

**The Pursuit of Peace with the Palestinians:  
Interviews with Ehud Barak  
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These interviews are part of a major research project that is based on interviews and discussions with influential decision-makers, facilitators, mediators and negotiators who were involved in the Israel-PLO peace negotiations over the past three decades, as well as on archival research in Oslo, London, Washington and Jerusalem. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with more than 80 Israeli, Palestinian, American, Swedish, Norwegian, Egyptian, Jordanian, British and United Nations 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 signed consent forms. The interviews are audiotaped, transcribed and the text was sent to interviewees for authorization. The interviews with former Israeli PM (1999-2001) Ehud Barak were held in three separate virtual meetings: on 25 May, 21 June, and 11 July 2022.

First interview: 25 May 2022

Cohen-Almagor: Prime Minister Barak, let me start with your opinion about Oslo. What do you think are the achievements of Oslo? What do you think about, maybe, its non-achievements or failures? Do you think that Oslo was a failure at all, and what do we learn from it?

Barak: This alone can be a subject for a seminar or an interview of several hours. I would say in very short terms, I think that Oslo was an important process and I think that it had major achievements. It broke many taboos in an inevitable way, leading towards normalization of our relationship with the Palestinians. I think that it changed the reality in ways in which there are pros and cons or pluses and minuses. I think that people usually miss the internal relationship, a kind of covert change between the Oslo agreement and the peace treaty with Jordan. They take it as a given. You know, we signed a peace treaty with Egypt, which is a strong and most important Arab country and a rival in war, so the second one should be Jordan, which has the longest border and a long history of fighting in several wars, as well as of cooperation. It is reasonable to assume that the peace with Egypt

prepared the ground and *caused*, so to speak, the peace with Jordan. But I think that without Oslo, without the agreements, however partial, not covering the whole aspect - but the Oslo agreements paved the road for the peace with Jordan. I was personally deeply involved in this relationship. I was very close personally to King Hussein, and I do not believe that it would have ever happened without the legitimacy and motivation created by the Oslo agreements. Of course, Oslo failed to continue along the different steps or stages, up to the ultimate objective of agreeing on a peace agreement, or framework for a peace agreement with the Palestinians which will be the equivalent of what we have achieved with Sadat before and with Hussein afterwards. But that is probably the subject of a much more detailed discussion later.

Cohen-Almagor: Why did it fail?

Barak: We will come to it later. But even with this kind of failure, you know, we can discuss whether “failure” is the right word, or whether there are only partial achievements and there are things that are not being achieved. It does not automatically make it a failure. It failed to culminate in a full peace agreement, end of conflict and finality of all mutual claims. It did not achieve *this*. It made for the future to be seen, and a lot of violence and suffering on both sides as a result of it. But I do not think that peace will not happen in the future. And when it will happen, it will become clear that Oslo was a kind of precondition for this whole process, which ultimately led to a solution. And I think that even in between, even in these days, there are people who tend to ignore, because in Israel the atmosphere is kind of ultranationalist and inspired by pictures, by events, by terror attacks, by the policies of the Israeli government in the past ten years or so, and by the Palestinian behavior, which is short of perfect, to say the least. But the cooperation with the Palestinian Authority (PA) on security is a great asset for Israel, even today. And I think that the alternative to the Palestinian Authority could have been much worse. And so, I think that Oslo has not yet achieved its original objective or nominal objective, but in my judgment, failure is not the right word.<sup>ii</sup> If I have to answer why it did not come to fruition, I think that at a certain point, the process reached a point following the decisions of the first stages of Oslo and Oslo B where the two sides ceased to progress. There was a kind of policy, which involved about three phases that had to be implemented. And, basically, it was stopped, originally, during the second Camp David in 2000. The Palestinians did not reach interim objectives. The final result was that, at the time, we could find no partner in Arafat. And I thought - and this was probably my mistake in judging the Israeli center-left camp or the Israeli collective psyche - I thought that if we cannot achieve a result there, I’ll return to the logical thought of our camp and will tell them, “Gentlemen, we tried our best. We made the most generous proposal we could put on the table.” In contrast to the urban legends, that we

tried to dictate to Arafat a solution, to tell him “Take it or leave it” - that is untrue. We basically made a far-reaching proposal that covered 90%+ of what you can think of. And neither Clinton nor I ever told him “Take it or leave it.” I personally told Arafat in front of Clinton: “You can have reservations about any given paragraph in our proposal or about all of them. We just ask you to take this far-reaching proposal as a basis for negotiations.” And, basically, the place where Camp David failed, or where it became clear that we were not going to achieve it, was the moment when his response to this proposal - “we want you to take it as a basis for negotiations, you can put down in writing all your reservations on any subject that is mentioned, but the basis of negotiations is this and we are going to negotiate” - was when he rejected it and turned deliberately to terror. And that is what brought me to tell the truth, that we have no partner in him for the present time. And *I thought* that the next step would be to tell the truth to our people. That we have to start to implement - unilaterally - the necessary disengagement from the Palestinians. I proposed it before the elections. I proposed a plan. I have it, in writing, from *that* time, not something that was written in retrospect. A proposal saying, let us disengage from the Palestinians. We are here, they are there. Good fences make good neighbors. Start the process. Let’s start the process of disengagement on our terms, basically define a line within the Holy Land, within which we have our majority, or have the majority of 80% or 85% of the settlers, and all our strategic interests. And beyond which we have a place for a viable, demilitarized Palestinian state. And let’s do it unilaterally, in order to make clear, remain both alert and determined to fight terror whenever it appears, but, at the same time, never to lose sight of the need to find any and every opportunity to calm down, to reduce, to relax the tension. To move, even in steps. To my surprise, I should admit, the part of our public that did *not* accept it was my camp, not the other ones. Sharon won the elections with, probably, very close to the number of voters who supported Bibi. Probably an extra 150,000, something like that. He never came close to the number of voters I could mobilize just two years earlier, to support this project. What really happened is not that people joined him, it was that I lost the support of our *own* camp. I can somehow understand the response of the [Israeli] Arabs, because the elections took place after the events in October 2000, which left them quite shaken, shown in my personal election, but not the Knesset elections. But the disappearance of [Israeli] Arab support cannot explain the dramatic decline of support in our own camp. Our own camp lost support, in my judgment, [due to the failure] to understand that the alternative was a rightwing government that would be much worse. So, basically, it was my mistake. It was a mistake. I thought that I would still have the support of our camp.

You know, I really took to Camp David people from both sides of the political aisle in Israel. Dan Meridor, Elyakim Rubinstein, and on the other hand, Shlomo Ben-Ami and Amnon Lipkin, Danny Yatom and others who were much more on the left. And that was my judgement

mistake. I could not even think that I would see something that I interpreted as a regression to infancy. It was a kind of immature response of the political public. Basically, if you ask where the peace process stopped, it was stopped technically at Camp David. Ehud Olmert tried to resume the process but couldn't do it because he had no authority. And probably, Abu Mazen was much clearer in his thinking than in his political readiness to dare and move forward. Arafat was much stronger, more authoritative, but he was deterred by the need to transform. I cannot explain it. People ask me many times, "Why did he take this position?" I cannot explain. A political leader is a gestalt. You cannot really separate his perception of reality as a leader, his character, his personal problems. His public image, the way he is perceived by the public - or the way he *thinks* that he is perceived by the public, and what constraints it puts on him. You cannot separate it. He is a gestalt. Within the gestalt, the bottom line was that Arafat faced his moment of truth and failed. Once again, I do not know whether failed is the right word, but he failed to take the decision to move forward.

Cohen-Almagor: With your permission, I still want to return to the days before your premiership. You spoke a bit about Oslo. I want to ask you specific questions about Oslo. What do you think is the role of small states, like Norway, in such a context? Are they able to do anything beyond facilitation? And can they do good facilitation between the two countries, between Israel and the Palestinian Authority? Can Norway be, again, a facilitator between Israel and Palestine?

Barak: I do not know about the future. In the past, they had a role. They created a channel, through which it was fully deniable from the point of view of (PM) Yitzhak Rabin. It allowed [Deputy Foreign Minister] Yossi Beilin and the two guys, Ron Pundak and Yair Hirschfeld, they started alone, without even Beilin. Then Beilin joined. Then, at a certain point, Beilin updated [Foreign Minister] Shimon Peres. And then, Rabin. So, and by this time, they were quite advanced. And Rabin was updated. He added Joel Singer into the picture, who has a more legal mind, not a peacenik mind. So, I think that Terje Larsen was, mainly, the guy, and probably several other guys in Norway. I think it was a positive thing. At the very beginning of the process, Rabin was not exposed to it. But when Beilin and Peres came to him, he already knew about it through our intelligence. We followed it for a long time, through intelligence. I was the chief of staff at the time, and both I and my deputy, and the head of intelligence, we all followed it through intelligence material to the last detail. I even remember the nickname the Palestinians gave to Hirschfeld and Pundak. They called Pundak "The Mouse," and Hirschfeld "The Bear," because of their appearance, their physical appearance. And we knew everything. But Rabin had a kind of [dismissive] hand movement that meant "This is unimportant." He never thought that it

would become the main channel to move forward. We used to talk about it from time to time. Each Friday afternoon I used to spend a half an hour with him, talking about everything over a small coffee or a beer in a corner of his office. Not around the office desk of a normal workday. And I asked him about it more than once, and his attitude was that he had other issues on his plate. He tried to follow through the remnants of the Jordanian-Palestinian joint delegation, which started after the first Gulf War. He even tried to create direct contact with the [West Bank and Gaza] locals, through other players that were here in Israel. At some point, it became clear that the Palestinians were more interested in letting it be channeled through Oslo. We called it "in the woods of Norway." And Rabin did not like it very much. He didn't like the idea, he didn't like the informality, he didn't like the absence of experts on any issue. He didn't like, probably, even the way that it kind of started behind his back and so on. And he didn't trust the people who came together with Peres. There was a lot of tension under the surface between the two. So, he thought of an alternative. At a certain point, it became clear that the negotiation with the Palestinians, through the remnants of the Jordan-Palestinian team would not go. And there was some initiative that was led formally by Elyakim Rubinstein to run certain types of contacts. I do not remember the exact details. And at a certain point, he even sent [Health Minister] Efraim Sneh to London. I do not know whether you ever asked him about this story, but it became clear, more and more clear, that the Palestinians preferred talking with the PLO in Tunisia, through the Norwegians. At a certain point Rabin described it to me in terms kind of borrowed from military strategy. He said, "it is like what we face sometimes on the battlefield. We try to break through the enemy line, and we try several places. And the place where we can achieve a breakthrough, we exploit the success and go through it." And I found this comparison misleading. I told him, "Yitzhak, this is not the same. In the case of the battlefield, the enemy tries to block you on all these three or four places where you try to break through. And if you succeed in one of them, it is *against* their wish. So, you follow what you have found to be the weakest point in their defense. But here, it is probably the other way around. They *want* it to be the Oslo channel because over there they find more positive responses to their demands or their perception. More readiness to compromise, to negotiate, to be more flexible and so on. And it seems to them to be more promising, because it includes bringing them back on the *ground* to the West Bank, not just playing it from behind the scenes, from Tunisia. While the other attitude, the one that was devised by the Palestinian-Jordanian joint delegation, was basically a way to put them on the sidelines. And the approach to do it through the local - what we called the local leadership in the towns and cities of Judea and Samaria - that was the way to push them even further, to make them almost irrelevant. So, they *want* it to succeed, so they give us more opportunities, and make it more rosy in this channel for us." And, basically, you know, I saw Rabin changing. I think that an Israeli

historian, named Adam Raz, recently did some detailed diving into the documents of the time, and he realized the exact moment when Rabin decided on Oslo, in a way that Raz called unexplainable. But for me, it was explainable. Once the Oslo track got the political weight of Peres with them, it became not just a statesmanship issue, how to run the under-the-table diplomacy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. It became a political issue. And I saw Rabin more than once at certain points during the dialogue between them. Peres would say, “Yitzhak, I cannot go further. I cannot live with it.” Or whatever. And Rabin understood that if he continued to press, it would end as a political clash in the central committee of the Labor party, where, you know, Rabin never won over Peres within the party. So, there was a kind of leverage for Peres, through his political majority within the party apparatus, to basically hint to Rabin that their undersurface tension could erupt to the surface, with a price that is usually higher for the man at the top than the one who is challenging him. So, I think that something of this nature happened as well. I do not think that nobody can play this role right now. I think the situation is totally different now. I think that the present government basically cannot afford it. Its fragile structure would not stand direct negotiations with the Palestinians, a breakthrough. And I am not talking about technicalities, of taking some taxes that we collect for the Palestinians and giving them or providing them with oil or with whatever, merchandise or goods that they need to operate the Palestinian Authority. So, I do not think that it is now relevant. But, as a matter of fact, Oslo was successful, what they called the end result. It was successful.

Cohen-Almagor: Do you think that the absence of the United States was an advantage?

Barak: Yes. Probably, at that stage, it was an advantage. In fact, any of our successful negotiations with an Arab neighbor started far from the public eye, and without the Americans. This was the case with the Egyptians. The original contact with Tuhami and Sadat started not when Begin was in power, but when Rabin was in power. Under Rabin’s orders, the head of Mossad, Haka, Yitzhak Hofi, was sent to Morocco and met with Tuhami. He brought the first messages, that there is some person, a little bit bizarre in character, but, for sure, we could easily verify that he was extremely close to Sadat and, for sure, represented his genuine will to negotiate. So, Rabin knew it. And having known Rabin for many years, I am confident that he immediately updated Begin, when they met to pass the torch after the elections. I am sure Rabin told him that “we just had negotiations with this guy, Tuhami. The head of Mossad, Haka, will update you [Begin] on all the details, but there is probably an opportunity there to move beyond the interim agreement” - that Rabin himself signed, a year or two years before, which created the first disengagement in Sinai. You could probably ask Dan Meridor if he knows more about it. He was, at the time, very close to Begin.

I think that one of the reasons that Begin decided to call Moshe Dayan and Ezer Weizmann to take these positions in the government, especially Moshe Dayan, was the fact that he understood from Rabin that there was an opportunity here to do something that might end up being dramatic. Begin understood that he would need a security person, because such dramatic moves might involve certain kinds of compromises that have a security weight. It was better to have someone that he appreciated and respected for a long time, Moshe Dayan, on his side within his government. And the point is that there was *no way* to achieve what Sadat did if it had to be done through negotiations with the Americans, which inevitably go public. And you can have problems of trust, which is not symmetric between us and the Americans.

