

Lessons from Peace Negotiations: Interview with Ehud Olmert

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Abstract

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered the Palestinians the most comprehensive peace deal that had ever received. Abu Mazen said he will reply “soon” and never did. I have met Olmert twice for lengthy interviews in which we opened all pertinent issues, putting delicate matters on the table for a candid conversation. This article records Olmert’s thoughts on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and his own involvement and attempts to end the bitter conflict. We discussed the Oslo Accords, Camp David 2000, terrorism, the Annapolis conference and Olmert’s extensive negotiations with Abu Mazen. The interview assesses the positive and negative lessons and implications of the peace process.

Keywords: Abu Mazen, Arafat, Camp David, Israel, Olmert, Oslo Accords, Palestinian Authority (PA), peace negotiations, PLO

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to understand the reasons for the unsuccessful peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) during Ehud Olmert premiership (2006 to 2009). Despite considerable efforts and resources in bringing the negotiating parties together, Israel and the PLO are still yearning for peace that seems beyond reach.

This paper is part of a large research project that is based on interviews and discussions with influential decision-makers, facilitators, mediators and negotiators who were involved in peace negotiations, and on archival work. I have already interviewed 51 Israeli, Palestinian, American, Swedish, Norwegian, Egyptian and British senior officials and peace negotiators. The interviews identify challenges and obstacles on the road to peace and suggest ways for moving forward. Prior to the interviews, interviewees sign consent forms. The interviews are audiotaped, transcribed and the text is sent to the interviewees for their authorization. Indeed, the novelty of this research is that it is based on primary resources: research in archives in Oslo, London, Washington and Jerusalem as well as on these semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The Olmert interview was opened with a discussion about Oslo 1993 and the subsequent waves of terror that swept Israel and undermined the peace process. Olmert believes that Yasser Arafat was behind the scenes of terror: “He knew, he

sanctioned, he did not prevent it and, in some cases, he definitely assisted. That I know". We then discussed Camp David 2000, to which Olmert was invited but did not go, the Al Aqsa Intifada which Olmert is convinced was orchestrated and financed by Arafat, the Annapolis peace conference, and Olmert direct negotiations with Abu Mazen. From December 2006 until 2008, the two leaders met 36 times and discussed all the pertinent issues. Olmert gave Abu Mazen the most generous peace offer to date. Abu Mazen did not reject it, but neither did he accept it. The offer was left in the air and did not translate to a concrete and abiding deal. Despite his extraordinary investment, Olmert was unable to sign a peace deal with Abu Mazen. This paper explains Olmert's drives, his mode of negotiations, the issues he was willing to compromise and those which he was unable to compromise, and his interpretation of Abu Mazen's lukewarm response.

I first met Olmert in London on February 22, 2019. That meeting was cut before I was able to conclude my questions. Olmert offered to meet again during his next visit to London. We met on April 24, 2019. This interview provides much food for thought. Here I record the major part of the first meeting.

Background

On November 21, 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had quit the Likud party and formed a new centrist party which he called Kadima (Forward in Hebrew). Sharon was fed up with the constant rivalries that he experienced with senior Likud leaders who, for political as well as partisan narrow interests, hampered his activities chief of which was his attempts to create a new vision for Israeli-Palestinian relationships. However, a month later Sharon suffered a light haemorrhagic stroke that served as a warning for Sharon's health condition, and on January 4, 2006 Sharon suffered a severe haemorrhagic stroke and fell into a state of prolonged unawareness. He was replaced by his deputy Ehud Olmert. Olmert organised Kadima for elections and ran on an explicit peace platform which clearly indicated that first on his agenda was to install peace between Israel and its Palestinian neighbour. On March 28, 2006, Olmert was elected prime minister of Israel, receiving a mandate from the public to pursue the peace efforts and settle the bitter conflict between the two rivals.

On January 9, 2006, Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). On January 26, 2006, his arch-rival Hamas won the Palestinian Parliamentary elections but Abbas remained PNA president. The peace wagon encountered a significant roadblock. Things went from bad to worse when, on July 12, 2006, the Lebanese terrorist party, Hezbollah, conducted a cross border raid in which three Israeli soldiers were killed and two others were kidnapped. The Israeli government responded by a massive retaliation and things escalated quickly to a full-fledge war. The war ended on August 14, 2006.

In December 2006, Olmert started negotiations with Abu Mazen. On February 8, 2007, Hamas and Fatah agreed to share power. However, the tensions between Fatah and the Islamist Hamas were simmering. On June 9, 2007, Hamas seized control of Gaza, routing Fatah forces and killing more than 100 people. The Palestinian rivals chose different paths of action. While Hamas opted for "resistance", violence

and terror, Fatah opted for peace negotiations with Israel, accepting the American mediation offer. In November 2007, the Bush Administration convened an international conference in Annapolis in order to publicly and officially revive the peace process. Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) reached a “Joint Understanding” in which they agreed to engage in negotiations with a view to conclude a peace treaty by the end of 2008. Negotiations between the two parties continued until Olmert was forced to resign on October 26, 2008, due to his indictment on corruption allegations.

A lot was published on Abu-Mazen-Olmert negotiations. Different interpretations were given. Different numbers were quoted. Various explanations were given for the failure to complete the talks with an agreed peace deal. What follows is Olmert’s version of the events, the story as he describes it in detail. We opened the conversation discussing the major milestones on the road to peace, starting from Oslo 1993.

Oslo

Cohen-Almagor: What do you think about the Oslo process and accords?

Olmert: Oslo was a very unusual endeavour, even in the context of a most unusual region, in a most unusual history of contacts between us and the Palestinians. It was, I know now for sure, because I discussed it with one of the initiators and participants, Ron Pundak, who was really the pusher and mover, together with Professor Hirschfeld. It was their own private initiative. It was not initiated by any political person. Whoever says something different, is trying to claim credit afterwards for something which was not his. It was an initiative of two private individuals from the academy, Professor Hirschfeld and Professor Ron Pundak, and it developed. And because of the very skillful and subtle manner and most likely because of their discretion and discreet manner, it was not leaked. And they kept it alive until it was completed. So, the process itself was extraordinary, and the participation of the Norwegians and their contribution and their desire to contribute to it is very exciting, very interesting. I think that the outcome, in terms of the agreement itself, came at a time when at least the Palestinian leadership was not yet ready to absorb all the possible ramifications, what it meant. And I think that the understanding of the Israeli leadership of the actual outcome of this agreement was also missing or lacking some important elements. So, the agreement was limited, was not specific *enough* in order to address all the possible aspects that needed to be carefully handled, in order to make it a real corridor towards what will then become a comprehensive agreement. And it did not take

into account the emotional response on both sides, but primarily on the Palestinian side, amongst the extremists, which practically destroyed the ability to implement the understandings of Oslo within the framework of the timetable that was agreed upon. So, the outcome of the Oslo agreement was not as expected, much less. The very fact that the barrier of direct contacts and recognition between Israel and the PLO was broken, was an historical turning point.

Cohen-Almagor: So, what is the main achievement of Oslo?

Olmert: The fact that it existed.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay, the meeting between them, sitting together –

Olmert: The fact that it was signed, the fact that, as a result, Abu Mazen, I'm sorry, Arafat and Rabin stood in the most visible, important place on earth, the lawn of the White House, together with the president of the United States and maybe 5,000 people, and the whole world watching, was so significant that, psychologically, it opened up avenues for further efforts that did not exist before. How these avenues were pursued is a different question, but it changed the parameters of the efforts that were made up until then.

Cohen-Almagor: So, in retrospect, do you think it was a success? Was it a success, Oslo?

