

## **Camp David: An Exchange**

Dennis Ross and Gidi Grinstein, reply by Hussein Agha and Robert Malley  
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*To the Editors:*

I read the article by Rob Malley and Hussein Agha [“The Truth About Camp David,” *NYR*, August 9] with interest and, unfortunately, some dismay. I know and respect both men. Rob served on the peace team that I headed during the Clinton administration. And Hussein, a longtime adviser to the Palestinians, is someone who has consistently sought to promote peace and reconciliation.

But their account of “the tragedy of errors” of Camp David—though correct in many aspects—is glaring in its omission of Chairman Arafat’s mistakes. One is left with the impression that only Barak did not fulfill commitments. But that is both wrong and unfair, particularly given Arafat’s poor record on compliance. Moreover, while striving to prove that the reality was far more complicated than Israel offering and Palestinians rejecting, they equate tactical mistakes with strategic errors. Did Prime Minister Barak make mistakes in his tactics, his negotiating priorities, and his treatment of Arafat? Absolutely. Did the American side make mistakes in its packaging and presentation of ideas? Absolutely. Are Prime Minister Barak and President Clinton responsible for the failure to conclude a deal? Absolutely not.

Both Barak and Clinton were prepared to do what was necessary to reach agreement. Both were up to the challenge. Neither shied away from the risks inherent in confronting history and mythology. Can one say the same about Arafat? Unfortunately, not—and his behavior at Camp David and afterward cannot be explained only by his suspicions that a trap was being set for him. Indeed, his mistakes cannot be reduced to his being “so fixated on potential traps, he could not see potential opportunities.”

Throughout the course of the Oslo process, Chairman Arafat was extremely passive. His style was to respond, not initiate ideas. That is a good tactic, especially for a weaker party that feels it has little to give. If it was only a tactic, it should have stopped when serious ideas or package proposals were put on the table. Whether the Israelis put a generous offer on the table is not the issue. The issue is, did Yasser Arafat respond at any point—not only at Camp David—to possibilities to end this conflict when they presented themselves?

Any objective appraisal would have to conclude he did not. Consider that in June when Barak was pushing very hard to convene a summit, and we were resisting on the grounds that we needed more preparation, more of a basis, Arafat resisted all our efforts to develop that basis. As Rob and Hussein rightly say, Arafat sought more time for preparation before going to the summit. But they neglect to say that he was neither revealing anything himself nor authorizing his negotiators to do anything to make additional preparation possible. On the contrary, at this very time, his negotiators hardened their positions, not being willing even to discuss security arrangements until the Israelis conceded the eastern border.

Consider Arafat's performance at Camp David. It is not just that he had, in the words of President Clinton, "been here fourteen days and said no to everything." It is that all he did at Camp David was to repeat old mythologies and invent new ones, like, for example, that the Temple was not in Jerusalem but in Nablus. Denying the core of the other side's faith is not the act of someone preparing himself to end a conflict. (What's more, in the completely closed environment of Camp David, he did nothing to control the fratricidal competition in his delegation—effectively giving license to those who were attacking other members who were trying to find ways to bridge the differences.)

Consider that near the end of September, when we had just concluded three days of quiet talks with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators and Arafat knew we were on the verge of presenting ideas that would have been close to those the President presented in December, he allowed the violence to erupt and did nothing to prevent it or contain it. This, despite a phone call from Secretary Albright asking him to act and reminding him of what we were about to do.

The President's ideas went well beyond those raised at Camp David. When Arafat proved unable to accept these ideas, he convinced the Israeli public that he could not accept any ideas for solving the conflict. Would it have made a difference if the President's ideas had been presented on October 1, rather than December 23? Rob and Hussein would probably say yes. I am less sure, but we will never know because the Chairman, knowing the violence was about to erupt, did nothing to stop it.

I am not one who believes that Chairman Arafat is against peace in principle. Nor am I one who believes that Palestinian negotiators made no concessions. But at no point during Camp David or in the six months after it did the Chairman ever demonstrate any capability to conclude a permanent status deal. Because it requires personal redefinition and giving up myths, I simply do not believe he is capable of doing a permanent status deal. But the choices before us cannot be either a permanent deal or nothing. There is a need to stabilize the current situation and to create a political process to provide direction and hope. There is a need to reestablish the core premise of

peacemaking: security for Israelis, the end of Israeli control of Palestinian lives for the Palestinians. And there is a need for real accountability on both sides so that commitments made are commitments fulfilled.

But there is little prospect of ever ending this conflict if we do not face up to the lessons of the past. I am now writing a book that looks at the last decade of peacemaking with the aim of telling the story of what happened and what we need to learn from it. Rob and Hussein have told a part of the story of Camp David. However, in their desire to show that there was a reason for Palestinian behavior—and for Arafat's suspicions—they may perpetuate a mindset that has plagued the Palestinians throughout their history.