Dayan went to see the same Tuhami, and the same Tuhami, after one or two meetings with Dayan, came to Sadat with a clear observation. And, as you know, Dayan denied until his last day that he ever told him something more concrete, which could be interpreted as compromising. But, somehow, the guy was clever enough to understand that, in exchange for a full peace with Egypt, full peace and normalization of relations, Israel would give up the [entire] Sinai. That was his impression, and that catapulted the peace with Egypt. So, of course, the Americans were there. You can visit Camp David and see on the walls the drafts of the agreement, handwritten by President Carter himself. And he did not negotiate with Begin or Sadat. He negotiated with [legal advisors] Osama El-Baz and Aharon Barak on the details. And there were certain roles of Dayan and Weizmann, and a certain role that Begin played. But it was basically the vision of Sadat, the readiness of Begin to accept the deal, with whatever reservations, and the toil and sweat of President Carter, Osama El-Baz and Aharon Barak. But it was all started and catapulted beyond the point of no return before the Americans were in the picture. And the same applied to the later agreement with the Jordanians.

We had a relationship for decades with Hussein, very intimate. I remember, before the opening of the war, the first Gulf War [1991], we were worried. There was a high level of readiness on the Jordanian side. They mobilized, they deployed their army along the Jordan River. And Iraqi reconnaissance aircraft starting to patrol and probably taking pictures along the sector, from the Dead Sea to Eilat, which is very sensitive for us because you can see Dimona and other sensitive installations. So, we were extremely worried. And we planned that, at the moment the war opened and they would start to launch missiles toward Israel, we planned our own operation at the western desert of Iraq, to stop, or at least diffract the missile launching toward Israel. And, in order to do this, we had to go through the air space of Jordan. So, we needed to coordinate with them, and [PM Yitzhak] Shamir took the deputy head of Mossad, as well as Elyakim Rubinstein and myself, I was deputy chief of staff, and we went to London. And outside London, at a mansion that belonged to His

Majesty King Hussein, we met with our counterparts, including Sharif bin Zaid, his relative who was the commander of the army. And so, basically, we had a very close relationship. It was all ripe. When we invited the Americans, it was more ritual. We did not need them in order to reach a peace agreement. And I can jump forward, fast forward, to these days. With the Emiratis, it is not a *peace* with them, or with the Bahrainis. We never fought them. There was never a war between us and them. It was taking out of the closet relationships which were intense and deep, very, very much so, for many years, for decades. Very intimate and very close relationships. Very good acquaintances. Not with Saudi Arabia, they are not part of it, but with the other players. The Abraham Accords, we had a long relationship. We needed the Americans to put it together for presentation to the world's publics. It could not have been run if it would not have started somewhere far from the public eye. And that remains the rule until now. You know, that is what I tried to do with Syria. I tried to convince the Americans, before we went to Shepherdstown. Find a place where we could sit together without anyone being able to follow what was going on. And it was impossible with America.

Second interview: 21 June 2022

Cohen-Almagor: There is a lot of criticism about Camp David, and there is a lot of criticism of you. I would be intrigued to know *your* opinion about this, because your opinion is the most important opinion *for me*. I have discussed Camp David, I think, until now with ten people who were there, from the three delegations. But for me, you are the most important person in the entire discussion. So, let me start with general questions and then I'll go to specific ones. In your opinion, was the time of Camp David 2000 ripe for negotiations, for this kind of a summit?

Barak: I was confident from day one when I entered into office that the process had reached a point where we had to push toward a clear, crystal-clear answer. Can we or can we not have an agreement with the Palestinians under Arafat? The reason was the following. When I came to power, it was already six years after the signing of Oslo, and about two or three years after the time agreed upon by the two sides to start the permanent state discussion. We had in power Clinton, who invested a lot of energy all around his presidency and learned, very profoundly, the details of the different positions, what the issues were. And he was going to end his term in a year-and-a-half or whatever, when I came to power. And it was not clear who would replace him, and how long it would take him to learn and to find out what was going on, and to shape policy. And that created uncertainty. On the other hand, we knew, both from common sense *and from intelligence*,



that we were heading toward an inevitable clash. It was only a matter of time, we had some hard data [about that] in late August [1999] or early, no, probably November. November, some nine months before Camp David started. We did not have an idea that we would end up with a summit. But as part of my role or responsibility as a defense minister, not just prime minister, I gathered the general headquarters, the leading group, the equivalent of the joint chiefs in the United States – but they are also the commanders, they are not just advisors to the prime minister - and the leadership of the IDF. I told them, based on the information we had, of the way I perceived the situation, to start prepare for a full clash, a violent, full violent clash with the Palestinians. Both the dynamics of the situation led to it more and more, as well as the data that we had from intelligence. So, the choice was, are we going to muddle through, to hope for something to happen, or are we going to test whether it is ripe or not or what was on the table? Basically, are you ready for the tough decisions that are needed in order to bridge the gap and have an agreement? Until then, I was quite skeptical about certain aspects of the original Oslo. But when it came to Oslo B [September 1995], I was already a member of the government, at the invitation of Rabin and Peres. And I remember the first vote I had to cast in the government. I abstained from a decision of this issue, together with one more minister, because I saw a dynamic that was bad. The bad element, or the weak element in the dynamic was the following: our government got a description of a process. There were three phases. The first phase [of IDF redeployment in Judea and Samaria] was already behind us. The second phase was to reach some situation where we had to give them certain agreed-upon things. The third and final phase was well-defined in the agreements from day one in the Oslo accords. And if you read between the lines, you will find that it has roots even in the first Camp David accords between Sadat and Begin. Namely, the size of the second phase was up to the Israeli judgment, but the third one was according to the agreement. It should complete the agreement. It was written quite clearly that we had to give the Palestinians the entire area, except for settlements and military installations, something like that, which was commonly interpreted as including some probably three hundred yards around every place, in order to avoid RPG or direct light weapons being used against the installations. And I saw a weak, very weak logic for it. There is a certain asymmetry in the relationship between us and the Palestinians in such negotiations. We have the tangible assets, namely, let us say, the territory, first of all. And we can, in exchange for giving them the territory, the most they can give us are promises about the nature of the future relationship. They have nothing. So, in a way, the risk is that if we reach the point where we are giving them, practically, most of the area or almost all of the area, then, we have to negotiate the tough issues, security –

Cohen-Almagor: Jerusalem, refugees.

- Barak: Jerusalem, right of return, finality of the conflict, finality of all mutual claims - it sounds illogical to me. You do not make agreements this way. It is better to come to a point, to understand whether we have a partner to deal with security, borders, the arrangements around the borders. Borders, security, Jerusalem, refugees, right of return, end of conflict. To start all this after you gave up the whole area does not make sense. That is not the way that negotiations among equals are done. So, I thought that before we make this irreversible - in a way - step of giving the whole or almost the whole area dictated by any honest interpretation of the third phase, it is better to know: Do we or do we not have a partner for tough decisions about the other issues?
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. So, if it was so important and nine months before, you suspected, you thought by your intelligence, by the information, that we are getting into a clash with the Palestinians – why did you not start as soon as you were elected to negotiate with them? Why did you go to Syria, why did you try Syria first?
- Barak: Oh, that is an older story. We had thought about this strategically for several years by then, and I did not see a reason to change it. I was part of the discussion, the intimate discussion around Rabin, how to go with it. When he came to power in 1992, I was already chief of staff. And even then, we had the following observation. We have two agreements to strike, one with Syria and one with the Palestinians, and Lebanon in the background. Lebanon, basically, was perceived by us to be a clash with the Syrians through proxies. The reason is that [President Hafez] Assad put a lot of weight on keeping his word to the slightest detail. His commitment was not to make any conflict or any clashes, any friction along the Golan Heights. Basically, the Golan Heights border was the quietest we had. It was quieter, not just in general, but quieter than the Jordanian or the Egyptian borders. But that created a problem for Assad. If he kept it quiet, we had no incentive, no reason to ever contemplate correcting what he saw as something that was still open: what is the future of the Golan Heights? So, he found a way to make Israel bleed and pay a certain price for being unready to move towards him on the Golan Heights, through the conflict in Lebanon. And somehow, our perception was the following: There is asymmetry. First of all, Syria was a much more concrete military threat. Syria could cause Israel to become involved in a devastating, a mutually devastating full-scale war. The Palestinians, with all due respect, could not do this. They could disturb the normalcy of life, but they could not wage a full-scale war on Israel. Secondly, the Lebanon issue, which was also bleeding for years, was an issue that we perceived as being called or stemming from Damascus, and could be solved. If we can solve and start a peace process successfully with the Syrians, Lebanon will be solved as an immediate by-product of this process. And the Palestinians will be left, and will be somehow, not in a very kind of direct way, but somewhat weaker in their position to negotiate with us, because Syria

was, you know, Syria is basically a third-grade country. It became so important in the Arab world because it led the line of extremism and animosity and active conflict with Israel. There are no other reasons for them to be that important. They used, somehow, their readiness to be the leader against Israel as a kind of provider of their status. So, some of the Palestinians are weaker without them, but the opposite is not true. If we solve the Palestinian issue, it is not a reason for Syria, per se, or on its own, to come to the negotiation table. And second, the last reason, which is unknown, is that it was not just Rabin's and my thought. I participated in the intimate consultation with Rabin about it. But also Netanyahu. Netanyahu, at a certain point during the three years [of first premiership], 1996 to 1999, initiated a peace process with Syria, or responded to some mediation efforts. He ended up sending once and again Ronald Lauder with some Arab *macher* [Yiddish, influential person, fixer] to Assad, to exchange points with him. And you know, I always used to say that if I would have to, I would read the ten points he sent Assad, Assad Sr., which basically meant that, in exchange for peace, he was ready to go down from the whole Golan Heights, probably leaving some small early warning station with the Americans on Mount Hermon. And holding a line, which would not be exactly the line, but something no more than two miles to the east of the 1967 border. And along most of the line, much of the lake. So, basically, Bibi discussed it with him, and he even initiated it, because he said that he would face a lot of resistance from his own political camp. He even started negotiations about establishing a unity government with me. We had some ten days of negotiations, Bibi and Yaakov Neeman, the later minister of justice, a lawyer at the headquarters of Mossad. And I came with Bougie [Isaac] Herzog, now the president. And we negotiated, with a draft for everything. At some point, it was leaked and exploded. So, I saw that it still remains strategically true. Let us make Assad first. If we succeed, we can solve, by default, Lebanon as well, and then come to Arafat. In fact, I did not hide this line of thought from Clinton, and even from Arafat. I talked to him this way, and I explained that we had with the Palestinians a kind of intermediate agreement. We had a series of agreements since 1993. With the Syrians, we were stuck and I wanted before Assad died - it was already known that he had serious blood cancer - and we had a short time with him. And no one knew who would replace him, and how strong he would be. I tried to explain it to Arafat. So, that was the logic.

Cohen-Almagor: So why did it not work out with Assad? Because Assad was clear about what he wanted. He said it time and time again. He said it to Rabin, he said it to Bibi Netanyahu. "I want to wade in the Sea of Galilee, to put my feet in the lake." That is what he said. And that is a precondition for everything.

Barak: When you will write your articles or book about Assad, we will invest time on it. I can tell you that there were quite delicate contacts during

Bibi's time. And the fact that they reached this point meant that he was not that clear, that the very fact that Bibi sent him these points and, you know, the truth is that Assad was a pilot. He asked Bibi to send him a map of what he had in mind. And Bibi thought he could draw it on a very small piece of paper, so the depth and breadth of the line would cover the whole conflict. And then Assad asked for a more detailed map. And Bibi felt that he could not send him a map without discussing it with his minister of foreign affairs, [Ariel] Sharon, and his minister of defense, [Yitzhak] Mordechai. When he showed them, they leaked it and it exploded. But that is different. We knew that it would be tough. We knew that it was serious. We were ready to go very far. I even had a solution for his feet in the lake, but let's delay that for another opportunity. There is an urban legend that we did not start any discussions. This is not true. Another urban legend is that Rabin hid from his top generals the story of Oslo. *This is not true!* He could not hide it from us, because we read about it continuously, as I mentioned to you previously.

Cohen-Almagor: This is what Ami Ayalon says in his book. He says, he did not know. You knew. He says he did not know. He was the head of Shabak.

Barak: He would not know. He was not a part of the senior leadership of Israel during Rabin's time and during Oslo. He could not know. I was the one who kind of encouraged the quite confused Shimon Peres to take Ayalon as the head of the secret service 24 hours after Rabin was assassinated. So, he could not know. And I can show it to you, if it is that important. We talked intimately, every Friday I sat with Rabin. I told you. And they were coming immediately after me, Beilin and, later on, Beilin and Peres. It was clear. I knew it. Many years ago, as head of intelligence, I went to meetings about the Arab world. The idea that Barak did not know anything about the Arab world is ridiculous. There was no other prime minister who could read Arabic, except for Sharett probably, and speak Arabic. And no one can tell you by heart the Surah al-Fatihah. No, no, let me just complete one point. I was very deep into it. I fully understood. And during those thirteen months, until we gathered there [in Camp David], we had from my government, not from the past, from *my* government thousands of pages. Probably 80 kilograms of documents, just the reporting from meetings that my people made with the Palestinians, with the Americans, on four continents, not including Antarctica, and probably not South America. Maybe not in Australia. But in four continents, there were meetings, detailed meetings, *but* under the policy that we first of all start to, not to delay, to separate a little bit further the date for the implementation, in order to give us time. And we asked the Palestinians openly: "We think that we need some time with the Syrians. We will come back to you with full seriousness. We promised you, we will commit. We will live up to anything that we told you."

- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. So, you started with Syria. It did not work as you wanted. And then you turned to the Palestinians, to talk seriously, because you suspected that there was going to be a violent clash and you wanted to avoid it. Clinton had less than six months in the White House. You knew that in American politics the last six months –
- Barak: No, no. We took power in March, so we had practically nine months.
- Cohen-Almagor: Ah, you started to speak with Clinton nine months –
- Barak: No! With Clinton I started from the first day that I took power. I fully described to him, during a long weekend, we discussed the whole strategy about Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians. Every detail. And I put to him very plainly all our considerations. We basically had nothing to hide. It was logical, clean, and I was fully committed to try and to do it.
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. When did you raise the issue of going somewhere in the world, Camp David, whatever, for a summit? When did you raise this with him?
- Barak: I do not remember the exact date, but probably in late April or early May or mid-May [2000].
- Cohen-Almagor: So, it is six months before he leaves.
- Barak: Yes, yes, okay.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, was he pleased? Because, usually presidents are lame ducks during the last six months of their term in office. Was he receptive to this?
- Barak: They are not lame ducks, when they are really convinced that something should be done. They are not lame ducks, where, on the table, there is something they worked for six years or more. Or for eight years, almost eight years. They worked from, let us say, at least seven years. Because Oslo was far from their eyes at the beginning. But let us say at least seven years. He was working on it, he invested a lot. He had a lot of influence on the others on both sides. It was clear to him that probably it could succeed. He was not clear about it, he did not, you know, he was not happy to see another issue that could succeed, or could probably fail. But this was clearly not something that he said, “Oh, no, no, probably I cannot do it now. If you had come three years ago, or a year ago, it would have been something that could be done. Now it is not.”
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. So, it was easy to convince him to have the summit, from what you tell me. It was not a problem.

