

Camp David and After—Continued

Benny Morris and Ehud Barak, reply by Robert Malley and Hussein Agha
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Robert Malley and Hussein Agha ["Camp David and After: An Exchange," *NYR*, June 13] still don't get it (or pretend they don't). And it's really very simple—Ehud Barak and Bill Clinton put on the table during July–December 2000 a historic compromise and the Palestinians rejected it. They concede that Barak's offer at Camp David was "unprecedented" and that the upgraded (Clinton) proposals offered the Palestinians 94–96 percent of the West Bank, 100 percent of the Gaza Strip, a sovereign Palestinian state, an end to the occupation, the uprooting of most of the settlements, and sovereignty over Arab East Jerusalem—and Arafat and his aides still rejected the deal and pressed on with their terroristic onslaught.

Yet Malley and Agha continue, in effect, to blame Israel for the descent into war while producing "a smokescreen," in Barak's phrase, of sophistry and misleading nit-picking, that aims to get their man off the hook. Permeating their response is that shopsoiled Palestinian *Weltanschauung*, that someone else, always, is to blame for their misfortunes—Ottoman Turks, British Mandate officials, Zionists, Americans, anyone but themselves.

Malley and Agha, trying to drive home the point of permanent Palestinian innocence and victimhood, speak of "the catastrophe of 2002" in the same breath as "the catastrophe ...of 1948." But how can anyone with a minimal historical perspective compare the 1948 shattering and exile of a whole society, accompanied by thousands of deaths and the wholesale destruction of hundreds of villages, with the two or three hundred deaths, mostly of Palestinian gunmen, and the destruction of several dozen homes in the IDF's April 2002 Operation Defensive Shield, a reprisal for the murder by Palestinian suicide bombers of some one hundred Israeli civilians during the previous weeks?

The answer lies in the realm of fantasy or propaganda—and, unfortunately, much of what Malley and Agha write belongs to one of these categories. They speak of Israel's "indiscriminate attacks of the past few months." Indiscriminate? We hazard to say that no military has ever been more discriminating and gone to such lengths to avoid inflicting civilian casualties. And there were precious few bona fide civilian casualties (despite Palestinian efforts to beef up the numbers with borrowed corpses, double and triple tabulations, the inclusion of dead gunmen in "civilian" rosters, etc., and despite the fact that the gunmen, as in Jenin's refugee camp, were operating from among and

behind a civilian “shield”). Human Rights Watch and other groups subsequently concluded that there was no evidence that the IDF had “massacred” anyone in the Jenin camp. Indeed, the only “indiscriminate massacres” that have taken place over the past few months have been of Israeli women, children, and the old by Palestinian suicide bombers, many of them belonging to Arafat’s own Fatah organization, in cafés, malls, and buses. But the European media persists in believing the never-ending torrent of Palestinian mendacity; political correctness as well as varied economic interests and anti-Semitism dictate that no third-world people can do wrong and no first-world people, right.

Regarding Camp David and the subsequent negotiations, readers should note that Malley and Agha invariably refer to what “Arafat’s negotiators” said or accepted or proposed—never to Arafat’s own views and actions. And this is no accident. Arafat himself has never affirmed Israel’s right to exist or its legitimacy, and has never waived the Palestinian refugees’ “right of return”—and what his underlings “offer” or “accept” can always be denied or repudiated. This is the Arafat method, and Malley/Agha enter the game with gusto, while pretending to their readers that what “Arafat’s negotiators” said or did carried the old man’s imprimatur. They apparently forget that in their original article [“Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors,” *NYR*, August 9, 2001] they stated: “...The Palestinians’ principal failing is that from the beginning of the Camp David summit onward they were unable either to say yes to the American ideas or to present a cogent and specific counterproposal of their own.” So Clinton had “stormed out” and said: “This is a fraud. I won’t have the United States covering for negotiations in bad faith.” The Palestinians went “through the motions rather than go for a deal,” Malley and Agha then concluded.

The new Malley and Agha are busy watering this down. Arafat, they now say, did not reject Clinton’s December 23, 2000, proposals; he merely “took his time” in responding. And both Barak and the Palestinians wanted to “renegotiate” the parameters, they say. This smooth, false symmetry is vintage Malley/Agha. They fail to tell their readers that the Israeli cabinet immediately and formally accepted the parameters as a basis for negotiation and that Arafat, on the other hand, according to both Clinton and Ambassador Dennis Ross, flatly rejected the parameters and slammed the door shut.

