

## Prologue

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In February 2009, during the final days of his government, Prime Minister Olmert invited us—the members of the Israeli Peace Negotiation Team with the Palestinians in the 2007–2008 round (referred to as the Annapolis process)—for a briefing at the Ministry of Defense at HaKirya<sup>1</sup> in Tel Aviv (see Figure 1). Olmert praised the work of the team, starting with the background research and laying the foundations for negotiations to our managing discussions with the Palestinians. According to Olmert, all the work done during the intensive year of negotiations had been worthwhile and would help achieve an overall settlement with the Palestinians in the future. Olmert complimented the planning process done in preparation for the negotiations, which emphasized the main challenge facing the negotiations: the transition from agreement to implementation.

Olmert shared with us his desire to achieve a “big bang,” namely a joint document of principles for an overall peace agreement with Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Unfortunately, the process ended before this task had been completed, since Olmert was forced to resign as prime minister. Nonetheless, Olmert felt that Israel could reach a workable security arrangement based on any border that was agreed upon by the two sides and that the Peace Negotiation Team should continue its efforts to understand the core of the other side’s position, so that we could identify creative and feasible solutions to the conflict.

Olmert referred to the map that he himself had presented to Abbas, according to which Israel would annex 6.5% of the territory and in exchange, Israel would transfer 5.8% of its sovereign territory to the Palestinians as part

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1 HaKirya contains the Tel Aviv District’s government center and the headquarters of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

of a swap, with a corridor between the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria,<sup>2</sup> calculated as another 0.7%, thus arriving at a 1:1 swap of territory, which was rejected by the Palestinian side. Olmert said that maps constitute a psychological barrier and that a more far-reaching compromise could have been offered. With respect to the Palestinian refugees, Olmert mentioned the pretext for refusing the offer that Abbas had presented, namely that Israel refused to recognize the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to the State of Israel and would admit no more than 5,000 refugees over a period of five years as part of a humanitarian gesture. He claimed that from Israel's perspective, this was the maximum number that could be offered in the talks and was based on the Arab Peace Initiative (a "just and agreed-upon settlement")—which had been included in the reference sources of the Annapolis Summit that launched the negotiations—and that Israel did not accept the Palestinian interpretation of UN Resolution 194, on which they based the idea of the "right of return."

Olmert summed up the meeting by saying that all the foreign leaders to whom he had presented the plan expressed their support for it and viewed it as going a long way toward accommodating the Palestinians. Indeed, in one of the conversations that the prime minister held with Udi Dekel, the head of the Peace Negotiation Team, an alternative option to final-status talks (called Plan B) was discussed, Olmert described his approach as follows: If the Palestinians continued to reject Israel's offer, Olmert would work to implement the plan unilaterally, while seeking international support and recognition of the State of Israel's borders. This was similar to his idea of "convergence," which was his main message in the campaign during the 2006 Knesset elections. Olmert concluded the meeting by saying that a professional peace negotiation team, such as the one we had created, was essential to any government in Israel, regardless of its composition or political orientation.<sup>3</sup> In conclusion, Olmert conveyed the message that hope should not be abandoned and that efforts should continue to reach a

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2 In this document, we will use the term "Judea and Samaria" when referring to the Israeli position and the "West Bank" when referring to the Palestinian and international perspective.

3 The Peace Negotiation Team disbanded with the election of Prime Minister Netanyahu in 2009 and has not been called upon since then.

settlement with the Palestinians, which the State of Israel should view as its most important strategic goal.

**Figure 1.** The Israeli Peace Negotiation Team



*Note.* The Israeli Peace Negotiation Team from left to right: Attorney Tomer Amar, Lieutenant Colonel (res.) Ofer Yerimi, Dr. Lia Moran-Gilad, Brigadier General (res.) Kamil Abu Rukun, Colonel (res.) Danny Tirza, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Brig. Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel, Ms. Noam Ginnosar, Attorney Lieutenant Colonel (res.) Lee Arad.  
Source: Private collection