Olmert: No. No, as I said, I think it was a failure, because it did not achieve what it set forth to achieve. First of all, it set forth to achieve a Palestinian state within five years. It was scheduled to be declared on the 13th of September 2000. At the beginning it was 1998, but then it was postponed for two years, so it was the 13th of September 2000. But on the 13th of September 2000, the whole world was focused on the opening of the Olympic games in Sydney, and not so much on an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. There is a critique that the agreement had a lot of loopholes in it, that it was like a swiss cheese, many holes in it. Do you agree with that? That many important subjects were not covered.

- Olmert: I mean, that it is very easy to agree with, but then what? Who thought, at the time when the agreement was signed, that this is a comprehensive final permanent agreement? It was not supposed to be. So, it was not supposed to cover all the possible issues, all the possible sensitivities and touch upon everything that might arise. This exactly was what was expected.
- Cohen-Almagor: Was it possible to cover everything in that time, do you think?
- Olmert: It was not, because, in the first place, it was not negotiation between the representatives of the two governments, that were authorized to hit all these issues. I mean, that is the beauty of the agreement and that is also weakness of this agreement. That it was negotiated by non-representatives that did not have the authority, nor did they have even the feeling in themselves that they are authorized to pursue further.
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. But then there was a second stage, where Uri Savir and Yoel Singer came in.¹
- Olmert: Yes, they came, but I think that they, mostly, I think their role was to try and to protect their bosses from unnecessary complications in this agreement. I mean, that was how to keep it within a framework which will not jeopardize their political position back home. That is what I think.
- Cohen-Almagor: Sorry, who are the bosses? Just to clarify this thing.
- Olmert: Peres and Rabin.
- Cohen-Almagor: So are you saying Savir-Peres and Singer-Rabin?
- Olmert: Yes, more or less. Look, I am not an expert on the Oslo agreement, because at the time, I was an opposition member of parliament and I was about to become mayor of Jerusalem. I was a senior member of the Likud party in the Knesset. I was not involved, I was not privy to all the different aspects, so what I say to you now about the developments and the progress of this process is based on what I heard from participants afterwards. Okay? But if you had a chance to watch, which I am sure you did, the play, there was the Oslo play, yes? Then in the Oslo play, it is quite obvious that Singer comes to protect

Rabin and that Savir comes to represent Peres. And there was Beilin. I do not know who he represented.

Cohen-Almagor: Do you know anything about the Norwegian role, besides Oslo and the theater play? I mean, are you in touch with the Norwegians? Do you know Terje Larsen?

Olmert: I know Terje Larsen. Actually, recently, I was in London speaking at RUSI, which is the Royal United Services Institute and one of the attendees, there was a very limited number of people invited, maybe thirty, thirty-five, a dinner and an open talk. The Chairman of the meeting was Sir John Scarlett, the former head of MI6, and one of the attendees was Juul, the wife of Terje Larsen. She is the ambassador in Great Britain. So, she was there. So, you know, we chatted a little bit. I think, at the beginning, when I was vice prime minister, Terje Larsen was very active in trying to promote the peace talks and he was moving around, *macher-ing* [Yiddish: maker, broker] in the Israeli politics.

Cohen-Almagor: Do you know why?

Olmert: Because he cared. I think he really cared.

Cohen-Almagor: Just good will.

Olmert: Yes, I mean, good will and a sense of mission and a sense of, you know –

Cohen-Almagor: So, no partisan interest there.

Olmert: Partisan? In what way partisan? Like representing the Labor party in Israel or what?

Cohen-Almagor: Partisan in the way of self-promoting.

Olmert: Look, never did I meet one political person in my life, who did not have a certain degree of self-promotion as part of his personality.

Cohen-Almagor: No, as the main drive.

Olmert: So, I do not think that was the main drive. But Terje is very ambitious and a very, very, very ambitious person and definitely desired, there is no question about it. But I think he really cared. I think he felt that he has been brought into the center of something which may become an historic process of great proportions, and he wanted to contribute to it.

Terrorism

People in Israel had hoped that Oslo would bring tranquillity and cessation of violence. Those hopes were dashed quite clearly and quickly. Terrorism was not relaxed after Oslo. Quite the opposite: 21 people were killed in 16 separate incidents during the time after the signing of the Oslo Accords until the end of 1993.² The trust in Arafat's willingness and ability to curb terror and violence quickly eroded. Although Arafat voiced his commitment to peace and called the Oslo process "peace of the brave", many people (including me) suspected that Arafat was playing a dangerous game in which he was holding the olive leaf in one hand, and the sword in the other, unleashing violence when he thought that it might serve his partisan interests. Olmert was privy to intelligence and I was curious to know whether Arafat was involved, for a fact, in terror.

Cohen-Almagor: Oslo was signed. Immediately afterwards, there was a series of atrocious bombings inside Israel. Who initiated it? Who was behind it?

Olmert: Here, my observation is not first hand. Okay? At that time, I was a member of the Knesset of the Likud, and the Mayor of Jerusalem, concurrently. I was both Mayor of Jerusalem and a member of the Knesset. I was not part of the inner circle that shared all the most delicate information. My feeling is that it was initiated by the extreme element; at that time, there was not yet Hamas, but the, all kinds of Islamic groups that were opposed to the Oslo agreement. And I think that it was assisted in very smart and subtle manner by Arafat. Arafat never lived in peace – with peace. He never really broke the glass ceiling that separates a terrorist from a statesman. He deliberately decided to remain a freedom fighter, rather than a statesman. And you have many historical examples to compare, in order to understand the difference. Menachem Begin, for instance. Menachem Begin was the head of a terrorist organization, an underground movement. Okay? But once the state was

declared, and in spite of his very deep emotional opposition to the policy and to the major decisions by the prime minister, at a time when it was not really a reflection of a democratic process that determined. I mean, that is before the first elections to the first Knesset, I am talking. Begin decided to abide by the new situation and completely separated himself from any illegal, violent activities. The same was with, or after a little while, but with the Lechi guys, Yitzhak Shamir, Natan Yellin-Mor and so on. This is in Israel. Look at Mandela.

Cohen-Almagor: Are there any other people like Arafat, who were not able to disassociate themselves from the past?

Olmert: There are many in different countries, but they are much less important. Who do you know who is really historically important, that helped influence the political and geopolitical situation of a region, that was similar to Yasser Arafat?

Cohen-Almagor: I do not know. I really do not.

Olmert: Yes, you do not know because there are not. But there could be. I think that Mandela, when he was released and there was the source of his confrontation with his wife, Winnie Mandela. Winnie Mandela was not a criminal, as they portrayed her. She was a decent freedom fighter. But she was not prepared to compromise and *he* was to prepared to compromise, because he understood that there must be a time where you have to move forward and put the past in its proper place. I think and this was the fact, that he created this commission for rehabilitation for truth and reconciliation. This is an historical achievement of unbelievable proportions. A man could draw his country into a blood bath and, instead, he opted for reconciliation. When I was there, as the first Israeli visitor of the new government, not of Mandela's; Mandela did not invite any Israeli leader. I was invited by Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela. And he introduced me to the leadership of the ANC, the African National Congress. Amongst them was Botha, the former minister of foreign affairs of the most apartheid government there was. So, it is unbelievable. You have not seen anything similar amongst the Palestinians, which is, I think, an historical tragedy.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you think that Arafat was behind the scenes.

Olmert: I think that he was, yes, involved. Yes. He knew, he sanctioned, he did not prevent it and, in some cases, he definitely assisted. That I know.

Camp David 2000

Ehud Barak needed someone to represent Israel in its negotiations about Jerusalem, a sticky point that was not resolved in previous negotiations and that needed to be settled as a precondition for agreement. At Camp David, that person was Dan Meridor. From this interview we learn that Barak first approached Olmert, who served at that time as Mayor of Jerusalem.

