

Israelis and Palestinians: the Price of Peace

The years of bitter conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, of indiscriminating Palestinian terrorism on the one hand, and on the other of occupation and humiliation imposed by the Israelis on the Palestinians, did not improve the positions of the two sides. Eventually, both parties understood that their respective interests could only be achieved at the negotiating table. Several processes lay at the root of this change, which brought the two sides to Madrid and later to Oslo. They were:

- ▶ the understanding by the Palestinian leadership that the conflict with Israel must be solved by political means, on the basis of the »two-States-for-two-peoples« solution;
- ▶ the success of the first Palestinian Intifada in the territories in the late 1980s as an authentic national and popular struggle against the Israeli occupation;
- ▶ a change in the attitude of the Israeli public and politics regarding the occupation of another people, as well as Palestinian national aspirations;
- ▶ the rising power of Hamas and fundamentalist-Islamic currents in Palestinian society;
- ▶ the global geopolitical changes which have affected the Middle East.

The first chapter of negotiations ended with the Oslo Agreement, which was signed on September 13, 1993, and culminated in the mutual recognition between the PLO and the Israeli government and in the handshake between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin. The Agreement stated that the time had come to end the conflict; to strive together to live in peace, coexistence, mutual respect and security; to reach a comprehensive, permanent and fair agreement; to achieve an historic conciliation; and to accomplish all these goals through negotiations. The two sides therefore began the negotiations on a permanent status between Israel and the PLO, which was expected to lead to a peace agree-

ment between the State of Israel and a Palestinian State.

Previously, the relations between the two peoples had been based on mutual hostility, with each side trying to attain achievements at the expense of the other side. Every victory won by one side was considered a defeat for the other, according to the principles of the zero-sum-game theory. In contrast, »Oslo« was, from the start, guided by efforts to abandon this approach, and to achieve as many win-win situations as possible, notwithstanding that the balance of power was tipped in Israel's favor.

In the past months, a violent confrontation has occurred between Israel and the Palestinians, in which each side has grossly breached the agreements signed. These events have created a mirror image based on which each side is convinced that the other side is responsible for the deterioration of the situation and that the other side is not prepared to reach an agreement based on concessions. At the same time, the reality of the peace process has proven to be stronger than the forces countering it. Many of the patterns and facts on the ground that were created since 1993 continue to operate, and the objective of the two publics remains identical: to reach a peace agreement based on the principles of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 and the two-States solution.

The »Price« of an Agreement

The problematic nature of negotiations with the Palestinians lies in the fact that a majority of the Israeli public believes that it is required to pay the higher price. They believe that the Palestinians are receiving more and more land and sovereignty without having to pay a significant price in return. The high price paid by the Palestinians (even

today) in exchange for an agreement is not clear to most Israelis, who tend to belittle it in comparison with what is demanded of Israel: returning parts of the historical homeland. It is similarly not apparent to many Palestinians that the price expected of Israeli society is very high. In the eyes of many parts of Israeli society this price is unjustified, as they assume that terrorism will continue and they do not believe in a genuine Palestinian desire for peace. Many in Israel are convinced that, even after Israel signs an agreement and withdraws from the territories, the Palestinians will continue to fight Israel in an effort to annihilate the Jewish State.

The Israeli public has become convinced that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is turning a blind eye to terrorism, and perhaps even encouraging it and employing it to satisfy its own ends. This approach had ostensibly been supported by: the terrible terrorist attacks which occurred after the beginning of negotiations; the terrorism against Israelis and within Israel by proxies of the PA during the last few months; the release of jailed terrorists by the PA (including those who had executed the most bloody attacks against Israeli civilians) and the Israeli sense that the PA is unwilling to effectively combat terrorism; and the virulent and incessant anti-Israel incitement.

In the pursuit of peace both sides will pay a high price – concessions which are viewed as extremely difficult by their constituencies – even while each remains unaware or unprepared to recognize the high price paid by the other. The threat this situation represents for the future of the peace process cannot be underestimated. Peace and reconciliation cannot be achieved if the two peoples do not recognize the price which the other side is willing to pay in exchange for a better future.

At this juncture, the negative image each side has of the other continues to feed the traditional hate-filled stereotypes. These stereotypes are accompanied by suspicion and lack of trust that only increase as a result of the difficulties encountered during negotiations, the socio-economic gaps, and the threat of terrorism which is employed by extremist groups interested in undermining the peace process. This constitutes a vicious circle in which suspicions rise and the willingness to advance the process of trust-building and reconciliation diminishes. In their absence, the negotia-

tions become increasingly difficult and the support for the peace process decreases among the two peoples. This is an extremely destructive situation which threatens the chance for peace at its most critical point – that of permanent status negotiations.

