

America and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1991-2001

Avi Shlaim

Major wars have a habit of generating a peace agenda which goes beyond the immediate security objectives of the campaign to outline a vision of a better world, of international order based on universal values such as justice and morality. This is particularly true of wars that are fought not by one country but by a coalition of countries. The broader peace agenda is needed to keep the coalition together and to justify the sacrifices that have to be made in the course of fighting the war against the adversary.

Thus, World War I was the war to end all wars. World War II was fought to free the world from the scourge of fascism and to make it safe for democracy. On 16 January 1991, George Bush Sr. stated that military action against Iraq would make possible a 'New World Order, a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations.' Similarly, George Bush Jr. embarked on the war against the al-Qaeda organisation and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan with the broader agenda of freeing the world from the scourge of international terrorism.

There are other striking parallels between the Gulf War and the war in Afghanistan. In the first place, on the American side, some of the key positions today are held by veterans of the Gulf War, including Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and Colin Powell. Second, in both conflicts the incumbent American president sought to build a broad international coalition to confront the aggressor. Third, in both wars Israel was kept at arms' length in order to preserve the coalition. Fourth, in both cases a link was quickly established between the conflict at hand and the Palestine problem.

In 1990 Saddam Hussein pioneered the concept of ‘linkage’ by making Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait conditional on Israel’s withdrawal from all the Arab lands that it occupied in 1967. Thus, before threatening the mother of all battles if Iraq was attacked, Saddam Hussein unleashed the mother of all linkages. President Bush rejected the proposed linkage so as not to appear to reward Saddam’s aggression, and in order to deflate his claim to be the champion of the Palestinians. But Bush could not, without exposing himself to the charge of double standards, insist that Iraq should comply immediately and unconditionally with UN orders to withdraw from Kuwait without accepting that Israel should be made to comply with strikingly similar UN resolutions that had been on the table since 1967. Bush’s way round this problem was to intimate that America would address the Arab-Israeli conflict as soon as Iraq pulled out of or was booted out of Kuwait. In other words, while rejecting simultaneous linkage, Bush implicitly accepted deferred linkage.

After the guns fell silent in the Gulf, the Bush administration came up with a five-point plan for the future of the Middle East. The elements of this plan, the ‘five pillars of wisdom’ as one observer dubbed them, were democracy, economic development, arms control, Gulf security, and a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was a sound and well thought-out plan but it simply fell by the wayside. The much-vaunted New World Order turned out to be the old world order minus the Soviet Union. In the aftermath of victory, America, the sole surviving superpower, and its Arab allies reverted to their bad old ways. (Arabic saying). No serious attempt was made to introduce democracy to the Arab world, to promote greater economic equality, to curb arms sales to the region, or to lay the foundations for an independent system of Gulf security.

The one element of the programme for post-war reconstruction that did receive sustained attention was the Arab-Israeli conflict. The American-sponsored peace process was launched with the conference in Madrid towards the end of October 1991. The basis of the conference was UN resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of land for peace that they incorporated. All the parties to the conflict were there, including the Palestinians who presented their own case for the first time at a major international gathering. In his opening speech, President Bush was faultlessly even-handed: he gave a pledge to work for a settlement based on security for Israel and justice for the Palestinians.

Two tracks for bilateral negotiations were established at Madrid, an Israeli-Arab track and an Israeli-Palestinian track. But as long as Itzhak Shamir, the leader of the right-wing Likud party, remained in power, no real progress could be achieved on either track. For Shamir, in line with the ideological position of the party that he headed, was adamant that the West Bank was an integral part of the Land of Israel. Bush was equally insistent that the project of Greater Israel had to be abandoned and that the building of new Jewish settlements on the West Bank had to stop. A battle of wills ensued. By forcing Israelis to choose between US aid and continuing colonisation of the West Bank, Bush contributed to Shamir's electoral defeat in June 1992 and to his replacement by a Labour government headed by Itzhak Rabin. But the bruising battle was also a factor in George Bush's own defeat in the presidential elections later that year. Deferred linkage did not materialise due to Israeli intransigence. Two years after the liberation of Kuwait, the Palestinian problem remained unresolved. George Bush failed to deliver on his pledge 'to push the Israelis into a solution.'

