

Winds of Change in the Middle East: How Israel Can Retake Initiative in the Palestinian Arena

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Twice in the last two decades the Palestinian leadership has proved unwilling to sign a comprehensive peace agreement based on terms offered by an Israeli premier. Instead, they preferred a strategy of “holding out for a better deal” over one of compromise that would entail facing the domestic backlash from making painful concessions; they opted to appeal to the international community to deliver on their demands, and the situation in the arena of conflict has moved further in the direction of a “one-state reality.” However, recent changes in regional dynamics and the election of President Donald Trump are heralding in an era in which Palestinian refusal to negotiate in the hopes for strengthening their position in the future will yield meagre results. At the same time, the government of Israel may be more appropriately positioned to make a bold move towards peace than it appears on a superficial level. Therefore, the timing appears ripe to make a new effort to work on multiple tracks to change the trajectory of the conflict towards a two-state reality by using methods that aim to cultivate and utilize Palestinian cooperation, but are not dependent on it.

Palestinian Intransigence and Internationalization of the Conflict

In the anticlimactic culmination of years of interim agreements and negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, Yasser Arafat rejected the forthcoming offer that Prime Minister Ehud Barak made at the Camp David Summit in 2000. According to Middle East hand Rob Malley, Barak had been elected on the platform of maintaining a unified Jerusalem, opposing land swaps, and offering the Palestinians about 80% of the West Bank, and he would eventually make dramatic concessions on all three of those positions; Arafat, however, would not budge on most major issues. President Bill Clinton was enraged that Arafat spoiled his chance for a legacy as the man who made peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and he reportedly yelled at the Palestinian leader saying:

If the Israelis can make compromises and you can't, I should go home. You have been here fourteen days and said no to everything. These things have consequences; failure will mean the end of the peace process.... Let's let hell break loose and live with the consequences.²

Instead of an agreement, Clinton left behind a set of parameters³ and strong reason to doubt whether Arafat was serious about signing a deal. The Palestinian Authority's ultimate response to Barak's willingness to make concessions did not come via diplomatic cable but through the barrel of a gun – support

¹ This article was finalized on April 2017

² Robert MALLEY and Hussein AGHA. “Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors,” *The New York Review of Books*, 9 August, 2001, www.nybooks.com/articles/2001/08/09/camp-david-the-tragedy-of-errors/.

³ For the parameters see: WHITE HOUSE. “Clinton Proposal on Israeli-Palestinian Peace,” 23 December, 2000, www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Peace%20Puzzle/10_Clinton%20Parameters.pdf.