The Israeli Perspective

The price that Israel – as the side which holds most of the cards – is expected to pay for peace, is relatively clear. However, by presenting it, one grasps just how meaningful and problematic it is to many Israelis. First and foremost, one must understand that all concessions are filtered through a deeply-rooted fear that the strategic aim uniting the Arab world is to see the State of Israel disappear, or at the very least to destroy the State of Israel as a Zionist entity. It is possible and even necessary to argue against this basic assumption, but nonetheless, it should be understandable that a people that had experienced the Holocaust may have certain paranoia.

The primary concession for Israel is territorial. For over thirty years the Israeli public was educated to believe that the area between the Green Line (prior to the 1967 war) and the Jordan river is strategically essential to Israel's security, and that the Jordan Valley is Israel's primary line of defense in the east. In practice, this approach was relevant to the 1960s when Israel occupied the West Bank, but this doctrine has since ceased to be pertinent to any future war, especially if it is assumed that the future Palestinian State will be non-militarized. Nevertheless, the basic fear of many Israelis, that the withdrawal of the Israeli armed forces from the territories will bring the »enemy« close to home, cannot be easily discounted. The issue of territorial concessions is also vital from an ideological-religious point of view to many Israelis, who believe that the areas of the West Bank and Gaza are part of the biblical promised land.

A second price demanded from Israel is the removal of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. This is not the place to discuss the legality of the settlement enterprise, but the fact is that there are currently over 200,000 Israelis living in approximately 150 communities, which have been established by the State or with its assistance.

Some of the settlements number only several dozen families, but others are inhabited by thousands, and those with over 15,000 inhabitants are considered – for all purposes – Israeli cities. The removal of all the settlements is de facto impossible. The Palestinians understand this and are therefore prepared to accept – as part of a Final Status agreement – limited Israeli annexation of settlement blocs in proximity to the Green Line. In exchange, Israel should transfer sovereign Israeli territories of equal size to the Palestinians (for example near Gaza). Nevertheless, any agreement, including that which was discussed between Israel and the Palestinians in 2000, will demand the removal and uprooting of a quarter to a third of the settlers (approximately 60,000 persons) living in some 100 settlements in areas which will become a part of the future Palestinian State.

An additional »price« is the delicate issue of Jerusalem. Following the Six-Day War, the western part of the city was expanded towards north, south and east. This area was annexed to Israel and declared, by all the subsequent Israeli Governments, as an indivisible part of the Capital. Every Prime Minister since then has declared that Jerusalem is a united Israeli city, which will never again be divided, and Israel's eternal Capital. As a result of this policy, the various governments took a number of steps, including the establishment of Jewish neighborhoods within and around Arab-populated areas in the city. During the years, the Israeli public and Government alike, ignored the important role played by Palestinian Jerusalem (Al Quds) as the administrative, cultural and religious center for the Palestinians in the West Bank. At the same time, they disregard the fact that the 200,000 Arab inhabitants of the city consider themselves as Palestinians and do not want to become Israelis or live under Israeli control. With time, Israelis became aware that the Arab neighborhoods do not constitute an integral part of the Israeli capital. This realization was eventually adopted by Prime Minister Barak, who consented during the Camp David negotiations to the division of Jerusalem between Jews and Arabs, between Israel and Palestine.

The solution to the problem of Jerusalem should follow President Clinton's proposal – i. e. the Arab parts to the Palestinians and the Jewish areas to the Israelis – and the price paid by Israel

should be to transfer the sovereignty over the Arab areas to the Palestinian State. The most delicate issue with regard to Jerusalem is the status of the holy site within the old walled city, known to the Jews as the Temple Mount (Har Habayit) and to the Palestinians as the Haram-ash Sharif. In the final event, Israelis will have to accept the difficult fact that this site, which according to Jewish belief was the site of the holy temple until 2000 years ago, has for over 1300 years been the site of a Muslim mosque and thus will be part of a Palestinian State and not part of the State of Israel. This concession will be most difficult for those Israelis who view this site as the most holy for Jews even today. Conversely, the Palestinians will have to recognize the high importance of the site for Jews, to enable their free entry (and that of other religions) and to honor the site.