On becoming President, Bill Clinton gave free rein to his pro-Israeli sympathies. He abruptly reversed the even-handed policy of his predecessor and replaced it

with an 'Israel-first' policy reminiscent of the Reagan years. The new approach was laid out by Martin Indyk, a senior official on the National Security Council, in a speech he gave to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on 18 May 1993. Two elements were listed by Indyk as central: Israel had to be kept strong while the peace process continued, and Iraq and Iran had to be kept weak. The second element was called 'dual containment' and one of its aims was to protect Israel on the Eastern front.

Regarding the Middle East peace process, said Indyk, 'our approach to the negotiations will involve working with Israel, not against it. We are committed to deepening our strategic partnership with Israel in the pursuit of peace and security.' Withdrawing from territory, Indyk argued, involved risks to Israel's security, and Israel would only take these risks if it knew that the United States stood behind it. Real progress in the talks could only come with this kind of special relationship between America and Israel. No similar pledge was made to work with the Arabs or the Palestinians. As a result, America in effect abdicated its independent role as the manager of the peace process and took the side of one of the protagonists. After ten rounds, the bilateral negotiations in Washington reached a dead end.

The breakthrough announced in September 1993 on the Palestinian track was made in Oslo not in Washington. The Declaration of Principles on Palestinian self-government in Gaza and Jericho was negotiated directly between Israel and the PLO in the Norwegian capital without American help or even knowledge. Israel recognised that the Palestinians have national rights while the PLO renounced terrorism. Bill Clinton served essentially as the master of ceremonies when the Oslo accord was signed on the White House lawn and clinched with the hesitant hand-shake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. Clinton did recognise,

however, the need for an active American role in supporting the experiment in Palestinian self-government. But while Israel continued to receive \$3 billion a year, as well as extra funds to finance its withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho, only modest 'seed money' was advanced to the Palestinian Authority.

The rise to power in May 1996 of a Likud government headed by Binyamin Netanyahu dealt a heavy blow to the Oslo peace process. Netanyahu was a bitter opponent of the Oslo accord, viewing it as incompatible both with Israel's security and with its historic right to the Biblical homeland. He spent his three years as prime minister in an attempt to arrest the exchange of land for peace that lay at the heart of the Oslo accord. This Israeli retreat from the historic compromise struck at Oslo called for a reassessment of the American role but no real reassessment took place. President Clinton maintained an active personal involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks but he only achieved very modest results in the shape of the Hebron Protocol of 15 January 1997 and the Wye River Memorandum of 23 October 1998. Israeli foot-dragging was the primary cause of the loss of momentum on the road to peace. But the redefinition of the American role, following Clinton's entry into the White House, inadvertently facilitated this foot-dragging. It left the Palestinians largely to the tender mercies of a right-wing government which remained committed to the old vision of Greater Israel.

The electoral victory of Ehud Barak in May 1999 promised a fresh start in the struggle towards comprehensive peace in the Middle East. It also provided an opening for Bill Clinton to resume the role he had always wanted to play, that of helping Israel to assume the risks involved in exchanging territory for peace. Like his mentor Itzhak Rabin, Barak was a soldier who late in life turned to peace-making. Israel's most decorated soldier, however, turned out to be a hopelessly incompetent domestic politician and maladroit diplomat. He approached

diplomacy as the extension of war by other means. He was much more interested in an agreement with Syria than with the Palestinians because Syria is a military power to be reckoned with whereas the Palestinians are not. Accordingly, Barak concentrated almost exclusively on the Syrian track during the first eight months of his premiership but his efforts ended in failure. It was only after his policy of 'Syria-first' failed that Barak reluctantly turned to the Palestinian track.

Throughout this period, Clinton remained solidly behind Barak and made no attempt to play an independent role in the management of the Middle East peace process.

The critical point in the Israeli-Palestinian final status negotiations was reached at the Camp David summit in July 2000. On the causes of failure there are two radically different versions. The Israeli version is that Barak presented a most generous package at Camp David but Arafat rejected this out of hand and chose to revert to violence. The Palestinian version is that Barak laid a trap for Arafat and sought to impose on him, with the help of the American 'peace processors', a fundamentally unfair and unsound final status agreement. Historians will continue to debate the relative merits of these two versions for many years to come. All I can do here is to offer some comments on the American role, based largely on the article published by Robert Mally and Hussein Agha in the *New York Review of Books* on 9 August 2001 under the title 'Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors.'