The question of the “right of return” offers a good example of Palestinian doublespeak. All Palestinian spokesmen, including Arafat (see, for example, his interview in *Al-Ittihad* (United Arab Emirates February 6, 2002) and *Abu Alaa* (at the press conference at the end of the January 2001 Taba negotiations), affirm the unreserved, uncurtailed “right of return” to Israel proper of the 1948 refugees and their descendants, of whom there are today close to four million on UN rolls. When speaking in Arabic, they assure their constituencies—in Lebanon’s and Jordan’s and Gaza’s refugee camps—that they will

return once “Jerusalem is conquered” (code for when Israel is destroyed). But when facing westward, they affirm that the “implementation” of that right will “take account of Israel’s demographic concerns.” Going one better, Malley/Agha state that “there is no Palestinian position on how the refugee question should be dealt with as a practical matter” and that “all” acknowledge that there can be no “massive” return. Really?

“All”—Palestinians and Israelis—understand that concession of the principle will entail a gradual effort at full implementation, in this generation or the next, spelling chaos and the subversion of the Jewish state and its replacement by an Arab-majority “Palestine,” a twenty-third Arab state. The demand for the right of return, in the deepest sense, is a demographic mechanism to achieve Israel’s destruction, says Barak. This prospect does not greatly trouble Malley and Agha, who (naively? duplicitously?) admonish their readers not to exercise themselves overmuch “on the question of whether the Palestinian leadership recognized Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state.” But surely that’s the core of the problem—the Palestinian leadership’s desire to ultimately undermine the Jewish state.

The origins of the current violence are a further case in point. Malley and Agha, after trotting out some qualifications, leave their readers with the clear impression that the Sharon visit was what caused the intifada. But Israeli intelligence (and the CIA, according to Barak) has strong evidence that the Palestinian Authority had planned the intifada already in July 2000. For example, in March 2001 the PA’s communications minister, Imad Faluji, told residents of the Ein al-Hilwe refugee camp outside Sidon: “Whoever thinks that the Intifada broke out because of the despised Sharon’s visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque is wrong, even if this visit was the straw that broke the back of the Palestinian people. This intifada was planned in advance, ever since President Arafat’s return from the Camp David negotiations, where he turned the table upside down on President Clinton.” (*Al-Safir*, Lebanon, March 3, 2001). Barak characterizes Arafat “and some (not all) of his entourage” as “serial liars.”

Arafat’s credentials as a serial liar are impressive, Malley/Agha’s protestations notwithstanding. Take, for example, Arafat’s interview with *Al-Ittihad* on February 6, 2002, in which he blamed the Israeli security service, the Shin Bet, for carrying out suicide bombings against Israeli soldiers and civilians; the attack on the Dolphinarium night club in 2001, in which about twenty-five Israeli youngsters died, he blamed on an IDF soldier. Arafat routinely tells anyone who will listen that Israeli troops use “poison gas” and “radioactive materials” against Palestinian civilians (Arafat on Abu Dhabi TV/Palestine TV, March 29, 2002).

To Western audiences Arafat usually affirms his interest in peace or “the peace of the braves” (a Palestinian baseball team?), as he puts it. To Arab audiences, he speaks only of battle and planting the Palestinian flag on Jerusalem’s walls (as Saladin planted his flag on Jerusalem’s walls, after defeating the Crusaders, back in 1189) and of sacrificing “one million *shuhada* [martyrs, meaning suicide bombers]” in “redeeming Palestine.” On May 10, 1994, he told a Muslim audience in Johannesburg that he was engaged in the Oslo peace process much as Mohammed had briefly acquiesced in a truce with the Quraish tribe of Mecca, only to unilaterally revoke it and slaughter them several years later. For good measure, Arafat in that speech said there is no “permanent state of Israel,” only a “permanent state of Palestine.”

It is worth noting that Malley/Agha conclude by proposing a settlement based on the establishment of “a sovereign, nonmilitarized Palestinian state based on the 1967 lines, with an equal exchange of land to accommodate demographic realities” and the return of refugees to the area that becomes the Palestinian state. But this, almost precisely, is the deal that Clinton and Barak proposed back in 2000—and Arafat violently rejected.

The time has come for the world to judge Arafat by what he does and not by the camouflaging defensive rhetoric tossed out by sophisticated polemicists, Barak says. He refers to Saddam Hussein and Arafat as “the terroristic odd couple” of 1991, who are now back for a second inning, with Saddam helping to fuel the present conflict by inciting the Arab world to join in and, like the Saudis, by paying gratuities to the families of suicide bombers. It is time that the West’s leaders, who initially dealt with Saddam and Milosevic as acceptable, responsible interlocutors, now treat Arafat and his ilk in the Palestinian camp as the vicious, untrustworthy, unacceptable reprobates and recidivists that they are.

