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JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING



"Quest for Middle East Peace: How and Why It Failed"

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Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Autumn 2001), pp. 75-85

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2001.31.1.75>

Accessed: 10/03/2015 14:48

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international resolutions rather than within the confines of America's uncertain proposals. In January, a final effort between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in the Egyptian town of Taba (without the Americans) produced more progress and some hope. But it was, by then, at least to some of the negotiators, too late. On 20 January, Clinton had packed his bags and was on his way out. In Israel, meanwhile, Sharon was on his way in.

Had there been, in hindsight, a generous Israeli offer? Ask a member of the American team, and an honest answer might be that there was a moving target of ideas, fluctuating impressions of the deal the U.S. could sell to the two sides, a work in progress that reacted (and therefore was vulnerable) to the pressures and persuasion of both. Ask Barak, and he might volunteer that there was no Israeli offer and, besides, Arafat rejected it. Ask Arafat, and the response you might hear is that there was no offer; besides, it was unacceptable; that said, it had better remain on the table.

Offer or no offer, the negotiations that took place between July 2000 and February 2001 make up an indelible chapter in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This may be hard to discern today, amid the continuing violence and accumulated mistrust. But taboos were shattered, the unspoken got spoken, and, during that period, Israelis and Palestinians reached an unprecedented level of understanding of what it will take to end their struggle. When the two sides resume their path toward a permanent agreement—and eventually, they will—they will come to it with the memory of those remarkable eight months, the experience of how far they had come and how far they had yet to go, and with the sobering wisdom of an opportunity that was missed by all, less by design than by mistake, more through miscalculation than through mischief.

**“QUEST FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE: HOW AND WHY IT FAILED,” BY
DEBORAH SONTAG, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 26 JULY 2001**

Days before the Palestinian uprising erupted in September, Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Yasir Arafat held an unusually congenial dinner meeting in the Israeli's private home in Kochav Yair.

At one point, Mr. Barak even called President Clinton and, two months after the Camp David peace talks had failed, proclaimed that he and Mr. Arafat would become the ultimate Israeli-Palestinian peace partners. Within earshot of the Palestinian leader, according to an Israeli participant, Mr. Barak theatrically announced, “I'm going to be the partner of this man even more so than Rabin was,” referring to Yitzhak Rabin, the late Israeli prime minister.

It was a moment that seems incredible in retrospect, now that Mr. Barak talks of having revealed “Arafat's true face” and Ariel Sharon, the present prime minister, routinely describes the Palestinian leader as a terrorist overlord.

But during the largely ineffectual cease-fire effort now under way in the Middle East, peace advocates, academics, and diplomats have begun excavating such moments to see what can be learned from the diplomacy right before and after the outbreak of violence. Their premise is that any renewal of peace talks, however remote that seems right now, would have to use the Barak-Clinton era as a point of departure or as an object lesson—or both.

In the tumble of the all-consuming violence, much has not been revealed or examined. Rather, a potent, simplistic narrative has taken hold in Israel and to some extent in the United States. It says: Mr. Barak offered Mr. Arafat the moon at Camp

David last summer. Mr. Arafat turned it down, and then “pushed the button” and chose the path of violence. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is insoluble, at least for the foreseeable future.

But many diplomats and officials believe that the dynamic was far more complex and that Mr. Arafat does not bear sole responsibility for the breakdown of the peace effort.

There were missteps and successes by Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans alike over more than seven years of peace talks between the 1993 Oslo interim agreement and the last negotiating sessions in Taba, Egypt, in January.

Mr. Barak did not offer Mr. Arafat the moon at Camp David. He broke Israeli taboos against any discussion of dividing Jerusalem, and he sketched out an offer that was

politically courageous, especially for an Israeli leader with a faltering coalition. But it was a proposal that the Palestinians did not believe would leave them with a viable state. And although Mr. Barak said no Israeli leader could go further, he himself improved considerably on his Camp David proposal six months later.

“It is a terrible myth that Arafat and only Arafat caused this catastrophic failure,” Terje Roed-Larsen, the United Nations special envoy here, said in an interview. “All three parties made mistakes, and in such complex negotiations, everyone is bound to. But no one is solely to blame.”

Mr. Arafat is widely blamed for his stubborn refusal to acknowledge publicly any evolution in the Israeli position, and later to seize quickly the potential contained in the eleventh-hour peace package that Mr. Clinton issued in late December.