Olmert is very critical of Camp David and specifically of Ehud Barak. Olmert was very candid and vocal of his lack of appreciation of Barak's personal characteristics that prevented him from reaching a peace deal with Arafat. While acknowledging that Barak proposed unprecedented courageous ideas, Olmert thinks that Barak contributed to the summit's failure by being "obnoxious, outrageous and despicable". Olmert did, however, say that he himself was wrong in his objection at that time to dividing Jerusalem. Barak was right on this issue at Camp David, when he agreed to divide the city. The story that Olmert tells about his late night-early morning negotiations with Barak and the way the two leaders tried to outfox each other shows just how "sexy", to use Olmert's term, Israeli politics is. You may pick other adjectives to describe the level of trust, or mistrust, between the two leaders.

Olmert is also very critical of Arafat. In his opinion, Arafat did not wish to strike a peace deal with Israel, and he certainly was not prepared to recognise Israel as the home of the Jewish people. In his mind, Arafat was a terrorist, remained a terrorist during the peace process and wanted to die as a terrorist.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. Let me jump to Camp David, another point that is very, very important.

Olmert: Camp David of Barak.

Cohen-Almagor: 2000, yes. What could have been done differently? Have you looked closely at Camp David?

Olmert: I looked closer, because I was asked to participate in Camp David.

Cohen-Almagor: Oh! Really! You, too! [laughs] Tell me the story. I heard a fascinating story from Yossi Sarid, now the late Yossi Sarid. He told me a fascinating story about his invitation by Barak. Now tell me your story.

- Olmert: Look, my invitation is, in a way, more fascinating, because I was Likud. I was the Mayor of Jerusalem. And, actually, before the elections, when Barak was elected, I may have helped him, *more than anyone else*, to be elected, because I then made the famous statement "Barak will not divide Jerusalem". Coming from the Likud Mayor of Jerusalem and broadcasted every night. They replayed it every night. Bibi was accusing Barak of dividing the city, and then came Olmert, the Mayor of Jerusalem, Likud, and he says, "Barak is a hero. He is a patriot. He will never divide Jerusalem."
- Cohen-Almagor: How did you know? How did you know that? Were you close to Barak?
- Olmert: Look, I am in Israel, where everyone knows everyone.
- Cohen-Almagor: But you spoke to him? Barak is not a very social person. He does not speak with everyone.
- Olmert: Barak is excellent in building up close contacts with those in whom he is interested at a particular time, for a particular reason, for a particular end. So, I knew Barak, Barak knew me and we were, at some point, I was even described as his chief lobbyist for becoming chief of staff, which is not true. But it is true that he came to me. He tried very hard to build up good relations with me, because he thought that he did not know what will be. He did not know about himself even, what will be his political direction. He toyed with the idea that he might be Likud, that he might be Labor. I knew that he would ultimately turn to Labor, which he did.
- Cohen-Almagor: Sorry, you are talking about the 1990s.
- Olmert: The late '80s. The late '80s. Barak was building up his prime ministership goal when he was a lieutenant in the army.
- Cohen-Almagor: I thought this is illegal in Israel.
- Olmert: Yes, but in his mind, in the strategy that he built for himself from the outset. Barak was always, whenever he was appointed to a position, most of the time was spent in how to build his next post. And that is why he never really achieved what he was

capable of doing, according to those who knew him, because when he was appointed to one position, he already spent most of his time in building up the road for another position and so on and so on. Anyway, so I knew Barak well.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you had discussions when you were Mayor of Jerusalem. You had eye to eye talks, like you talk to me now, with Barak and Barak pledged to you that he is not going to divide Jerusalem.

Olmert: No, no, no, no, not exactly. Barak invited me several times to his home at very strange hours of the day and night, 2:30, 3:00 in the morning, to ask me to join him at Camp David, to the negotiations, saying that he plans to reach an agreement on a comprehensive basis, including Jerusalem. That Jerusalem will be the most sensitive issue, and that he believes that if I would stand next to him when he announces that he made an agreement on Jerusalem, when we are standing on the lawn of the White House and I will be next to him, he is more likely to convince the Israeli public opinion to accept such an agreement if I will be next to him. So, the natural question that I asked was, "So what do you want to propose about Jerusalem?" He said, "That I cannot tell you." So, I said, "So how do you expect me to go to Camp David, to join you, without", I said, "Ehud, you may have forgotten, but I am not in the Labor party. I am in Likud. I made the statement before the elections which helped you greatly because I did not want Bibi to involve Jerusalem in the political campaign". I thought it was damaging to Jerusalem. It was terribly damaging to the city of Jerusalem, that the prime minister accuses the leader of the second largest party in the country, that he is actually in favor of dividing the city. If half of the Israelis are in favor of dividing the city, then the outcry from outside of Israel to divide the city of Jerusalem is not anti-Israeli. Fifty percent of the Israelis, according to the prime minister, support it. So, I thought that it was not the right thing to do.

Cohen-Almagor: But you did not know, you did not know that he is not going to divide Jerusalem. He never told you that.

Olmert: Of course he did. Of course, he said it. He said it not only in private, he said it in public.

Cohen-Almagor: That he is not going to divide Jerusalem.

Olmert: Absolutely. There was a famous event – by the way, I was wrong at the time to object to the division of Jerusalem, and when he promised me that he won't divide the city, he was wrong. But when he was in Camp David and he actually proposed to divide Jerusalem, he was right. But that I understood later. And I said it to him. "When I criticized you about Camp David, I was wrong and you were right." I did it in the heat of our confrontation in the cabinet, when I was prime minister and he was my defense minister and we were fighting day in and day out. I told him, "One thing I have to admit. That when I criticized you about Camp David with regard to Jerusalem, I subsequently reached the conclusion that I was wrong and that you manifested courage and statesmanship when you proposed that." But let us go back. So, in June of 2000, a month before he went to Camp David, there was the annual meeting of the Ammunition Hill memorial to the fallen soldiers at the Battle of Jerusalem.³ And this is always a state event, with the president, the prime minister, the mayor of Jerusalem and, also, the president of the supreme court, thousands of people. This is very remarkable. Two weeks before, Barak called me and he said that he wants to apologize in advance, that he will not be able to be present that year at the event, because he has scheduled a meeting with President Clinton for that same day in Berlin, and he will not be in the country.

Cohen-Almagor: And he called you, because you are the mayor of the Jerusalem.

Olmert: I was the mayor of Jerusalem. So, I said to Barak, "Barak, listen. I do not care about your meeting with Clinton. Reschedule it for a day later or a day earlier, I do not care. There is no way that on the 14th of July the president of France will not be in Paris, or that on the 4th of July the president of America will not be in Washington. And if you are not going to be there, on that occasion, I am going to tear you apart, into pieces. So, you had better watch it." So, he called me and he said, "Okay, I rescheduled it. I will be meeting with Clinton in Portugal at 3:00 AM the night before, and immediately afterwards I will be flying back to Israel to be in time for the ceremony." So, I said okay. But then, just before, when we were about to start the ceremony, he had not shown up yet. He was late by a few

minutes. Normally the order of speakers was first was the president, then the prime minister, then the mayor of Jerusalem. His staff asked to reverse the order of speaking so I speak before him. I agreed. In my speech, I made a very strong pitch about the need for not dividing Jerusalem and so on and so forth. And Barak arrived, and he was already listening to me. After my speech, he came to the podium. So, we crossed each other on the way up and down. And we, you know, we met. So, we hugged each other, and he whispered to me, "Don't you worry. I will never ever do it." And then he made a remarkable speech.

Cohen-Almagor: I will never divide Jerusalem.