It is not, as Abba Eban said, that the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. It is that in always feeling victimized they fall back on blaming everyone else for their predicament. It is never their fault. History may not have been kind or fair to the Palestinians. They have suffered and been betrayed by others. They are, surely, the weakest player with the fewest cards to play. But by always blaming others, they never have to focus on their own mistakes. And that perpetuates the avoidance of responsibility, not its assumption.

Like Rob and Hussein, I believe that Camp David and the Clinton ideas, by breaking the taboos and responding to the essential needs of each side, will eventually provide the basis for solution. But, given the damage done by nine months of violence, it will take a long time to create the conditions in which solutions can again be discussed. And that day will not emerge as long as the Palestinians avoid facing painful truths, and leveling with their own public about what is possible and what is not. They, too, must assume responsibility and be accountable. They, too, must face up to their mistakes and learn from them.

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*To the Editors:*

The article by Malley and Agha sets out to question the so-called “orthodoxy” concerning the Camp David summit, which assigns the blame for the failure almost exclusively to the Palestinian side. In so doing, they focus on the mismanagement of the process by Israel and

the US. I contend that the foundation of the failure lies in the willingness and the capacity of the respective leaderships to seize a historic opportunity at a high political cost and not in tactical and methodological mistakes.

On the Palestinian side, a fragmented leadership was consumed by brutal internal struggle over succession and political and economic power. The organized structure that in the past enabled continuous and effective preparatory negotiations was fractured. Rarely was there an integrated Palestinian position. Sometimes more than one Palestinian claimed to have the authority to negotiate. At other times, senior Palestinians would undermine their own official delegation. Anyone who sought to advance the negotiations was soon delegitimized. It was a messy collective paralysis.

The peace process in its entirety was the victim. The Palestinian side repeatedly retracted from understandings reached during the negotiations. The famous Beilin-Abu-Mazen understandings of 1995 became, for the Palestinians, the “Beilin-Abu-Beilin Understandings” (i.e., no Abu-Mazen). The document that was formulated in the “Swedish Track” (4–6/2000) did not exist for the Palestinian Camp David negotiators. New claims kept surfacing even in the most critical moments of the Camp David summit. In the aftermath of Camp David the Palestinian side retracted from many of its tacit understandings. Even the uprising is partially related to local rivalries.

On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Barak, guided by a coherent and comprehensive strategy, assumed full and direct responsibility by engaging in substance and tactics avoiding opportunities to abort the process altogether. This is not to say that the Israeli side or, for that matter, the American side, did not make significant tactical and other mistakes. Notwithstanding, the major structural obstacle remained with the Palestinian side.

Malley and Agha describe candidly the failings of the Palestinian leadership and recognize Barak’s far-reaching offers, qualifications notwithstanding. The Palestinians, consumed with the struggle for succession, rendered the deal virtually impossible. Barak was willing to move a great distance giving clear hints of further flexibility. They conclude that Arafat “never quite realized how far the Prime Minister was prepared to go, how much the US was prepared to push, how strong a hand he had been dealt,” eventually turning down the Clinton ideas of December 2000.

The article is a sophisticated contribution to the public debate. Some of its statements are highly controversial. This is not a surprise. The 1999–2001 negotiations are, to a large extent, a story of misperceptions and mirror images. The article is a challenge to others to formulate a shared narrative that will enhance the prospects of success.

Ending the Israeli–Palestinian conflict requires leaderships that will be ready to walk the full distance in the face of great challenges. I cannot but embrace the conclusion reached by Malley and Agha, that when the two sides eventually resume their path toward a permanent agreement, based on the progress that was made, which is captured in the Clinton ideas of December 2000, “they will come to it with...the sobering wisdom of an opportunity that was missed.”

### **Gidi Grinstein**

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### **Robert Malley and Hussein Agha reply:**

Dennis Ross offers one of the more thoughtful and articulate presentations of the view that has been widely accepted since the failure of Camp David. His central argument is that, while all sides made mistakes, Yasser Arafat’s were of a different nature and demonstrate that he is inherently incapable of “doing a permanent status deal.” In other words, having conceded missteps on the Israeli and American sides, Dennis then proceeds to deny that they might have had any significant impact on the ultimate outcome of the effort to reach a final agreement. Were Arafat capable of reaching a deal, we would have had one; the fact that we do not proves that he is not.

But Dennis, who spent countless tireless hours seeking to bridge gaps between Arabs and Israelis, knows—better than most—that any negotiation is a fragile enterprise, in which one must be attuned to questions of timing, personal psychology, popular moods, domestic constraints, distrust, and politics pure and simple. This is all the more true in the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which is so laden with cultural, historical, and religious components, where deep insecurities on both sides magnify the importance of the negotiating process, and whose core issues the leaders had to resolve in a fortnight after having studiously ignored them for years.

