Introduction

A half century ago, the 1967 war brought the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Since then, there have been a host of efforts to address and resolve the ensuing conflict between the two sides, but without success. Forward-looking Israeli governments, particularly those of Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert, came close to meeting the core requirements of Palestinian nationalism but were defeated by a combination of domestic opposition and Palestinian rejections. Almost every American president since 1967 has tried his luck in breaking the code of this desperately intractable dispute—indeed, Bill Clinton offered the most thorough and judicious peace parameters ever conceived by any foreign statesman. They all failed.

The decades-long process to formulate a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians has been a voyage of trial and error throughout. The failure to reach a settlement thus far has not always been the result of bad faith or inadequate negotiating skills. Rather, it stems mainly from the inherent incapacity of both parties to reconcile themselves to each other’s fundamental requirements. Yet left to their own devices, the two sides have proven themselves tragically incapable of settling their dispute. Some of the reasons for this stalemate lie in the intrinsically intractable nature of the conflict; others, however, can be found in the broader politics that have enveloped it and in the failed negotiating paradigms.

It would be wrong to dwell excessively on the weaknesses of the current leaders, since that presupposes that with different leaders at the helm, an agreement could be reached through bilateral negotiations. This is not the case, however. Personalities are of course important in history, but the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has long been the hostage of the impersonal—and unyielding—forces of history. It is not only Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s dishonest attitude to negotiations and the Palestinians’ fragmented and visionless polity that make a return to negotiations a pointless affair; it is also the entire two-state idea, and the toolbox used to reach it, that needs to be revisited.
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The Clinton Parameters: From Taba to Geneva

In January 2001, I led an Israeli team on a last-ditch attempt, in the Egyptian sea resort of Taba amid the savage war of the second intifada, to reach a final settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians that would be based on the peace parameters that President Clinton had offered the parties a few weeks earlier as “a take it or leave it” deal.¹

For the Israelis, the Taba meetings were a determined effort to translate the Clinton Parameters into a final peace agreement. For the Palestinians, it was an attempt to breach the parameters on every issue: borders, Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, refugees, security, and more. We fought for the two-state solution and very much wanted to see it come to pass, yet we failed and Israel ended up being dragged into the Al-Aqsa Intifada, its fiercest war with the Palestinians since 1948.

The Geneva Initiative: A Lesson on the Intractability of the Conflict

Governments, particularly during a tense period of uncertain transition from war to peace, are frequently inhibited by the political constraints imposed by a skeptical and deeply divided nation. As the 1993 Oslo Accords demonstrated, it is at these points that the unofficial, non-binding exercises of track II diplomacy can be particularly useful, in this case, to help produce a two-state peace formula that would inevitably go beyond what politicians would be willing to accept. That was the outcome of the 2003 monument to creativity known as the Geneva Initiative, a follow-up to the Taba meetings. Its attempt to change the course of the conflict and rescue the two-state solution drew significant attention for a while and then faded into oblivion.

In the Geneva Initiative peace game,² the wide maneuvering space that Israeli negotiators allowed themselves ended up producing a deal that broke all of Israel’s red lines but still fell short of meeting the minimal requirements of the Palestinians. Yet no peace plan, real or imagined, has ever gone as far as the “Geneva Understandings” in meeting Palestinian demands. Former President Jimmy Carter, who attended the signing ceremony of the agreement in Geneva, called on Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to adopt the Geneva Accord as a “bible.” In the end, its rejection by both parties speaks volumes about the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

With the Israelis led by Yossi Beilin and the Palestinians by Yasser Abed Rabbo, the 2003 Geneva Understandings represented a commendable challenge to the blind aimlessness of the political leadership at the time. Its message was that there can be no tactical solution to the conflict, nor can it be resolved by a “war on terror.” Piecemeal concessions, such as the return of limited territory like the Gaza Strip or clumsy attempts to improve the living standards of the Palestinians, would not suffice either. Geneva’s message was that what was needed was a comprehensive solution, a radical surgery, that would deal with all the core issues.