Olmert: Yes. And he made a remarkable speech, which turned out to be almost identical to my speech, because what I did was, in *my* speech, I quoted the famous speech of Ben-Gurion from the 5th of December 1949, prior to the decision of the UN Security Council about the internationalization of Jerusalem, and in which he talked about a very deep contact between Israel and the Jewish people and Jerusalem, and the loyalty of the Jews to Jerusalem, and so on and so forth. A remarkable speech, a remarkable speech. So, I quoted Ben-Gurion and I said, "Who knows", I said to Barak, "if you were not elected to be prime minister at this time, only for that purpose. To fulfill the vision of Ben-Gurion and to protect Jerusalem." And he stood up, after we crossed each other and he whispered to me, and he said, "No one who knows the ethos of the Jewish people, and the history of the Jewish people, and the history of the State of Israel could even dream of touching any part of Jerusalem", and so on and so forth, and made a remarkable speech.

Cohen-Almagor: So, this is June 2000.

Olmert: Yes. And then a month later, he went to Camp David. And in between, he invited me and I said, "Listen, if you want me to be there, I need to know in advance what exactly you are going to propose. I am not going to, I have my political agenda. I am not going to put myself in a trap." And he said, "Listen, you know, I cannot tell it to you. It is too early, it is too this, it is too that." And I figured that he wants me to, you know, he thought that I will be tempted to be part of this historical mission going to Camp David and then fuck myself, which I was not prepared to

do. So after two such meetings, he said to me, "You know, why won't you bring an aerial photo of Jerusalem. Let us just go through, you know, the map and see what can be done." And I said, "Ehud, let me ask you something. Why do you need me to bring you an aerial photo of Jerusalem? You are the prime minister. You are in charge of all the systems. Get them, give them an order to prepare for you an aerial photo of Jerusalem, and I will come and we will talk about it." Okay. He did, he brought it. He said, "You know, take a pen and a pencil and draw the map of Jerusalem that you think I can settle for." I said, "Ehud, why don't you do it? I will tell you and you draw the map. I will talk to you and you will draw the map." Why do I tell you this? Because later, it turned out to be very significant. Okay. He went to Camp David.

Cohen-Almagor: What happened?

Olmert: He drew, he made signs on the map, here, there, on different parts of the map. He did not draw a map, but he –

Cohen-Almagor: That some parts are going to be Palestinian.

Olmert: Yes, yes, yes.

Cohen-Almagor: And what did you say?

Olmert: I did not say anything. I said, "Certain things, I can agree with –"

Cohen-Almagor: Like what?

Olmert: Like, for instance, I said at the time, that the northern neighborhoods, Shuafat, the refugee camp, should not be part of the State of Israel, and so on and so forth. So, and there are certain sections in Beit Hanina, certain sections in Shuafat. I was ready, I said, "If you will do this, I may not propose it in the first place, but if you will do this and you will come, and there will be an agreement on the basis of these concessions, I will not say that you divided Jerusalem."

Cohen-Almagor: But?

- Olmert: "I will not say it, I will not accuse you. So, it will be helpful to you to be able to market it to the Israeli public opinion. I will not say that this is a division of Jerusalem. Then you will carry a certain additional weight, because of my position as the mayor of Jerusalem."
- Cohen-Almagor: So what happened? So it seems you got some sort of conclusion. So why didn't you go?
- Olmert: No, I did not want to go, because he did not say that he will do this and only this. He, you know, we were discussing, but there was not a commitment, an agreement in a very clear-cut definition of what will be done, and what will not be done and so on and so forth.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, then you told him you are not going.
- Olmert: Obviously, at that time –
- Cohen-Almagor: And then he approached Dan Meridor to replace you.
- Olmert: Dan Meridor was a member of the government.⁴
- Cohen-Almagor: But Dan Meridor went to Camp David.
- Olmert: Yes, but he was a member of his cabinet. Why not?
- Cohen-Almagor: Dan was not intended to go.
- Olmert: Yes, but he was not my replacement. With all due respect, you know, I have respect for Dan.
- Cohen-Almagor: He needed someone for Jerusalem. He appointed Dan to be on the Jerusalem issue. Barak did not plan to invite Dan Meridor.⁵
- Olmert: Maybe, I do not know.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, you do not know that.
- Olmert: That is why I do not want to comment on this. Dan Meridor at that time was member of the Central Party.⁶ Remember, he was not a member of the Likud. He did not cover that part of the public opinion which needed the support of potential Likudniks

that could be in opposition. Dan was at the Center party with Amnon Lipkin, Itzik Mordechai, and Roni Milo.

So, anyway. There was Camp David. Of course, in Camp David they went much more than my comments and my notes to him. Why do I remind this? Because in 2001, there were elections for prime minister, if you remember. Barak resigned and he said we will have elections for prime minister only, not for the Knesset. And Sharon was combating him. And I was interviewed for the first night of the political campaign broadcasts by Likud. I stood on the Mount of Olives peak and I pointed at the Temple Mount and I said, "Barak promised that he will never ever touch Jerusalem, but when he came to Camp David, he promised, agreed to divide it and to give up all of these places." A day later, by the time it was broadcast, I was overseas already. I taped it a few days before and I had to go overseas to America to make some speeches. When it was broadcasted, Barak had a press conference, and he said, "Ehud Olmert is a liar. He gave me a map with specific proposals to divide the city of Jerusalem in his own handwriting." So, people said, "If you are already revealing, why don't you expose the maps?" He said, "No, that I cannot do, because I gave him my word that I would not show it." Barak gave me his word that he will not talk, that he will not leak anything that we talked. If you now air this to the public, why don't you show it? So I made a statement from overseas, that I release Barak from any commitment and he can show all the maps and all the indications. And that is why it is important that he said to me then, "Why won't you draw it?", and I said, "No, no, no, no, no. If you want to draw it, draw it yourself. Do not ask me to do it." Because I knew I cannot really rely on Barak. It is, you know, a sexy story.

Cohen-Almagor: Yes, it is. He never revealed that map, did he? He never revealed that map.

Olmert: Of course not! Because there was no handwriting of mine there. It was only his handwriting. And that is not what he proposed at Camp David. At Camp David he proposed a lot more. But I have to say that, subsequently, I thought that he was right! Okay? So, the story that I tell you, I tell you about the integrity of the man. The fact that he is ready to lie any time, on anything, without any problem. But, *on the substance of it*, he was correct. I myself went much further than he did.

Cohen-Almagor: So, what do you think are the achievements of Camp David? The main achievements?

Olmert: Nothing. The only achievement was for Israel, not for peace. For Israel, the achievement was that Israel appeared to have been ready to sacrifice a lot more than ever before, and that the Palestinians turned that down, his proposals. And therefore, the international comment by most leaders, first and foremost by President Clinton, is that Israel was forthcoming and far-reaching and the Palestinians rejected. So, Israel won a great deal in the public opinion because of this. There is no question about it. So, this was the only achievement. However, I said on numerous occasions that, objectively speaking, now distancing myself from the clashes that I had with Barak on other matters, in another time and so on. If you look at Camp David objectively, as an historian, you have to say that he has, in the final analysis Barak has proposed ideas that were far more forthcoming and serious and daring than anything before him. And that he showed a great deal of courage in the negotiations. But, the way he handled himself in the negotiating process was obnoxious, outrageous and despicable, and most likely, it contributed to the failure. It did not cause the failure. The failure was the fact that Arafat did not want to make peace. I have not changed my opinion about it since the beginning. I think that Arafat, and probably had I been prime minister at the time that Arafat was president, I would not have done anything with him anyway. I did not trust him, I did not believe him. I thought that he was a terrorist, remained a terrorist and wanted to remain a terrorist and to die as a terrorist. As a freedom fighter, according to his terminology. But, to think that Barak forced Camp David against the desire of President Clinton, forced it against the desire of Arafat, forced it against his own people's early warnings, his own intelligence people. You ask Amos Gilad, he will tell you, that he warned Barak that Arafat is not going to sign the agreement and subsequently, he will start a series of terrorist attacks. Amos Gilad warned Barak *before* Camp David that that is what will be after Camp David.