Yet another »price« involves the issue of the Palestinian refugees. This problem is both a symbolic and national issue and a material one. The Zionist narrative – when describing the establishment of the State of Israel – has denied and rendered invisible the fact that the Israeli War of Independence, which represents the pinnacle of the success of the Zionist enterprise, was also the lowest and most difficult moment for the Palestinian people, with hundreds of thousands becoming destitute refugees. In an eventual peace agreement Israel will have to accept its partial responsibility for the events which took place during the war, and to express sorrow and regret for Israel's part in creating the refugee situation. The issue of the »right of return« represents an enormous obstacle which both sides will have to overcome in a way which does not threaten the identity of Israel as the home of the Jewish people, while offering a fair and acceptable solution to the Palestinian refugees. Part of this solution will have to be material, with Israel providing monetary compensation to refugees whose property was »inherited« by Israel.

The Palestinian Perspective

The first and most meaningful »price« paid by the Palestinians is the loss of their historic dream for a large Palestinian State established on the entire area of mandatory Palestine. The shattering of the dream entails the acceptance of the new parti-

tion plan and a territorial concession. The future Palestinian State will be established only within the borders of 1967, leaving the Palestinians with less than a quarter (22 percent) of mandatory Palestine. Furthermore, on these twenty two percent Israel has created facts on the ground, by establishing settlements which will influence the final contours of an Israeli-Palestinian permanent status agreement. The resulting agreement will necessarily stray from a sterile framework of peace in exchange for the transfer of lands which were occupied in 1967, and will instead involve a Palestinian acceptance of Israeli annexation of settlement blocs in exchange for territorial compensation.

The issue of the refugees represents the second area in which the Palestinians will pay a price. From the Palestinian perspective, the 1948 war had devastating consequences: the national leadership collapsed, the Palestinian State which was to be created beside Israel was not established, and the territories intended for it were taken by Israel, Egypt and Jordan. Moreover, over half of the Palestinian population (approximately 700,000) became refugees, and were dispersed among neighboring Arab countries, destined for a life of humiliation, poverty and destitution in crowded refugee camps. These events are viewed by the Palestinians as their national catastrophe.

This paper will not enter the discussion of what caused the refugee problem – whether the refugees freely left, fled or were expelled. However, it is clear that the decision by the Israeli Government after the 1948 war, to seal the borders and to prevent the Palestinian inhabitants from returning to their homes, contributed greatly to perpetuating and determining the refugee problem which has since plagued the Arab-Israeli conflict. This decision, which is undoubtedly very problematic from a moral point of view, can however be justified as a legitimate national policy in the face of the genuine threats to Israel's existence during the war, and due to the fact that Israel at the time received hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Arab countries where their lives were in danger.

Be it as it may, from a national and an historical point of view, the refugee issue became the dominant feature of the Palestinian collective discourse and has become the central and unifying ele-

ment of the Palestinian narrative. The Palestinians placed the blame squarely on Israel, and this in turn fed the conflict and hatred in the decades following the war. In entering upon an agreement with Israel, which will obviously have to determine an agreed-upon solution to the problem, this narrative will have to be transformed into accepting the new realities of peace and reconciliation with Israel. Such a solution, if it is to be acceptable to the Israelis, will be far from the declarations made over the years by the Palestinian leadership to its refugee constituency, and will be based more on an objective view of the chances for the future, rather than on the realization of past hopes.

The third area in which the Palestinians are expected to pay »the price of peace« involves combating terror and particularly Islamic terrorism. The Islamic opposition – which uses terrorism to hurt Israel, the peace process and in the final event to oust the PA and establish an Islamic State – presents the PA's struggle against terrorism as benefiting Israel exclusively. In practice, the relentless struggle against Islamic terrorism is in fact one area on which the PA and Israel have total agreement. Senior PA officials understand that the Islamic opposition represents a genuine threat to Arafat and to the national-secular movements (Fatah, Popular Front, Democratic Front etc.), and view the terrorism which the Islamic movements espouse as a danger to peace and stability in the territories and the region as a whole. An effective struggle against terrorism requires such fierce measures as to be seen by Palestinians as verging on a war between brothers. Previously, there was a great deal of cooperation (intelligence and operational) between the Israeli and Palestinian security forces on the issue of combating terrorism. This professional and effective model should be renewed as a basis for a joint struggle against terrorism, but its continuation is contingent on progress made in the negotiations and in the sense of partnership with the Palestinians. However, once the Palestinian authorities renew this cooperation, they will be criticized again for »collaborating« with Israel against Palestinian brothers.