But then God, and at times the devil, is in the details. The Israeli signatories at Geneva agreed to a number of Palestinian demands—which were deviations from the Clinton Parameters—without receiving a single concession indicating that the Israeli position at Taba had been maintained, let alone improved. No less importantly, in accepting the Clinton Parameters, Israel had already gone beyond the outer limits of its capacity for compromise. The result was a broken political scene and diminishing domestic support in Israel that ate away at the very legitimacy of the Barak government’s peace policies.

On the territorial issue, Clinton had proposed that the Palestinians receive 100 percent of the Gaza strip and between 94 and 96 percent of the West Bank. A three percent land swap, a safe passage linking Gaza to the West Bank, and the right to use a wide array of infrastructure assets inside Israel amounted in effect to a return of 100 percent of the occupied territories to the Palestinians. It also meant the evacuation of more than 100 settlements, which would have almost certainly entailed a monumental social and political earthquake for Israel.

The Clinton Parameters divided Jerusalem into two capitals on the principle that “what is Jewish is Israeli and what is Arab is Palestinian.” Clinton also suggested that the Old City be split into two parts, with the Christian and Muslim Quarters allotted to the Palestinians and the Jewish and Armenian Quarters to Israel. The Parameters gave the Palestinians sovereignty over the

¹ Details of that plan can be found at “The Clinton Peace Plan – 23 December 2000”, Israel Ministry Foreign Affairs website [last access: June 18, 2019].
² More information on the initiative can be found at http://www.geneva-accord.org
upper surface of the Temple Mount, the area of the mosques, while Israel was to have de facto sovereignty over the Western Wall and a symbolic declarative sovereignty over the depths of the Mount where the “Holy of Holies” is believed to be buried. The president also included the Western Wall Tunnel in the area that would be under Israeli sovereignty.

At the Taba meetings, the Palestinians had challenged all of these proposals, and in the Geneva document they obtained what they had been asking for. The Geneva Initiative gave them the three quarters of the Old City that they had demanded at the start; it also nullified Israel’s sovereignty over the Wall Tunnel and made no mention of the symbolic sovereign Israeli link to the Temple Mount.

I myself had deviated from the prime minister’s instructions by suggesting to the Palestinians during the talks at Bolling Airbase in December 2000 that we would offer them full sovereignty over the Temple Mount if they were prepared to acknowledge that deep in the mount there is a “site that is holy to the Jews.” The Palestinians rejected this proposal but accepted it in the final Geneva document in a way that subtly diluted the centrality of the site’s holiness for Jews—they agreed only to acknowledge the “unique religious and cultural significance of the site to the Jewish nation.”

The Palestinian refusal to recognize that the Temple Mount is holy to Jews represents a rejection of its being the heart of the Jewish link to a political sovereignty that has existed twice in history: in biblical times and in the Hasmonean and Hellenistic periods. In fact, the Palestinians never ceased to deny the millennial roots of the Jewish presence in the Holy Land. Arafat insisted that the Temple was never in Jerusalem but in Nablus. Moreover, Arafat, who saw himself not only as the new Saladin who would redeem Jerusalem for Islam but also as a modern Richard the Lionheart who would protect Christianity’s holy sites as well, could never answer a question I regularly put to him: if there was no Temple in Jerusalem, why would Jesus the Jew bother to come to the holy city at all?

The Refugee Question
On the matter of refugees, Geneva is blatantly at odds with the Clinton Parameters in both substance and spirit. Clinton made it unequivocally clear that “there is no explicit right of return to Israel,” whereas the Geneva document allows the right of return essentially through the front door. It endorses UN Resolution 194, which asserts that “those Palestinian refugees who want to live at peace with their Jewish neighbors are entitled to return at the earliest possible opportunity.” Yet UN Resolution 194 was never an agreed basis for peace negotiations; only Resolutions 242 and 338 have ever been internationally recognized as such. This understanding was part of the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles of September 1993 and the Interim Agreement of September 1995.