Cohen-Almagor: Amos Gilad knew there is going to be a second intifada?

Olmert: This was his analysis, based on the data of intelligence. He was, at that time, very, very high on the intelligence rank. So,

despite all these warnings and despite the fact that President Clinton himself was not very anxious to convene a peace summit, because he did not trust Arafat to sign. And Arafat himself was not anxious to come to Camp David, because he did not want to come to Camp David in the first place. Barak forced everyone to come to Camp David. One thing he does not want to do in Camp David is to sit, one-on-one, with Yasser Arafat. Ask yourself, how can you seriously expect to build the personal trust, which is essential in the framework of such a process? He is not even ready to sit with the principal of the other side one-on-one. Talk to him about his son, talk to him about his wife, talk to him about his childhood, talk to him about the suffering of the Palestinian people. Cry with him, yell with him, laugh with him, joke with him. Do something! But how can you expect to make an agreement with someone you do not want to even meet with one-on-one? And Saeb Erekat told the story, which I guess is probably true, that one day, he and Arafat were sitting on the terrace of the bungalow where they stayed in Camp David. And Barak was walking not far on the road, just strolling, you know, with one of his assistants. At some point, they noticed that if they would continue on the way, they have to come close enough to Arafat to stop by and say hello. So, he turned around and moved away. And he said, "He did not even want to just say good morning to us." So, in terms of the trust which is needed in such processes, the impact of Camp David was terrible on the emotions of the two sides. And you can ask yourself, how can one person proposes, is prepared to be courageous enough to propose the division of Jerusalem and the concessions and whatnot and, on the other hand, to make all these mistakes, all these obstructions which are definitely causing the failure of this process? This is Barak.

Cohen-Almagor: Why do you think he never met him?

Olmert: I do not know. I cannot answer for him. You will have to, you need to interview him. He will probably give you twenty different sophisticated, highly intelligent, fascinating analyses that will screw your mind – you will not understand where you live and what you know and what you do not know – in order to exculpate himself. But that does not matter. At the end, you look at the outcome, you look at the bottom line and you judge for yourself. You do not need all the rest.

Cohen-Almagor: That is why you say it is despicable. The way that he treated Arafat.

Olmert: The way that he treated the entire process.

Cohen-Almagor: The entire process. If Barak were to give Yasser Arafat all that Arafat wanted, one hundred percent, do you think that Arafat would have signed?

Olmert: Look, this is a very tough question. I do not know to say, but I can say that, if I understand the dynamics and the emotions of Yasser Arafat, if he received all that he wanted on the ground level, okay, the refugees, the borders, Jerusalem and so on and so forth, he would have probably raised some statement issues, in order to put Barak in such a corner that he would not be able to do it. In order to put the blame on Israel. Like, he would have to say that we have caused on purpose the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes in Israel, because we wanted them out of the state, and so on and so forth. So, he would have added all kinds of demands. Something that we are doing now, by the way, when we come to the Palestinians and say at the beginning of negotiations, before they start, you have to declare that you recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Did we ask this from Jordan? Did you ask it from Egypt? No! Why do we want to ask it from the Palestinians *prior to negotiations*, as a precondition? Why? Because we want to put them in a corner where they will not be able to deliver, and we will have an excuse not to make an agreement. So, Arafat would have done something similar to this, I am sure.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you think that Arafat would not sign. Was not ready.

Olmert: He did not want to make peace with us. He did not want to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. As a state. As an independent legitimate state.

Cohen-Almagor: So why did he go to Oslo? Why all this charade?

Olmert: Because he was smart enough to play the political game. He did not want to refuse, to be seen as a refuser, as someone who turns down every possible effort. He relied, in a way, on the constraints of Barak.

Cohen-Almagor: What do you think about Barak's insistence that the Palestinians would proclaim that this is the end of conflict. Is it justified?

Olmert: This is absolutely necessary. This was part of my plan also. It was quite obvious that, once we agree on borders and Jerusalem and on the refugee issue, that is it! You will sign an agreement that means that there are no more outstanding issues that need to be resolved. So, the end of conflict, this was *my* demand. I do not remember that it was Barak's demand, but this was definitely my demand. My demand, which was, by the way, accepted, pending the agreement. That this is the end. No more claims, end of conflict. No more claims, end of conflict. I do not know that Barak asked it, but –

Cohen-Almagor: He did.

Olmert: If he did ask it, on the basis of an agreement, this is a legitimate demand. You make an agreement, you do not leave anything outside.

Terrorism again, Arafat again

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. Camp David collapsed and then terrorism again. Who is responsible for terror? Who?

Olmert: Arafat. Absolutely.

Cohen-Almagor: Are you sure?

Olmert: Yes.

Cohen-Almagor: Absolutely sure.

Olmert: Yes.

Cohen-Almagor: Intelligence sure?

Olmert: Yes.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. So, Arafat organized the Second Intifada.

Olmert: Organized and financed. Instigated and motivated.

Direct Negotiations with Abu Mazen

In December 2006, Olmert started negotiations with PA President Abbas. I wanted to know about the process, what was offered, what was agreed, and why a peace pact was not signed. Olmert provided some interesting insights.

- Cohen-Almagor: When did you start the negotiations with Abu Mazen?
 Olmert: In December of 2006, and I never wanted, never did I ask the Americans to help me negotiate. I said, I know what I want. We needed the Americans only when we did not want to negotiate. Then the Americans felt that they need to intervene in order to force us into the process. But in *my* time, there was no such need, because I was absolutely committed to carry on from day one. I announced before the elections what I will do. Something that no prime minister before me ever did. Before the elections in 2006. And I carried on right away. Therefore, I did not wait for Annapolis until November of 2007.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, what happened? Did you decide this format? Why one-on-one?
 Olmert: Why do I need, what is the best way to negotiate, if not one-on-one?
- Cohen-Almagor: So, you initiated, you invited Abu Mazen to come.
 Olmert: Of course, and at the beginning he was, you know, hesitant and so on and so forth. So, I tell all this story, in order to save time, read it in my book and you can quote from my book anything that you want, because it is written there.⁷ And I tell all the story, how he cancelled, every time we set up a meeting he cancelled, he cancelled, he cancelled. And finally, we said, no this time he will not cancel. And he called again, and he wanted to cancel. I said to him, "How do you, why do you do it? You want to insult me? You want to hurt me, okay, that I understand. But why do you have to insult my wife?",⁸ and this was in December of 2006.
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay, so why Annapolis? So why go to Annapolis?

Olmert: This is already when we went through lots of negotiations and Abu Mazen related to the Americans that he finds me a very serious and a very trustworthy and a very forthcoming partner. So, the Americans thought that the international umbrella can help promote and push forward these negotiations. That is why they proposed it. So, I said, "Why not? I don't care. It is a good platform for an international event that will portray Israel as a peace pusher."

Cohen-Almagor: So, the Americans initiated Annapolis?

Olmert: Yes.