Three points are reasonably clear. One, the idea of setting aside Israel's interim obligations and tackling all the issues together at a summit meeting was proposed by Barak to Clinton. Two, Arafat pleaded for additional time to prepare the ground and warned Clinton of the danger that the summit would explode in his face unless progress was made in narrowing the gap between the two sides. Indeed, both the concept and the timing of the proposed summit reinforced in Arafat's

mind the sense of an Israeli-American conspiracy. Three, Clinton assured Arafat that he would not be blamed if the summit did not succeed. 'There will be no finger-pointing', he promised. What is not clear is why Clinton put all the blame on Arafat after the failure of the summit. The answer suggested by Mally and Agha is that Camp David exemplified for Clinton the contrast between Barak's political courage and Arafat's political passivity, between risk-taking on one side and risk-aversion on the other side. But they also point to the complex and often contradictory roles that the United States played at the summit: as principal broker of the putative peace deal; as guardian of the peace process; as Israel's strategic ally; and as its cultural and political partner. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Clinton's strong commitment to Israel undermined his credibility as an honest broker and was therefore one of the factors that contributed to the collapse of the Camp David summit.

Clinton himself seems to have drawn the right lessons from the failure at Camp David. On 23 December 2000, five months after the meeting in Maryland and two months after the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada, he presented a detailed plan for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The plan reflected the long distance that Clinton had travelled towards meeting Palestinian expectations since the American 'bridging proposals' tabled at Camp David. His plan envisaged an independent Palestinian state on about 96 per cent of the West Bank; Palestinian sovereignty over all the Arab parts of Jerusalem except for the Jewish Quarter in the Old City and the Western Wall; and the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland in historic Palestine, subject to Israel's sovereign decision to absorb them in its own territory. Considerable progress towards a final status agreement was made by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators at Taba, Egypt, in January 2001, on the basis of these proposals or 'parameters'. They basically accepted the parameters, although each side had

many outstanding doubts and reservations. But time ran out on two of the main actors. On 20 January, Clinton was succeeded as President by George W. Bush, and, on 6 February, Ehud Barak was defeated by Ariel Sharon in the direct election of the prime minister.

The new Republican President departed from the approach of his Democratic predecessor in two respects. First, whereas Clinton was prepared to devote as much of his presidency as it took to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Bush Jr. adopted a 'hands-off' attitude of leaving it to the two sides to sort out their own differences. Second, whereas Clinton had a special bond with the leaders of the Labour Party in Israel as well as with Yasser Arafat, Bush cold-shouldered the Palestinian leader and established surprisingly warm relations with the right-wing Israeli leader. After their first meeting at the White House, Bush commented on Sharon's 'marvellous sense of history.' More importantly, the Bush administration seemed receptive to the Sharon line that Yasser Arafat is a terrorist, that the Palestinian Authority is a terrorist entity, and that they should be treated as such. Sharon's refusal to resume the political dialogue with the PA, until there is a complete cessation of violence, struck a sympathetic chord in Washington. Vice-President Dick Cheney went as far as to justify in public Israel's policy of assassinating Palestinian activists suspected of orchestrating the violence.

The terrorist attack of 11 September on America violently shook the kaleidoscope of world politics. It had far-reaching consequences for almost all aspects of US foreign policy, including the relations with Israel and the Palestinians. Many Israelis hoped that the events of 11 September would engender greater sympathy and support in America for their own war against Palestinian militants. Ariel Sharon reportedly said to Colin Powell, 'Everyone has his own Bin Laden and Arafat is ours.' Sharon also hoped to make common cause with America in the war

against international terrorism. All these hopes, however, were quickly dashed. Colin Powell made it clear that 'Israel will not be part of any anti-terror military action.' The attempt to demonise Yasser Arafat backfired. While Israel was firmly excluded from the emergent anti-terror coalition, some of its enemies, such as Syria and Iran, were being considered for membership. Hizbullah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad were conspicuous in their absence from the list of 27 terrorist organisations that had their assets frozen by Congress. They were treated on this occasion as local movements fighting against occupation, not as global terrorist networks like the one headed by Osama Bin Laden. Far from gaining respectability, Israel felt that it was being treated almost as a pariah and as an impediment to the American effort to build an anti-terror coalition.

