

Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations through the Eyes of Gamal Helal

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This interview is 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 Arab-Israeli 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 the challenges and obstacles on the road to peace and suggest ways for moving forward. Prior to the interviews, interviewees signed consent forms. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and the text was sent to interviewees for authorization. The interview with Gamal Helal, a senior American diplomat, interpreter and advisor to Democrat and Republican Presidents who participated in the Camp David 2000 peace summit and in many negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, reveals the challenges on the way to peace, the mistakes that were made along the way, and a potential solution to the conflict.

The interview was long. Its full transcript is 35-page long. Here we publish only a small segment of this interesting communication.

Key words: conflict resolution, diplomacy, Israel, mediation, Palestinian Authority, peace, United States

Cohen-Almagor: Today is the 11th of November 2022. This is an interview with Gamal Helal, who is in Washington. I am at my home in Beverley, UK and we are conducting a Microsoft Teams interview.

Keys for successful negotiations and mediation

Cohen-Almagor: First, what do you think are the keys for successful negotiations?

Helal: I would say the real key, in my view, is the acceptance of the intended goal of these negotiations, and the promotion of why we are doing these negotiations. If I hide, either from my government or from my public, the value and what I would gain from these negotiations, then I start the first step of misleading. Because that means I am embarking on these negotiations with the mindset of two tracks. One is to continue, the other one is to place obstacles and end it. So, I think the first step would be to make it clear, in public, why I am doing this, what I intend to get out of it, and what are the principles that will guide me. And no side should shy away from saying this. Even the things that would not be acceptable at that time, publish it. I know politicians do not like that, because politics is a little bit different. However, what I remember are the very profound words that were said by late Prime Minister Rabin in one of his interviews. "I will negotiate peace as if there is no terror. And I will fight terror as if there is no peace process." I think that is the essence, and that is what is really needed to start any kind of negotiations. Clarity. What is it that I am doing and why? I do not believe that this happened on any of the tracks, frankly. They

kept everything secret until they would reach an agreement. Then they had a hard time promoting their agreement, one side or another. In some cases, it worked. In some cases, it did not work. But the point here goes back to your question. I believe that clarity, in terms of what are the principles that will govern my negotiations. Why am I doing these negotiations? Why would we win, if we reach an agreement? What would we lose, if we do not reach an agreement? And it can be even on both sides. [21:39]

Cohen-Almagor: Thank you. What do you think are the keys for successful mediation?

Helal: Are you always going to ask the hard questions? First of all, I will actually question: is there a need for mediation? And is that need permanent or temporary? Sometimes, as a tactical diplomatic move, you might need a third party to mediate. However, if you are not careful, you become the third leg and you become a buffer zone. But also, you become the reason why each side wants to hide behind you, to blame the other. There are negotiations that can succeed without a third party, without a mediator. And there are negotiations that might need a mediator early on. But a clever mediator should say, in my view, that I am not a permanent presence in this. I will let you sit down together. Then my role will change. As the US, I think we failed on that front. We became a permanent element. It was a three-way negotiation always, even if the two sides were negotiating face to face, as was the case on the Palestinian side. But we were always there, sometimes to help, sometimes we became, unintentionally, an obstacle. Because we gave people, we gave the sides the opportunity and the chance to hide behind us and to use us as an excuse. So, then we became, I would say, I do not want to say an obstacle, but we became unhelpful. Not intentionally, but because of the way we positioned ourselves in these negotiations. So, the role of the mediator has to be very carefully calibrated. And it has to be very well-defined and accepted by everybody, that it is going to be limited, it is going to be confined, it is going to be used only as a safety valve or a safety net, but *not* as a permanent player throughout the negotiations.

Cohen-Almagor: In order to wrap it all up, do we need to have a mediator?

Helal: No, you need to revive, basically, a tangible, real hope that there could be an agreement. Right now, I do not think both sides believe that an agreement is viable, that an agreement is reachable, or an agreement is practical. I mean, look at the politics on both sides. Look at the leadership on both sides. And that is what reflects the reality. The peace process is not going to be based on wishful thinking or a very clever political move or theory. The peace process will have to be based on a genuine desire on both sides that the ultimate outcome will have to be coexistence. Do not even call it two states. Do not even call it whatever of the old terminology. But are the two sides willing to coexist and give what it takes to reach that understanding and agreement, or are we still going to continue this process, on the basis of generosity on one side, and accepting that generosity on the other side? That will not lead you to a peace agreement. And I think the worst is yet to come. What we have now is a dormant status of two populations, two groups that do not trust each other, do not see anything on the horizon that makes them trust each other. And I will even dare to say, do not see the *value* of taking a step forward to achieve that. You have to convince them that they really need to believe that the ultimate objective here