Mr. Arafat did eventually authorize his negotiators to engage in talks in Taba that used the Clinton proposal as a foundation. Despite reports to the contrary in Israel, however, Mr. Arafat never turned down “97 percent of the West Bank” at Taba, as many Israelis hold. The negotiations were suspended by Israel because elections were imminent and “the pressure of Israeli public opinion against the talks could not be resisted,” said Shlomo Ben-Ami, who was Israel’s foreign minister at the time.

Still, the details of a permanent peace agreement were as clear at Taba as they ever have been, most participants said. So afterward, United Nations and European diplomats scrambled to convene a summit meeting in Stockholm. There, they believed, Mr. Arafat—who is known to make decisions only under extreme deadline pressure—was prepared to deliver a breakthrough concession on the central issue of the fate of Palestinian refugees, and a compromise was possible on Jerusalem.

For a variety of reasons, the summit meeting never took place. In the Israeli elections in February, Mr. Barak lost resoundingly to Mr. Sharon. It was then that peace moves froze—not six months earlier at Camp David.

After Camp David: Much Went On behind the Scenes

Key Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, as well as several American and European diplomats keenly involved in the peace talks of the Clinton-Barak era, were interviewed for this article. Mr. Arafat also gave an interview. Mr. Barak did not; Gadi Baltiansky, his former spokesman, said the former prime minister, who has kept a low profile since his defeat, was unwilling to talk.

Few Israelis, Palestinians, or Americans realize how much diplomatic activity continued after the Camp David meeting appeared to produce nothing. Building on what

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turned out to be a useful base, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators conducted more than fifty negotiating sessions in August and September, most of them clandestine, and most at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

There were also some field trips to examine the practicality of ways to divide Jerusalem—some so complicated that Nabil Shaath, a senior Palestinian official, joked about fitting residents' shoes with global positioning devices that would light up in different colors to alert them as to whose territory they were in.

One day, Saeb Erakat, a senior Palestinian negotiator, accompanied a high-ranking Israeli security official on what was to be a quiet visit to the City of David area outside the Old City walls, where some Jewish families have established homes in the Palestinian residential neighborhood of Silwan.

The Israeli official gave Mr. Erakat an Israeli paint company cap, and the burly Palestinian negotiator removed his eyeglasses and dressed uncharacteristically in casual clothes. He thought himself incognito, he said, but a young Palestinian boy on a bicycle peered in the window of the Israeli secret service car and said loudly, "Hi, Dr. Saeb!"

During August and September, Mr. Erakat and Gilead Sher, a senior Israeli negotiator, drafted two chapters of a permanent peace accord that were kept secret from everyone but the leaders—even from other negotiators, Mr. Erakat said.

At the same time, American mediators were pulling together Mr. Clinton's permanent peace proposal. It appeared in December, but Martin Indyk, the former American ambassador to Israel, disclosed recently that they were already prepared to put it before the parties in August or September.

All this behind-the-scenes movement was reflected in the atmosphere at that dinner party at Mr. Barak's home. The prime minister, who had refused to talk directly to the Palestinian leader at Camp David, now courted him. Mr. Ben-Ami, then foreign minister, said he left the dinner and told his wife that Mr. Barak—whom he describes as "deaf to cultural nuance"—was so intent on forging a peace agreement that he was willing to change "not only his policies but his personality."

But Palestinians drove away from that dinner with something else on their minds—Mr. Sharon's coming visit to what Muslims call the Noble Sanctuary and Jews know as the Temple Mount. Mr. Arafat said in an interview that he huddled on the balcony with Mr. Barak and implored him to block Mr. Sharon's plans. But Mr. Barak's government perceived the planned visit by Mr. Sharon, then the opposition leader, as solely an internal Israeli political matter, specifically as an attempt to divert attention from the expected return to political life by a right-wing rival—Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister.

On the heels of very intricate grappling at Camp David over the future status of the Old City's holy sites, Mr. Sharon's heavily guarded visit to the plaza outside al-Aqsa Mosque to demonstrate Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount set off angry Palestinian demonstrations. The Israelis used lethal force to put them down. The cycle of violence started, escalated, mutated, and built to a peak between mid-May and 1 June with the Israeli use of F-16 fighter jets in Nablus and the terrorist bombing outside a Tel Aviv disco.