Worse was to come. Two weeks after the attack on the twin towers and the Pentagon, President Bush issued the strongest statement yet endorsing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Bush administration's plan, which was said to have been in preparation prior to 11 September, envisages the handing back of nearly all the West Bank to Palestinian control. Departing from its standard operating procedures, the State Department prepared its own plan rather than forwarding Israeli proposals with minor modifications. The plan itself was anathema to Mr Sharon. For he is committed to keeping the whole of Jerusalem under Israeli control; he is reluctant to yield to the Palestinian Authority more than the 42 per cent of the West Bank that it currently controls; and he envisages a weak Palestinian entity made up of isolated enclaves with no territorial contiguity.

Sharon reacted to America's peace plan with an astonishing outburst of anger which reflected his deep fear that America might abandon the strategic alliance with Israel in favour of an alliance of convenience with the Arab states and the

Palestinians. He warned President Bush not to repeat the mistake of Neville Chamberlain in 1938 of trying to appease Nazi Germany by offering Hitler part of Czechoslovakia. 'Do not try to appease the Arabs at our expense,' said Mr Sharon. 'Israel will not be Czechoslovakia. Israel will fight terrorism.' The analogy with Munich is preposterous: Israel is not Czechoslovakia but an occupying power; the Palestinian Authority is not Nazi Germany; and Yasser Arafat is no Adolf Hitler. After being compared to Neville Chamberlain of all people, Bush must have regretted his remark about Sharon's marvellous sense of History. In any case, the official American response reflected extreme displeasure. 'The prime minister's comments are unacceptable,' said Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman. 'Israel has no stronger friend and ally in the world than the United States. President Bush has been an especially close friend of Israel. The United States has been working for months to press the parties to end the violence and return to political dialogue. The United States will continue to press both Israel and the Palestinians to move forward.' Although Mr Sharon expressed regret for provoking this public row, his allegation of appeasement and of treachery continued to rankle.

Israel's reaction to the assassination of tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, in Jerusalem on 17 October, deepened the crisis in the relations with America. The radical right and racist former general, who advocated the 'transfer' of Palestinians from Palestine, was a personal friend of Ariel Sharon. The assassination was a straightforward retaliation for Israel's 'targeted killing' of the PFLP leader, Abu Ali Mustapha in August. Sharon warned Arafat of 'all-out war' unless he handed over the assassins. Without waiting for a reply, he ordered the IDF to reoccupy six cities in area A on the West Bank in the most drastic assault on Yasser Arafat's authority since limited self-rule began seven years ago. The scale and ferocity of the

incursion shocked many Israelis, including Shimon Peres, the foreign minister and leading advocate of the policy of negotiation as opposed to the policy of retaliation. It appeared to serve the not-so-secret agenda of the hardliners in the government and in the army of destroying the peace process by banishing Arafat and bringing about the collapse of the Palestinian Authority.

The aggressive move against the PA placed Israel on a collision course with America. America denounced the move in uncharacteristically blunt terms and called on Israel to quit the West Bank cities immediately and without conditions. It also warned Sharon that the war against the Palestinians threatens the fragile coalition against the Taliban regime and Osama Bin Laden. Sharon flatly rejected the American demand in a remarkable display of defiance towards an ally that gives his country \$3 billion in aid every year. But he was forced to recognise his error in thinking that the terrorist attack on America provided Israel with an opportunity to redefine the rules of the game in the local conflict with the Palestinians. Having declared that Israel will act unilaterally in defence of its own interests, he was compelled to take American interests into account. A gradual withdrawal from the West Bank cities was set in motion. America succeeded in yanking Israel back from the brink of all-out war.

The pro-American Arab regimes, led by Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, viewed the escalation of violence in Palestine with mounting anguish and anxiety. They had been shamed and discredited in the eyes of their own people by their inability to help the Palestinians or to modify America's blatant partiality towards Israel. Osama Bin Laden was quick to seize the plight of the Palestinians as an additional stick with which to beat these Arab regimes following the Anglo-American assault on Afghanistan: 'Israeli tanks are wreaking havoc in Palestine - in Jenin, Ramallah, Rafah and Beit Jala and other parts of the land of Islam, but no one

raises his voice or bats an eyelid.’ Like the Iraqi dictator, Bin Laden is exploiting the plight of the Palestinians for his own ends. But his motives do not detract from the centrality of the Palestine question. His plea struck a sympathetic chord in much of the Arab and Islamic world. And by swearing that America will have no peace until Palestine is free, the besieged Bin Laden succeeded in setting the agenda for Arab demands on Palestine.

