What lies ahead for Israelis and Palestinians?

Reflections on the Camp David 2000 Summit and the 2020 ‘Deal of the Century.’

By Gilead Sher and Ze'ev Portner/ July 9, 2020

In January 2001, just three days before he was about to leave office, former president Bill Clinton received a farewell phone call from the then chairman of the PLO, Yasser Arafat. Arafat flattered “you are a great man.” Clinton did not mince his words, “The hell I am. I am a colossal failure, and you made me one.”

Clinton was referring to the Camp David peace talks of July 2000 held under his administration’s auspices, and the subsequent Clinton Parameters in which he expended so much effort, energy, and time. King Abdullah II of Jordan has written that “Prime Minister Ehud Barak showed great courage” at Camp David in terms of the steps he was prepared to take to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and put a finality to the respective claims.

The problem was that this was never reciprocated on the Palestinian side; the only person who could take things forward, Arafat, failed to cross the Rubicon from leading a national movement to statesmanship. Arafat undermined his own negotiators’ positions at Camp David, with his consistent no to any of the American proposals put to him – not even willing to discuss them as a basis for negotiations. As Clinton told him at the time, Arafat was making an error on the scale of 1947 when the Palestinians had rejected the partition plan and the creation of an Arab state next to a Jewish one.

But despite the failure to attain a framework for a permanent peace agreement, Camp David will always remain a milestone in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. For the first time, in a formal summit, the core contentious Permanent Status issues – Jerusalem, the Holy Sites, refugees, borders and territory, security arrangements – were discussed.

On the verge of annexing unilaterally by Israel, West Bank territory with Jewish settlements or the Jordan Valley under US President Donald Trump’s “Deal of the Century,” the Camp David summit could provide more than a few lessons to all parties concerned. Annexation is detrimental to the fundamental vision of Israel as a Jewish, democratic, moral state and undermines Palestinian self-determination in a viable, peaceful state.

Here are the lessons. Firstly, the way forward requires gradual disengagement of Israelis and Palestinians within a framework that promotes a reality of two nation-states and regional prosperity throughout interim agreements and transitional phases, rather than a one-off deal. It is therefore essential to change the “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” Camp David paradigm, to “what has been agreed or mutually coordinated should be implemented.”
Secondly, once people start seeing positive changes on the ground, this will increase the confidence the two respective societies have in the process. There must be preparation of public opinion. As former president John Kennedy said, “peace does not rest in charters and covenants alone. It lies in the hearts and minds of people.”

Chief Palestinian peace negotiator, Saeb Erekat, has stated that he regards the Palestinian leadership’s biggest mistake as “not preparing their public for what it takes to make a comprehensive peace on all issues of negotiations, but instead courted popularity, by telling people what they wanted to hear.” In past periods, Israel’s leadership did not do much better vis-à-vis its own constituency.

Thirdly, substantive participation of Arab states can incentivize Israelis and Palestinians to contemplate the benefits of a viable negotiation outcome, even if short of a comprehensive agreement. Not only can Arab states provide important infrastructure for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but Israeli-Arab normalization is a key component of any road map to regional stability. The Arab Quartet (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) might be considered as a potential vehicle in that respect.

And finally, a continuous, hands-on, inclusive, and binding process of negotiations, with clear benchmarks, while lowering the bar of expectations to a more modest but achievable level, is required.

The Camp David Summit and successive rounds of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, namely in 2007-8 and 2013-14 laid out the foundations for a final status package containing the following elements:

A viable and democratic Palestinian state living peacefully side by side with Israel, based on the 1967 borders with modifications to reflect the realities on the ground and equitable territorial swaps.

Security cooperation between Israel and a demilitarized Palestine with mutual guarantees.

Compensation and practical rehabilitation arrangements for Palestinian refugees including termination of their refugee status, but no right of return to Israel.

Jerusalem, including the Jewish neighborhoods in the eastern side, serving as the capital of Israel, and Al Quds, comprising the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, with a special regime over the Old City.

Free access to, and worship in the holy places; and Finality of mutual claims.

But we are not in the endgame yet..

To further capitalize on past experience, we need to encourage the two sides to also take constructive independent steps toward disengaging from one another, thereby creating a reality of two states on the ground; to advance gradually towards delineating a border between two distinct national entities; to get an Israeli commitment to stop building settlements eastward of the security fence and a parallel Palestinian commitment to stop violence and terror; and to deter either side or others from actions that undermine a two-state solution.
We must admit that the likelihood for real progress in the near term is slim. There are even slimmer chances for a full-fledged agreement in the foreseeable future. But one day, Israelis and Palestinians will have to face each other again across a negotiating table. When that happens, the agenda will not have changed. The core issues will remain the same and so will have the solutions.

Back then, now and in the future, two states for two peoples with a clear, recognized border between them, would make Israel the Jewish democracy it set out to be, and provide freedom, self-determination and statehood for the Palestinians. This is the only way to secure a democratic nation-state for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel within secure and recognized boundaries, alongside a viable demilitarized Palestinian state, as well as interjecting hope for a brighter future for both Israelis and Palestinians.

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