In June and early July, a flimsy, American-brokered cease-fire rekindled talk by diplomats of what they said remained their goal: to push the parties back toward "final status" talks. But all acknowledged that the distance between what was achievable at the negotiating table and what would be palatable to the Israeli and Palestinian publics had become greater with every passing month of violence.

Some Israelis and Palestinians, in fact, believe that the clock has been set back decades and question the very two-state solution that was the goal of the Oslo accords.

Many Israelis now believe that Mr. Arafat has been completely discredited as a “peace partner” and that there is no point in negotiating more agreements with him. They believe that he deliberately resorted to violence to put pressure on Israel to give him what he could not obtain at Camp David. And an increasing number believe that he once more has his sights fixed on destroying Israel.

At the same time, many Palestinians have been led to believe the worst of the Israelis. Many fear that the inclusion of far-right parties in Mr. Sharon’s coalition government signals a new respectability in Israel for the extremist belief that Palestinians should be “transferred” to neighboring Arab lands. In the last ten months, their frustration has turned to despair, anger and, in some cases, suicidal and homicidal vengeance.

The bloom is off the rose for the “peace camps” on both sides as well. “The Woodstock-like idea of peace—did you hug your Palestinian today?—is over,” said Avraham Burg, the speaker of the Israeli parliament who is the front-runner to become Labor Party leader in September.

Similarly, Mr. Erakat, the Palestinian negotiator, said: “The rosy peace is out. I just want my state and to be done with them.”

Yet relatively few Israelis, Palestinians, or outside observers believe that there can be a military solution to their conflict—or that a solution can be imposed. Thus the two sides will eventually have to return somehow to some kind of talks.

“For us living here, we have no alternative in the long run to a permanent status agreement,” said Mr. Sher, the Israeli negotiator. “On the horizon, we will become a minority on the West Bank of the Jordan River. And if we don’t have recognizable and coherent borders, we will live through a much worse period than we are living through now.”

Progress by Inches: Peace Effort Meets Rising Disaffection

In the Oslo accords signed in 1993, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization agreed to recognize each other’s legitimacy and to enter a transitional period during which a permanent peace was to be negotiated as Israel gradually transferred land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to a new self-governing Palestinian Authority.

In actuality, the “peace process” involved considerably more process than peace. Still, American mediators believed that it was probably irreversible and would eventually achieve its goal of two neighboring states. The mediators devoted themselves to inching the effort forward as the region withstood assassinations, terrorist attacks, and countless political crises.

The inching, which produced several interim agreements, went on for more than seven years, however, and always the big final-status issues—the fate of Jerusalem, of Palestinian refugees, and of Jewish settlements and the future borders—were deferred. Mr. Shaath, the de facto Palestinian foreign minister, said: “The lingo during all those years was 2 percent territory here and 3 percent there. Release twenty prisoners today and thirty prisoners next week. Open this dirt road. It was bits and pieces. This did not create any deep understanding between the parties on the big issues.”

Many Israelis were not in much of a hurry to get to the endgame. They simply wanted the terrorism to stop. Right-wing Israeli politicians complained that the Palestinian leadership was not educating its people for peace, not collecting illegal weapons, and not acting to reduce incitement against Israel. But many Israelis chose to focus instead on the relative quiet that they eventually came to enjoy as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian security relationship.

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The Palestinians, however, while they began the process of building a state, lost faith as land transfers were routinely delayed and as they watched the West Bank and Gaza sliced up by Israeli bypass roads and expansion of Jewish settlements. The settler population increased by 80,000 between 1992 and 2001. The expected economic dividends of the peace path did not materialize; the Palestinian standard of living dropped by 20 percent. The Palestinian Authority proved increasingly corrupt. And Mr. Arafat kept setting and postponing dates for declaring Palestinian independence, most recently last 13 September.

This created a growing disaffection with the peace effort that was largely ignored by the Israeli and American negotiators. The Palestinian opposition—the Islamic militants who considered the negotiations to be a sellout and others frustrated by the corruption of the Palestinian leadership—gained adherents who were more than ready to return to the streets when the peace effort broke down.

Looking backward, Dennis B. Ross, the long-serving American mediator, told the *Jerusalem Post* recently that “one of the lessons I’ve learned is that you can’t have one environment at the negotiating tables, and a different reality on the ground.”