- Barak: It was quite easy. Probably some of his aides, there were two camps there. The Rob Malley camp probably said, "Oh, no, do not do it. We need a series of summits. Do not start it now, if it really means to try to end it." And the other camp was Dennis Ross or some others, who thought it was a good idea and it anyhow should be done. Because the alternative was to move into the abyss without even knowing whether we could avoid it or not.
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. Was it also easy to convince Arafat to go to Camp David?
- Barak: No.
- Cohen-Almagor: Tell me about that. Why was that?
- Barak: First of all, I do not know. You have to ask him. But I can guess that he was much more comfortable in the trajectory as already was agreed upon. Namely, why go to a summit, where he knew for sure that he would be asked: "What are you ready to give in exchange for these territorial compromises of Israel? Are you ready for an agreement that will be acceptable to the Israelis in Jerusalem? On refugees, on the right of return, on end of the conflict?" Why go there? He already had a document that said that Israel should give him phase two and then phase three. He probably said, let's negotiate after phase three. They already signed it.
- Cohen-Almagor: Yes, okay. So, Clinton was able to convince him to come to Camp David. He did the work for Israel in that respect. Now, you want to go to Camp David, and now you have the task of forming your delegation. Tell me a bit about it, because I am curious about the delegation that you formed. Why do it in such a way?
- Barak: Why, what is the point raised in your attention? Not enough women, not enough –
- Cohen-Almagor: I understand politics, and I was involved in politics. I understand your thinking. I just want to hear this from you. I understand that you had some sort of obligations that you needed to fulfill. So, Shlomo Ben-Ami should be there. That is for certain, and so on. I know that Gilead Sher should be there, because he was very close to you and he was your, so to speak, chief negotiator. I understand that Danny Yatom was very close to you. I am more curious about other people.
- Barak: Clear, clear, clear, clear. Let me tell you, so you understand it. We had a limited number of people. There was even one that, it is almost anecdotal, but not totally anecdotal. When the Palestinians insisted that Yossi Ginosar also should come - he was the closest Israeli to Arafat, and Rabin used him more than once, as a special kind of channel. So, the Americans took him on their account. It was limited, probably twelve or I cannot tell you exactly. So, we needed to add, of

course, those who were in my inner core of advisors, Gili and Yatom. And there was a need for the minister of foreign affairs and I was glad, because Shlomo was very, very, very good. A very important person. He became a minister as a result of the fact that David Levy, following his ideology, decided to leave when we went to Camp David. And then, I had to have a military expert, an authority from the armed forces, in order to be able to negotiate the detailed aspects of security, and certain aspects of borders. We needed him, because I could not do it personally.

Cohen-Almagor: Shlomo Yanai

Barak: I remember very well that, at the first Camp David [1978], the people who did the job - without, of course, Begin, who was closed in his cabin all the time - it was the two ministers that Begin deliberately brought there, because he *knew* that he would be closed in his cabin, so he needed someone to make sure that it moved. These were Moshe Dayan and Ezer Weizmann. *And*, when you look at the drafts on the walls of Camp David, they still keep them, they are in the handwriting of President Carter. He basically negotiated not with anyone, only with Osama El-Baz, almost only with Osama El-Baz and Aharon Barak. So, it was clear to me that I needed Ely [Rubinstein]. He was kind of legal advisor to the government. And then, I thought that I had to bring more people, more ministers, which would reflect the diversity of our government. I needed at least a kind of understanding that I need people from the width of my coalition to be there. And I could not find better people than Amnon Lipkin, who belonged to the left side, and Dan Meridor, who belonged to the right - moderate, liberal right, but rightwing. And I thought that because we prepared something, which we committed ourselves in advance to bring to the judgment of the Knesset later on, the public, through the Knesset. Even if we achieve something, it is better to discuss it, not ignore or dismiss the fact that the government is not just me and some of my friends, like Beilin or whatever. We have a wider government, and if we plan something that has to pass the judgment of the public or judgment of the Knesset later on, it is better that Meridor and Rubinstein - it was not a secret that he was a right-winger. I said, they are not going to *decide* anything, and it is good to hear another voice. The result of it was that I could not take Beilin or Yossi Sarid or many other people who were heavily invested. I expressed my personal view more than once that the Nobel peace prize for these agreements should be given to Beilin and Abu Mazen, if you follow what really happened. But it was given to the political leaders, who also deserve credit for their courage to move.

Cohen-Almagor: Why not Shimon Peres?

Barak: Shimon Peres? I did not think that he could be of any help.

Cohen-Almagor: He was the elder statesman of the government.

Barak: Elder, yes. Statesman, yes. But I was personally exposed to what really happened between Peres and Rabin all along those years. You know, they are all now in heaven. I was very friendly, very close to King Hussein. So, I was even intimately aware of the facts of what happened with King Hussein. So, from my experience, it was a bad idea to take Peres to such a summit, if you really want to make clear that you know what you are doing. Namely, that you will have an opportunity to put to the test the need to take a tough decision. I do not know whether I told you that there was an event in Oslo, for the sixth anniversary of Oslo. I was already there with Clinton and Arafat. And Leah Rabin was invited, as a salute to her husband's contribution. And after the formal event, we sat in the private residence of Ambassador [David] Hermelin, the American-Jewish ambassador to Norway. And it was probably on the fifth floor and we sat near the windows. So, we sat together Arafat, myself and Clinton, and I told Arafat: "Look, there is a problem here. It has to be solved, in order to avoid tragedy for both sides. It will not be solved in heaven. You understand it as well as I do. So, it should be solved by human beings here on earth. We happen to be these two human beings. If we solve it, we'll make a great change in the history of both peoples. If we do not, our successors will have to tackle the same issues, and without a way to explain why the hell their predecessors did not solve it. The problems will not change. It will be the same jabels [mountains] and the same wadis [valleys], the same geography, and the same demography. So, it is not going to change. The only thing that will change is the size of the cemeteries, the graveyards. And I can promise you, that yours will grow faster than ours. So, there is no reason, [I told him], the only way that I can think of it metaphorically, is to assume that both of us now have to jump, to parachute out of this building. We look through the window. Assume that it is high enough for free parachuting. And we have dare to jump in order to solve the problem. But the point is that you have the handle of my parachute, and I have the handle of your parachute. And we have to jump together. [I told him], your toughest decisions will not be vis-à-vis me or Clinton. Your toughest decisions are facing your own people. And the toughest decisions I have to make are not about you. They are about facing my own people. So, it is only if we are ready to jump together, when we know we are lost if our chutes will not open fast enough." So, you know, he always used to respond by some other kind of a detour of other stories or whatever. It does not matter. So, I was very clear. I thought that because of the condition in which I entered, you know, in politics, in diplomacy, you can allow yourself to maneuver. But the situation I found when I came to power was that you cannot trick very much. And you cannot avoid putting very clearly what you expect, or what you are looking for, what you are trying to achieve. Otherwise, the dynamics of what had been agreed before would lead us, Israel, into a much worse situation.



- Cohen-Almagor: Yes, okay. So, you wanted Meridor, as far as I understand, to be in charge of Jerusalem. You invited Meridor, just to have another point of view on the right of your government. And you wanted Meridor to be your go-to guy about Jerusalem.
- Barak: No. I thought, I have a long acquaintance with Meridor. He is a high-quality person who very profoundly understands security issues and political issues and strategic issues. I did not take him as an expert on Jerusalem. I knew and I expected that when the issue of Jerusalem would come, he would be against anything profound. But I am the one who will make the decisions about our positions. I did not see him as someone who would torpedo. He would not go behind our back to do something. He would not leak something in order to get attention. You mentioned earlier someone who tried any of these bypasses. This is an honest man, with different views than mine, who is worth listening to. You cannot move historic steps like these without being able to openly, genuinely listen to others who think differently than you.
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. But in Camp David there were negotiators on specific topics. There was security, there were refugees, there were Jerusalem, borders and so on. On Jerusalem, your go-to guy was Meridor.
- Barak: Yes.
- Cohen-Almagor: And you knew that he was going to be very tough on this, because he opposed the division of the city.
- Barak: Yes, yes, yes, I knew, but I knew also –
- Cohen-Almagor: Tell me the logic, because he is going to - and you were, at that time, as far as I can read you, you *supported* the division of Jerusalem. And yet, you appointed Dan Meridor.
- Barak: You know, I knew him well enough. He is honest enough. He is clear enough, he is transparent enough. There is no risk in it. The only thing is that they will hear an honest position of an Israeli who does not agree with me, and he will represent exactly what I will tell him. And if it comes to a point that it should be raised from the level of the negotiator to the level of myself and Arafat - and, in fact, at a certain point we had a special gathering. It took several hours. We discussed only Jerusalem with the whole group. So, I was not afraid that they would not agree with me. The same thing happened to me in other issues. The whole leadership of the army was against pulling out of Lebanon. I didn't think of firing [anyone], like Sharon did with [chief-of-staff Moshe] Yaalon. He fired him, in order to be able to do what he wanted. I had no doubt that they had the right to have opinions. They could be different than mine. I never questioned whether they would obey an order from me to do it against their opinion. So,

Meridor never deluded himself - you can interview him - that he would make the decision on this issue. The best one for the refugees was Elyakim Rubinstein, if I remember correctly, because he knew all the history of it, Camp David and the history from day one. And he is a legal guy. And the best guy for security was the general. And the best guys for other issues were other members of the delegation. But all of them reported to me. They never hid anything. This is the positive side of acting with a team that you trust. It is part of the fact that you know, and they know that I know, that we have different opinions on the issues.

Cohen-Almagor: I understand. So, you didn't think that it was an obstacle. Is it true that before you approached Meridor you approached Ehud Olmert to come with you?

Barak: Yes. No, not to come with me!

Cohen-Almagor: Not to come to Camp David?

Barak: No, never. He was not part of the government. He was mayor of Jerusalem. And I thought that it made sense - once again, you know that you are going into potential decisions that are against the gut feeling, the ideology, the soul of too many people in our society. So, I thought that the wider I could do the preparation, the better. So, there were several people with whom I discussed the issue of Jerusalem. I knew that they thought differently, or they *should* be much more flexible on Jerusalem when they were facing me, and the issue is a concrete issue, it is not propaganda. They are not talking to the public, to be remembered what they say. And I made a point of knowing what they really thought. And I thought it was important to understand what the mayor of Jerusalem thought, because he could be involved, in a case we had something. He needed to be informed. You probably know it from your research in history.

Cohen-Almagor: I interviewed Ehud Olmert.<sup>iii</sup>

Barak: I still have here somewhere an aerial photo of Jerusalem, where Olmert described to me where he is ready to make a compromise. It was short of what would be at the end of a real discussion, but it was very promising, in the sense that he even said, you know, it costs him a lot politically. He even said at certain events of Likud, before my election, that Barak would not divide Jerusalem. And he pushed immediately to deserve his place, he ended up near Sharon. But I never invited him to Camp David. Did he tell you I proposed that he come to Camp David?

Cohen-Almagor: Yes.

Barak: Okay, so that is another proof that his commitment to truth is kind of not fully solid.

Cohen-Almagor: I will send you the article where I published part of the interview. I had a very long interview with him for a few hours. So, Elyakim Rubinstein was now negotiating the refugee issue with the Palestinians. They demanded the right of return. As a counterproposal to that, Rubinstein said to the Palestinians, let us discuss the 700,000 Jews who were forced to flee from the Arab world. What did you think about this kind of gambit?

Barak: I think that it probably was at the opening session of discussions. And it is very usual, I know it from other discussions I have had, that if one side proposes something that sounds absurd, then the second side puts forward another thing that is absurd, with the understanding that both sides understand that, now that they have proposed this, they can write down that they proposed their starting positions. They probably proposed the absurd idea that “we need the right of return.” Under the Palestinian interpretation, this means welcome everyone, anyone, whoever, whenever he wants can come. This is absurd and they know that it is absurd. And they did not propose it in order to negotiate, but in order to put it on record. And they proposed something that is almost a quotation of some public opinions along the years.