During the 2001 negotiations under Clinton’s auspices, I proposed that Palestinian refugees be allowed to return to the areas that their new state would annex from Israel in the swap arrangements. This notion was subsequently included in the Clinton peace parameters and, notably, in the Geneva document also. I was at the time motivated by a belief that such a provision would enable the Palestinians to claim that there had been an effective return of refugees to Israel proper. But in Geneva this particular clause had no such connotation, even though there was no point in simply mentioning, as Geneva did, that some refugees would be returning to areas of Israel now annexed to Palestine unless the significant symbolic importance, such as a formal “return to Israel,” was also conveyed.

The Geneva document did state that any return was “at the sovereign discretion of Israel.” However, the proposed rules for the operation of the International Commission charged with implementing the solution to the refugee problem essentially vitiated this assertion. Israel would not be able to restrict the number of returnees only to humanitarian consideration of family reunification as had been the intention of both President Clinton and the Israelis. Instead, the Geneva document stipulates that Israel would have to propose a significant and specific number of returnees to the International Commission, and that failure to do so would be regarded as a blatant violation of the spirit of the agreement.

Clearly, these provisions were in direct conflict. If everything were dependent on “Israel’s sovereign consideration,” how could that be consistent with the a priori condition that this “sovereign consideration” required Israel to propose a number of returnees that was equal to the average number of refugees absorbed in much larger countries such as Australia and Canada? Moreover, the International Commission would be charged with “the full and exclusive responsibility to carry out all the aspects of the agreement connected to the issue of the refugees.” In effect this established a sovereign body to resolve the refugee problem in which Israel was not a member. In addition to the number of returnees, on such issues as compensation and Palestinian property, Israel was also likely to regularly find itself in a head-on collision with the Commission. Finally, although there was no stipulation giving Israel the right to appeal the Commission’s decisions, the document clearly stated that “Refugees shall have the right to appeal decisions affecting them according to mechanisms established by this Agreement...” This right of appeal would have undoubtedly opened a Pandora’s Box that would have made Israel’s determination to obtain a pledge from the Palestinians on the “end of conflict and finality of claims” a hopeless endeavor.

According to the Geneva document, Israel would essentially be dealing with two compensation funds, one relating to property and the other to “the situation of refugeehood.” A panel of experts would value the Palestinian property based on the “the records of the Custodian for Absentee Property,” thus creating a mandatory link between the extent to which Israel had benefited from Palestinian property and the matter of compensation, as well as Israel’s share in that compensation. Israel would also be ex-
pected to contribute to the second fund, a “Refugeehood Fund,” aimed at “commemorating the experience of refugeehood.”

My Palestinian interlocutor, Abu Ala, used to say to me that “the Clinton proposal is like a prison. It gives us no room to move.” “It is a prison for us as well,” I would reply. “If you want to open it up so as to improve your position, we will demand the door be unlocked on issues where we too have reservations.” Abu Ala, of course, rejected any such idea. The Geneva document unlocked each and every part of the Clinton plan about which the Palestinians had reservations but then stopped there. Alas, neither the Palestinian polity nor the public at large embraced the Geneva Understandings.

A Missed Opportunity
Numerous well-intentioned back channels have mushroomed alongside the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Palestinians, however (understandably, I would concede), have used such unofficial channels to test the limits of Israeli flexibility without ever agreeing to endorse an outcome. A typical document in this mold is the one drawn up in 1995 by Yossi Beilin and Abu Mazen. When I suggested to Abu Ala during our secret “Swedish channel” in the spring of 2000 that the Beilin-Abu Mazen document become the peace agreement, he took the document from his briefcase and showed me the many tightly packed reservations that Abu Mazen himself had noted in the document’s margins. I also had the opportunity to make a similar suggestion to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat at a meeting in Ramallah in 1997. His answer was that the Beilin-Abu Mazen document was “empty words” (“kalam fadi”).