is coexistence. And then you will look at what is needed for that coexistence to become solid and become some kind of an arrangement or an agreement. So, far, I do not think that there is hope. The Palestinians on one side, they see that either the Israelis or the United States or the world community succeeded in delegitimizing all forms of resistance. All of it. Accept the status quo, try to find a way to reach some kind of an agreement. So, they feel that everything they will say to oppose the status quo has been delegitimized. No more arms struggle. It is unacceptable by the world community. Even civil disobedience probably will be no longer acceptable.

Cohen-Almagor: They never tried it.

Helal: They never tried it, and maybe they will try it in the future. I do not know. But the point here is, there has to be a form of saying no that is acceptable, because when they said it during the negotiations, they produced bupkis. Nothing. You can say no from now until hell freezes over. These are the principles of the process. This is the structure of the process, which was fraud, as I mentioned to you earlier, land for peace and all of this. But that is what you got. So, the problem itself in the process, the problem that you are unwilling to accept the minimum.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay, let us suppose that we are talking now about the very last stage of negotiations. And now we are discussing issues like refugees and Jerusalem, that were kept until the last stage. And both sides feel that they cannot bang heads against each other, because it is not very fruitful. And they call on a mediator, who actually can mediate between the two sides.

On refugees

Helal: Well, actually, I really think, I do not know what my other colleagues told you, but I really think that the issue of refugees was no longer an issue.

Cohen-Almagor: Really?

Helal: Oh, yes. It was a phony issue. And the Palestinians knew it and the Arabs knew it and the Israelis knew it.

Cohen-Almagor: How do you know that? That is very interesting. Nobody told me that. How do you know that it was a phony issue?

Helal: It was a done deal. There was nothing more to negotiate. But it was used by the Palestinians as a card, to get what was important to them. And what was important to them was the 100% of the territories.

Cohen-Almagor: How do you know that?

Helal: How do I know that? I was in the middle of the negotiations. What do you mean, how do I know that?

Cohen-Almagor: They *told* you? Because I am saying, I have interviewed 80 people. Nobody told me that.

Helal: They will never tell you that, because of a principle. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed on. That principle prevented anybody from accepting anything. The issue of refugees was no longer a problem. We had presented an incredible set of four or five or six different elements that would have been, at the end of the day, acceptable. No question about it in my mind.

Cohen-Almagor: Do you remember them? What were they?

Helal: I can try to refresh my memory. I think one of them was to utilize family unification, which is an Israeli law, to bring some of those Palestinians who left in 1948, and to have the right to live unconditionally in the newly-established state of Palestine. In the West Bank and Gaza. Number two, President Clinton was talking about a massive fund to compensate. We were talking about, I think, 37, 47 billion dollars, to compensate for those who needed compensation as a result of 1948. We were talking about a number of countries, immigration countries, that would be willing to have some of those refugees. The United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil and couple of other European countries that were willing to accept those who do not want to continue to live where they are living right now. Number four. The Palestinians who are living now in different countries could continue to live in those countries, if those countries would allow it. And the issue here, obviously, was focusing on Lebanon, for example, because of the demographic balance and the sensitivity of it. Or the Palestinians, who are living anywhere else, either in the Arab world or in Europe, and did not want to continue to live there. If those countries would accept them, then they would become legitimate residents of those countries. If those countries would not accept them, then they would have the option to go to the newly-established state of Palestine, to immigrate to the United States or Canada or Australia or Brazil or any of those countries, to be compensated financially. And also, I think the Palestinians made it clear, including Abu Mazen and the other parts of the leadership, that those who were born and lived and suffered, for example, had no plans to go back and live and suffer. So, the issue of saying that the issue of refugees was a big problem, that is false. That is not true. It was not a problem, but it was a card in the hands of the Palestinians. And I think the Israelis knew it, but they did not want to admit it.

Cohen-Almagor: Did any Palestinian tell you that, that it is merely a card? Or is it your interpretation?

