

# FROM BREAKTHROUGH TO BREAKDOWN?

[Transcript of a lecture given by Afif Safieh at Harvard University in April, 1997]

Deciding on titles for lectures is an interesting and intriguing affair. Speaking at MIT in 1986, at a moment of diplomatic stagnation, the title I gave to my talk then was: “Dead ends?” A friend later told me that the question mark after dead ends was my only concession to optimism. Years later, in May 1994, lecturing in California at the invitation of the World Affairs Council, I opted for: “Palestine: A State in the making?” and then the question mark seemed as my only reluctant concession to pessimism.

During the Napoleonic wars which devastated Continental Europe, the Swiss had a wise saying: “Les peuples heureux n’ont pas d’histoire”, Happy peoples have no History. Well in Palestine/Israel, both peoples concerned are blessed or burdened and plagued with too much history. I still remember when Fukuyama wrote his article and then published the book: “The end of history”, Andre Fontaine, the editor-in-chief of *Le Monde* in Paris, wrote in his regular column: “if we really live the end of history, then we are witnessing the beginning of boredom”. Bearing in mind that “may you live in interesting times” is a curse in China, you can imagine how often and how hard we sometimes yearn for a . . . boring moment.

Chou-en-lai, China’s Prime Minister for decades, was extremely worried by the then widely acclaimed Detente of the late sixties/ early seventies. He feared both American-Soviet collusion but also American-Soviet collusion that might result in a world condominium. In his own inimitable way, he, the blase statesman would warn: “detente is like a bed but where each makes a different dream.” Today the same could be said of the Middle East peace process. Everybody is in favour of peace of course. Majorities in each constituency support the peace process, but, like in Chou-en-lai’s detente, each player has a different finality in mind, where visions for end-results are competing and incompatible and the dreams of one side can be a nightmare for others.

When Labour was still in power in Israel, I often repeated that it seemed to me that in this peace process, we, the Palestinians, were interested in peace but that the Israeli side seemed more interested in the process itself. To-day, with Netanyahu and the Likud presiding over an extreme right-wing coalition, I believe that we neither have peace nor do we have a process anymore.

Let me retrace briefly important landmarks. After the end of the Gulf war in 1991, the USA could not remain inactive towards what former British Secretary of State Douglas Hurd had called the “unfinished business”, namely the unresolved Israeli-Arab conflict.

From March up to October, 1991, Secretary of State James Baker undertook multiple trips to the area in what I called then negotiating pre-negotiations leading to pre-negotiating negotiations. It was an exercise of shuttle diplomacy dealing with talks about talks about talks.

Years earlier, both at the think-tank in Washington close to the Israeli lobby AIPAC and in the American magazine *Commentary*, abundant literature on conflict resolution in the Middle

East was produced with the following recommendations emphasised: (1) With the decline of the Soviet Union and of communism, Islam and fundamentalism were the new global threat and in those new changing realities, Israel maintains an important strategic function as the regional ally; (2) The Palestinian question should not be given centrality in any quest for peace. The Arab countries should not be invited as a bloc to negotiate with Israel but as individual actors with different sets of priorities and concerns; (3) Israel should be enticed into a peace process by carrots normalisation with non-neighbouring Arab countries, economic dividends etc. – rather than the stick. Israel was to be encouraged by rewards rather than sanctions; (4) The UN and other third parties should have as limited a role as possible leaving the diplomatic outcome to emanate from the interaction of the local belligerent parties that would become negotiating partners. The international ramifications of the conflict were to be sized down to regional proportions and, even further, to a local dimension.

The team around James Baker had all worked in that think-tank, the Washington Institute for Near East policies, and their motto was: “we should make an offer to Israel that it cannot reject”. So they simply adopted Israel’s preferred negotiating strategy and made it their own. The choreography of negotiations starting in Madrid end of October 1991 was to be extremely complex with multiple bilateral tracks coupled with several multilateral talks.

In the aftermath of the Gulf war, the Orient was literally disoriented. Advantage was to be made out of Arab disarray. Minimum levels of co-ordination were lacking and Israel did not hesitate to take advantage of the difficulty in synchronising positions and progress in the different tracks.

In any negotiation, the nature of the forum, the nature and the number of the participants determines the possible outcome. Instead of an “International Conference” under UN auspices, we all were invited to a “Peace Conference” with the USA and the rapidly vanishing USSR as co-sponsors. The UN was expected to be and to remain a silent observer and the European Community, that hoped and the Arabs supported that aspiration to be a co-sponsor playing a decisive role in the birth of a future Middle Eastern constellation, was relegated to a financial- economic role on the margin of the geo-strategic sphere kept jealously as the domain reserve of the Americans.