For Abed Rabbo and possibly also for the other Palestinians on his team, the Geneva document was the best agreement they could produce. In the end, however, the Palestinian leadership did not support the document. The Palestinian signatories were dismissed, in the words of Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, as having “little credibility in the eyes of their respective publics (which ) … may be reluctant to approve a document associated with such individuals.”

Indeed, a poll conducted between December 4 and 9, 2003, by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found significant opposition to the document among those Palestinians familiar with it. Among those who had heard of or read about it, support was as low as 25 percent and opposition reached 61 percent. After informing the respondents who were not familiar with the document of seven core elements of the document, support increased from 19 to 39 percent, but opposition also increased from 44 to 58 percent. Palestinian opposition groups managed to frame the whole Geneva document as a sellout of refugee rights, and no one in the Palestinian national leadership supported it. The Geneva Understandings ultimately turned out to be the swan song of Yasser Abed Rabbo’s political life, and he left the political limelight accused of having betrayed the Palestinian national ethos.

It could be argued that the Geneva document vindicates Arafat’s negotiating strategy. For him, every agreement, however “final,” could be repudiated later in order to make further gains. The Saudi Ambassador in Washington, Bandar bin Sultan, called Arafat’s refusal to accept the Clinton plan a “crime,” and Clinton said Arafat was the reason for “me having been such a colossal failure.” Even French President Jacques Chirac was on record stating that Arafat’s obsession with improving every “final” proposal presented to him was responsible in large measure for the catastrophe that had engulfed the peoples of the region. At a dinner party I attended in Madrid with President Clinton in 2003, the former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, as well as none other than Egypt’s Former Foreign Minister Amr Mussa, both said much the same thing: “The opportunity missed by Arafat was not at Camp David,” said the-then secretary General of the Arab League, “the missed opportunity was his refusal to accept the Clinton plan.”

Yet it was not all bad news. Yossi Beilin was a brilliant politician whose publicized virtual peace deals always had an impact on Israel’s national discourse—and in this case, also on a change of policy by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. One of the immediate consequences of the release of the Geneva Initiative was to force Sharon to come up with his own plan of unilateral steps, lest the Geneva Initiative gain sufficient momentum locally and internationally and thereby force his government to contend with it.

The Two-State Solution: Necessary but Unattractive
Why, then, has peace in Palestine been such a tragically elusive enterprise? Peace between Israel and the Arab states—speaking of Egypt and Jordan—is a strictly political undertaking based on the restitution of territory. Peacemaking with the Palestinians, however, is not just a matter of land for peace; it is an attempt to almost break the genetic code of the entire Arab-Israeli conflict, and perhaps even of the Jewish-Muslim dispute, by touching what might be called religious and historical certifies of ownership.

The tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian peace conundrum is that though the two-state solution represents the only salvation of both national movements, it is at the same time highly unattractive to both of them. A mini Palestinian state would be sandwiched between two skeptical neighbors, Israel and Jordan, both deeply suspicious of its future evolution. Moreover, a Palestinian state acceptable to Israel would be unable to satisfy the Palestinian constituent ethos of the right of return and its quest for justice. Hence, such a state would likely be seen as illegitimate even among sizable segments of the Palestinian nation at home, and still more so in the Diaspora.

As for the Israelis, a two-state solution would mean a return

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embraced Hamas as a legitimate option. the sad vicissitudes of deficient governance, the Palestinians redistribution, with the backbone of their society broken and facing religion of unilateral disengagement. Humiliated by Israeli ret terrorism, Israelis lost any hope of a negotiated settlement and, even the far right. Exposed to indiscriminate waves of suicide cy and radically shifted Israeli popular opinion to the right and be seen as the fatal blow that destroyed Israel's peace constituen it. For too long, the peace process has served as a curtain behind the very serious question of the settlements is hands. The settlers movement continues as vigorously as ever, and underlying the very serious question of the settlements is the involvement of the entire Israeli body politic in maintaining and continuously expanding a regime of coercion and discrimi nation in the territories. This is a regime of dominance that has all the drive and characteristics of permanence; it would require truly historic leadership to successfully dismantle and eliminate it. For too long, the peace process has served as a curtain behind which a policy of practical annexation has flourished.