Yossi Beilin, an Israeli architect of the peace effort, echoed the sentiment. In an interview in Tel Aviv, he said Israeli advocates of a negotiated peace, those known as the “peace camp,” had not been tough enough about the settlement expansion and not tough enough on the Palestinians about incitement from their ranks against Israel.

Rob Malley, the National Security Council’s Middle East expert under Mr. Clinton, added that the Americans had not been tough enough on either side. Speaking at a public forum in Washington last spring, Mr. Malley said, “If the fundamental equation had to be land for peace, how can it have any meaning and any relevance when, on the one hand, land was being taken away on a daily basis and, on the other hand, the peace was being maligned on a daily basis.”

An Israeli expert on the conflict, Joseph Alpher, who was an adviser to Mr. Barak at Camp David, argues that the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, was provoked by the failures of the seven-year interim period rather than by the Camp David impasse.

“Postponing the discussion of the contradictions between the most fundamental Israeli and Palestinian narratives allowed the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic to be invaded by a virus that has now paralyzed it,” he wrote in a recent study for the Bertelsmann Foundation.

The Blame Game: Why Did Talks End in Collapse?

Assuming the mantle of Mr. Rabin, Mr. Barak came to office in July 1999 trumpeting his intent to end the conflict with the Palestinians in short order. But then he chose to direct his energy at seeking peace with the Syrians, and ignored the Palestinians long enough to make them suspicious. He also brought the settlers’ representatives,

the National Religious Party, into his coalition and gave them the Housing Ministry, which led to a significant expansion of the settlement enterprise.

Four years late by the original peacemaking timetable, the first substantial final-status talks began secretly only in late March 2000, after the Israeli-Syrian talks died. "It all started too late and on the wrong footing," said Mr. Larsen, the United Nations envoy.

As a signal of his good faith, Mr. Barak promised to transfer to the Palestinians three Jerusalem-area villages, a promise that was relayed to Mr. Arafat by Mr. Clinton. Mr. Barak even won parliament's consent to do so. But, on the day of the vote, an intense spasm of violence erupted in the West Bank, which seems in retrospect a harbinger of what was to come.

Mr. Barak indefinitely deferred the transfer because of the violence. Both Mr. Arafat and, according to Mr. Malley, Mr. Clinton later said they felt burned by Mr. Barak's broken promise.

Nonetheless, what became known as the "Stockholm track" consisted of fifteen substantive sessions, culminating in three long weekends, two in Sweden and one in Israel. Israelis and Palestinians who took part say now that the discussions were groundbreaking and that the mood was positive. They made progress on the issues of territory, borders, security, and even refugees, although there were both advances and retreats on every issue.

In mid-May, the fact and the substance of the talks were leaked to Israeli newspapers, and what was printed about potential concessions caused political problems for both Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat. That in effect brought the talks to a halt and led Mr. Barak to seek a summit meeting before the Palestinians considered the groundwork laid.

"Stockholm died once revealed," Mr. Indyk, the former American ambassador, said in an interview in June. "If Stockholm had continued, it might have laid a better foundation for Camp David. But Barak felt the leaks would lead to the breakup of his coalition and he'd never get to the endgame."

Mr. Ben-Ami said the negotiators had supported Mr. Barak's decision to push for an American-led summit meeting at that point.

"We didn't feel there was a purpose in eroding our positions further before a summit where we'd have to give up more," he said.

For other reasons, though, Mr. Ben-Ami said that in retrospect he considered it a pity that the Stockholm track was aborted. Referring to Abu Ala', he said: "The Palestinian negotiator there was an extraordinarily talented and able man who had the trust of the chairman. And he liked discreet channels. The moment they collapsed, he became an enemy of the process. He thought Camp David was a show."

The palpable displeasure of Abu Ala', whose given name is Ahmad Qurai', at Camp David was considered by many to have contributed to the talks' failure—just as his subsequent leadership role at Taba was believed to have contributed to greater success there.

Abu Ala' himself said Mr. Barak had doomed Camp David by cutting short the preparatory session. "We told him without preparation it would be a catastrophe, and now we are living the catastrophe," Abu Ala' said in an interview in Abu Dis, his village in the West Bank. "Two weeks before Camp David, Arafat and I saw Clinton at the White House. Arafat told Clinton he needed more time. Clinton said, 'Chairman Arafat, come try your best. If it fails, I will not blame you.' But that is exactly what he did."