As we all remember, the Palestinians were offered to be half a delegation, representing half the people and seeking half a solution. Taking pretext that the Israeli government would not negotiate with the PLO and that it was also opposed to the emergence of a Palestinian State, the Palestinians were offered to sit in a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. The Palestinian participants were supposed to be recruited from the West Bank and the Gaza strip only but no Jerusalem residents or diaspora Palestinians or PLO officials could be admitted in the negotiating room. The fact that it was the PLO leadership which selected the Palestinian negotiators and gave them legitimacy and instructions made former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban say: “Whether he likes it or not, Shamir is negotiating with the PLO, but he prefers to adopt the ostrich posture which is neither a comfortable nor an elegant posture”. By seeking half a solution I mean that, unlike the other tracks, we were expected to negotiate a five-year interim transitional period of Palestinian self-government on the road to final status. The more difficult issues – Jerusalem, the refugees, the settlements, boundaries and sovereignty were deferred to a second phase starting no later than the beginning of the third year.

I have often described the Palestinian attitude then as being unreasonably reasonable and that not only because we are angelic but because peace, and peace now, corresponds to our enlightened national interest. Any loss of time is extremely detrimental for us. We are the

ones whose land is being confiscated, whose water is being plundered, whose individuals are being deported, whose houses are being demolished, whose trees are being uprooted, whose universities and schools are being closed, whose economy is being strangulated. . . . Yet we went to Madrid with great expectations in spite of all the flawed and humiliating conditions since we were led to believe that this was the only game in town. From March to October 1991, we carried all the burden of momentum, all the burden of flexibility, because we wanted to give peace a chance hoping that Madrid would trigger a snowball process.

On the other hand, Israeli Prime Minister Shamir had to be dragged reluctantly and grudgingly to the negotiating table. He had difficulties understanding and adhering to the principles of “land for peace” the basis and foundation of the entire exercise and his political “generosity” and magnanimity” never went beyond offering peace for . . . peace” and the perpetuation of the territorial status quo. In Madrid he looked as though he had been ambushed and trapped. He sounded anachronistic and out of place. Months later, in June 1992, Madrid resulted in the electoral Waterloo for Shamir who, back in opposition admitted and confessed that he intended to play delaying tactics at the negotiating table for ten years while accelerating settlement-building and accomplished facts on the ground creating thus an irreversible situation that even the peace process would not overcome.

From Madrid, the bilateral talks moved to Washington and the multilateral talks (arms control, economic development and integration, water, environment and refugees) literally to the four corners of the world. In Washington, resorting to “corridor diplomacy”, the Palestinian team succeeded in imposing an Israeli recognition of the gradual decoupling of the Jordanian and Palestinian tracks while the composition of the different layers of the Palestinian team PLO co-ordinators, diaspora advisors, Jerusalem spokespersons reflected more and more the different categories of Palestinians that Israel wanted to see excluded.

But in Washington, the talks quickly stagnated and the change of Israeli government, from Likud to Labour, did nothing to reinvigorate them. The head of the Israeli negotiating team was confirmed in his functions signalling more continuity rather than change and Israel amused itself, but not the others, by sometimes giving the semblance of an impression that it might shift the emphasis from the Palestinian to the Syrian track or back to the Palestinian without any tangible achievement anywhere.

In the meantime the level of support among public opinions started to be seriously eroded. In Palestine, on their return from Madrid, the Palestinian team were welcomed by massive and spontaneous demonstrations where a new subversive weapon the olive branch was brandished proudly. But, by now, disenchantment and scepticism prevailed and radicalism was again on the ascendancy.

It is at this juncture that a secret channel was opened in Oslo by the Israeli government and the PLO and when, in August 1993 the breakthrough was announced, it took almost everybody by surprise including the official negotiators in Washington. I keep saying, maybe impertinently, that if the Oslo channel has not yet put fully Palestine on the map, it has put Norway on the map. I usually offer this thought as an additional incentive to third parties with a potential for a decisive role in peacemaking.

The Declaration of Principles agreed upon in Oslo was signed on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993 with the world as witness. Even the reluctant hand extended by Rabin after an encouraging nod from Clinton to Arafat’s enthusiastic availability did not ruin the mood or alter the general perception that History was in the making. It must be said here that Israel was finally negotiating with the Palestinian National movement as such representing the totality of the people as an indivisible unit.

Yet the magic, the spell, the charm were of short duration. Again at the negotiating table in Taba, the Palestinians were stunned to discover that Israel intended to keep 40 per cent of the Gaza Strip during the interim period. After laborious negotiations only 28 per cent remained under Israel's exclusive control and those were 28 per cent too many knowing the Palestinian need for every single square inch in over-crowded Gaza. Also the Israelis interpreted the "Jericho area" to withdraw from as close as possible to the city limits far beneath Palestinian expectations for freeing the "Jericho province". Again "constructive ambiguities" in diplomacy proved to be a dangerous recipe.

Israel should be aware that redeployment out of Gaza was a Palestinian gift to Israel, and not the other way round bearing in mind how unmanageable Gaza was for the occupying authorities. For the Palestinians, the test of Oslo, the credibility and the believability of Oslo resided in further redeployment in the West Bank. If the process became static, the very pillars of its legitimacy would be seriously shaken. Yet Rabin was in no hurry repeating that "dates are not sacred" even though in the often unsatisfactory Oslo agreement, the only precise area was the calendar of events. I believed and often repeated then that "a territory that was occupied in 1967 in less than six days, could be also evacuated in less than six days so that Mr. Rabin could rest on the seventh.