Helal: I am not stupid. I know it is a card. Everybody knew it is a card. Everybody who was honest and involved in the negotiations knew that it is a card. But the point here is, was this card enough to reach an agreement? I would say no. That is not the bread and butter of the agreement. The bread and the butter of the agreement is land. And on that issue, the Israelis were not willing to give the 100% of land that was taken on June 5, 1967. I can understand why, but that is the cornerstone. The other piece of this is Jerusalem. So, it is not the refugees. It was never the refugees. All this was just marginal, in terms of its impact on the process, but it was very important as a negotiating tactic.

Cohen-Almagor: Now, you mentioned money. You said there was something like, you are not sure, 35 or 45 billion dollars. That is a very large sum.

Helal: It is very large sum. President Clinton was working very hard to make sure that there was a substantial fund for anybody who immigrated or was forced to immigrate or was forced to leave in 1948 and, for some reason, they wanted either compensation or they just do not want to go back either to Israel or Palestine and put those two behind them. At least there would be a fund. And it was not completely an American fund. This was President Clinton's plan, to collect it from all corners of the earth, including the Gulf states, including Europeans, including everybody. Everybody wanted them to contribute to this. If they really wanted to find the solution, it was time to put their money where their mouth was. [40:22]

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. But that requires the power of the United States to do that. There are very few countries, I mean, I cannot think of any other country, besides the United States, that would be able to garner such a process and do that.

Helal: Correct. And at that time, that was a very important role that the United States would play.

American-Israeli relationship

Cohen-Almagor: Do you think that it is crucial to be an impartial broker, impartial mediator? Or impartiality is not important.

Helal: It is very important, but it is almost impossible for the United States to be impartial when it comes to Israeli-Arab negotiations.

Cohen-Almagor: It is because of shared values?

Helal: Yes, shared values, shared understanding. Of course, there is a role for Jewish Americans. Of course, there is a role for all kinds of lobbying groups, because this is the nature of American society. You are allowed to lobby. You are allowed to promote your point of view. And if you succeed and others fail, that is not a problem in the system. That is a problem in you. And if the Arabs failed to make their point of view and make their story and their narrative clear to the American public and American government, that is not Israel's fault. That is their lack of being able to affect the US society and policymakers and think tanks and the media and everything. This is hard work, and the Israelis succeeded. And they should be praised for that, working day and night in every community and every society, in every county, state. And every field, media, think tanks, governments, you name it, to promote the narrative of what you believe in. This is not a hit and run approach. This is consistency. This is durability. This is something you have to do day and night, regardless of the political agenda. And the Israelis succeeded in doing this and they will continue to succeed in doing this, because the society accepts it. It is a part of who we are in the United States.

Cohen-Almagor: Okay. So, you explained to me that United States is unable to become impartial when it comes to Israel and Palestine. Is this a catch-22? Does it mean that the United States cannot play a meaningful role in the negotiations? Because of that.

Helal: With the Israeli government, in general, we have a principle. It is called "No surprise". The principle of no surprise, basically forces us to say, or sometimes decide, sometimes discuss, sometimes consult with the Israeli side about what we would like to do, because we agreed to no surprise. So, that, in itself, is a shackle that we impose on ourselves. Is it useful? Some would argue yes, because what is the reality here? The reality here is we cannot force Israel to do anything, but we can convince, persuade Israel to do certain things. [45:02] And if we keep surprising them, there will be no government in Israel that will trust us. And therefore, since trust is very important, nobody will be willing to work with us. Who holds all the cards here? It is not the United States. It is Israel. Israel holds all the cards. So, from a practical point of view, if you are going to mediate, you will take that side into more consideration than the others, because they have the ability to say yes or no. And when they say yes, we will work very hard to convince the other side with this yes. If you reverse that formula, and the Arabs would say something, and we try to run it by the Israelis and they say no, it is a dead end. The Arab Initiative is an example. And when I say the Arab Initiative, obviously a lot of people would argue, including myself, what exactly is the Arab Initiative? Because the initial phrase or paragraph or sentence that was supposedly given by Crown Prince Abdullah to Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, was basically, *if* the Israelis will give the Palestinians their land, the road will be open to have peace between all of them, all the Arab states and Israel, So, the Initiative, in its initial phase, was limited to the Palestinians. Then that Initiative went to the Arab League and became complicated. Oh, you had to add Lebanon. Oh, you had to add Syria to it. So, it became another form of 242, land for peace. So, that is why the Initiative died. Immediately. Because it was not clear to start with. The original intention was good, by Crown Prince Abdullah at that time. But it became polluted and toxic by the Arab League, when it was expanded to include other territories, all Arab territories, instead of the Palestinians. And I have never seen, actually, a formal text of this Initiative when it was initiated. We all saw the form that the Arab League produced. But I would argue that it was fundamentally different than what Crown Prince Abdullah said. That is basically it. I am sorry.