In the end, however, it was the second intifada that should be seen as the fatal blow that destroyed Israel's peace constituency and radically shifted Israeli popular opinion to the right and even the far right. Exposed to indiscriminate waves of suicide terrorism, Israelis lost any hope of a negotiated settlement and, in their despair, succumbed to a new self-defeating political religion of unilateral disengagement. Humiliated by Israeli retribution, with the backbone of their society broken and facing the sad vicissitudes of deficient governance, the Palestinians embraced Hamas as a legitimate option.

The intifada forced the Israelis to turn their backs on the Palestinians, erase them from their consciousness, and imprison them behind impenetrable walls, all the while keeping for themselves the essential areas of land required for their settlements and rising security needs. For the Israeli right, particularly under Benjamin Netanyahu, the peace process is now merely a way to achieve these goals under the veil of a two-state solution.

Failed Diplomacy, Alternative Scenarios, and New Paradigms

That the Israeli right reconciled itself to any peace process at all is not due to the wonders of the two-state solution but to the need to delineate the geographic limits of Israel's expansion. However, with no Palestinian partner willing to accept peace based on Israel's seizures of land, it was the specter of the loss of Jewish demographic predominance in historical Palestine, an inevitable concomitant of the death of the two-state idea, that gave life to the concept of unilateral disengagement from populated Palestinian areas. Sharon's Gaza disengagement and the wall he built in the West Bank were a response to the “demographic threat.” Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert, won an election in 2006 on what was then called a Convergence Plan, a unilateral withdrawal from great parts of the West Bank.⁴

The main third-party actor has not fared any better than the local players. The U.S. failure at peacemaking in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is actually a defining failure. Its pattern of peace diplomacy—direct negotiations between the parties under U.S. guidance—has proved utterly inadequate. A successful peace diplomacy requires at times the transformation of the mediator into a manipulator and an arm-twister. The only fruitful exploits of American peace diplomacy in the Middle East—Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy in the wake of the 1973 war that led Israel to groundbreaking interim settlements with Egypt and Syria, President Carter's historic achievement of peace between Egypt and Israel, and U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's success in convening the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference against the will of the recalcitrant Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir—were all the result of a masterly combination of power, manipulation, and pressure.

All of this accumulated wisdom has unfortunately been absent in the U.S. peace efforts on the Palestinian front. Washington's primary blunder stems from its perception of power and diplomacy as distinct and separate categories of foreign policy. By de-linking force from diplomacy, Washington removed the vital component of intimidation from the equation. It became possible to humble the United States and get away with it. Washington continues to be an indispensable actor in the Middle East and beyond, but it has lost the awe-inspiring drive of the past.

Now, a new player is on the scene, U.S. President Donald

⁴ More information on the plan can be found at https://ecf.org.il/issues/issue/259 [last access: June 18, 2019].
Trump, who even boasted that peace in the Middle East “it is not as difficult as people have thought.” Still, the best Trump can expect is another day of reckoning on the Palestinian side and a much-needed shakeup of Israel’s political map. To abandon their present comfort zone, Israeli and Palestinian leaders must be confronted with both a tempting peace plan and the threat of massive American and all-Arab pressure. Unless this happens, the parties would prefer, as they always have, to retreat into their accustomed refuge from unpopular decisions and the protective warmth of their unilateral moral consensus.

Yet, however dim its current prospects, the technical, though not necessarily the political, feasibility of the two-state solution has not entirely disappeared. There is much truth in the Palestinian claim that Israel’s settlement expansion is aimed at making the creation of a Palestinian state impossible. However, a recent report by the Israel Central Statistics Bureau has shown that 80 percent of the settlers are still concentrated in settlements adjacent to the green line, altogether consisting of no more than 4 percent of the West Bank. This would, at least in principle, still allow for a peace agreement based on land swaps between Israel and a future Palestinian state.