The assassination of Rabin by a fanatic right-winger sent shock waves through Israeli society. Peres, his successor, decided to move fast towards redeployment from the urban centres of the West Bank so that the Palestinians could go ahead with their presidential and legislative elections. Yasser Arafat had in the meantime obtained from the Islamic tendencies, through persuasion and also better control, several months of an unproclaimed cease-fire. During this period, it was the Israeli government and their secret services who were provoking the Islamists and not the Islamists provoking Israel. Dr Fathi Shikaki, leader of Islamic Jihad was assassinated in Malta in October 1995 and Yehya Ayyash was exploded by telephone in Gaza early in January 1996 in the midst of Palestinian territory and election campaign.

Retaliation was to be predicted and, as expected, happened in March 1996 both in West Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv. Israel immediately resorted to its customary policy of closures and collective punishments that totally crippled Palestinian society and suffocated Palestinian economy. The date of Israeli elections having been already advanced to May 1996, Peres decided to out-Likud Likud in his campaign message to the extent that observers commented that "with a dove like that who needs hawks, with a left like that who need a right?" He even waged an unnecessary war on Lebanon and then succeeded in failing again in the Keneset elections.

To-day, there is a tendency to view the Labour-led era with nostalgia. In a way, this is simply the prolongation of the undeserved praise and positive media coverage labour usually got, whether right or wrong. History will record that, when Netanyahu assumed power, the Palestinian side already had 34 legitimate grievances on agreed upon issues that were left unimplemented during the interim period: freedom of movement for people and products, the management of the passages towards Jordan and Egypt, and through them to our Arab hinterland, the free passage the corridor linking the Gaza strip to the West Bank, the port, the airport, the freeze on settlement building. But now Netanyahu carried away by his victory, his ideological inclinations, his demagogic promises and a successful first trip to Washington, where Senators and Congressmen shamelessly gave him several standing ovations, simply declared war on the Peace Process which he views as the continuation of war but by other means. The battle for Jerusalem was immediately waged, first with the opening of a

controversial tunnel then by the bulldozers in Jabal Abu Ghoniem. The mounting pressures, local and international, resulting from the tunnel crisis forced Netanyahu to implement an 80 per cent redeployment in Hebron city. This was applauded, maybe too enthusiastically, as an indication that the pragmatic Netanyahu was prevailing on his more ideological nature. For the first time Likud negotiated with the PLO and Likud was seen withdrawing within the West Bank. That victory was short-lived since he immediately rewarded or compensated his indispensable extreme right-wing coalition partners with bulldozers in Jabal Abu Ghoniem. The settlement there would be innocently repackaged as a “suburb”. A week earlier, few Israelis had ever heard of “Har Homan”. Now, abandoning the site became equivalent to “national suicide”.

I personally believe that, had Labour been in power, we would also have had a deadlocked situation. We have now finally reached the moment of truth: final status issues and the gaps, if the parties are left to themselves, are simply unbridgeable.

In spite of all the diplomatic agitation, the local parties are left to themselves. And the overwhelming military superiority Israel enjoys encourages its insatiable appetite making impossible an acceptable compromise. In the absence of decisive external input by third parties, this process is doomed to failure. Yes, it is true, the European Union have nominated a special envoy, yet his mediating efforts need a clearer mandate and, surely, more muscle. In the meantime, the Russians were busy managing their decline and occupied in occupying Chechnya. Warren Christopher and/or Dennis Ross, though frequent visitors to the area, project the image of messengers with no message. The USA, a superpower all over the globe, seems to have abdicated this particular role in the Middle East in favour of its regional ally Israel. The American Congress is even more supportive of Israeli extravagance than the Knesset itself validating the perception of “Capitol Hill as that other Israeli occupied territory that needs to be liberated” if we are to have a successful peace process.

American decision-makers, but also other Western capitals, better realise soon, that unlike the fifties, the sixties and the seventies when Israel marketed itself as a bastion against militant Arab nationalism, Israeli intransigence today defies, destabilises and delegitimises a profoundly pro-Western Arab regional State-system. In this context, is Israel a strategic asset or a liability? Awaiting the storm that will inevitably come, one wonders whether there is a convergence or rather a divergence and a bifurcation between Israeli ambitions and Western interests

Years ago, during another depressing moment, a joke was fashionable in certain circles. Brejnev and Reagan went to see God and asked him whether there will be detente between their respective countries. God, it seems, said: “yes, but not during your lifetime”. Yasser Arafat heard about it and rushed to see God and asked: “God, God Almighty, will there ever be peace in Palestine?” According to reliable sources, God looked melancholically at Arafat and said: “Yes, Yes, of course, but not during My lifetime.”

I am sure God would not mind being proven wrong on this one.