Arafat

Cohen-Almagor: You met Arafat many, many times. What did you think of him?

Helal: Sometimes he was very reasonable, sometimes he was very unreasonable. And here again, I am going to quote Yitzhak Rabin, when he said once in a television interview, "When it comes to the Middle East, logic is not the most dominating factor in the Middle East." I think Arafat, at some points, felt that he was belittled. At some points, he felt that he was looked at as, it is okay to humiliate him. Sometimes, he felt that he was looked at as not the major player that he thought of himself. His ego was not fed enough. But sometimes also, he was a very practical and very down to earth guy. But he never ever wavered from the two most important things that he had in his own mind. Jerusalem and the land. He always felt that he is not less than Sadat. He is not less than Hafez al-Assad. One got all his land back. The other one was basically promised to get all his land back. So, he was not willing to show more than what he did in terms of flexibility. Waving the violence card, when he thought that tactically it was useful. Being a hardliner when he thought that it was useful. Or being flexible when he thought it was useful. Sometimes, I got the sense

that he created his own reality, that maybe it was detached from the reality itself. And on that particular front, I would say maybe minimizing how important peace is to the Israeli public, or how important Jerusalem is to the Israeli public. Maybe he could have done more on that front, but he was expecting more praise, maybe, from Israeli politicians and government, even for the baby steps that he was taking. [1:11:00]

Cohen-Almagor: How do you explain his saying or claim – and when he told it to Israelis, they almost fell out of their chairs – that the Temple was actually in Yemen? How do you explain that?

Helal: This is the typical tactical Arafat use of fantasy to serve reality. He said it is in Yemen. At some point, he said it is in Saudi Arabia. At some point, he said, I do not know where. And there were so many things that I am not at liberty to say at this interview.

Cohen-Almagor: But why? He was just enraging his partners. So, why did he say that?

Helal: Yes, well, maybe, let me put it this way. People in his own teams had big smiling faces whenever he came up with any of these ideas.

Cohen-Almagor: Why? To make them smile? I mean, why? Why do that?

Helal: No, to minimize the value of Jerusalem to the Jewish people and Israel.

Cohen-Almagor: It is not going to minimize, I mean, of course not.

Helal: But in his mind, it will. It will not, in terms of having a real impact, having the Israelis or the Jewish people change their mind. But for him, it was to say, listen, I am not going to roll over when it comes to the issue of Jerusalem.

Cohen-Almagor: Shlomo Ben-Ami told me that negotiating with Yasser Arafat was like picking up mercury with a fork. Impossible. Ehud Barak said that the reason why he did not want to negotiate with Yasser Arafat is that Yasser Arafat was unable to negotiate. He would just tell you stories. And he would not be concrete. And there was no way that he could communicate with him in a reasonable manner that could actually be effective. So, he just avoided the entire exercise. He was totally, but absolutely disillusioned, with Yasser Arafat. How do you explain these things?

Helal: I will tell all those Israelis to join the club. What I mean is, the same exact words, you can hear them from any Arab leader who dealt with Arafat. From any American who dealt with Arafat. And certainly, it applies to all Israelis who dealt with Arafat. Not all of them. Some of them were able, may God bless his soul, Yossi Ginnossar, for example, was one of the people that really penetrated Arafat and he had a good working relationship. Amnon Shahak was the same thing. General Shahak, was one of the people who basically were able to call his BS. So, yes, some Israelis succeeded. Some Arabs succeeded. Not all of them. You will hear all kinds of stories from the late King Fahd to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to President