Yasser Arafat was the first Arab leader to denounce the horrific crime of 11 September. He had paid a heavy price for his support of Saddam Hussein following the invasion of Kuwait, and he was not about to commit the same mistake again. Arafat and his colleagues, and all thoughtful Palestinians, sought to distance themselves from Bin Laden, the Lucifer of international terrorism. His war against the West is a religious war whereas their struggle against Israel is essentially a political and national struggle although there is an undeniable religious dimension to it. Palestinians also draw a firm distinction between the kind of unbridled terrorism practised by Bin Laden and their own resort to violence in self-defence. A further distinction they make is between Israeli violence which they regard as illegitimate because its purpose is to perpetuate the occupation of their land and their own resistance to Israeli occupation. America stands accused of double standards, of subscribing to a definition of terrorism that, until very recently, suited only Israel. Arab and Muslim groups have been pressing for some time for a new definition of terrorism that excludes movements resisting occupation. The lack of one helps to explain their lukewarm response to the American-led coalition against it.

Clearly, there is a link between the war in Afghanistan and the conflict in Palestine. For the majority of Arabs and Muslims, Palestine is a central issue. Their attitude towards America’s war in Afghanistan is determined to a large

extent by its stand on the Palestine question. And the dominant perception is one of American double standards, of one standard applied to Israel and another standard to the Palestinians. Consequently, America cannot count on unambiguous Arab support in its long war against international terrorism unless it adopts a position that satisfies the moderate Arab demands on Palestine. This means the Clinton parameters: a deal that would establish the borders for an independent and sovereign Palestinian state, allow for the return of some refugees, and divide Jerusalem between Israel and the Palestinians. Mr Bush has taken a critical step forward in invoking international justice to justify the war in Afghanistan. To be consistent, he has to uphold the same standard of justice for the Palestinians. Verbal commitments will not carry much credibility this time round. His father promised justice for the Palestinians after the Gulf War and failed to deliver. He himself will be judged not by words but by actions. Moreover, the situation has changed in one significant respect. In 1990-91 the Arabs needed American protection against Saddam Hussein. Today America badly needs the support of the Arab world in the war against international terrorism.

From this brief review of American policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the last decade, a number of conclusions emerge. First, on their own the two sides are incapable of reaching a resolution of their 100 years-old conflict. They came tantalisingly close at Taba in January but they did not get there. Second, the policy of using US moral, material, and military support to give Israel the confidence to go forward in the peace process, has not achieved the desired results. The best proof is Bill Clinton. He was, in the words of one Israeli newspaper, the last Zionist. Yet, even he could not sweet talk Israel into a final settlement. If Clinton could not do it, nobody can. That leaves only one possible path to progress: an externally-imposed solution.

An externally-imposed solution sounds rather coercive and brutal towards Israel but it need not be. Indeed, if it is brutal, it will backfire. The key to progress is to bring about a change in Israeli public opinion in favour of ending the occupation and conceding to the Palestinians the right to genuine national self-determination. Improbable as it may look today, such a change is not inconceivable. The Israeli public has never been as resistant to the idea of Palestinian statehood as the politicians of the Right. At the last elections, Ariel Sharon promised peace with security and has decidedly failed to deliver either. Today, Sharon does not have a plan with the remotest chance of being acceptable to the other side and he knows it. Hence his stubborn opposition to the resumption of the final status negotiations. At the same time, he is being subjected to the most intense pressure by his partners on the right and on the left of the political spectrum. His main aim is survival and that precludes the option of voluntary withdrawal from the West Bank. So once again, as so often in the past, the peace process is held hostage to domestic Israeli politics.

Only America can break the deadlock in Israeli politics. If America does not, no one else will. America's credentials as a friend are impeccable. Since 1967 America has given Israel more than \$92 billion in aid and this aid continues to the tune of \$3 billion a year. America should involve the United Nations, European Union, Russia, and its Arab allies in a concerted effort to generate internal pressure on Sharon to move forward on the political front, but its own leadership role is crucial. The key point to drive home in this educational campaign is that America remains committed to Israel's security and welfare, and that the country's security will be enhanced rather than put at risk by ending the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Arguably, America would be doing Sharon a favour by walking him into a peace deal against which, given his ideological provenance, he is bound to protest loudly in public. Moreover, a fair number of sensible, level-

headed Israelis would be grateful to America for liberating them from the 34 years-old colonial venture which has so disastrously distorted the Zionist political project. In the end, it might be a question, as George Ball once put it in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, of how to save Israel against itself.

8 November 2001

4,632 words