Other Options are Discouraging
The alternative scenarios to a two-state solution are all unacceptable. Persisting in the current slide to a one-state reality would end up institutionalizing a South Africa-type situation, but one that would not be susceptible to a South African solution. Israel’s control of the power resources and its military might mean that it would never have to abdicate its predominance in a de facto bi-national state. Such a country would live in a permanent state of civil war. An affront to the international community, it would also strain to its limits Israel’s capacity to resist outside pressure.

But even if forced to return to the two-state paradigm, it would be implausible to assume that any future Israeli government would accept a position beyond the Clinton Peace Parameters, let alone Ehud Olmert’s peace proposals, which were in any case both rejected by the Palestinians on the grounds that “wide gaps” still remained.

The Israeli side might then try to get away with unilateral moves that would help it salvage its international image, while at the same time responding to genuine Israeli concerns. The nature of these steps would greatly depend on the structure of the governing Israeli coalition of the time. Yet this kind of Israeli unilateral convergence plan would be utterly rejected by the Palestinians if only because it would turn the West Bank into a replica of the situation in Gaza, where Israel controls all the outer access to the territories, first and foremost the Jordan Valley.

Unilateralism, however “nicely” conducted, should not be the preferred option. In only one sense can the lessons of Ariel Sharon’s Gaza disengagement serve as an inspiration to those who still believe in a negotiated settlement. Against the ominous predictions of civil war that loomed over Israel if a massive dismantling of settlements were carried out, the mostly peaceful Gaza disengagement proved to be an anti-climax. Especially shocking to the settler communities was the overwhelming popular support for uprooting the Gush Katif settlements.

In summer 2005, it looked as though Israel was a society mature enough to face the formidable challenge of defining its final borders without cataclysmic upheaval. The precedent was established and, for the first time since 1967, the State of Israel challenged Eretz-Israel and survived.

Nevertheless, if, as now looks to be the case, all efforts to reach a viable settlement end up crashing against the harsh wall of reality and the resilient obstinacy of political actors, as well as the impotence of the international community, any kind of change—leading to a two-state solution of sorts, to a massive

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and violent Israeli disengagement from the greater part of the West Bank, or to a Jordanian-Palestinian solution—would come only from a major revolutionary shift in the region’s geopolitical conditions. After all, the impersonal forces of history have always been the combustible source of change in the region. If it were not for the Yom Kippur War, Israel and Egypt might still be confronting each other along the Suez Canal. If it were not for the Gulf War and the first intifada, neither the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference nor the Oslo Accords would have occurred.

It was precisely the fear that such a major revolutionary shift—for example, Olmert’s 2006 plan to unilaterally disengage from the bulk of the West Bank—might produce a massive and uncontrolled flight of Palestinians into the East Bank that induced two former Jordanian prime ministers, Abdel salam al-Majali and Tahir al-Masri (probably with the King’s knowledge) in 2007 to advance detailed and articulate plans for a Jordanian-Palestinian state.⁵

It is unlikely that a two-state solution in any form will emerge

⁵ Pedatzur, Reuven, “The ‘Jordanian Option,’ the plan that refuses to die”. Ha’aretz, July 25, 2007 [https://www.haaretz.com/1.4954947, last access: June 18, 2019]
from the by now worn-out paradigm of direct negotiations between the parties with U.S. mediation. Today, it is likely possible only in the wake of a major crisis that would shatter current Israeli complacency and the visionless Palestinian politics. A master of coercive diplomacy, Henry Kissinger knew what he was saying when he implicitly advised the Egyptians that only by starting a war would they be able to trigger the United States to lead a credible peace diplomacy in their dispute with Israel. “I cannot deal with your problem unless it becomes a crisis,” was his reaction to Egyptian Foreign Minister Hafiz Ismail’s last-ditch attempt to avert a war in February 1973 by advancing a proposal for a comprehensive settlement with Israel.