Mubarak to any Arab leaders about the difficulties and the challenges that they always had over the years with Arafat, trying to figure out what exactly he wants. If you go to Prince Bandar's memoirs on things that he said in the early '80s, when he succeeded in securing a commitment from President Reagan, regarding the right to self-determination in '82, I think, or '83, which was a *huge* success for the Palestinians and which was *the* demand from Arafat. And they delivered it to Arafat on a silver platter. Arafat said, "Okay, what I need now is an airplane to go around the Arab capitals to promote this idea and celebrate this success." He took that plane, he travelled to half of the world capitals, and never got back to King Fahd. So, it was not easy to deal with Arafat, and it was not easy to figure out what he wants. But at the same time, I would say, or I would argue, that for those few who would have been able to penetrate Arafat, they could have been in a position to put him, somehow, in harmony with reality. But these were very few and most of the time, very ineffective. One of the people that comes to my mind now is the late Osama El-Baz of Egypt. He was one of the people who was able, really, to sort of bring Arafat back to reality and speak very frankly with him. But anyway, Arafat was Arafat. If you ask me, if Arafat got territories in Jerusalem, the way he wanted, would he have signed a peace agreement with Israel? I would say yes. But did he have any hope of achieving this, too? I would say no. Did he toy with the Israelis, because he knew that he will never get Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank and Gaza, as it has been interpreted by the Arabs and the Palestinians? I would say, he never believed that this would happen. He was hoping, and he thought he would do the last possible thing he could, which is get involved in peace negotiations. But I think, deep down, he knew that the definition of land for peace, what was applicable to Egypt and what could have been applicable to Syria, and the idea of getting East Jerusalem and the West Bank and Gaza back for the Palestinians, I do not think he ever believed that this would happen. And he was unwilling to accept less than that, under the circumstances. [1:17:49]

Cohen-Almagor: Did language play any role? I mean, were you closer to him than your colleagues, because you spoke the same language?

Helal: Yes, as a matter of fact, during Camp David, President Clinton and Prime Minister Barak they both sent me it, mainly President Clinton, to have a sit down with Arafat. And I went there, and I sat down with Arafat for about 45 minutes. And we were there for about 45 minutes, and the entire conversation was in Arabic. And that was during Camp David. And, basically, it was around one thing. "What you have is an opportunity. Maybe it is an imperfect opportunity, but such opportunities come every ten or fifteen or twenty years. And if this one is lost, I do not think another opportunity will come in ten or fifteen years. And by that time, there will be no more land to negotiate over. The land will be gone. Settlements will be everywhere. So, what you have now is an opportunity. It is imperfect. You will not be able to achieve everything you want to achieve. But at least, do not waste this opportunity." For 45 minutes, I hammered him on this point. Then, at the end of the 45 minutes, he looked at me and he said, "If I do that, they will kill me." When I briefed President Clinton and Prime Minister Barak, Barak said, "So, what? Let them kill him. Rabin died for peace. Sadat died for peace. I probably will die for peace. Let him die for peace, too." But yes, I mean language was a factor, but it is not a very great factor. This is not about language. This is about Jerusalem and land. That is what it amounts to.

Cohen-Almagor: So, if Barak would give 100% of the West Bank, including in Jerusalem, then Arafat would have signed?

Helal: Any Israeli prime minister, who would do that – Arafat would sign, not only Barak. But at the same time, I think, deep down, Arafat knew that there is no prime minister, alive or dead that can do this. So, he did not want to go to his grave being the one who gave up on Jerusalem and the Palestinian cause. I think, in his mind, he said, “Okay. During my time, I will never achieve this. I would rather die with honor, than live with shame.”

Camp David peace summit

Cohen-Almagor: Let's discuss Camp David 2000. Why did you invite only the Israelis and the Palestinians? I mean, Arafat claimed all the time that he cannot do that. He cannot do that, because he has to consult. He has to consult the Saudis. He has to consult the Egyptians, the Jordanians. If you wanted to really solve the problem, why not bring them all in?

Helal: Bring all the parties? No, that would have complicated matters, because the Arabs would say no, and the Palestinians would hide behind the Arabs. The Israelis might feel some pressure, that they are going to be cornered and the issue would no longer be the Palestinian track, but all Arab occupied territories. And the issue will become the Syrian track and the Lebanese track, and no longer the Palestinian track. So, no. That was not even in the cards. When we tried to consult with the Arab leaders during Camp David, it was too little, too late. And maybe if we made a mistake, it would have been this. Not to have enough face-to-face consultations with the leaders prior to Camp David. But it is always a two-edged sword. It is a way that could work or it could put death into that process, because you will never know what these meetings will produce because everybody here is trying to protect himself. So, the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, the Emiratis, the Moroccans, everybody, they will tell you the standard answer. We will agree to anything that Arafat will agree to. And Arafat would say, “I will never agree to anything unless all the Arabs will agree, too.” So, again, you go back to the catch-22.

Cohen-Almagor: The atmosphere, was it good at Camp David? Was the atmosphere good at Camp David?