Our article does not assign blame or catalog each side’s respective mistakes. Rather, it shows how the historical context and conduct of the negotiations shaped the parties’ attitudes and effectively undermined the possibility of a deal. Dennis wishes to treat Arafat’s behavior at Camp David in a vacuum—divorced from what had occurred during the seven years since Oslo and the twelve months since Barak had become prime minister; and divorced, too, from

political dynamics on the Palestinian side. But it is no more possible to do this than it is to divorce Barak's behavior from Israel's parallel experience or from its own political realities.

Years of accumulated mistrust and loss of faith in the peace process, political circumstances in Israel and among the Palestinians, the history of prior agreements, perceptions of the United States' role, the relationship (or lack thereof) between Barak and Arafat, the mechanics of the negotiations—all these contributed to a situation in which each side's actions were interpreted by the other in the most damaging way. For instance, Barak's decisions not to implement some of the interim commitments made at Oslo and afterward, and not to turn over three Jerusalem-area neighborhoods to the Palestinians, were consistent with his desire to seek a comprehensive deal and therefore entirely logical from his point of view; but those decisions were seen by the Palestinians merely as further examples of Israel's ignoring its obligations and seeking to maximize the pressure it was bringing to bear on them.

To say that these steps undermined the prospects for a deal is not to engage in a post hoc attempt to absolve Arafat. Indeed, as Dennis well knows, the US administration's concern at the time about their potential negative impact was such (given the frailty of the process and the already highly suspicious mood on the Palestinian side) that US negotiators repeatedly sought to persuade Barak to modify his approach. Nothing in what Dennis writes demonstrates that Arafat's alleged inability to reach a deal, rather than the overall context and the clash of opposing mindsets, was responsible for the failure to achieve an agreement.

Dennis fears that our article will reinforce the Palestinians' belief that it is "never their fault." But it surely is symptomatic of the skewed nature of today's debate that our article, which describes how the Palestinians' actions—and inaction—contributed to the breakdown in the negotiations, can be characterized as absolving the Palestinians of blame. There also is considerable irony in worrying that the Palestinians will avoid responsibility when, to date, they are the only ones to have been held accountable for the failure to reach a deal. In reality, the predominant view that Arafat alone is to blame has spared both Israel and the United States from the necessity of self-critical analysis.

Of course, the Palestinians made serious mistakes. As Gidi Grinstein observes in his letter, we mention quite a few of them; and Dennis adds others. (In particular, Dennis points to their claim that the Jewish Temple was not in Jerusalem—an offensive position that cannot be excused.) But the question is not whether Arafat made mistakes, or whether these were justified. The question is whether his behavior can

be explained by factors other than his presumed inability to put an end to the conflict. A close scrutiny of events, we believe, shows that it can.

One of the more unsettling consequences of the notion that the failure of the negotiations was caused by Arafat's incapacity to reach a deal is that it obscures the significant substantive progress that was made. Dennis notes that Barak was prepared to "do what was necessary" to reach an agreement and we, too, noted that he broke many taboos. But Dennis refers only in passing to the Palestinians' "concessions," attributing them to "negotiators" as if they had nothing to do with Arafat.

The fact is that Camp David and the talks that followed demonstrated that, at their core, Israeli and Palestinian interests are compatible. For Israel those interests include its continued existence as a Jewish state; genuine security; Jewish Jerusalem as its recognized capital; respect and acknowledgment of its connection to holy Jewish sites. For the Palestinians they include a viable, contiguous Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza with Arab East Jerusalem as its capital and sovereignty over its Muslim and Christian holy sites; meaningful sovereignty; and a just settlement of the refugee issue. In short, both sides share a fundamental interest in realizing their national right of self-determination within internationally recognized borders on the basis of the two-state solution.

This may not suggest that a deal was readily at hand. But can we, on this record, maintain that it was out of reach? And that, on the basis of a hurried, unsuccessful six-month effort, we are better off giving up on the current Palestinian leadership and placing our hopes on a gamble that as yet unknown but presumably more flexible leaders will somehow emerge?

To solve a one-hundred-year conflict in a matter of months is a daunting task even under the best of circumstances—without the miscalculations, missteps, and mismatched timetables that occurred before and during Camp David. In this sense, paradoxically, this tragedy of errors contains a message of hope. For it points to the possibility that things can turn out differently if they are done differently.

The priority today, of course, must be to put a stop to the tragic cycle of violence that is exacting a heavy price from Israelis and Palestinians alike. But eventually all sides must honestly confront the lessons of what went wrong. That certainly must be the case if we are to achieve the goal to which Dennis has devoted so much of his life—a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians that meets the fundamental aspirations of both peoples.