Cohen-Almagor: I have to say that Tzipi Livni, in her interview with me, she said *she* initiated Annapolis.⁹

Olmert: (Laughs) Look, there is one thing about Tzipi. Truth is not an option. It is an option, but it is not necessary. You know when Annapolis was first proposed to me by Condi Rice? In May of 2006. The first visit that I had in America, already then, she said to me, "How about this?" I said, "If this will not be a replacement and come instead of direct negotiations, which I think is the only option that we have, is to negotiate directly one-on-one, but if you want to have an international family to promote the idea of negotiations, fine." Then came the war in Lebanon, so we could not continue. And then we started negotiations without them. With American knowledge, with their sponsorship, with their support, *but not in their presence*. I negotiated directly in my home with Abu Mazen. She was not, Condi was not involved, but, of course, she was briefed on every step. And Tzipi never sat in our one-on-one meeting. She only dealt with environment and with, you know, water issues and other things. I mean she is telling a story that never existed about her peace negotiations. I appointed her as Chief of the peace negotiations, why? Because when Abu Mazen told me that Abu Ala was appointed by him, I said, "Oh! That is bad." He said, "Why is it bad?" He told me, "You do not know how committed Abu Ala is to the peace process." I said, "Precisely why I do not like him." He said, "Why?" "Because", I said, "he is committed to the process and I want peace and not process." But he said, "I need him because of political reasons. He is very strong politically and I need him on my side." So I said, "Okay. So let us send Tzipi to sit with him, because they fit each other. She

likes to negotiate every small item which is unimportant, unnecessary and he can do it. Let them do it.” So they dealt with, you know, *narishkeit* [Yiddish: foolishness, trivialities]. And I was negotiating with Abu Mazen.

Cohen-Almagor: What is the achievement of Annapolis?

Olmert: Just an international – first of all, the setting of a time framework, which was important and, also, I think, recognizing the fact that there is a genuine, serious, credible process taking place.

Cohen-Almagor: Something meaningful happened as a result of Annapolis?

Olmert: We came very close to reaching an agreement. So, I mean, it was not part of necessarily, there would probably would have been an achievement, even without Annapolis. But Annapolis was certainly contributing to it.

Cohen-Almagor: Was there anything that you would have done differently about Annapolis?

Olmert: No.

Cohen-Almagor: No. Okay. All these committees that were established, something happened as a result of them? I spoke with Udi Dekel,¹⁰ your –

Olmert: Listen, Udi Dekel, I appointed him to be the director of this committee. Look, this committee was very important. It would not ever have made peace. This was not a committee that was supposed to make peace. This was a committee that had to complement all the other elements, that when you *make peace* and you take a decision on the crucial issues of Jerusalem, of refugees, of borders, and so on and so forth, on the Holy Basin, *then* you need all these other aspects. They were dealing with it. They were creating, they were on the framework, on the periphery. The heart of the negotiations was conducted by two guys only. Abu Mazen and myself. If anyone tells you anything else, he is not telling the truth. And you ask Abu Mazen – he will verify what I say.

Cohen-Almagor: Why didn't he sign?

Olmert: Why didn't he sign? First of all, read Condi Rice's book, on page 723 – okay? – 723, bottom paragraph.¹¹ She writes, earlier, how I shared with her my peace plan on the 3rd of May 2008, which is eleven months before I retired. A long time before I retired, because anyone who will say that I made my peace plan at a time when I was investigated, in order to somehow immunize myself – this is rubbish. This was on the 3rd of May, I proposed it to her. And that she was overwhelmed, and she ran to the hotel and she called the president. She said to the president, "You were right! Olmert wants peace. I am so sad that he will die before he can do it, because I recall that they killed Rabin for far less." That is what she said. It is written in her book. Okay? And then she says that Tzipi Livni called her – the one that almost made peace, right? – and told her *and* she writes and she also told Abu Mazen. And Abu Mazen admitted, by the way, publicly, on Israeli television that indeed that is what she did. She came to Condi Rice and to Abu Mazen – Tzipi Livni – and said, "Do not rush with Olmert. Do not rush with him. He has no influence. He is going to go down. He will not be able to deliver. Wait!" All those who eulogized Tzipi now, in the last few days, forgot it, but it is there. You can read it. And she came to me after the book of Condi Rice was published – Tzipi Livni – and she said, "She is lying." So I said, "How can you say that? She writes about you so nicely in the book. She does not show any hostility to you. She just tells the story." But in any way –

Cohen-Almagor: Did you know that?

Olmert: No. I told her, "Look, I did not know that you went to Condi Rice. I knew that you went to Abu Mazen, because –"

Cohen-Almagor: Abu Mazen told you?

Olmert: You know, prime ministers of Israel have ways of knowing things on the other side. But I did not know it about Condi. But I told her, I told Tzipi, "Look, she does not write there that I was present in a meeting with you and her, where you told her do not rely on Olmert's claim. She talked about a one-on-one meeting between you and her. So, you have to go to her and ask her, why did you write it? You say that you did not say it to her? I believe you. She says that you *did* say to her. I also

believe her, because she wrote it in her book. I got the book, just like you got it. She sent it to me with an inscription, 'To my friend, Ehud Olmert, from Condi Rice.' So, it is in the book. What do you want from me? Go and talk to her." But it is written in Condi's book that she came to her and asked her not to cherish Olmert's plan, because Olmert is going to be done.

Cohen-Almagor: So, this is why Abu Mazen did not sign.

Olmert: No. This certainly contributed to it. I think Abu Mazen was hesitant. I think he was afraid himself. By the way, he made a terrible mistake. He should have signed *precisely* because he may have thought that I am not going to be able to deliver. Why? Then he would have a prime minister sign a peace proposal authorized by the democratically elected government of Israel. And he could say from then on, "What do you want from me? Here it is. This is what I want. This is what was proposed to me", and so on. But he made a mistake. In any event, he probably may have analyzed the situation himself and reached a conclusion that it is not safe.

Cohen-Almagor: You think that was the reason why he did not sign?

Olmert: You asked me why he did not sign. So, I said, number one, Tzipi came to him and told him not to. Barak came to him and told him not to. And also, he himself, even without, had they not come to him, he may have thought, "why should I sign if, on the other hand, I will be embarrassed that I signed and the other side did not deliver". And also, because he had his own opposition. I mean, you have to see the entire picture. He had his own opposition. He had Hamas, he had the extremists. He had Dahlan, who wants to assassinate him and so on and so forth. So, he had many reasons to hesitate, and then comes the Israeli prominent ministers of the cabinet of Olmert, and they tell him, "Olmert cannot deliver. Why do you have to sign?" So altogether, I think that contributed. To this day, he thinks that this was his greatest mistake in life, not signing.

Cohen-Almagor: How do you know that?

Olmert: I know it, because he said it.

Cohen-Almagor: To you? Or publicly?

- Olmert: He said it to many Israelis. You can check with many Israelis, you know, who visit him occasionally and you will, they will verify it to you.
- Cohen-Almagor: What did you offer to him about Jerusalem?
- Olmert: I said exactly. The Jewish Jerusalem will be the capital of Israel, including everything that was built after the Six Day War. All the neighborhoods, Gilo, Ramot, Neve Yaakov, Pisgat Ze'ev, whatever, Armon HaNatziv. The rest, which is the Arab, the *machane hap'litim* [Hebrew: refugee camp], Shuafat, Beit Hanina, Sheikh Jarrah, all these neighborhoods, Isawiya, Abu Dis, all of these will be, the east side of Jerusalem will be part of the, this will be the Palestinian capital. So, Jerusalem will be, the Jewish Jerusalem will be ours, the Arab Jerusalem will be theirs and the Holy Basin, which will be defined accurately on the map, will be administered by a trust of five nations and trusted by the United Nations Security Council with specific provisions that will be accepted and, you know, defined. And the five nations will be the Saudis, Jordan, the Palestinians, America and Israel. And it will be open for all believers and so on and so forth. All the rights and the privileges. And it will not be sovereign under anyone, it will be under God's sovereignty.
- Cohen-Almagor: Did he agree to that?
- Olmert: He did not disagree.
- Cohen-Almagor: What did he say?
- Olmert: He, I think that he was more hesitant about the borderlines and the swaps that I proposed, more than – that is the main argument that he raised at the last meeting. He said, "I am not expert on maps, so I need to check the maps." By the maps, he meant the borders, not the Holy Basin concept.
- Cohen-Almagor: But as far as I understand, you showed a map and you drew a map.
- Olmert: Yes, I showed a map.