Two days ago, I was in Baku, in Azerbaijan. I sat down with Amr Moussa and Prince Turki and Ahmad Abul Gheit, the head of the Arab League. I discussed with them the Palestinian issues and one of them asked: how come Israel proclaimed Jerusalem [as its capital]? It was supposed to be a *corpus separatum* according to the General Assembly. I told them, look, I want you to know the facts. There was a General Assembly resolution to partition Mandatory Palestine into two states, Arab and Jewish. The Jewish state was hardly conceivable. It was three cantons, hardly connected to each other. Without Jerusalem, without even a *road* to Jerusalem. And [David] Ben-Gurion, on behalf of the Zionist movement, accepted it. And the Palestinian leadership, backed by your own leadership, rejected it. They opened fire the day after the decision. And the moment the British left, [the Arab] armies came in. And Israel survived. So, we will never be apologetic about surviving. And yes, we know there was suffering, there was death, and 650,000 left, I am old enough to remember it. But, during the same time, the same amount of people came from the Arab world. We did not call them refugees. We called them brothers. And, nowadays, a majority of Israelis are the siblings of those great waves of immigration. And that is the ordinary, standard public answer. Elyakim Rubinstein knew exactly that we are ready to negotiate certain practical arrangements. I used to tell rivals in Israeli politics and the Americans what you questioned me about. I told them, “look, even Begin and Shamir, two right-wingers, no better right-wingers, they allowed the coming in of thousands of Palestinians every year. But based on humanitarian considerations, totally under

the decision and the control of Israel, whom to accept to come.” Basically, it was people who came from Mandatory Palestine and wanted to, I called it once “to die near the place where they were born.” The idea is to provide humanitarian help. And if they agree to several thousand every year, we can agree to something like that. That is not the real problem. People asked me, “How can you solve it? They will never give up the right of return. You will never let right of return happen, so it is doomed to explode.” No, it is not! We had a clear answer to this. We’ll agree on practices, which they did not reject. We had many discussions before Camp David and after. In Annapolis, it was the same story. We will agree to certain numbers. At a certain point, they were ready to agree to a number, probably 100,000 or 200,000, if the title would be kept that they stick to the “right of return.” But I proposed the following. When we come to the bridge, let’s agree first of all on the practical arrangements. If we could agree on the practical arrangements, we, instead of coercing the Palestinians to give up the right of return – symbolically, it is probably impossible – or drag any Israeli government to *accept* the “right of return,” do something else. And I didn’t say it to the Palestinians, because we did not reach it. But I am sure they knew this position, because the Americans came to me. I said, one of the first sentences in the finality of agreement, or in the summary of the whole agreement, it was not supposed to be an agreement, it was supposed to be just a framework agreement to be ratified by the parliaments, and then go to full negotiation. So, I said, at the end of it we can state in the paragraph that deals with end of conflict that the details, practices and rules, as agreed upon in the previous paragraphs, both sides see the end of the conflict as the finality of all mutual claims. Now, think what this means. They do not have to give up the “right of return.” We do not have to accept the “right of return.” We agree on what will happen on the ground. And both sides agree that whatever was there in the upper paragraph reflects the acceptance of both sides of this agreement as the end of the conflict and finality of all mutual claims. That is, I think, a kind of somewhat creative idea how to bypass such symbolic issues that no side can answer. I can tell you about Jerusalem. I have a similar idea, which is not originally mine. I heard it from King Hassan of Morocco. He was the head of the Jerusalem Committee, and I visited him as a minister of foreign affairs. I knew him, I visited him as a general, when he celebrated his fiftieth birthday. The present king was an old teenager sitting with him. So, I visited him with a delegation from Mossad. And when we came to it, I asked him to try to somehow use his authority to reduce the tension around it. And we started to discuss what would be the future. And he told me, I have an idea. The clear question is not about what will be done within the compound of mosques. You understood, you have a government decision to respect the status quo. It is a mosque for 1,300 years, so there is no question about this. But there is still the symbolic question of sovereignty. Who is the sovereign there? He proposed the following. He said, there is a concept in Islam called *Dall Allah*, the shade of Allah. We can take

the whole Holy Basin, which includes the Temple Mount and the City of David and the slopes of the Mount of Olives, and now see it as a special zone under the sovereignty of the Almighty, the Adalah. Israel will not have to state that it lost or gave up sovereignty. The Palestinians do not have to state that they accept Israeli sovereignty. But they decide on this special zone, where the practices within the compounds, within the religious compounds, will be given to the authorities of the respective religions. Both sides, which share the same God, agree that this special zone is too important, it is under the sovereignty of heaven, without giving up anything of their symbols.

Cohen-Almagor: Did you like this idea? That means that Israel does not have any sovereignty over the Temple Mount.

Barak: It does not say so. You can compare only apples to apples. You can compare Israeli sovereignty versus Palestinian sovereignty, inter-Arab sovereignty, Jordanian, Saudi or whatever. You cannot compare any of these terrestrial entities to the Lord. So, it is of a different level, it is not typical. I want to emphasize the point that, sometimes, by being too rigid, you end the flexibility with which to do an honest affair. And you come too easily to the conclusion that nothing can be done, or the conclusion that you have to fight to the death. And I do not believe in both ends of it. It is not really needed where human beings are. I spent a long time in Ireland, looking and talking to people. I spent a long time, and I now have many friends among the IRA. I signed the sending of weapons to Croatia, during their fight. I came there, they did not even notice that I signed it. But that is probably what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1948, when they sent us arms. And they probably didn't even notice that it is something important. So, I am well acquainted now with the whole story of the Balkans, to see what happens there now with all reservation. In Ireland, also, there are now some steps backward. But it proved that things that seemed to be unsolvable and cost the lives of millions along centuries *could be solved*. It is not beyond human beings, once they realize that, in the long term, it doesn't work, or it is unbearable to bear the price of the alternative. So, we are not in this situation of an unbearable price. It is still bearable for us, bearable for them. The world is looking at the other side now, different from twenty years ago. Twenty years ago, there was a very strong tailwind for any effort to make compromises and move forward. I am confident that when it will be solved, and I said it after Camp David, whether it will take five, fifteen or fifty years - it is already twenty years now - you will need a magnifying glass to see the difference between what was on the table in Camp David and what will be agreed upon in the end. And people, a few years afterwards, will wonder why the hell it took us so many years. Why we had to bury, on both sides, so many people, in order to reach this agreement which is so painfully similar to what we could not agree upon twenty or forty years before.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you are still committed to the two-state solution. You think it is doable?

Barak: Sure!

Cohen-Almagor: What do you do with all the settlements? Now there are half a million settlers.

Barak: No, it is not half-a-million. You can easily draw a line within the Promised Land, which will have *inside it* all our security interests, and 80% probably – it was almost 90% twenty years ago – but now, let us say 80% of the settlements. In these few settlement blocs and very close to the border, to the 1967 border, were very close cities like Harish or whatever, Beitar Illit or Modi'in. That is not the problem. You can delineate this line in a way that you will have a majority of settlers inside, and a place for a viable Palestinian entity on the other side. And it probably will include some certain fraction of the area. I still believe that it could be solved on 6% of the whole area, without cutting it into unconnectable, not connectable kind of Bantustans. The 6% of the area, probably with certain compensation for this 6% in areas around the Judean Desert and around the Lakhish region and around the border near Gaza. So, we can find ways to do it, if both sides are ripe for it. As of now, both governments seem not to be ripe for it, but I am sure that it is only a matter of time. Reality will impose itself. I am confident that at a certain point it will become clear to Israelis that the alternative is a kind of abyss. Because of the numbers, the demography. We already have an equal number of Jews and non-Jews in what used to be Mandatory Palestine. So, if we keep controlling the whole area, it will inevitably be either non-Jewish or non-Zionist or a non-democratic state, for the obvious reasons. If these blocs of millions can vote, it is a binational state overnight. And within a decade or so, it will be a kind of binational state with a Muslim majority. That is not the Zionist dream. That is not the dream for which we fought and died. And the other alternative, if they cannot vote – is undemocratic. Usually, I am quite cautious not to call it by the name from the neighboring continent, where similar kind of attempts failed after fifty years. So, probably we need time, probably, you know, even in this case in the neighboring continent, it took some fifty years. And in other cases, it took sixty years, eighty years. It will not stand forever. There is no way to hold the occupation forever. The Jewish state will lose not just its demographic nature; it will lose its soul if it continues down this slippery slope.

Cohen-Almagor: It *is* losing its soul, as long as the occupation continues. Every day, it is losing its soul.<sup>iv</sup>

Barak: Ah, you know, I did not answer you exactly what to do with the settlers. The settlers will be there. There will be about 100,000 of them remaining within these isolated settlements that were deliberately

deployed, in order to avoid the possibility of agreement. And I think that if a generous compensation for relocation will be deployed for them – we even planned or prepared something like this in the past. If we allow each community to decide, many of them would leave. Many are there not for ideological reasons but for economic reasons. It was too cheap to refuse.

Cohen-Almagor: But the hard core settlers are more isolated.

Barak: I will come to the size of the hard core. For the moment, let's talk of those settlements that are beyond this line of 6% of the area, which contains 80% of the settlements. There are 100,000. I believe that about 80% of them, some 80,000 or probably more, could be persuaded once they realize that this is the decision of the duly-elected government, and it is really going to be implemented. They will be ready to move, either as a community or as individuals, back to either Israel or the 6% of the area that will remain in our hands. In fact, before we came to Camp David, we made a plan. We put people in the ministry of finance and some others. I think that Yossi Kutchik was the contact guy, with a guy from the treasury named Oz. Kutchik was my contact. We basically ordered them to prepare a plan, and we identified the places where these settlements should be allocated, new settlements for those communities who want to go and remain within Judea and Samaria. Then, the others, you give them, at the time it was about a million shekels or a million dollars. Probably a million dollars, a million dollars per family would solve the problem of moving. If there are 25,000, so, okay, it will be 25 billion. You spread it over years. I do not want to go into all the details, it does not justify our time. So, that is basically the situation. And the hard core, which is now probably – at the time it was some 8,000 people – probably it is now double the number, probably 16,000. They would be allowed to stay there for five years as a kind of experiment. A five-year test. They are allowed to still be there, and the Israeli police or border guard will secure them. And then, they have to make the decision whether they want to be there. Probably they will refuse and start making problems. It is all about will power. A self-confident government changes the whole balance within the psyche of a people by its very actions. Anyone who wants to rebel against the government practically announces publicly that he does not accept the sovereignty of the State of Israel over its citizens. And that is something that many of the right-wingers are not ready to cross.

Cohen-Almagor: Itamar Ben Gvir and Smotrich are a different breed, I think.

Barak: Yes, yes, but they are two people. Really cowards. Cowards. They are only powerful, or pretend to be powerful, as long as no one stands before them, looks them in the eye and says, okay, now, you have to do this. They are not strong people. I happen to know many of them. Some unbalanced individuals here and there might join them. They

are much more fragile than we believe, *if and when* there is a majority in the elected government that decides to do it. There is nothing that the government cannot impose, if it is duly-elected. The zeitgeist is against it right now, because we do not see Europe, you do not see America, pressing towards two state solution. Trumpism, and populism around the world, do not help. Probably it will take five years or ten years or fifteen years, but it will end. We will come once again to the cruel realization that facing the challenges, the elements, the pandemic, the climate, we have enough reasons to understand that we must prefer coordination over animosity, and do not allow a Darwinian jungle on the level of collectives.

Cohen-Almagor: How do you solve the problem of Ariel?

Barak: There are two possibilities. First of all, I think that the edge of Ariel is too close to Tapuach junction and the mountainous ridge. And so, it might have to move. I would love to have Ariel still in Israel. Ariel, Kedumim, it is not just Ariel. But I am sober enough to know that the Palestinians will raise it as a major issue at the negotiations. And it is an issue, because it is 40,000 people, 50,000 people. It is an issue, it is a complicated issue, but we have to negotiate. When you start to understand the historic potential of an agreement, if you trust that the other people can deliver it, there are many things that seem to be impossible now, which might become possible. But personally, I would love to see it in our hands, to see it kept. And it helps if we can keep these, the Etzion Bloc and Ariel, Kedumim and the several cities around the border. Probably even Beit El and Ofra. We need these hills for the foreseeable future, these hills by Hatzor, near Ofra.

Cohen-Almagor: You mean security-wise?

Barak: Yes. We need these hills, otherwise, there is a dead area that we cannot cover from any other place in Israel. So, we need these places, and it is justified to hold Beit El and Ofra. But there should be a certain arrangement, to make it as minimal as possible. And even to set milestones, where every ten years, it will be reconsidered by the sides, with the Americans. I described to you the way that I think the refugees should be approached, Jerusalem. These are much more, much greater issues than any hill in the area.

Cohen-Almagor: Yes, you are right. What about the connection between Gaza and the West Bank? What did you have in mind?

Barak: Even on the night that Oslo was agreed upon in the government, Gaza and Jericho First. Do you remember it?

Cohen-Almagor: Yes, of course. In 1993.



Barak: Gaza and Jericho First. I was there, I was the chief of staff. I participated in meetings, in all the negotiations. So, I proposed to Rabin the following. I told him: “Without connecting them, we are doomed to see them developing different trajectories. If you read honestly even the Begin-Sadat agreement, it is there. Continuity. It is a continuum. You should give them the West Bank and Gaza as a single territorial unit. Do you remember that?”

Cohen-Almagor: How do you do that? How do you physically do that?

Barak: During the discussion on Oslo, in 1994, I proposed building a flyover. I told Rabin that I had seen in Miami a kind of flyover, going into the sea, about 12 miles. Over there, from Beit Hanoun to the closest place in the West Bank, it is exactly 30 miles. It is 48 kilometers. So, I proposed it at the time. And I even proposed, together with the late Jean Frydman [French Jewish businessman and activist], we brought a proposal from leading engineering companies that were ready to build it. And there was a price tag. It should cost some \$3 billion at the time. And we thought of a high flyover, probably 20 meters, beyond something that you can throw anything at it. And probably covered with Perspex. But they can go without seeing any Israelis. They drive freely. There will be four or six lanes. Underneath there will be carried power, electricity from the power plants on the seashore. Gas and communication cables and, in the future, desalinated water. And we said let us propose it, they will build it, probably another \$2 billion for the infrastructure, to move the gas, electricity and, in the future, prepare the provision for desalinated water. And I even got into contact with Jimmy Wolfensohn. He was, at the time, the head of the World Bank. At the time, I was a general. I was not part of the government. I approached him. We even agreed that at the opening ceremony, he would play the cello.

Cohen-Almagor: And you will play the piano.

Barak: We had a plan to play a certain piece of Dvorak. So, there was a technical solution. Nowadays, it is much better. You can do it in a tunnel. It is very easy to dig a tunnel, very easy and relatively cheap. So, probably it will cost ten billion. It is nothing. You make a big tunnel, big enough for six lanes. And together, once again, with desalinated water, with electricity and gas. And this connects them. You put it under the authority of the Palestinian Authority, not Hamas. It will coerce them to be together. And I would not ignore the idea that was raised several times to build an artificial island in front of Gaza, where they will have an airport.<sup>v</sup> They will have a seaport. There will be tight control, probably by a third party, of security arrangements and so on. But it makes much more sense than pushing it forever. With what prospect? What is waiting for us at the end of this tunnel?

Cohen-Almagor: What do you do with security, Hamas on the one hand, Fatah on the other?

Barak: No, we had the wrong policy for at least the last seven years under Netanyahu. Or six years, until the last one. Where he deliberately strengthened Hamas and weakened the Palestinian Authority. Because his conclusion is that Hamas is good. Hamas is a rival that you can always demonize and attack, and no one will ask you seriously to make peace with them. And the Palestinian Authority is dangerous, because even though they are short of perfect, they have many weaknesses, but they fight against terror against Israel. And we have many common interests. So, he basically perceived, without being able to admit it, the Palestinian Authority as the rival and Hamas as the ally. And he ended up with cash money, bribery and whatever, big bribery. And you know, all along this year, the heads of the secret service, the heads of the military, the general who is coordinator of government activities in the territories, and some of his own ministers, always proposed concrete steps. You can find many of them in the site of commanders for the security of Israel.<sup>vi</sup> The elite of our commanders of all these organizations, including police, all intelligence, military organizations and the secret service, Mossad. Everyone. Ninety percent of them believe exactly what I have described right now. And they have also created professional groups of people who dealt with this in their active careers. They are now retired. And they wrote long papers about what exactly should be done, down to the sewerage project near Beit Hanoun, or allowing them to take some gas from a small gas field, Mari B, that belongs to, I do not remember the name. A small one, not like Tamar or Leviathan. A small one, and they do not produce there. There is a lot to do. There is a need for clarity of sight, for deep understanding of the alternative, less populism and more commitment to solve the real problems. For us, not for them. I do not demand Israeli leaders to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Palestinians, but to follow the interests of Israel and to be fair, without hurting your own interests.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you think it is possible to negotiate with Hamas. You think it is possible to make a deal with Hamas.