Helal: It was good, but tense. It was good, but tense. I mean, you have to understand that the Palestinian negotiators and Israeli negotiators, they had their own lives together. These people were closer to each other, more than anybody else thinks. They dealt with each other all the time. But each one of those two sides of the negotiators, they had a sword on their necks. Either on the Israeli side or on the Palestinian side. And if the leaders were not prepared to do what was needed, then negotiators cannot do much.

Cohen-Almagor: Did the Israelis and the Palestinians talk to each other then?

Helal: All the time. The Israelis and the Palestinians never stopped talking to each other. Except the leaders. And the reason is Barak decided not to drive any bilateral talks with Arafat.

Cohen-Almagor: Was Arafat insulted by this?

Helal: Of course! *We* were insulted by this, because we invited the two sides to Camp David, based on what Ehud Barak told us.

Cohen-Almagor: So, you were surprised that he did not want to meet with him.

Helal: Of course, we were very surprised. And we did not learn from Shepherdstown or from Geneva. We always gave the Israelis the benefit of the doubt.

Cohen-Almagor: Were you aware that Clinton insulted Abu Ala? At that time.

Helal: I was the reason.

Cohen-Almagor: Sorry – you were the reason?

Helal: Yes.

Cohen-Almagor: Oh! Tell me about it!

Helal: Well, we were having negotiations at Camp David. And certainly, President Clinton was trying to work on maps. And the Palestinians were incredibly against maps. So, President Clinton even put a new blank paper, with the shape of the State of Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. And Abu Ala kept refusing even to discuss this. And I was sitting next to President Clinton, and I said, “Mr. President, it is time to be tough.” So, he just simply gave him hell and left the meeting. Because, frankly, it was unacceptable.

Cohen-Almagor: So, this was the discussion about borders, about the territories?

Helal: Yes, because the idea was for this to lead us to territories and percentages and all of this. So, even a blank map was rejected by Abu Ala. It was, frankly, it was unacceptable. And yes, I told President Clinton, “This is unacceptable, and it is time for you to change tactics.” Even after the meeting, he wrote me a note. He sent it with his assistant, saying, “I do not know what we could have done without you, Gamal.”

Cohen-Almagor: Was it constructive? Did it help?

Helal: Of course. It was a very important. If you really want to negotiate, you have to start at some point on the issue of territories.

Cohen-Almagor: But was it a constructive step to lead the negotiation forward?

Helal: Of course! Otherwise, we would be going through the same ring, we would be going through going back to principles, going back to ideas and we would never have an end to this. We went to Camp David in order to put this to rest.

Either by an agreement, which was our hope or, at least, to see are they playing us or what?

Cohen-Almagor: No, no, I understand that. I am asking about whether the eruption of Clinton was constructive to the talks.

Helal: Absolutely. It was followed by additional, very useful, long-time sessions on security, on other issues, on air space which President Clinton had with Dahlan, Rashid, I think, Nabil Shaath and other members of the Palestinian delegation. And we were achieving some progress on that. [1:45:05]

Cohen-Almagor: What about borders, territory?

Helal: Well, again, borders related to maps. And if Abu Ala is refusing to deal with maps, what is there to talk about when it comes to borders?

Cohen-Almagor: I understand. But after that, after the eruption, were they are willing to negotiate maps? Were they were talking maps or not? Was there any progress on that?

Helal: They were not willing to talk about anything. I think President Clinton even left after that, went to Asia or something. I forgot the exact dates. But I think none of these issues would have been seriously tackled without a bilateral, even a trilateral, a series of trilaterals or a series of bilaterals between Arafat and Barak, and occasionally maybe President Clinton. And that did not happen. So, everything else is just nothing.

Cohen-Almagor: So, I understand from you that there was no progress on borders. There was no progress on Jerusalem. Was there any progress on anything during the meetings?

Helal: Depends how you define progress. If you define progress by saying they achieved an agreement on one of the elements, this is never going to happen, either in Camp David or after Camp David. Or if you bring them now. Because the two sides strongly accepted one principle – nothing will be agreed on unless everything is agreed on. Although the principle was laid to give them courage to speak freely, it also gave them shackles, not to show their cards on any of the issues.

Cohen-Almagor: Was it a mistake to go to Camp David? Or was it something you should have tried?