The Palestinians went to Camp David so reluctantly that the failure of the talks should have been foreseen, many now say. "The failure of Camp David was a self-fulfilling prophesy, and it wasn't because of Jerusalem or the right of return" of refugees, said Mr. Beilin.

Mr. Larsen agreed: "It was a failure of psychology and of process, not so much of substance."

The Palestinians felt that they were being dragged to the verdant hills of Maryland to be put under joint pressure by an Israeli prime minister and an American president who, because of their separate political time tables and concerns about their legacies, had a personal sense of urgency.

The Palestinians said they had been repeatedly told by the Americans that the Israeli leader's coalition was unstable; after a while, they said, the goal of the summit meeting seemed to be as much about rescuing Mr. Barak as about making peace. At the same time, they said, the Americans did not seem to take seriously the pressures of the Palestinian public and the Muslim world on Mr. Arafat. Like Mr. Barak, Mr. Arafat went to Camp David dogged by plummeting domestic approval ratings.

Mr. Indyk, who is planning to write a book on the peace effort called "Unintended Consequences," said Mr. Barak's requirement that Camp David produce a formal end to the conflict had put too much pressure on the summit meeting.

The discussions on some issues actually went backward during the two weeks at Camp David, Mr. Sher and Mr. Ben-Ami said. Mr. Sher said he believed that it was because Palestinian negotiators had kept Mr. Arafat in the dark about key details of the Stockholm talks, which they deny. He said he and Mr. Ben-Ami had traveled to Nablus, in the West Bank, to see the Palestinian leader shortly before Camp David and were stunned to discover that Mr. Arafat did not know precisely what had been discussed.

The Israelis and the Americans describe a "bunker mentality" on the part of the Palestinians at Camp David. In response, the Palestinians say that at one point Mr. Barak did not come out of his cabin, the Dogwood, for two days and that he refused to meet with Mr. Arafat personally except for one tea.

"There was also one dinner in which Barak was on the right side of Clinton and Arafat was on the left," said Mr. Shaath, the Palestinian, adding in reference to Mr. Clinton's daughter: "But Chelsea sat to the right of Barak all evening, and she received his undivided attention. Why the hell did he insist on a summit if he did not intend to meet his partner for a minute?"

Western diplomats here say the Palestinians believed that they were being manipulated by the Americans. They said American officials had made a crucial mistake in trying to nurture special relationships with two younger-generation Palestinian officials whom they thought were pragmatic: Muhammad Rashid, Mr. Arafat's Kurdish economic adviser, and Muhammad Dahlan, the Gaza preventive security chief. That angered the veteran Palestinian negotiators, they said, who felt that the Americans were seeking to divide and weaken them.

In the middle of Camp David, one of the negotiators, Abu Mazin [Mahmud Abbas], flew back to the Middle East for his son's wedding. He was furious about the American tactics, a European diplomat said, and pledged that Camp David would never succeed if such games continued and that he would use the refugee issue to foil it, if need be.

Mr. Sher said the Palestinians had never put forward any counterproposals to what the Israelis were suggesting. They just said no, he said. Mr. Malley, who was at Camp

David, wrote in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* in mid-July that the American mediators were “frustrated almost to the point of despair by the Palestinians’ passivity and inability to seize the moment.”

The two sides had discussed territorial swaps at Stockholm, in which the Palestinians would cede a percentage of the West Bank for settlement blocs in exchange for territory elsewhere. They continued the conversation at Camp David. But Abu Ala’ said the Israelis had talked of an unfair swap—annexing about 9 percent of the West Bank and giving the Palestinians the equivalent of about 1 percent elsewhere.

“I said, Shlomo, I cannot look at the maps. Close them,” Abu Ala’ said, describing a conversation with Mr. Ben-Ami. He declared that he would discuss only the 1967 borders. “Clinton was angry at me and told me I was personally responsible for the failure of the summit. I told him even if occupation continues for 500 years, we will not change.”

But at Taba, the Palestinians were more than willing to look at maps. Now the Israelis were talking about annexing 6 percent of the West Bank in exchange for land elsewhere that was equivalent to 3 percent. That would have given the Palestinians some 97 percent of the total land mass of the West Bank, which is much closer to their long-held goal that the Israelis should return all the territories captured in 1967.