Barak: I do not think. I think that we are interested that the PA will take responsibility over the whole thing.

Cohen-Almagor: But they did not. Now, it has been since 1993 that they did not. They are not willing to go through the Altalena test.<sup>vii</sup>

Barak: No. They cannot go if we are sitting on the side and waiting there. If we were, together with the Egyptians acting for them, using our leverages to almost impose on them, we cannot impose, but to pressure them, I think it could have worked. But if a rightwing government will be elected now and they will continue the Bibi

policy, it will end up that Hamas will take over the West Bank as well. Only Hamas. And with Hamas, it will end with a clash, a full clash at the end. Probably it will come to taking over Gaza once again, and that does not serve Israeli interests, so there will be resistance from within. There will be international intervention. We should not be the ones who sponsor the island, the building of an island or digging of a tunnel. It is a little bit humiliating for them. They do not have to see the Israelis bestowing this upon them. If an international initiative that Israel cannot resist, or would not like to resist under the right government here -the right, meaning left, you know. So, if there is a government that is ready to take steps that we have no reason to reject or to oppose, and we are neutral, it could be done. We should, behind the scenes help it, to give it a push, and that would solve it. If they had to work together, you know, we do not have to get too apologetic. In a way, the fact that Israel doesn't allow them to build an airport or a seaport, and doesn't find a way to get them to be connected, that somehow supports Hamas. Because the PA cannot show that *its* way works, namely rejecting terror, trying to work in collaboration with Israel. They are short of perfect: the incitement, paying probably too much to families of terrorists, and they do it by the government, not by some philanthropic religious organization. There are many things that they can correct, but if we want to be honest, we also have our small share.

Cohen-Almagor: Let us go back to 2000. Before you went to Camp David, were you optimistic? Did you think it would be successful?

Barak: I was open. You know, I spent too many years as head of intelligence, as chief of staff, and even as a curious citizen. I read a lot, I tried to look at the history of other cases. So, I was very sober. Before I went, I was asked what are the chances that you will succeed? I told them fifty-fifty, but not because I have certain hard evidence that there is a solid 50% possibility to succeed. Just because I know that there are only two possibilities. Either it succeeds or it fails. So, it is fifty-fifty. And they did not believe me.

Cohen-Almagor: Who are "they"?

Barak: Some of my closest friends among journalists approached me afterwards. They said "tell me in confidence, I will not write about it." As explained in our first interview, the agreements with the Egyptians started with secret contacts. Haka, the head of Mossad, met with Tuhami during Rabin's time. And Rabin passed the torch to Begin, who *immediately* understood the opportunity, and he probably brought Dayan and Ezer to this position because of this identification of an opportunity. The case with the Palestinians started in the forests of Scandinavia. It did not start with something formal. And when it came to light, it was fully agreed, technically almost signed in initials. And even the agreement with Jordan followed long decades under

secret negotiation. So, people get used to it, that if someone initiates such a dramatic step, it is clear that something is already cooked, and it is just to celebrate it. But that was not the case before 2000. So, I was totally sober. But I was convinced that we were heading toward an inevitable clash and, in this inevitable clash, Israel would need the chance of unity. It needs to be able to fight together, to unify. We needed the world's support, and our situation was very fragile, because basically the world, in those years, was extremely pro-Palestinian. I did not mention originally, when I described my considerations, that the Europeans, already announced *before* I took office that next year they would recognize a Palestinian state, even without an agreement. And that they would formally announce it.<sup>viii</sup> So, I did not take this opportunity as a sure thing, but it was clear that the zeitgeist was supporting this opportunity. And I thought, "I cannot make sure, I cannot promise that it will work. I will see it as a grand negligence, total irresponsibility, not to try, after six years of Oslo and three years after the agreed date for opening final stage negotiations about permanent peace agreement. I said, I could not look in the mirror and tell myself I behaved responsibly if I would not put it to the test, to whether it is possible or not." I did not strongly believe that anyone who would come after me would be ready to go that far. I knew that I could impose whatever I decided on the military and defense forces. It was not an opportunity where everything was ripe. The alternative was bad. We are committed to this third phase of the Oslo agreement, which was for me clearly bad for Israel, because it would damage dramatically our negotiating position, and our capacity to reach what is needed crucially for Israel. But what are we afraid of? Why not touch it and try to see whether it can fly. I thought, at least, if it does not fly, no one will have any doubt in the world, inside Israel and in the region, that Israel kept the moral high ground. That we were ready to go very far to try to solve the issues. And to put it beyond any doubt - that was what I thought in advance - that if it failed, it failed because of them, the other side. And I thought that, with all due sorrow, it is still something that is justifiable or worth being attempted.

Cohen-Almagor:

I presume, knowing you, that before you went to Camp David in 2000, you probably studied Camp David 1978. I presume, correct me if I am wrong, that you probably had a plan as to how it is going to work. You knew that there were going to be two weeks during which you would be in Camp David. You have two weeks to try to go and break this awful, awful trajectory of violence, in which our lives have been mired for the past 100 years, and you knew that more violence is going to come. So, you had a plan. Tell me about it. What was your plan?

Barak:

Okay. I will not be able to tell you about it, but, basically, I knew it, but you mentioned it on your own. That the alternative to which we were heading was a violent clash. Now, put aside, for a moment, the positive side. Look at the negative side. Even if you know that you

are going to an inevitable clash, you have to do something. It is your responsibility as the chief executive of the State of Israel. *It is your responsibility to do whatever you can, in order to try to avoid it.* You know, when I was criticized later on by Likud, I used to tell them, according to your standard, I understand what you would have said about Ben-Gurion. The Likud said: “The Palestinians saw and the Arab world thought that this is a weak leader. For no obvious reason he gave up his position. He accepted this ridiculous proposal of two states. He did it only because he is weak”. So, at that time, in the Knesset they attacked me. Likud tried to describe the whole Intifada as the *result* of Camp David. It was not the *result* of Camp David. It was after Camp David on the timeline, but not the *result*. Camp David was an attempt, a last moment attempt, to avoid violence. Not to mention everything that could be promised if we could reach an agreement. And I felt that I am more self-confident to make the necessary decision, however tough, and to impose it on our people. Remind me to tell you about something that Rabin raised with me about the Golan Heights in the past, on the same issue.

Third interview: 11 July 2022

- Cohen-Almagor: In the first Camp David, there were essentially three models that guided the conversations. President Carter had first in mind to have the three leaders together. This didn't work. Then, he started a second model that was Plan B for the Americans, which was through the delegations. There was some success, but it was limited. Then he moved to the third model that proved to be successful, which was to have three people in the room.<sup>ix</sup>
- Barak: Yes. Carter, Osama and Aharon Barak.
- Cohen-Almagor: *Not* Begin and Sadat, who did not see eye to eye. And this model was successful. So, before you came to Camp David, did you have any of these three models in mind, or maybe another one?
- Barak: I will start from what you asked. Look, the main difference between the first Camp David and “my” Camp David was that at the first Camp David they came with a quiet, clear feeling. Begin himself tried to either self-deny it or suppress the explicitness of the fact that he knew that the other side was ready for peace, and he knew basically the terms. And if he wanted to strike a deal, there would be a deal. A painful one, very far from his political positioning or perception by the country. But he had a sense of history. And he was clever enough to realize that with these two generals, Dayan and Weizmann, who clearly wanted it and were aware of the fact that there was an opportunity - all of them knew - that he could somehow play this subtle game, which is basically behind the veil of Camp David, but

will be revealed over the years, later on. And that is a game that is partly tactical, vis-à-vis Sadat, and partly for domestic future consumption. Namely, that he will be the one who stood firm and did not want to give up any position. And it was hardly achieved, because he was insistent on his positions, but the moment he will feel it was ripe, or he will be ready, he will release a little bit, loosen the demands a little bit and an agreement could be made. So, it was something that, in a way, there was a conditional success assured. There were certain conditions, but if you were ready to call them conditions, the contours were quite clear. This was not the case in Camp David when I came there. So, the tactic could not be based on anything like that. And I mentioned to you that before I went, people *used* to think from the history of the first Camp David, from the history of Oslo, that something was already cooking, had been cooked behind the scenes, and it was just a ritual. Yes, sure, there is a certain risk, it is not a simple ritual, but a kind of ritual that, if you go through it, you have to come out with an agreement. That was not the case. Last time, I started to tell you the whole thought behind it. It was a last-minute effort to avoid a clash that was clear to us that going to happen in the very near future. On the one hand, it was an attempt by daring proposals, *probably* to reach a breakthrough. No certainty. Not anything like the information that was about Sadat and his intentions. Sadat was the real leader of the peace with Egypt. It was not Begin. While Begin was not dragged into it, he played this game of being dragged into it, almost against his will. But here, it was different. I told people that the chances were fifty-fifty, not because I know something that you do not know, but because there are two possibilities. Either it succeeds or it fails. I do not know. They asked me: So, if you do not know, why are you going there? And I explained it to you last time. You go there because you cannot afford not to come. Our national responsibility dictates this. You will not find the real answer unless you come. Look them in the eye, propose something that is probably not everything they can think of. I did not know how ripe the other side was to take decisions, but I was convinced that I had to try. I had total responsibility because we were heading, for sure, toward a great explosion. And when it happened, you wanted to be able to answer yourself as to whether it could have been avoided. And you cannot answer yourself why you didn't try. What did you have to lose? If you see a ticking bomb, what did you have to lose by trying to defuse it? The only thing you can lose is what happens in the minds of people. If Event B happens after Event A, in the Western way of thinking, it means that A somehow caused B. It was Hume, I believe, who originally said that the fact that the cock crows early in the morning and then the sun rises does not mean that the cock causes the sun to rise. So, there was a certain risk. There were many other risks, but I compared them to the risk of losing the lives of people going innocently to their work every day, going to study, writing articles, whatever - and they are going to be buried as a result of the clash. We had the responsibility to do something, namely, to

clarify whether, even at a high, painful price, you can achieve something. We had thousands of pages of meetings that happened during *my term*, on four continents, with the Palestinians. We knew the give and take. We knew from discussions with younger Palestinians, especially when talking to them in private, informally, a somewhat softer tone. But basically, there was no soft tone on any of the issues. All questions were speculation for our people. Shimon Peres was always sure that, if he were at the table, something would be achieved. He used to say that if we were ready to give 70% or [of the West Bank], I do not remember the number, if we would be ready to reach an agreement, and we would be ready to give them 70% of the area of the West Bank, he was sure that he could produce a breakthrough. Chaim Ramon probably put it at 80%, but there was quite a strong belief - I call it belief, because there was no hard evidence that that was the case - among our people, out of their conversations with Palestinians, that they were flexibilities on certain issues. So, I thought, let us arrange those teams on the different subjects. My logic was that it does not make sense to give all the tangible assets that create your leverage in these negotiations to the other side first, and *then* to start to negotiate borders, security, refugees, right of return, finality of conflict. It does not make sense. The world does not work this way. So, I thought, let's see, with these different teams, if there is any kind of compromise. And I told our people, I didn't expect equal generosity, reciprocity. I didn't expect reciprocity. I didn't expect that, assume metaphorically that you have a gap of ten meters, that if I go one meter toward them, I'll see them coming one meter toward me. I didn't expect that. I knew that we are the stronger side. We have the assets. They carry with them either genuine or imagined or produced feelings of being humiliated, being there, being already paying it in advance. I looked for concrete items. And the threshold I thought of was that I do not need them to see, that probably we will not meet in the middle. Probably we will meet 90% closer to *their* starting line than to ours. But we cannot agree to a procedure where we move forward and, at any stage, we see no movement whatsoever from the other side.

You know, Arafat was a sophisticated person. He had many mannerisms, but he was an extremely sophisticated person. So, he for sure understood, even if he would never admit it, that the dynamic of negotiations should include steps toward a meeting, probably in different paces, from both sides. So, we thought that spreading it into this spectrum of issues would allow us to understand where the more profound issues were, where the issues that could be resolved more easily were, and what the parameters were. Because in a lot of these negotiations, we do not agree now, but let's imagine that we can agree at another time. And we are ready. What kind of ideas might you be ready to think of? This kind of quasi-speculative discussion, in a place where everyone knows that we met in order to reach something concrete. We set certain rules. I do not remember all of them. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, to relieve people of the feeling

that they gave up something. Even if you give up something, you did not give up anything, because nothing is agreed. Just to measure how, what direction to take. If I need to take you into account, to take your feelings, your perception into account, then I have to know what they are. And we had these constraints. It was like Sisyphus climbing. Clinton was deeply invested, fully understanding of all the issues. If he left, it might take half a year until a new president catches up. And you don't know who he will be, and what his positions will be, and you will have to start all over again. I had this warning and prediction that we were going into a clash. We had this European warning that they were going to recognize a Palestinian state, even with no borders and no agreement. And we had the tension. The zeitgeist was very positive, and you cannot predict how long this will last. So, I thought that that was the right start.