Benny Morris and Ehud Barak

Robert Malley and Hussein Agha reply:

One might be tempted to dismiss much of what Benny Morris and Ehud Barak write as hollow demagoguery were it not so pernicious and damaging to the future of both the Israeli and Palestinian people. In the past, and through his words and actions, Barak helped to set in motion the process of delegitimizing the Palestinians and the peace process, thereby enabling Ariel Sharon to deal with them as he saw fit and absolve himself of all responsibility for Israel’s diplomatic, security, and economic predicament. Now, the inability to reach a peace deal in the seven months between Camp David and Taba has become, in Barak’s and Morris’s version, a tale in which Arab cultural deficiency and the Palestinians’ inherent desire to destroy Israel are the dominant themes. As Shimon Peres has famously put it, Barak is

making an ideology out of his failure. It is time he dealt with the failure, put aside the ideology, and let Israelis and Palestinians return to the far more urgent and serious task of peacemaking.

To begin, a few words about Morris's and Barak's rejoinder, a catalog of misrepresentations that scarcely deserves more. They distort what we wrote about the tragic events of the last few months, the reactions to President Clinton's December 23 ideas, the right of return, the importance of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, and the origins of the current intifada. They turn what the world saw as Sharon's dangerously provocative walk on the Haram/Temple Mount into an innocent stroll. They charge the Palestinians with trying to evade all responsibility but then proceed to evade all responsibility on Barak's part, placing the entire burden of failure on the Palestinians while adding for good measure the usual tired accusations about Arab doublespeak, European media bias, "varied economic interests," and even political correctness. They refer to the "Arafat method" by which negotiators, and not Arafat himself, laid out Palestinian positions, without acknowledging that it was precisely the method routinely and quite openly practiced by Barak. Indeed, the desire not to commit himself personally was the reason Barak provided for his refusal to hold substantive discussions with Arafat at Camp David and it is also the reason why he both declined to give his negotiators specific instructions during the Taba talks and asked not to be fully briefed by them.

Then there is the issue of Barak's astonishing remarks about Palestinian and Arab culture that he now seeks to obfuscate. Yet his words in the initial interview were unequivocal. "They are products of a culture in which to tell a lie...creates no dissonance," he pronounced. "They don't suffer from the problem of telling lies that exists in Judeo-Christian culture. Truth is seen as irrelevant." And so on. But, plainly, factual accuracy and logical consistency are not what Morris and Barak are after. What matters is self-justification by someone who has chosen to make a career—and perhaps a comeback—through the vilification of an entire people.

For that, indeed, is the real issue that warrants attention. In Morris's and Barak's crude account, Barak made a most generous offer, the "vicious" Palestinian leadership turned it down because they wanted to get rid of Israel, and all the rest is gossip. But is a man who believes that a whole race or culture is immune to the truth well placed to make such a sweeping assessment or, for that matter, well equipped to strike a historic deal with the people about whom he holds such prejudiced views? Barak deserves credit for understanding the need to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the importance of separation between the two peoples as part of a final peace agreement. But it is worth recalling that Barak opposed the Oslo accords from the outset; before 1996 he was against the inclusion of Palestinian statehood in the Labor Party's platform; he insisted on renegotiating an agreement with

the Palestinians signed by his predecessor and then failed to carry it out; and, today, he takes pride in having made fewer tangible concessions to the Palestinians than Benjamin Netanyahu, the right-wing prime minister who preceded him. Are these truly the qualifications one would expect of a man who claims to sit in judgment of the peacemaking capabilities of others?

What is clear from his reply and other recent statements is Barak's utter lack of self-doubt. Yet, by the time he was defeated by Ariel Sharon, less than two years after coming into office, he had antagonized both the religious right and the secular left, not for the sake of high principle but through poor management. His governing coalition had disintegrated. Arab-Israelis had lost all confidence in him. His own Labor Party was adrift and strongly critical of him. He was unable to reach an agreement with Syria. And relations with much of the Arab world were at a lower point than they had been under his hard-line predecessor. The Palestinians, in short, were only one on a lengthy list of people whom he successfully managed to alienate or had failed to deal with successfully. In view of this record, might there not be room to wonder whether Barak's tactics, approach, and cast of mind had at least something to do with the breakdown of the peace process?

Finally there is the question of what, today, Barak stands by and stands for. What, in his opinion, actually happened at Taba in January 2001, and does he accept the positive assessment provided by his official Israeli delegation? It is an assessment he ignores in his reply and that is worth repeating here:

The two 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.

That statement contradicts the claim made by Barak, and frequently heard from others, that the Palestinians simply turned their backs on a possible agreement. Would Barak be prepared, today, to resume where things were left off and seek to complete the negotiations, as he pledged at the time and as he repeated to the Israeli public throughout his reelection campaign? The question whether a peace agreement can still be reached, in the current situation of appalling daily violence, has become more urgent than ever. We know what President Clinton's ideas were for an Israeli–Palestinian agreement. We know the positions of more than a few Israeli political leaders who in recent weeks have unveiled their own peace formulas. We even know what the official Palestinian proposal is—though it may or may not be something the Israeli people can accept. But can Barak, who likes to tell the left that he went further than everyone else and the right that he gave less than anyone else, let us know what are his specific proposals for a final peace agreement with the Palestinians?