In the past 20 years, Washington has excelled at forming international coalitions for war in the Middle East. It might be now forced by a radically new reality in the region to try an international alliance for Middle East peace. This would mean giving a greater role to the Quartet (the European Union, Russia, United Nations, and United States) and to key Arab states. The new paradigm needs to be that of an essentially international solution for Palestine. It is not clear why the Iranian nuclear problem needs a P5+1 forum of powers (consisting of China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany) to lead the negotiations with Teheran yet the Palestinian question remains an American monopoly, particularly in view of Washington’s proven incapacity to solve the problem single-handedly.

An international solution is required also because of the domestic political constraints on Washington’s freedom to maneuver in its relations with Israel. Donald Trump is not eternal, and a Democratic administration in Washington is bound to change U.S. policy toward the Palestinian question and certainly also end the current unconditional support for every Israeli whim. Netanyahu’s “love affair” with the Trump administration and its Evangelical power base is costing Israel the support of the Democratic Party and new, younger generations in the United States. Israel is now clearly a partisan issue in the United States’ highly polarized politics, and a new generation of Democrats is emerging that is deeply alienated from Israel’s occupation practices in Palestinian lands. In his last days in office, Barack Obama’s farewell gift to the Palestinians was a refusal to veto a resolution in the UN Security Council criticizing Israel’s expansionist policy in the occupied territories. An administration inspired by the new rising forces in the Democratic Party would go further than that on the question of Palestine.

The new paradigm also means that a peace plan based on the core principles that were understood time and again to be the foundation of a peace deal could be turned into a binding UN Security Council resolution and the internationally accepted interpretation of what is a fair deal in this dispute. Led by the United States, the international community would then have to devise a strategy for the implementation of this plan.

The new model also requires a broadening of the scope of the peace process—it can no longer be only about an Israeli-Palestinian peace. The objective should be a regional settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbors—if only because any future Palestinian state would be in no condition to offer Israel the kind of security it requires. Palestine is a not the major security challenge for the Jewish state; it is the broader Middle East that explains Israel’s formidable military buildup, and it is through a settlement with the regional players that Israel should get the security guarantees that it needs. That was very well understood by the initiators of the 2002 all-Arab Peace Initiative, though neither Israel nor the United States paid it the attention that it deserved.

In “normal” times, Israel would never accept an international solution, nor would the Palestinians acquiesce to a such a strategy if it did not respond to each and every requirement that in the past had defeated every good-faith Israeli peacemaker. Hence, the Israel-Palestine situation might have to wait for the unintended consequences of a major geopolitical shift in the region that could come in a variety of ways and forms. This could be, for example, a violent, abrupt Israeli disengagement from the West Bank; a mega-terror event; a military earthquake in the form of a major conflagration involving Israel, Iran, and its armed militias throughout the region, first and foremost the formidably powerful Hizballah; or a new and much more determined explosion of an Arab and Palestinian Spring that would sweep away regimes and borders and in turn, reshape the attitude of the parties to the conflict.

The result would not necessarily be any of the different scenarios mentioned above, though it could also create the conditions for any of them. After all, any progress toward peace that has ever occurred in the Israeli-Arab conflict has come about only after such major strategic shakeups. It is also something of an irony—and an anomaly—that Israelis and Palestinians should be struggling for a final settlement in a region that has been living under an interim, precarious arrangement, the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, that was born out of nothing less than a world war. Reshaping Sykes-Picot in the Israel-Palestine-Jordan triangle will not come about through the good will of the parties involved; changing realities would have to force them into it.

**Conclusion: Clio’s Judgment**

A peace agreement is always possible if one is negotiating in laboratory conditions, that is, in a socio-political vacuum unaffected by the pressures of political reality and by considerations of feasibility. Such conditions do not exist, however, particularly in the Middle East. If politicians and statesmen continue to fail at all efforts to bring peace to the region as they have done so far, the stage would have to be left to history’s impersonal forces—to Clio, the goddess of history. And history itself has demonstrated that it indeed has its own ways of forcing recalcitrant politicians out of their havens of political comfort and expediency.

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