At Camp David, Mr. Ben-Ami said, the Israelis discovered very late in the game how differently the two sides perceived the final status talks.

“That the Palestinians would agree to less than 100 percent was the axiom of Israeli politics since 1993,” he said.

Mr. Sher said most members of the Palestinian leadership “knew and agreed that this is a historic compromise that requires the Palestinians yielding on some issues—all except one: Arafat.”

At the end of Camp David, the three parties agreed that the chemistry had been bad. That was about all they agreed on. The Americans were dejected, although months later Mr. Clinton described Camp David as a “transformative event” because it forced the two sides to confront each other’s core needs and allowed them to glimpse the potential contours of a final peace.

At the close of July 2000, however, the Israelis felt that their generosity had been rebuffed. And the Palestinians felt that they were being offered a state that would not be viable—“less than a Bantustan, for your information,” Mr. Arafat said in a recent interview.

“They have to control the Jordan Valley, with five early warning stations there,” Mr. Arafat said. “They have to control the air above, the water aquifers below, the sea and the borders. They have to divide the West Bank in three cantons. They keep 10 percent of it for settlements and roads and their forces. No sovereignty over Haram al-Sharif. And refugees, we didn’t have a serious discussion about.”

Mr. Ben-Ami said he spent considerable time after Camp David trying to explain to Israelis that the Palestinians indeed did make significant concessions from their vantage point. “They agreed to Israeli sovereignty over Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, eleven of them,” he said. “They agreed to the idea that three blocs of the settlements they so oppose could remain in place and that the Western Wall and Jewish Quarter could be under Israeli sovereignty.”

Mr. Malley added that the Palestinians had agreed to negotiate a solution to the refugee issue that would not end up threatening Israel’s Jewish majority. “No other Arab party that has negotiated with Israel—not Anwar Sadat’s Egypt, not King Hus-

sein's Jordan, let alone Hafiz al-Asad's Syria—ever came close to even considering such compromises," he said.

In the public analysis, the summit meeting fell apart in bitter disagreement over how to share or divide Jerusalem. Mr. Clinton recently said it was the refugee issue that did it in. But Mr. Malley and others who took part said there were gaps on every issue.

But at the end, Mr. Clinton praised Mr. Barak's courage and vision and said Mr. Arafat had not made an equivalent effort.

Mr. Shaath said: "I personally pleaded with President Clinton: 'Please do not put on a sad face and tell the world it failed. Please say we broke down taboos, dealt with the heart of the matter and will continue.'"

"But then the president started the blame game, and he backed Arafat into a corner," he added.

Mr. Ben-Ami expressed a similar sentiment. "At the end of Camp David, we had the feeling that the package as such contained ingredients and needed to go on," he said. "But Clinton left us to our own devices after he started the blame game. He was trying to give Barak a boost knowing he had political problems going home empty-handed but with his concessions revealed. But in doing so he created problems with the other side."

Mr. Arafat "rode home on a white horse," Mr. Shaath said, because he showed Palestinians that he "still cared about Jerusalem and the refugees." He was perceived as having stood strong in the face of incredible pressure from the Americans and the Israelis.

Nonetheless, Mr. Erakat said he had traveled from Bethlehem to Gaza preaching that "Camp David was good, Camp David was progress." He also said Mr. Arafat had made such comments, but if he did, they were very quiet.

But after Camp David, negotiators plunged back into their work at the King David Hotel. And the results were positive enough that Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat held their upbeat dinner meeting, and the Clinton administration summoned negotiators to Washington on 27 September. On 28 September, Mr. Sharon visited the Temple Mount. On 29 September, the situation began disintegrating with a rapidity that shocked everyone.

Each side blamed the other. The Israeli government has said the Palestinians initiated the uprising to force the Israelis to give them what they could not get at Camp David. Mr. Arafat said in an interview that Mr. Barak in effect conspired with Mr. Sharon "to destroy the peace process" once he could not get the Palestinians to accept his offer. Mr. Arafat called Mr. Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount "a vehicle for what they had decided on: the military plan."