We were very flexible. We knew that we needed some two weeks at least for the summit, otherwise you couldn't go through some learning of each other, some advances, some retreats, some crises, probably, along the way. I knew quite a lot about negotiating. As head of intelligence, I had to dive into many historical, regional and other cases, just to be able to judge it for our government. As chief of staff, I was deeply involved in Rabin's negotiations. So, comparatively speaking, I was very, very knowledgeable about it. And I had with me some of the best negotiators. Oded Eran and others, Gili Sher. Shlomo Ben-Ami was not really experienced, but he had a lot of historic background. He knew a lot from his profession about how those things run. He was a very creative person. So, I thought that this will be the beginning, and we will play it by ear, to see what to do. And it was clear, we had first to shape it. Then, at a certain point, the Americans might intervene. We thought that, at a certain point, we knew the technique that was used previously in America, the IP [Israeli position (I) versus Palestinian position (P)] you know, in brackets. You put issues, first of all, to define what is agreed. And put in brackets what is not agreed. And then probably go to an upper level, some senior American. Then, we had the ultimate weapon, the president himself. You mentioned the first Camp David. You see all the drafts there, written in the handwriting of Carter himself. So, that was my model. I was not blocked by any model. I was open to *any* model. If someone would find that the right way was to sit with Arafat and Clinton alone for ten hours, I would do it. If it would be to take someone like Ben-Ami or Sher, who is a lawyer, and Meridor, who is a lawyer, and have them sit alone with two Palestinians, probably together with, I do not know, Jonathan Schwartz, who was a legal advisor to the Americans, or Dennis Ross, or Bruce Reidel, and sit down and shape something. I was open to everything. What I knew is that I am ready to go very far. We have nothing to lose. I was ready to go very far. I knew that Israel is strong. I never thought that these tensions might destroy Israel. They might result in a big clash, costing many human lives, shaking the sense of normalcy of life, but they won't destroy us. I wasn't afraid, like people around Ben-Gurion had been, that the



defense of Israel would collapse. That was the only real worry at the end of 1947.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you have Shlomo Yanai on security. And you put Elyakim Rubinstein on refugees. And you put Meridor on Jerusalem. And there was a team on borders, if I am not mistaken.

Barak: There was a team for refugees. You can probably find it in my book, I wrote a book, an autobiography.<sup>x</sup> You can find lots of details I cannot remember exactly. But, yes, we had those teams. Yes.

Cohen-Almagor: And what do you do? So, they are in the teams. You are in your cabin there.

Barak: I am reading. I am thinking. I had a phone that could connect me with the, I call it the rear command post, at the rear, sometimes in Jerusalem, sometimes outside of it. And I would get reports from time to time from the teams. There were several teams, and I was thinking, okay, some details, what could be answered. What should the answers be, and so on. And I thought that for sure it would deplete the teams of any kind of efficiency, sense of meaning, sense of opportunity to do something, if I would run any kind of simultaneous negotiations on a higher level on the same issues. There were no other issues. I couldn't open a discussion with Hussein ash-Sheikh on the cultural relationship between our philharmonic orchestras. And if I would have any kind of independent discussion on anything with the Palestinians, that depleted the others. And there were the Americans. From time to time, this or that American guy wanted to come. They, too, I assumed, were sitting in their cabins with Clinton, trying to define how to go on, what to encourage. They were also getting their reports, and they were doing something similar. And, from time to time, some idea was ready. They would send someone to me, to ask what I thought. If they thought they really knew my position, or that any kind of Israeli position should be processed in a more subtle way, they would approach Lipkin or Sher or Danny Yatom, and try. And those guys would report to me. They would say, I was approached by this and that guy, who asked me what you think, how do we do this? It is a kind of living action. You cannot really put it, conceptually, in small boxes. It is not an algorithm. It is something that is, in a way, alive.

Cohen-Almagor: And every day, once the teams finished their work, they would come to your cabin and have a conversation?

Barak: Yes.

Cohen-Almagor: And then you planned for the next day?

Barak: Yes, yes. But, sometimes, you know, on certain issues, Jerusalem, for example – I didn't want to discuss it with the whole group. So, I didn't ask for reporting on Jerusalem. I do not even remember if we started immediately. Probably the discussion was delayed for some days, because, once again, it was clear that Jerusalem was more explosive. It could explode the whole thing, even before we knew whether there was any readiness to make compromises about our strategic needs, security, borders and interrelationship.

Cohen-Almagor: What is the logic of dealing with Jerusalem separately? Why not the entire delegation?

Barak: Jerusalem is heavily emotional, heavily loaded on both sides, for normal, humane reasons. And because of its symbolic aspect in the minds of the publics, the Israeli and Palestinian publics, not just the political claims or room for maneuvering in these negotiations, it was clear that any leak about the content of the discussion about Jerusalem, which necessarily would include painful compromises – even if speculative at first - can damage the whole process. It will draw all the attention. If it leaks, it will create a huge storm that you will not be able to avoid, back in the Israeli public and in the Palestinian public. Probably in the Arab public. We tried to nurture a certain tailwind to Arafat, a certain forthcoming atmosphere within the Arab leadership. I talked to those whom I could meet, King Hussein - Hussein or already Abdullah, I do not remember - and Mubarak and the Jordanians. I took them upon myself. But I could not talk to the Saudis. I could not talk to other Arab players. The Americans took that upon themselves. So, you cannot keep them supportive if it leaks that there are major explosions, or an accident on Jerusalem. And I thought that, out of human nature, if you start to see certain achievements possible on areas like borders and security, and probably something that doesn't sound so terrible about the refugees, and some hypothetical thoughts about how you formulate the end of the conflict and so on, and you feel that you can get something that might answer your needs, you have a higher motivation not to break it on every *small* hurdle about Jerusalem. It was clear that without Jerusalem, nothing would work. That was one of the reasons I realized that there was no reason to give them, say, 90%+ of the land, and then find, surprisingly, that Jerusalem is not solvable. It doesn't make sense. So, I thought that because it is more sensitive it is better that both sides see that they have an opportunity. And I thought that the Palestinians might see that I was more flexible than they imagined, and more flexible than anything that was proposed to them until then, and that there was a genuine readiness to take the decision. What I tried to show them was that I was not afraid. I proved it in Lebanon. I proved it in other places. All my career told them that I was not afraid of taking a decision because it was not popular, or because you have to withstand challenges from within, or

whatever. I thought that it was common sense. Why deal with Jerusalem first?

Cohen-Almagor: So, with whom did you discuss Jerusalem?

Barak: Oh, I started to discuss it long before. We started in Israel. I started discussions, first of all learning the material, the positions of Begin and Dayan and even before. Even historically, I went to the negotiations between Dayan and Abdallah Tal, just after the War of Independence. And I talked with people like Chaim Herzog, the late president. He was the first governor of Jerusalem. Shlomo Gazit, who was, the first year after 1967, the one who ran this. And many other people. I looked at legal problems. There was a professor, an elderly woman named Ruth Lapidot. Probably, a dozen different people. I think we mentioned even Olmert, at a certain point.

Cohen-Almagor: But at Camp David, did you discuss Jerusalem with anyone?

Barak: Of course, with the whole team. Probably on the sixth day of the summit. I do not remember the exact day. You have to check the books of others and my autobiography. But, at a certain point, we realized that, okay, there is very little, disappointingly little progress on the other issues that we started with. Disappointing, but, yet, with a cool head, you have to think, okay, so what should be done now? If we decide that, based on our judgement of the very little that was achieved in the discussions of all the other teams, we conclude that there is no way to have a breakthrough by raising Jerusalem, it will only complicate matters. And knowing that there is a political price and other prices for just placing it on the table, we decided *not* to talk about Jerusalem. It was clear to me, for my own account, as the chief executive of Israel at the time - not to mention how honest critics, like you, twenty years younger, would assess it. The natural question was, what the hell do you have to lose? Okay, you hoped to achieve more, and you achieved very little. Not encouraging at all. But now, if you avoid taking this further step, to start to touch Jerusalem, you basically make it meaningless. You didn't try to touch the fire.

Cohen-Almagor: What did you offer on Jerusalem?

Barak: You can read everything. You can read it probably in my book, to be more accurate.

Cohen-Almagor: You offered East Jerusalem? Just to make sure.

Barak: No, it developed. We started with certain control of East Jerusalem for sure. But it developed, because it was an exchange. Another round and another round. At every iteration, we considered, we measured to what extent, at what point, we reached something that we can agree upon. So, there were many slight developments. At the end, we

discussed very seriously, even to give them part of the Holy City, even within the walls. And to give them even a certain kind of de facto control of life on the Temple Mount because it is a religious compound. And so, many aspects. It went beyond what Olmert put, as a kind of deposit, in my hands, an aerial photo of Jerusalem with the points where he thought we could show flexibility. At the beginning, for example, we didn't consider giving them parts of the Holy City. But there was a question. How will people who come from abroad, who want to pray on the Temple Mount, pray in the mosques? How can they go there? And we solved even the technicalities, a kind of overpass on high pillars that will go from around the area of Mount Scopus directly into the parking lot near the entrance to the Temple Mount. So, they can pray there. We discussed many issues. But basically, I didn't start it. I had many ideas. I talked with Oded Eran. I think I told you that I talked with King Hassan of Morocco, when I was still minister of foreign affairs. And I talked for sure with the Jordanians who were responsible for it for many years in agreements with Israel. And I talked about it with [Egyptian Chief Intelligence Officer] Omar Suleiman. With President Mubarak I talked generally, but only after Camp David failed. I met him in Cairo to discuss what happened at Camp David. And he told me, "Ehud, can you show me where this Haram al-Sharif is?" [laughs] No, he knew that it is al-Aqsa and so on, but he was a pilot. He wanted to see. So, I opened a map and showed him.

Cohen-Almagor: Why didn't you invite him to come and see for himself?

Barak: There were many, many attempts to bring him, but he didn't come. He backed the peace well enough. I have no complaints. He stood behind it, but he didn't want to personally expose himself. He remembered very well what happened to Sadat. But Haram al-Sharif has a religious, almost technical meaning. What is allowed, what is not allowed. So, of course, he knew that it is on the Temple Mount. But he knew it generally, so I showed it to him. He asked me, "But what is the Haram here? Is it only the inside of the mosque, is it also these trails around? Or is it the whole place?"<sup>xi</sup> And I answered, "It is the whole place." But he didn't know it. He asked very genuinely. And then he asked: "And where is this Wailing Wall, where you cry?" So, I showed him the Wailing Wall. But this is not to tell you that he didn't know what he was doing. He was supportive. And this was basically the position of all the Arabs. They said: "We are going to back whatever Arafat will accept. We will stand behind it."

Cohen-Almagor: But, as far as I understand, Arafat was calling them every day from Camp David, trying to seek assurances. But Arafat didn't receive enough support. That's what he claimed. He was afraid. Now, I understand that the person who guided Jerusalem was first Meridor, and then he was replaced by Sher. Why?

Barak: No, I do not think so. I didn't remove Meridor at any step, but, at a certain point, we added Shlomo and Gili to be the sources, the generators of more creative ideas, so Dan could protect himself, so to speak. That he was not the one who initiated. Ehud's people initiated and then he just conceded. But we started it with a very dramatic conversation on the porch of my cabin for several hours. I let everyone talk. Here, I told them, are these dramatic decisions, probably Ben-Gurion-like decisions.

Cohen-Almagor: The entire delegation. All the delegation.

Barak: Yes, yes. All the delegation together. We sat for probably five hours. We started in the early afternoon and ended when it was already dark. I even put some of their positions in my book. But basically, it was what you can expect. Meridor thought that we were going beyond the acceptable. And we needed to hear this view, I didn't want it to look tricky. Together, we represented basically the entire spectrum of normal, balanced Israeli political or public persons. And it was important to hear all of them, including both Rubinstein and Meridor, who were on one side, and most of the others who were on the other side. And I decided to adopt the most forthcoming positions, but not at any price. So, I made it clear that we were not going to reach a point where we would give up, on behalf of the Jewish people or whatever, sovereignty over the Temple Mount. But, as I told you, there was more than one idea about how to bypass, in reality. If the other side wanted, we didn't demand of them to give up their thought of sovereignty. We didn't demand from anyone who talked to us to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. I thought that it is not a Zionist position. The Zionist movement never asked for approval from our enemies [laughs]. We didn't demand from Sadat to recognize a Jewish state when we made peace with him. We didn't demand from King Husain to recognize Jewish state when we made peace with Jordan. We didn't demand it from Syria when Rabin, Netanyahu or myself negotiated with the Syrians. It was not even a part of our short-lived romance with Bashir Gemayel in Lebanon. That makes sense. We know that they are against it. We took history into our own hands, in order to shape it. We had the right. It was our responsibility. We do not need their approval. We need the support of friends, and we need sometimes criticism from other friends, but we are basically responsible. We are not conditioning that you are being recognized. You know, I put it at the time that there was a sense that we were not dealing with their souls and their dreams. It is beyond us to control their dreams, or thoughts, or hidden wishes. We want them to agree to *political* terms and a *political* legally binding contract at the end. We dealt only with the framework phase of it that will agree what goes here. We want them to leave behind the idea of destroying Israel *as a practical plan*. You cannot take from them the right to dream that we will disappear someday, or that everyone will come back to a pre-1947 situation or pre-1880. We made the whole history of dreams, so we will not take

it from them.

Cohen-Almagor: Did you keep a diary?

Barak: No, I didn't write a diary. All my life, I was always focused on actions, and I didn't find the energy to put it on diary. I kept some notes, but not in a systematic way. It is very arbitrary. I saw Shlomo [Ben-Ami] writing there. He wrote all the time, all the time. Working and writing together. I asked him why. He said, "Ehud, I cannot withstand it. I am a historian. I know I am doing something that happens once in a lifetime, and is probably historically important, so I write."<sup>xii</sup>

Cohen-Almagor: Yes, also Meridor kept a diary.<sup>xiii</sup> Tell me about your meetings with Arafat.

Barak: First of all, I knew I would have to meet him at a certain point. And I met him, we met every evening. Every evening, there was a dining room and we ate together. And sometimes I was sitting half a meter from him. Probably sometimes Clinton or someone else would be between us. Sometimes he just sat by me. Actually, he didn't want to sit by me because he was one step further from Clinton, so we usually sat only on both sides of Clinton.

Cohen-Almagor: Did you meet him, just the two of you, ever?

Barak: No, no, we met, the two of us, but not there. First of all, I met him many times before.

Cohen-Almagor: I know. I was talking about Camp David.

Barak: In the past, I met him many times, including quite a long time ago in Gaza and in Jerusalem, in private. But in Camp David, there was no use to meeting him in private.

Cohen-Almagor: Because? Because? Because?

