since the day the United States committed itself to protecting Israel's

security and maintaining its military edge over its neighboring Arab states, the United States ceased to be a neutral third party, or an honest broker. It actually became a party to the conflict, supporting the Jewish state and its expansionist, criminal policies, while denying the Arabs the opportunity to regain their rights and free themselves from foreign occupation.

Between September 2000 and September 2003, the number of Palestinians killed by the forces of the Jewish state has exceeded 2700. Since the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza is only about one-hundredth of the American population, the number of Palestinians killed by the Israelis each month amounts to more than 8,000 Americans. This means that the number of Palestinians killed monthly by the forces of the Jewish state equals two and a half times the number of Americans killed by terrorist in their vicious attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. The Palestinians, consequently, have to endure a September-size massacre at the hands of Israel every 12 days. Despite the almost daily massacres the Sharon government commits, and the human tragedy it has created and continues to perpetuate and deepen in Palestine, Bush called Mr. Sharon “a man of peace,”

The Bush administration, by focusing “its sights on the domestic politics and the sensibilities of a pro-Israel congress,” as the *Washington Post* noted on August 1, 2001, “has lost its ability to develop a Middle East regional policy.” Meanwhile, the Bush administration decision to attack and occupy Iraq has served to deepen anti-Americanism in the region and cause regional instability and terrorism to become more pronounced and structural. Since the Bush administration made its intentions regarding Iraq clear, America has lost almost all its friends in the world, including many of its European friends. I believe, if President Bush were to be reelected and to continue current policies and attitudes, America would be left with no friends in the world by the time Bush leaves office. Most people of the world today, seem to have much fear of the US power, but to nurture neither love nor respect for its values and policies. A public opinion survey taken in Europe in late 2003 had indicated that a majority of Europeans see Israel and the United States as the first and second most dangerous states in the world threatening world peace and security.

Today, while violence goes on, radicalism on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict claims more followers and legitimacy. The international community, meanwhile, seems unable to do anything to arrest the deterioration and renew hope for peace. The German *Frankfurter Rundschau* noted on May 22, 2001, "Never before has the world stood so helplessly by [while] peace in the Middle East could be buried under the victims of suicide and missiles attack."

A general consensus subsequently emerged that Israelis and Palestinians are unable to work together and make peace without outside help and pressure. The former French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine said on July 7, 2001 in Rome that "the outside world is becoming convinced the Israelis and Palestinians are no longer capable of resolving their differences on their own. We cannot leave the Israelis and Palestinians alone in this atmosphere of growing hate and panicky fear." The *Washington Post* wrote in an editorial on July 21, 2001, "The Bush administration, faced with this difficult and deteriorating situation, appears at a loss about what, if anything, to do. The dilemma the administration faces is that if it leaves the Palestinians and Israelis to their own devices, the situation will only grow worse."

Nevertheless, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, the Bush administration recognized that there is a link between the US Middle East policy and the terrorism. On October 7, 2001, President Bush said that his administration had been working on an outline for an Arab-Israeli peace plan that envisions the establishment of a Palestinian state. Weeks later, Secretary of State Colin Powell talked about the Palestinian suffering and the need to end occupation. No doubt a call for ending occupation and supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state were music to the ears of all Palestinians. However, talk remained mere talk. Arab hopes for an American peace plan were dashed when Bush gave a speech in June 2002 in which he called for changing the democratically elected Palestinian leadership and the restructuring of Palestinian institutions, which the Israelis had by then almost totally destroyed and rendered dysfunctional. Palestinians, having no choice, responded to Bush's demands, approved the appointment of a prime minister who tried and succeeded in convincing all Palestinian radical forces to declare a cease-fire. Sharon, however, continued his assassination policy causing the cease-fire agreement to be suspended and suicide activity to resume

The war on terrorism, described by President Bush as a huge long-term undertaking that requires patience and perseverance gave Sharon an opportunity to claim that he is America's partner in the war on terrorism and a pretext to intensify his attacks against the Palestinian people. He assassinated many of their leaders, arrested thousands more, holding them as hostages, and engaged in a systematic process of destruction to eliminate all security, political and non-political Palestinian institutions. Even Palestinian universities did not escape the cruelty of Sharon's government. In addition, he confiscated more land, built several new Jewish colonies, destroyed more than four thousand Palestinian homes, rendered more than eleven thousand Palestinians homeless and uprooted tens of thousand of trees.