- Cohen-Almagor: And you refused that he would take it to Ramallah in order to consult with his experts.
- Olmert: I said, "Unless you sign it." And he did not sign it.
- Cohen-Almagor: But just to consult, why not give him the map, just to —?
- Olmert: Because he would never return the map. And he will come after two years and say, "This is the beginning. This is already what I have. I got it from Olmert. Now if you want to negotiate with me, give me more." And I proposed it as the take it or leave it. Not as a starting point for further concessions.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, you did not really trust him.
- Olmert: Not that I did not trust him. He was the other side and when you negotiate, you know, you have to keep your aces, you know.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, you showed him the map, you drew the lines and he said nothing. He said I want to consult with my people.
- Olmert: And he never came back. But he never said no. Never said no. To this day, he insists that he never said no. Which is very important, because if today he says I never said no to this, that means that it is still open from his point of view.
- Cohen-Almagor: For negotiations, yes, absolutely. What did you agree about on the refugees?
- Olmert: I proposed that within the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative, we will accept, not on the basis of United Nations Resolution 194, which is the right of return, not on the basis of family reunion, but on a humanitarian individual basis, we will accept a thousand refugees.
- Cohen-Almagor: How many?
- Olmert: A thousand.
- Cohen-Almagor: One thousand.
- Olmert: One thousand a year for five years. So all together, five thousand. And if he came to me and said, not one thousand

every year in five years, but four thousand every year in five years, I would have signed it on the spot, but he did not come back to me with this. Now, when he was negotiating with, we talked with Condoleezza Rice, he said that Barak promised him sixty thousand, forty thousand refugees. So, Condi told him, "Listen, forget about it. The most that you can get is the number of refugees that you can stick into the Mukataa, is the number that you will be able to get from Olmert." Which is about maybe twenty thousand, fifteen thousand. So, I was ready to do it had he agreed to it, but I did not want to propose it in the first place. I proposed a thousand a year for five years, within in the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Cohen-Almagor: So how did you come to the fifteen thousand number? Where did it come from?

Olmert: I did not come to the fifteen thousand. I said a thousand a year for five years, five thousand. That is what I proposed. You ask me, had he come back to you and said, not five thousand, fifteen thousand, I would have said okay. So, maybe I said it to someone else, that I would have agreed in principle to fifteen thousand, had it been proposed by Abu Mazen. And now everyone says fifteen thousand. But what I proposed was five thousand.

Cohen-Almagor: Again, in the interview with Tzipi Livni, she says that you were willing to propose a greater number than five thousand and that she stopped you.

Olmert: That is rubbish. She did not stop me.

Cohen-Almagor: That was one of the major divisions that you have with her.

Olmert: We *did* have a division. She said that if there will be *one* refugee, she will not sign the peace treaty. So, when I proposed five thousand, already I was departing from her. So, it is not that she agreed to five thousand and did not agree to more.

Cohen-Almagor: But she thinks that you would have agreed to more than five thousand.

Olmert: I told you now that I would have agreed to fifteen thousand!

- Cohen-Almagor: So, the maximum number is fifteen thousand.
- Olmert: Fifteen, twenty thousand is something that I would have agreed to, yes.
- Cohen-Almagor: And you think Abu Mazen would agree to that? There was a chance that he would agree to that?
- Olmert: I think so, yes. Because for Abu Mazen, he said from the outset, we do not really want to change the nature of the Jewish state. Never, anyone will not come anyway. He said to me, "Do not worry. No one will come anyway. What we need to do is to compensate them financially." And we actually talked about establishing an international fund that will support them, that will give compensation for Arab and Jewish refugees who were uprooted from their homes as a result of the wars. And that was the main vehicle that we thought will satisfy this issue.
- Cohen-Almagor: Money. Money will resolve that. And he accepted that.
- Olmert: He proposed it.
- Cohen-Almagor: What was the point of Ariel in these negotiations?
- Olmert: Naturally, they would have loved us to evacuate Ariel, and I said it is impossible. Do not ask me to do what I cannot.
- Cohen-Almagor: Because some commentators argue that Ariel was the bone of contention.
- Olmert: It was not. It was not. By the way, Ariel was part of the three population centers that were stipulated in the letter of President Bush from the 14th of April 2004, in which he said that three population centers will, as a result of the democratic changes, will remain under Israeli control in exchange for swaps.
- Cohen-Almagor: Where?
- Olmert: That will have to be agreed. But the three centers that he mentioned were Ariel, the surroundings of Jerusalem and Gush Etzion.
- Cohen-Almagor: And Abu Mazen accepted that?

- Olmert: Abu Mazen did not, it was not written to him. It was written to us, but Abu Mazen would have agreed to it. At the end, he would have agreed to it.
- Cohen-Almagor: I understand that he agreed to the handover of 1.9% of the West Bank to Israel? Is that correct?
- Olmert: It is true that he was ready to, yes.
- Cohen-Almagor: What does it include, the 1.9%? Did it include these three areas that you just mentioned?
- Olmert: No, no, no. Including specific settlements that all make up into 1.9%, without roads amongst them, without any integration of territory and so on.
- Cohen-Almagor: What about the blocs?
- Olmert: Not about the blocs. It was not made to include blocs. It was made to include individual settlements.
- Cohen-Almagor: So that is not acceptable to Israel.
- Olmert: It was not acceptable.
- Cohen-Almagor: Why did you ask for 6.8% of the West Bank?
- Olmert: No, I actually asked for 5.8% and I was –
- Cohen-Almagor: So why do they say 6.8%?
- Olmert: He says, but this is not what I proposed. Read my book.
- Cohen-Almagor: You proposed 5.8%.
- Olmert: 5.8%. And I proposed also, a tunnel or a highway between Gaza and the West Bank.
- Cohen-Almagor: In our control.
- Olmert: No! In their control. The entry and exit would have been in their control, but it will be such that they will not be able to cross into

Israel and so on and so forth. The point was this. I told him, you want exactly the '67 borders? All right. Separation from Gaza and the West Bank, that is what you want? He said, no. I said, so you do not want '67 borders, because in '67 there was no connection between Gaza and the West Bank. I am ready to give you a highway or a tunnel. Most likely a highway will be better because it can be, you know.

Cohen-Almagor: Were the plans already in the making?

Olmert: He did not agree on it, so I did not go to the engineers to build it. But the point is this. A connection between Gaza and the West Bank – is it worth half a percentage of territory?

Cohen-Almagor: One percent.

Olmert: Okay. One percent. So, from 5.3%, we go down to 4.3%. 4.3% is what I really am ready now.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you offered 5.3%. You said 5.8% before.

Olmert: So, maybe 5.8%. I do not remember now I have to –

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. Why that number?

Olmert: It is technically the number that I, you know –

Cohen-Almagor: Because, as far as I know, the number is 4%. For the bloc, it is 4%.

Olmert: The number that we really need and that we can give in return in swaps is 4.2%.

Cohen-Almagor: Yes. So why did you say –

Olmert: Okay, we left a certain margin.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. So that was open for negotiation. I understand. Do you know how many people actually live in this 5.2% included in Israel, or supposed to be included in Israel? Do you know the number of Palestinians that were supposed to be included in the 5.2%?