Barak: Because the man was not the kind of man that we are thinking of. He reminded me of the description of Kissinger, who preferred always to negotiate with [China PM] Zhou Enlai, not with Mao Zedong. Mao was not negotiating; he was talking with him. He was telling stories and, afterwards, you had to see what he meant by this story and that story. It was always vague and open to more than one interpretation. And Arafat had a habit of always writing on small bits of paper when he talked to you. And we didn't record him. I didn't care if he recorded me or not, but we didn't record him. So, we met more than once. He did the same with Rabin. He used to come to us when we had some obstacle, and say, "But Rabin promised me that this will be an easy thing to solve. We met in private, and I have it in writing, in my small Arabic letters in pencil, not in pen". So, it was not productive. He was

not communicating. You cannot, me, I cannot create a real warmth, but I never hurt him. I always showed him respect. I never raised my voice. I never scorned him. I never pretended to know more or do more. I have enough experience with Arabs. They need respect. You should demand respect as well. It is not just giving respect; you have to demand respect, for otherwise they do not know how to read you. Do it, but do it in a quiet manner. And, in fact, he was the same, in a way. He didn't shout or try to put on a bravura display. But it was clearly unproductive to meet him. What could I do with whatever he told me? First of all, he was telling stories. I even quote some of the stories in my autobiography. The stories had some meaning, something to tell you about how he saw something. But he would not answer you directly. But there was pressure, because it seemed that I didn't probably pay enough attention to him around the table in the evening, and so on. So, I tried to improve our relationship, but, you know, people are so on their toes to see something. I even remember that Begin hardly met Sadat. Where there is a will, there is a way. That is what Arafat always used to say.

Cohen-Almagor: You met Arafat with Clinton. There is a famous meeting when you –

Barak: Yes, yes. We met with Clinton more than once, but usually with Yatom, and one of Arafat's people, and [NUS National Security Advisor] Sandy Berger or someone else on the other side. And we met at his cabin once. Yossi Ginossar, who was kind of a mediator, he was there on the American headcount, not ours. We didn't have a place for him; we didn't see a reason to have one. It was known that Ginossar was very close to Arafat, probably too close to Arafat. And Rabin used him quite often as personal emissary for some shortcut messaging to Arafat. And let me also tell you something about the characteristics of the whole negotiations. There was criticism that I heard very often: "Yes, we understand why you didn't succeed in negotiating. You didn't understand the way Arabs negotiate. If they see that you start with a map that shows 77% of the area of the West Bank and then, after two days, you show them a map that shows 82%, and then, after another three days, they see a map that shows everything. So, they ask themselves, why not wait? Wait, we will get everything. Why make any concessions?" I know that the same people, if you took the other position and would tell the Arabs at the opening day, we thought about it. We have had all these ten months of negotiations with you, on four continents. Some of us have negotiated with you during the last seven years, or six years. So, here is our proposal. We propose, we can think of giving you 92% of the West Bank, 4% for the rest of it in exchange [for Israeli territory]. It was blocked, it wouldn't fly, because that was not the issue. The issues were in totally other areas such as the need to agree to certain practicalities in regard to refugees, and basically tell, at the end, that that is an answer to 181 and 194, the original General Assembly decisions that [in Palestinian perception] defined the issue of the "right of return." Or the need to finally agree, to say,

this ends our conflict. Whatever is written there, in thirty pages, is a framework agreement that is end of conflict, if it is completed and ratified. And end of any mutual claims. Not end of dreams, not end of wishes, but it is an end of mutual claims. Legally. This was the real block. So, they would say, that I proposed it this way and it didn't fly. And then the same people would have said, you do not understand the Arab nature. They *need* to negotiate. Does it remind you of something? So, I do not know what to call it. I have spent enough time in the academy to see there is no issue to proposing two different ways. There are infinite streams of new ways to look at things. Where common sense tells you that this is the right way. Arabs need negotiations. They needed to see that there is progress. They need to see you moving through it. It is the only way to expect from them. People would say afterwards, "How did you do it? What kind of flexibility did they see? You stated from the very first moment that they got 90%+ of all they want. Now, they were waiting for the rest of it. When you move from 77% to 82%, they moved a tenth of one percent in your direction on certain points." They agreed that, yes, Israel needs some strategic posts for its overall security. Or we need to keep a certain kind of listening station on some mountain. So, I would like, that when you hear the criticism, think of it always in common sense terms, realistically. I am not afraid to take decisions that my people do not like, as long as this fits with a certain logic and structure. And whoever tells you that it is all about emotion - I know enough about negotiating with the Arabs. I used to tell people, that except for probably Moshe Sharett, I do not know of any other former prime minister who could read Arabic, or ever read Ibn Khaldun, or know what the pillars of Islam are, or can recite Surah al-Fatiha by heart, or who even spent so many years, just looking at the thinking of the Arabs.

- Cohen-Almagor: Do you speak Arabic?
- Barak: Yes. I cannot write poems, but I speak basic Arabic.
- Cohen-Almagor: And you read Arabic, better than you speak.
- Barak: Yes, I can read Arabic. I cannot read a subtle line of thought in English, not to mention Arabic, but I can talk.
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. So, tell me about these meetings that you had with Clinton and Arafat and others. What was the meaning of that? Why were they held? Why did you have meetings that included you, Arafat and Clinton, among others? What was the reason for that?
- Barak: When things culminated to a point that, you know, there were several stages that I think are all covered in my book and in more detail in the books of others. The summit didn't succeed in creating a framework



agreement, but it was very successful in creating many books written about it.

Cohen-Almagor: Yes, but there is not much about these meetings.

Barak: I assume that in the books by Ben-Ami<sup>xiv</sup> or Yatom,<sup>xv</sup> because they were with me at most of them. So, the Americans tried to go, to encourage, to prod the sides. I was invited to meetings; Arafat was invited to separate meetings. They sent Madeleine Albright to me, and sometimes Dennis Ross. The president used to have meetings with me and with Arafat at the same time. At a certain point, they were disappointed by the fact that the Palestinians were not moving forward and Clinton even kind of shouted at them, and they had to go to one of the meetings with Abu Ala, and they tried to forcefully pressure them. So, at a certain point, the talks seemed to be stuck on these different things. They didn't show signs of genuine moving. Very, very little, almost symbolic, to avoid being blamed for not even answering questions. The Palestinians, from time to time, made something that could be optimistically interpreted as including a certain silver lining or whatever. So, Clinton wanted to meet with us. And at a certain point, they started to offer an American, not just an IP kind of formulation, but an American proposal, how to bridge. They took several issues that seemed to them to be a little bit riper and started to overcome the gaps in IP in this or that issue. And that set up a fight for the higher moral ground. Who can convince the Americans better that he is operating in good faith and trying genuinely to reach it? And the reason that it doesn't move is the other side. And usually, we won this kind of contest, because, in reality, we were ready to move forward. It wasn't something symmetric. Arafat probably had, from day one, the idea that he would play, and end up with another summit. Their practice was that, from every summit, they grabbed whatever was said, even under the condition that nothing is complete unless everything is complete. They said, okay, we will grab it, and next time we will start only from the shoulders of these texts, however uncommitted. Because the Israelis, they still want to do it. So, it was not symmetric.

And so, there were meetings. Usually, they were about some of the issues. You might find descriptions of them in my book and in Yatom's book, probably in Ben-Ami's. In fact, in some cases, I even sent Ben-Ami to him, alone. And we, at a certain point, nominated two people from each side, Ben-Ami and Sher from our side, to spend the whole night trying to bridge and propose something. At a certain point, Clinton was angry at me that this was not what he understood from some previous conversation or whatever, or from a report of his people. And later on, I saw him once very angry, or I heard that he was very angry with Arafat. And, at a certain point, he even talked with both of us, together. But that was toward the very end, when it was quite clear that he was trying to know how to save the summit from exploding as an American failure, so to speak. And then was the

event of going to Okinawa. He had to meet the G-7 there. It was a pity because we needed every day, but, to tell you the truth, with all the effort that had been made, I do not think that if he had been there during the 72 hours or whatever that it took to fly to Okinawa, spend the day there and come back, would have made a huge difference. So, basically, it was something that didn't have the conditions to fly at this stage. People ask me what brought it to this. People say, you were so close. You have to multiply the width of the gap by its depth. It was very deep, it touches the cornerstone. I couldn't differentiate what really motivated Arafat. Probably he didn't want to go into these petty, routine days. Tasks of a head of state, to deal with social security, with sewage, with complaints about this or that, or the education system, about the absence of good transportation. Probably he needed to be the great historic figure, the great general, engineer, that never lost. Probably he had a certain sense, which was not totally imagined, that nations are born in blood, not in air-conditioned negotiations rooms. For Arafat, something is missing if a nation was born healthily in an air-conditioned room. You still need the element of cohesion that you got from the common sacrifice that you got along the way, in order to achieve it. I do not know. You could not fully penetrate him. I once told Clinton, "you need to have around you someone like Jim Baker." Jim Baker never raised his voice, and with his way of talking calmly you felt that the whole clout of America is behind him. And he never threatened. He would say, it is up to you, but it is your fate that is hanging in the balance. We are in America. Clinton, even when he flushed red and was extremely angry, I looked at Arafat and I probably misread him. I thought that he didn't feel that Clinton's anger was really consequential, that if he didn't respond to it, there was a concrete price to be paid, and it would be exacted from him. I am not sure that this was the situation, but sometimes I felt that.

Cohen-Almagor: Tell me about the American paper that was proposed. When was it proposed? There was an American paper at Camp David.

Barak: Yes, yes, I mentioned it. I said that at a certain point they –

Cohen-Almagor: Do you remember what day of the summit it was?

Barak: I cannot remember all the details. You might find it in my book or Ben-Ami's report or Sher's.<sup>xvi</sup> Basically, it was something where we could not agree to some of it.

Cohen-Almagor: Why?

Barak: Because it was beyond what we thought we could convince our people about. But, once again, it became more and more critical for us not to enable anyone to question who really caused the failure of the summit. It was clear to me that it would become an issue, not just of political maneuvering and rivalry but also it would end up with this clash

inevitably. And when people will start to be buried, a question will be asked. Did it fail because of your unreadiness to agree to the American ideas? You still do not have even a framework agreement, not to mention a full agreement. And you killed the chance of having settled this conflict because you insisted on having the Armenian Quarter [in Jerusalem]. It was clear that once you agreed that there will be a Palestinian presence, a sovereign presence, not just in the eastern city of Jerusalem, or most of it, but also within the walls of the Old City, are you really serious? It was clear that the Muslim Quarter will be theirs, and that the Jewish Quarter will be ours. But was it really critical for you that the Christian Quarter will be part of theirs? That was the reason that you couldn't solve and erase once and for all, or at least for the next several generations, the threat of a major clash? So, we basically adopted the idea that even when we didn't agree, we never said no. We said yes, but we have a reservation. Later, when the time comes, we will raise our reservations. And the Americans, basically, were clever enough not to put in things to which we had to say no. For example, you have to pass sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Palestinians. Why? What is the reason? We respect their right to faith, to worship there. We respect their right to run it through the Waqf. We respect everything. Why, what reason could there be that the thought of sovereignty - because we annexed it in 1967, it created a price for giving up sovereignty? You know, before 1967, there was no issue of sovereignty there.

- Cohen-Almagor: It was Jordanian.
- Barak: Yes, Moshe Dayan, even during the Six Day War, during the war, Moshe Dayan remarked, why do we need this Vatican? And immediately after, when someone tried to put an Israeli flag in the Old City, he said remove it. We do not need symbols; we have it now. When it came under Israeli sovereignty, you change the structure of the picture. Now, it becomes meaningful if you decide to give up sovereignty.
- Cohen-Almagor: So, you say that you did not reject the American paper. You just stated that you had reservations about it.
- Barak: Yes. We had some reservations. We didn't reject them. We didn't reject even what they did afterwards. Even afterwards, I think toward the very end of his tenure, Clinton issued the Clinton Parameters.
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay, that is different. So, you made some proposals. The Palestinians claim they didn't receive anything in writing. They didn't see anything from you, so, actually, they say, there was no proposal at Camp David. Why didn't you put anything in writing?
- Barak: Why put it in writing? What was the problem? If you agree to it, we will put it in writing. It is not a competition of who can formulate his

position. You know, we know what happens with written documents. They become a kind of position, and that is the kind of escalator over which they climb from place to place without ever making any decision.

Cohen-Almagor: So, then you are saying this is the written agreement, take it or leave it?

Barak: Even when it came to a point where we made a proposal together with Clinton, it had the American weight behind it, not just ours. I said that Clinton never told Arafat, this is our proposal take it or leave it. We said, I said, you can have your reservations from any paragraph, even from every paragraph. Write it down. The only thing we ask of you is to accept this document, together with the reservations of both sides, as a basis for negotiations. Because, you know, it is very typical, psychologists will tell you about the behavior of people who attack the other side with their own failures. The Palestinians were the ones that were not even ready to say something, let alone read something. They were not even ready to say something that could be quoted by someone who heard them. That on this date, and at this place, they told me that they were ready to do this and that. So, it is very easy, this manipulation, to try to say, oh, we didn't have a written proposal from the Israelis. They knew exactly what the proposal was. And, in fact, we said to them, why do it? We might be ready to give you more, but we need to see any kind of movement, on any subject, from you. Not in writing, but tell us that you agree, and it is agreed by your leader. They wouldn't say that, even in small, enclosed rooms, without quoting from their leader. You know, years earlier, I was chief of staff. And I watched and discussed with Rabin the meetings in Paris, the Paris agreement that shaped the economic relations. I was against it. I thought that the whole idea was bad. I quoted Frost, "Good fences make good neighbors." Our intention should be to get them to develop their own economy, independent of ours. The objective is not to make them as *dependent* as we can, but as *independent* as we can, with our support, with other support, in good faith. Because that will make them face the responsibility; it will educate them to run it on their own, and that will create trust. But putting us all together, and making them as dependent as we can - I told Rabin, you will create corruption on both sides. And more complaints, and no move forward. But when I listened to the reports from Paris, I told him, look at what's happening here. If the Israeli guy goes to the bathroom and stands in front of the wall with a Palestinian colleague, and they talk to each other, and the Israeli says something that could be interpreted as a compromise, a concession on certain points, issues that are being discussed in the room - the Palestinians will keep it, will quote it. And we, according to our conscience, we cannot withdraw from it, if a member of our delegation proposed it, or said it to a Palestinian. But if, at the plenum meeting of the entire two teams, the two delegations, and the Americans in the room, on record, as a part of the record of

the meetings, the Palestinians made a slight concession, and it is written in the record, it is all what is called by the legal people, ad referendum. It is ad referendum. It can come to Arafat and he can wipe it, with no need to explain anything. So, negotiations are not symmetric. It is very complicated from our side. So, I didn't see any reason we have to provide written documents of ours without even having a spoken record of what they will do in exchange, expecting from the very beginning that this will be very minimal, not to compare the magnitude of importance or weight.