Having failed to settle their differences, most Israelis and Palestinians seem also to have concluded that their only hope is to have the international community conceive and "impose" a settlement on them. Uri Avnery wrote on October 6, 2001 in the Israeli paper *Ma'ariv*, "at this time only foreign intervention can put an end to the violence and promote the peace." Several Palestinians have also expressed their conviction that the only way out of the current dilemma is to have an internationally 'imposed' settlement before radicalism and fatalism transform the conflict into an existential and self-destructive war.

## The Role of the Great Powers

In light of this sad reality, the only option that Arabs were left with is to have the international community develop a comprehensive peace plan to resolve the conflict in its entirety and create an effective mechanism to implement it. The great powers, the US and the EU in particular, should use all the carrots and sticks they have to persuade the parties concerned to accept an internationally sanctioned plan to end the conflict, restore stability and security, and achieve peace. Although peace in the Middle East is not a guarantee that terrorism will end, peace will certainly delegitimize the forces of political radicalism and religious extremism that underpin terrorism on both sides of the conflict as well as in most Arab and Muslim countries. The September tragedy has made it crystal clear that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians, nor the Americans will have peace and security until peace prevails in the Holy Land.

It is widely acknowledged that neither the United States nor the European Union is capable of producing a comprehensive political settlement that stands a good chance of being accepted by both Arabs and Israelis. Nevertheless, if all major international powers were to agree on a plan to settle the conflict, it would be very difficult for either party to reject it, especially if the proposed plan includes enough carrots and sticks. The “Road Map” developed in December 2002 by the US, the EU, Russia and the UN could be such a plan. However, after the PA welcomed the Road Map, the Bush administration, in its continued and undisciplined efforts to appease Mr. Sharon, decided first to prevent the publication of the plan. Though the Sharon government had accepted the plan with 14 modifications, it continued to pursue its crimes and expansionist policies. Mr. Bush did nothing to stop Mr. Sharon from committing more crimes against the Palestinian people and pressure him to negotiate peace. Some of the measures Israel committed in Gaza and elsewhere in the occupied Palestinian territories were described by Amnesty International as “war crimes.”

In early 2004 Mr. Sharon, while launching a genocidal war against the Palestinian people, especially in the Rafah refugee camp, announced that he had decided to evacuate all Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip and unilaterally disengage from that area. Mr. Bush immediately welcomed the Sharon plan and called Mr. Sharon a courageous man. The plan, however, was rejected by Sharon’s own party, which put Sharon in a difficult position and made it doubtful that the plan will be implemented in the future. In an editorial, The Washington Post wrote on May 18, 2004, “As Mr. Powell conceded, the administration now finds itself in the uncomfortable position of waiting to see whether Mr. Sharon will take action to revive his Gaza withdrawal plan—with part of the United States’ own standing in the Middle East, and Iraq, hanging on the outcome. Normally, a US president might be expected to insist that his ally deliver on his promises instead of launching offensives that make matters worse. But that has not been Mr. Bush’s habit with Mr. Sharon.”

Thomas Friedman, writing in the New York Times on January 17, 2003, said that the “Ariel Sharon’s all-stick-no-carrot crackdown over the past two years has failed to improve security for Israelis. When Mr. Sharon succeeded Ehud Barak, roughly 50 Israelis had been killed in the

uprising; today the number is more than 700 Israelis, and over 2000 Palestinians.” Mr. Friedman summed up the dilemma facing Israel as a result of the Sharon policies and intentions in the following words: “If there is no [Israeli-Palestinian] separation, by 2010 there will be more Palestinians than Jews living in Israel and the occupied territories. Then Israel will have three options: The Israelis will control this whole area by apartheid, or they will control it by expelling Palestinians, or they will grant Palestinians the right to vote and it will no longer be a Jewish state. Whichever way it goes, it will mean the end of Israel as a Jewish democracy.”

If the Road Map were to be pursued with diligence and all powers that participated in its development were to commit themselves to its implementation; it would be almost impossible for any Israeli government to reject it. A peace plan that America stands firmly behind has a great chance of succeeding because no rational Israeli politician would want to risk alienating the United States and angering the American people. The Arabs, likewise, would find it extremely difficult to reject a plan that enjoys European and Russian backing and risk losing Europe’s sympathy. Furthermore, an internationally sanctioned peace plan that enjoys the full backing of the US, the EU, Russia, and the UN would give leaders on all sides a legitimate excuse to accept it. Such a plan would also enable leaders on all sides of the conflict to override the objections of the radical forces within their own ranks and among their populations.

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**\*This paper was written in 2004**