An international fact-finding committee headed by former Senator George J. Mitchell did not hold either side solely responsible for the breakdown and described a lethal dynamic on the ground that grew from the behavior of both sides and took on a destructive life of its own. More than 650 people have been killed since 29 September, the overwhelming majority of them Palestinians.

"Too Late" at Taba: Some Still Look to Eventual Peace

Both sides, in recent interviews, wondered aloud why Mr. Clinton could not have presented his peace proposal at Camp David or immediately afterward. In late De-

cember, when he finally did so, the timing was very tight. Mr. Clinton was due to leave the presidency on 20 January, and Mr. Barak faced elections on 6 February.

The proposal offered more to the Palestinians than what was on the table at Camp David, but they initially responded with skepticism. The plan was too vague, they said. In the midst once more of a violent relationship with Israel, they were not emotionally poised to abide by the political timetables of others and to rush into a fuzzy deal, they said.

A European diplomat said the Palestinians did not understand the imminence and implications of a victory by Mr. Sharon; another said they did not want to waste their time with Mr. Barak, who was predicted to lose.

Still, in early January, Mr. Arafat visited Mr. Clinton at the White House. In a subsequent interview, he said he had suggested that the president summon Israeli and Palestinian negotiators immediately for marathon talks. Mr. Arafat said he had told Mr. Clinton that he believed a deal was possible in fourteen days.

Instead, the negotiators met later that month without the Americans and without their leaders at the Taba Hilton on the Red Sea. With the exception of Mr. Sher, who said Taba was little more than “good ambience,” most of the Israelis and Palestinians who took part felt that it was a very successful session.

“Peace seemed very possible at Taba,” Mr. Ben-Ami said. And Abu Ala’ said, “In Taba, we achieved real tangible steps toward a final agreement.”

In Taba, the Israelis for the first time accepted the Palestinian principle of a return to 1967 borders, the Palestinians said. The Palestinians therefore agreed to settlement blocs, provided there would be a swap of equivalent land. Mr. Shaath said they were to end up with 10 percent more territory than they were offered at Camp David.

The Israelis also agreed for the first time to give the Palestinians full sovereignty over all Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem, both sides said, and to give the Palestinians air rights over their land. The two sides were still grappling with the precise terms under which Israel could retain small bases and radar posts in the Jordan Valley, at least transitionally.

Many Israelis believe that throughout the final status talks, the Palestinians were inflexible in their demand that all refugees be given the right of return to their former homes, which raises existential fears in Israel. But Mr. Beilin, the Israeli who ran the negotiations on refugees at Taba, said the two sides were exploring an “agreed narrative” that would defuse the explosive nature of this issue and protect the Jewish identity of Israel. They noted that about 200,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem would drop off the Israeli demographic rolls, and they devised a mechanism giving refugees more financial incentive to settle outside Israel.

Abu Ala’ said: “When other issues move, this will move. It’s not a deal breaker.”

The negotiations at Taba were interrupted by Mr. Barak after two Israelis were killed in the West Bank. The talks resumed and then halted again with the agreement to pick up after the elections. They never did.

“If Camp David was too little, Taba was too late,” Mr. Shaath said.

Mr. Larsen, the United Nations envoy, said he believed that a final peace deal could have been hammered out after Taba if both Mr. Barak and Mr. Clinton had remained in office.

But that is a big “if.” Mr. Sher noted, for instance, that the status of Jerusalem’s holy sites—always a potential deal-breaker—was barely touched during the Taba sessions.

In any case, on leaving office, Mr. Barak declared that his successor would not be bound by the negotiations that began with Stockholm and ended with Taba. Similarly, Mr. Clinton said his peace plan would expire when he stepped down.

Yet a year after Camp David, with the reality on the ground so transformed by bloodshed, most of those who took part in or observed the negotiations still believe that a permanent peace agreement is possible.

Although they acknowledge little likelihood of final status talks under Mr. Sharon, they still believe in the inevitability of a future agreement that is very near to what they were designing.

“Even at this darkest of hours, I believe that peace is achievable,” Mr. Erakat said in an interview in his Jericho office. “Clinton took us on a futuristic voyage. We have seen the endgame. It’s just a matter of time.”

Mr. Sher agreed. “I still think that peace is doable, feasible, and reasonable,” he said in his Jerusalem office, which is decorated with photographs from Camp David. “That’s the tragedy, because the basis of the agreement is lying there in arm’s reach.”