- Cohen-Almagor: I want to understand now. You saw that the negotiations for ten days were not going anywhere. There is very little movement, if at all. And you did agree that there was some progression in what you were willing to concede, in terms of, say, territory or whatever. There was progression. Why not, after seeing all this failure until now, put something in writing and say, take it or leave it? This is what we are offering, and let's agree on it. Why not try it? What was the reason for not trying?
- Barak: Because it doesn't mean anything. First of all, the very style of dictating anything, take it or leave it, is something that projects arrogance and the absence of readiness to listen to nuances of the other side. I see a clear advantage to an approach where you come with something very generous. You understand that it is very heavy on the other side. It doesn't prove anything. I don't believe that if I would do it, it would prove anything. The natural interpretation, probably the genuine interpretation was: "You came here, you are not playing it equally. You are playing it like you are running the show, and he has to either accept it or leave it."
- Cohen-Almagor: Okay. Do not say, take it or leave it. Give it to them and say, this is our proposal. In writing.
- Barak: Why do you need it? There is enough of a record. Ben-Ami was writing everything down. Yatom was writing everything down. No one hid anything. And the Americans were probably recording everything. It is all recorded. There is no question of our proposal. In fifty years, there will be the opening of all the documents. You will find everything. So, that is not the problem. I thought there was an interest, a positive interest, genuine interest to do something very generous, that doesn't insult him. Not by the content, not by the style by which it was proposed to him, and it leaves him an equal opportunity, like it does for us, to write certain reservations, but to take it as the basis for negotiation. There are reservations on both sides. That is basically what happened at the end, in regard to the Parameters. But even then, basically, Arafat said no. Even when Clinton, in a way, did, toward the end of his tenure, exactly what you said. We answered with a long document that has probably 14 or 25, I do not remember, reservations. But we said that we are ready to take

it as a basis for negotiation. And Arafat said no, and turned deliberately to terror.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. What happened when Clinton went to the G-7? I think he sent Albright to speak to you. Is that correct?

Barak: No, he did not. I told him, look, Mr. President, it will block everything for 36 hours. I will not do anything.

Cohen-Almagor: Why?

Barak: I will not block my people from talking to each other, from talking to the Palestinians or to your people. But I will not let it move, because, if they rejected moving in the presence of the American president, there was no way they will move in his absence. I loved Madeleine, I highly appreciated her. But she didn't have the gravitas or the capacity to move it. The real, essential problem they face here is that, not only that Arafat is not ready to do it himself, or to let his people express any slight readiness to move forward on any issue, as even in your presence in the background, no way that something will be done when you are not here. And so, I tell you that, from my point of view, on our level, it stops for 72 hours or whatever time it will take. And he basically agreed.

Cohen-Almagor: So, what happened for 72 hours? Did something happen? You were in your cabin, I understand.

Barak: Look, at a certain point, probably both delegations were meeting here and there, but not in an organized way. They played some basketball and other things. And at a certain point, I chose not to go to the common dinners, because it was meaningless. You are there, you behave as if it is normal, but it is abnormal. So, by going there as if you are conducting business as usual you project that you do not give enough importance to the real negotiations, however unsuccessful, that are going on with the president of the United States. He is not in the room, but he is in the other room. So, I requested that my meals be brought to my cabin. I was there with several close aides. And Sher and Yatom were updating me. They came with the news that Albright was on the way to see me. She wanted to talk to me. And, you know, I thought that either Clinton didn't tell her that we agreed that I will not move it, or that he agreed, but she tried anyhow. I have a very good personal relationship with her. I didn't want to insult her. So, I immediately changed into sport shoes and clothes, and just went outside to run. I used to run around the whole Camp David compound every day or two. So, I am engaging in sport. So, for sure she understood that I didn't want to meet her. In fact, I remarked to Clinton, when he came back, that I didn't like the fact that there was somehow a "broken telephone", that Albright was not told that we agreed that we would not meet.

- Cohen-Almagor: And when Clinton returned it was too late, I presume. Nothing could be salvaged.
- Barak: It was not too late for a breakthrough, if the other side wanted it. Remember, for example, in the first Camp David, if Begin would have tried to drag it until the last moment, if it was the last 24 hours, they probably would still complete it in 24 hours. The Americans might prolong the summit for another 36 hours in order to complete it.
- Cohen-Almagor: But, in fact, nothing happened when he returned. He didn't salvage anything.
- Barak: No, no. There was a final attempt to see if there is a ripeness, but not in a very detailed way. They tried to protect it from being announced as a failure. So, we had some important meetings. But it was clear that Arafat was not there basically.
- Cohen-Almagor: Did you try, at any point, to bypass him? With Rashid or Dahlan. To try to talk to him, or through him without –
- Barak: No. No.
- Cohen-Almagor: Did the Americans try?
- Barak: It is a little bit, I do not know how to put it, denigrating, to go to his people behind his back. Those people owed their loyalty to him. They will tell him. We knew from their whole behavior, during these two weeks, that they did not have real authority to make any decision on their own, and they will not do it with me. And, in fact, on a personal level, Sher was very close to some of them. Lipkin was extremely close to some of them. Ginossar was very close to them. Ginossar formally was not part of our mission, but, practically, he was. So, I knew that they are there. And they were coming to me from time to time, saying this and that guy, he seems a little bit more flexible in private. So, we tried to speak to him. Someone who was a close friend of Lipkin can talk to him, and be sure that he will not share it with anyone. But talking to me, they have to report. They do not report to Arafat about every talk they had with someone they are very close to. So, I preferred to keep it as an open crack or door, for informal exchanges, rather than to come, with my weight and presence, that they have to report everywhere.
- Cohen-Almagor: Was Arafat the only person who made decisions?
- Barak: Yes. We thought, at the beginning, that Abu Ala can be independent and make some decisions. That was not the case. And toward the end, Abu Mazen was not there. Toward the end, he found some remote relative who had a wedding in Amman, and he left Camp David.

- Cohen-Almagor: It was his son. He went for four days.
- Barak: His son, I didn't know. He left four days before. I interpreted it as if he understood that no breakthrough would come out of this summit, and that it was better for him not to be present when it failed.
- Cohen-Almagor: Could he, Arafat, decide alone? Without the others? Was it possible for him?
- Barak: He was the only one who had the authority, if he would have decided to. So, for him, even calling and complaining to Mubarak or the Jordanian king or the Saudi king or whatever, it was just a ritual to bring them.
- Cohen-Almagor: Abu Mazen was not there for four days. Abu Ala was insulted by Clinton. You mentioned this event, when Clinton became red and so on, and started shouting at Abu Ala, and as a result of that - I do not know whether you know that - but Abu Ala just actually put on his pajamas and closed himself in his room after this clash with Clinton. So, there was no Abu Mazen, there is no Abu Ala, and they are the two most important people in the Palestinian camp. Was it possible for Arafat to decide anything without them?
- Barak: Yes, I am sure. As a close observer of the situation, as someone who experienced it on his own.
- Cohen-Almagor: That he *was* able.
- Barak: Of course. Of course he was. The same way that I did it in Lebanon. I was ready to do it in Syria. You know, at a certain point years earlier, when I was still chief of staff, Rabin asked me, "What do you think about what we are negotiating with Syria?" We had a discussion about Syria. We discussed what we were proposing to Warren Christopher and Dennis Ross, who were shuttling back and forth.
- Cohen-Almagor: You are not Arafat. You are a very different person and you were leading a democracy. It is entirely different from Arafat's position, I think.
- Barak: I am not sure, not sure. He used to complain that he will be assassinated. So, I told him, Sadat was assassinated because of his effort to make peace with Israel, directly. Rabin was assassinated because he was ready to make peace with you. Tell me of one single Palestinian who was assassinated because he tried to make peace with Israel. I told him, in terms of precedence, I am in a riskier situation than you are. But it is not the same. I tell you that I found in many democratic leaders an absence of readiness. In fact, in regard to Syria, even I was blamed by some of my political opponents in Israel and



some of the Americans – that Barak got cold feet at a certain point with Syria, at Shepherdstown. It is not true. I told Rabin, years earlier, I told him it is not about the public. He asked me: How will it pass the public? I told him it is not about the public. It is only about us. He asked me: What do you mean? I said, if we couldn't be convinced that the terms we propose really, genuinely serve the security interests of Israel, then we should not propose them to the public. But if we are convinced that this is something that should be accepted, not because it is clear of being a security risk, but because we still believe that Israel can be effectively defended or protected, in case we make these compromises, and that it is worth the risk, because of the fruits of the potential peace agreement that is waiting down the stream. If we got to this position, we will have the courage of our convictions to go from door to door in Israel, in a referendum and win. And, in fact, even about Camp David, I said, why not try now? If I will bring back a framework agreement, it will not be a peace agreement. If it includes painful decisions, it will be put forward in a referendum. But I remembered, all the way, what happened at the first Camp David. We talked about it. Three weeks before Camp David, a year after the visit of Sadat to the Knesset, two-thirds in the polls were against giving up the entire Sinai for peace. Three weeks after he came back, even before ratification by the Knesset, two-thirds of the people believed that it was great. The public and the masses are very, if you know the term, accepting of leadership. And for sure, the position of Arafat, in his public, was much stronger than mine in ours, at the time. And I had no hesitation for one moment that if there is agreement that passed my judgement, it will pass in a referendum.

Cohen-Almagor: You were, I would not say optimistic, but you thought that there could be an agreement, before you went to Camp David. You thought that maybe something can be done with him. That is why you went.

Barak: No, no, no. I went for two reasons. I went because I believed that there is a responsibility to try, even independently of the question. And as long as there is a significant probability that it could be done, you have to try. Even if you believe that the probability is low, you have the responsibility to do it because when you bury the people, as a consequence of this, not self-created, but half self-created deadlock, you cannot honestly answer the question, why the hell you did not try to solve it? But what price the nation should not be ready to pay in order to make clear whether there was a choice or not?

Cohen-Almagor: So, you were not optimistic when you went to Camp David.

Barak: I was realistic. I was brought up in science. You can never know whether a theory is right or wrong until you test it, until reality verifies that it is valid or not. I was very cool-headed. I wished, of course, that it would succeed. I thought that there would be no better opportunity because we were in a unique point in time, with the collapse of the

Soviet Union, and what happened in the first Gulf War, the fact that the Jordanians and Arafat were not there to support others to liberate Kuwait from Saddam, and the huge investment and political capital invested in Oslo. It was not clear of risk. And then Rabin was assassinated, and Clinton was nearing the end of his tenure. Still I had the awareness that it is up us. I cannot look to the clouds or the corner of the room. I am here now, and I saw no more important meaning to sitting in the chair of the prime minister than to make clear that the needed attempt would be genuine, generous, ready to take painful, painful - I had no illusion about how painful the decisions might be, and what kind of fight to ratify or approve them might follow. But I thought that that is my basic role, this is what you were elected for. So, it is not optimism. You know, on a very shallow level, they said that Barak thought that he can solve the whole problem by just letting Arafat, putting him, bringing him in a room with the right people; he will manipulate him. But it was never the truth; it was just the budding fake news culture.

Cohen-Almagor: At what point did you think that this is done? That Camp David failed. When did you realize that?

Barak: I was extremely worried that it was over and will end with nothing. And when Clinton left for Okinawa - in fact he delayed his departure by a day. We tried for an extra day. He delayed his departure and arrived a little bit late to Okinawa. And the situation became clear. You know, I am a very stable character. I do not have this pendulum from either euphoria or hysteria. I cannot blame anyone. I made all the decisions. I was there. I have no one to blame. I did it, in spite of the fact that I was aware that the bridges were burning behind me when I moved forward to control the situation politically. And all these scenarios were processed by myself, and I shared them with Clinton at the very first meeting that we had, 18 months earlier. And so, this is the reality. You understand, even as a leader, as a human being, you cannot act out physically. As a leader, you know there are certain things you should try, even if you are not sure. And there are certain things that should not be tried if there is a significant chance that they will not work. And I did my best, and I am very proud of it. People ask me, what do you think historians will say, about that you were kicked out after? I do not care about what historians will say. When people will have all the documents and the perspective, they will see a rational, no-nonsense leader who was ready to come to grips with the horns of the dilemma, and try to, to the extent of human capacity, to shape it for the better.

## Notes

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- <sup>ii</sup> For further discussion, see R. Cohen-Almagor, “The Oslo Peace Process: Interview with Joel Singer”, *Israel Affairs*, 24(5) (2018): 733–766.
- <sup>iii</sup> R. Cohen-Almagor, “Lessons from Peace Negotiations: Interview with Ehud Olmert”, *Israel Affairs*, 27(6) (2021): 1160-1189.
- <sup>iv</sup> R. Cohen-Almagor, “Fifty Years of Israeli Occupation”, *E-International Relations* (14 October 2017), <http://www.e-ir.info/2017/10/14/fifty-years-of-israeli-occupation/>
- <sup>v</sup> G. Ernst Frankel, “Prefabricated and Relocatable Artificial Island Technology”, *Macro-Engineering*, Mit Brunel Lectures on Global Infrastructure, Woodhead Publishing Series in Civil and Structural Engineering (1997): 155-173, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9781898563334500124>
- <sup>vi</sup> "Commanders for Israel's Security" (CIS) is a non-partisan movement comprising over three-hundred retired IDF generals as well as Shin Bet, Mossad, and Israel Police equivalents united in their commitment to Israel's future as a strong, Jewish democracy. [en.cis.org.il](http://en.cis.org.il)
- <sup>vii</sup> Jerold S. Auerbach, *Brothers at War: Israel and the Tragedy of the Altalena* (New Orleans: Quid Pro, 2011).
- <sup>viii</sup> The State of Palestine is a partially recognized sovereign state, similar to Kosovo and Taiwan, classified as a "non-member observer state" by the United Nations. As of April 2022, 138 of the United Nations' 193 member (and one observer) have recognized Palestine. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-that-recognize-palestine>
- <sup>ix</sup> R. Cohen-Almagor, “Lessons from the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Talks: An Interview with Aharon Barak”, *Israel Studies Review*, 34(2) (Autumn 2019): 1–32.
- <sup>x</sup> Barak, *My Country, My Life*.
- <sup>xi</sup> Aref El Aref, *A Brief Guide to the Dome of the Rock and Al-Haram Al-Sharif* (Supreme Awqaf Council, 1 Jan. 1965).
- <sup>xii</sup> Shlomo Ben-Ami, *Prophets without Honor: The 2000 Camp David Summit and the End of the Two-State Solution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Dan Meridor, “Camp David Diaries,” *Haaretz* (29 July 2011) (Hebrew).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ben-Ami, *Scars of War*; idem, “Ben-Ami's Camp David Diaries.”
- <sup>xv</sup> Yatom, *The Labyrinth of Power*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Gilead Sher, *The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations, 1999-2001: Within Reach* (London: Routledge, 2006).

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