Helal: At that time, I think it was a mistake, but it was an inevitable mistake. When you have the Israeli prime minister telling you, “I am willing to conclude all of this. Just invite me to Camp David”, what do you expect the president of the United States would say? And he has six months left in his administration. You want history to say that Barak said, “I am willing to come to Camp David and finalize the deal with the Palestinians”, and the sitting American president, Mr Clinton, said no? What politician on earth, in the United States or any other country will say no? So, the burden will shift on his inability or unacceptance of hosting this? Of course,

he will accept. The burden should be put on those who asked for Camp David to be convened. Why did you ask for Camp David? Especially when two previous attempts failed. Shepherdstown and Geneva.

Cohen-Almagor: Because he wanted Clinton to pressure Arafat into a corner, so that Arafat will have to concede.

Helal: Well, maybe your prime minister at that time did not know anything about Arafat. They still do not know anything about Arafat or the Palestinian cause.

Vision

Cohen-Almagor: Do you see any vision for the future between the Israelis and the Palestinians? What is going to happen?

Helal: I am going to tell you something now that is probably shocking. A lot of people will not like it. I always believed that the fastest way to achieve a two-state solution is the one-state solution. Shocked enough?

Cohen-Almagor: Explain, please. How do you see that? What is the progression? I need to see it.

Helal: I will explain it to you. During the last two hours, I told you that one thing that the peace process produced is the notion that, somehow, this process is based on Israeli generosity. Or, the Israelis can do it on the cheap. The cost is something I can live with. But if the cost is all the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, that is too high. I cannot live with it. I will never do it. Therefore, one thing the Israeli public *and* governments continue to minimize is the demographic problem. Still, it does not fully sink into the psyche of Israelis. The one-state solution will revive this. The acceptance of the one-state solution will force the Israelis, public and government, and will force the Palestinians that now coexistence is completely taking a different shape and form. We do not know if we want it or not. Which will make them revisit what is it that needs to be done, to find some kind of acceptable two-state solution?

Cohen-Almagor: Who wants a one-state solution?

Helal: People who are sitting on the sidelines, thinking about it, like you and me. Maybe I will not implicate you on this, but people who are trying to think of what is practical. We have tried everything else. I lived with this process for twenty years. Twenty years of my life were spent on this process, and I am not the only one. Others of my colleagues, and maybe entire populations in Israel and the Palestinians lived with it. Nothing moved. Nothing was achieved.

Cohen-Almagor: Israelis want divorce. They do not want to live with the Palestinians.

Helal: I know, but they are not willing to pay for that divorce, the price that is debated. And therefore, what makes them think that the price will have to go a little bit higher, even if reality will prohibit it? And when I say, *even* if reality will prohibit it, because

on the ground, I do not think that the contiguity is there, to create a Palestinian state. I am afraid it is too little, too late. That is my fear.

Cohen-Almagor: But how you are going to create one state, when nobody wants it? How is it going to be created?

Helal: Well, it could be created as a default position. And the default position is that Palestinian Authority will be dismantled. There will be no Palestinian body. Violence will continue. The Israelis will be forced there, somehow, some way. There will be no calls on the Palestinian side for another state. And then the Israelis will have a choice. What are we going to do with these few million Palestinians who live in the West Bank and Gaza? And possibly, what are we going to do with those few, also, who live in Israel proper?

Cohen-Almagor: Continued occupation.

Helal: Well, continued occupation. And how long have you ever heard about perpetual occupation? It does not exist, my friend.

Cohen-Almagor: I do not think that there has ever existed occupation for 50 years.

Helal: Let me tell you something, Rafi. Continuous occupation will lead to real apartheid.

Cohen-Almagor: There is already apartheid, Gamal. There is already apartheid in the West Bank.

Helal: Correct, but there will be more and more and more and more. They will ask for equal rights. Now Israel, as a democracy, promoted itself as a democracy for the sixty, seventy last years. What? All of a sudden, it will become no democracy? My only fear is that no solution will expose Israel. No solution will lead to unacceptable consequences for the future of the State of Israel. Those who think that they live safely are delusional. The status quo is unacceptable. You cannot solve this issue on the cheap, my friend. And so far, everything was around how to solve it on the cheap.

Cohen-Almagor: What do you think about a federation or confederation between the West Bank and Jordan?

Helal: I do not know. It represents a serious threat to the Kingdom of Jordan. The Jordanians do not like it, do not accept it. Do not forget the majority of the population in Jordan are Palestinians, and will continue to be Palestinians. I do not know. Maybe a confederation between the Palestinians and Israel is more realistic.