- Olmert: Palestinians? Almost no one. Almost no one.
- Cohen-Almagor: 55,000.
- Olmert: I do not think so. But anyway, so what?
- Cohen-Almagor: What do you do with them?
- Olmert: Nothing. They become Israeli citizens.
- Cohen-Almagor: Do they want to become Israeli citizens?
- Olmert: I do not remember that, at that time, according to the drawing that we had, that there would be any 55,000 Palestinians living in the swaps, in the territories that we would have annexed, in the centers, because it was defined in such a way that it would not include any Palestinians. So, I do not remember talking about it or discussing it as a separate issue.
- Cohen-Almagor: It was not discussed. Did you speak about the number of settlers, Israeli settlers, that need to be resettled?
- Olmert: It is so that there may be 80,000 that will have to be resettled and that most of them could be resettled, relocated into the West Bank into the three major centers, Ma'ale Adumim, Givon, Givat Ze'ev, Ariel, Gush Etzion.
- Cohen-Almagor: But you need to build for that.
- Olmert: Okay, so what? We are builders.
- Cohen-Almagor: This is going to increase the territory.
- Olmert: No! Within the limits of the territory.
- Cohen-Almagor: Not encroaching into the West Bank, but –
- Olmert: No, no, no. Within these three centers that were designed and drawn on the map, we could have relocated all of them.
- Cohen-Almagor: Without expanding.
- Olmert: Not, we are not talking, you know –

- Cohen-Almagor: Did you have any considerations or any intelligence about what will be the reaction of those who would be resettled?
- Olmert: Yes. Very, very violent.
- Cohen-Almagor: Of the 80,000 or a smaller amount?
- Olmert: Small parts of it.
- Cohen-Almagor: And then, what do you do with that?
- Olmert: Handle it.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, you were ready to.
- Olmert: Yes.
- Cohen-Almagor: How do you deal with security? What did you have in mind about security?
- Olmert: Security? I would have pulled out entirely from the Jordan Valley. I did not need to be in the Jordan Valley. I agreed with the king that there was such an option, which was supported by him and which is verified by Condi Rice, who talked with King Abdullah of Jordan, to have an international force on the other side of the Jordan, that will block the passage of Palestinians from one side to the other, both ways.
- Cohen-Almagor: International force composed of?
- Olmert: Of NATO forces.
- Cohen-Almagor: NATO forces. Not American forces. NATO forces.
- Olmert: NATO forces. America is part of NATO, by the way. But we did not go into these details, this resolution, which countries will be represented in the international force.
- Cohen-Almagor: And what if there are going to be rockets, either from Gaza or the West Bank? How do you deal with that?
- Olmert: Like we deal with it now. What is the big deal?

Cohen-Almagor: Who is responsible for that? Is it Israel? Is it the Palestinians? Joint forces?

Olmert: Of course, if there will be a Palestinian state and there will be shooting of rockets from the Palestinian state, it will be the responsibility of the government of the Palestinians. But we will have to deal with it. If you want to draw the lines of border in the east according to the range of rockets, you have to draw the border between Israel and the Palestinians near Basra. So, I mean, this is all ridiculous. And Israel can handle it.

Cohen-Almagor: So, security could have been resolved. What about Hamas?

Olmert: Hamas is a problem anyway.

Cohen-Almagor: Yes. How do you deal with Hamas? Is it a Palestinian problem? An Israeli problem? A joint problem?

Olmert: It is a Palestinian problem and an Israeli problem and the international community problem. Everyone who wants to have an end to terror, has to deal with it, has to relate to it. But we could relate to it. I think that we missed the opportunity to destroy Hamas in Gaza in Operation Cast Lead, because at that time Barak and Gabi Ashkenazi and others were not prepared to carry on Cast Lead to the end.

Cohen-Almagor: 2008, 2009.

Olmert: 2008, yes, 2009. And this is a major, major, major failure. But I was, at that time, stuck because this was three weeks before the elections. I had already resigned and I was not running for new elections. And to carry on a war against the defense minister, against the chief of staff, against the foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, because all had their own political calculations, at a time like that, is something that I thought was already outside the limits of national consensus that has to be protected. That you do not send soldiers to die, when the minister of defense and the chief of staff and the foreign minister are against it and you are retiring.

Conclusions

Olmert thought that he alone could strike a peace deal by engaging one-on-one with Abu Mazen. Olmert did not think that he needed advice from experts or colleagues, or that experts in conflict resolution and negotiations may provide different qualities than his that may improve the quality of decision-making processes and underscore contributing factors that politicians might ignore. Olmert still thinks he had the needed skills, knowledge and expertise to complete the process. This view is contested, more so in the face of brute facts of reality.

Olmert was very blunt of his assessment of his colleague and party leader, Tzippy Livni. There is no much appreciation and respect between these two leaders. I also interviewed Livni and know that their negative feelings are mutual.

Olmert mentioned Livni and Ehud Barak as two people who undermined his position and were destructive forces in the peace process, dissuading Abu Mazen from signing peace pact with Israel because they did not believe Olmert could deliver his side of the deal. The former Mayor of Jerusalem was willing to split the city, in accordance with the Clinton Parameters:¹² the Jewish Jerusalem will be Israeli, the Arab Jerusalem will be Palestinian and the Holy Basin will be administered by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Palestinians, the United States and Israel. It will not be sovereign under Israeli or Palestinian; instead, it will be under God's sovereignty.

From the previous story of Ehud Barak's nightly discussions, we understand Olmert's sensitivity to maps. He and Abu Mazen had 36 meetings; yet, Olmert still did not trust him enough to deposit in his hands the map that he drew, thinking that Abu Mazen will only use it as a springboard for making further concessions. The map, of course, was only an excuse. A formula could have been found to enable Abu Mazen consultation with his advisors about the proposed map. He was not ready to sign. He trusted the Israeli prime minister to the same extent that Olmert had trusted him.

Olmert's concession on the Palestinian refugee question is not altogether clear. Olmert started by saying that "we will accept a thousand refugees". Then he said "one thousand a year for five years". Then he conceded that this was only the starting point and that he would have be willing 15,000 Palestinians. Then he said that 20,000 refugees would have been acceptable. If he had a red line, then this red line is unclear even today. While Olmert's offer was notable, it was still quite far from what the Palestinians wanted.

Olmert denies that Ariel was a bone of contention. He said that he wanted to give the Palestinian 94.2% of the West Bank and a highway between the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinians demanded 100% of the West Bank. When I queried why he insisted on leaving 5.8% of this territory in Israel's hand when in fact the major settlements constitute about 4% of the territory, Olmert answered that he wanted to leave a certain margin for negotiations. He did not know how many Palestinians reside in the 5.8% that will be Israeli. He was willing to absorb them.

Unlike Netanyahu, Olmert does not regard the Jordan Valley as a strategic necessity. Security of the area can be deposited in the hands of NATO. Olmert proved that he has no qualms to use military force if and when these are needed. He regrets

the missed opportunity in late 2008, when he opened Operation Cast Lead and could not complete it as he wanted due to internal opposition of political and military leaders who opted for restraint.¹³

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NOTES

¹ Raphael Cohen-Almagor, "The Oslo Peace Process: Interview with Joel Singer"; Singer, Joel, "An Oral Agreement Isn't Worth the Paper It's Written On."

² Wm. Robert Johnston, Chronology of Terrorist Attacks in Israel Part IV: 1993-2000.

³ June 6, 2000.

⁴ Meridor at that time was a member of the Knesset, and the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairperson. In that capacity, he was somebody who had oversight of the government, not part of the government.

⁵ Author's interview with Dan Meridor, Jerusalem (January 20, 2016).

⁶ The Centre Party was a short-lived political party, formed in 1999 by former Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai its aim was to create a middle-of-the-road alternative to Likud and to Labour.

⁷ Ehud Olmert, *In First Person*.

⁸ Aliza, Olmert's wife, was preparing the hospitality.

⁹ Interview with Tzipi Livni, Jerusalem, June 22, 2016.

¹⁰ Interview with Udi Dekel, Tel Aviv, June 17, 2014.

¹¹ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: a memoir of my years in Washington*.

¹² On December 23, 2000, President Clinton published his parameters for peace. See <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-203898/>

¹³ On December 27, 2008, in response to increasing rocket barrages from Gaza Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against Hamas.