A fourth sphere in which the Palestinians feel they are paying a high price for peace is the stamp of legitimacy which they gave Israel in its relations with the international community and the Arab world. While in Israel the positive change in the

attitude of the Arab countries towards Israel was taken for granted as part of the negotiations for peace, on the Palestinian side any recognition of Israel prior to the signing of a permanent status agreement is seen as undermining the struggle of the Palestinian people. In practice, the Jordanian delegation in Washington signed the protocol for the negotiations with Israel on the day after the Oslo agreement was signed with the PLO, leading to the official signing of the peace agreement with Jordan one year later. The signing of the protocol and of the peace agreement with Jordan were a direct product and consequence of the agreement with the Palestinians, and would not have happened had the Oslo Agreement not been signed. The new legitimacy given to Israel by the Palestinians also brought diplomatic and trade relations with Arab countries in the Persian Gulf and North Africa which had previously recognized Israel. These relations collapsed with the advent of the violent events starting in September 2000 and will probably be re-established when Israel signs an agreement with the Palestinians.

Towards a Permanent Status Agreement Between Israel and a Palestinian State

The Oslo Approach

The Oslo approach was based on the understanding that the negative history between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples represents an almost insurmountable obstacle for conventional-type negotiations. Its goal was to work towards a conceptual change which would lead to a dialogue based, as much as possible, on fairness, equality and common objectives. These values were to be reflected both in the character of the negotiations – including the personal relationships between the negotiators – and in the proffered solutions and implementation. This new type of relationship was supposed to influence the type and character of Palestinian-Israeli talks which would develop between other official and semi-governmental institutions in the future, as well as the dialogues between the two peoples.

The basic aim of the Oslo Agreement was to initiate a process which starts with an Interim Period and leads to a Permanent Status Agreement

between Israel and the PLO as a means of bringing the two sides to peace, coexistence and a decrease in the probability of violent confrontation and war. The Agreement was in fact a Declaration of Principles which mainly outlined the formula for the Interim Period as well as the pending issues to be dealt with in the permanent status negotiations (i.e. Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations with other neighbors, water and economics).

The Oslo Agreement did not spell out the concept that the Permanent Status Agreement will lead to the establishment of a Palestinian State. Nonetheless, until October 2000, when violence erupted between the Palestinians and Israel, the establishment of a State in the territories of the West Bank and Gaza seemed to be only a matter of timing: a question of when a State would be established, rather than if it would be established at all.

Why a State?

In the not too distant past, the prevailing consensus in the Israeli public denied the right of the Palestinian people to a State. The Oslo process changed this. Today, the Israeli public at large, even in right-wing circles, acknowledges that a Palestinian State will eventually be established. Nonetheless, there are political leaders in Israel who still view the establishment of a Palestinian State as the first stage in what they perceive as a predictable process whereby this State will become a strategic threat to Israel. Recent events strengthened the position of those in the Israeli public and government who view the Palestinian State as a black box that transforms tactical threats into strategic ones. Within this black box, they argue, the Palestinians will have the capacity to intercept civilian airplanes at Israeli airports, to own missile launchers that can be used to attack Israel, and to establish an alliance with Iran and Iraq, thereby allowing Iranian and Iraqi soldiers to threaten Tel Aviv.

This threat exists only as a »worst-case scenario.« Since the establishment of the Palestinian State is predicated on the conclusion of a Peace Agreement with regional implications, the probability of the actualization of the »worst-case

scenario« is relatively low. The easiest way, however, of obstructing a political process which aims at resolving the Israeli-Arab conflict, is to tout the extreme and threatening scenario and to label those searching for a balanced and reasonable solution as misperceiving the reality of the Middle East. The withdrawal from Sinai in the framework of the Peace Agreement between Israel and Egypt was originally presented in this way – as an existential threat to Israel because it involved conceding Israel's strategic depth to the Egyptians. This is how the establishment of a Palestinian State is presented today. It is perceived as posing a strategic threat to Israel, although its establishment will be carried out in the framework of a Peace Agreement that will stipulate a non-militarized Palestinian State and a ban on threatening military alliances.

Statesmanship often involves taking calculated risks. The establishment of a Palestinian State – as part of an agreement with Israel – presents a clear example of such risks. This was also the case when Menachem Begin's Government decided to withdraw from all of Sinai as part of the peace agreement with Egypt, despite the apparent advantages that the Sinai Peninsula presented in terms of strategic depth. If and when the course of events leads to compromise and peace with the Palestinians, Israel should clearly have an interest in the establishment of a Palestinian State, and an obligation to take this calculated risk. The State is the most acceptable form of political entity. It is preferable for Israel to have as neighbor a sovereign entity that, by definition, will have to abide by recognized international obligations. The alternative would be a neighbor of unclear status and unfulfilled national aspirations.

The establishment of a Palestinian State will fulfill Palestinian national aspirations and will demonstrate the advantages of a peace agreement with Israel. Moreover, it will clarify the price of any additional confrontation, which could shatter the Palestinian national dream. Societies and countries tend to preserve achievements. It is therefore expected that the Palestinian leadership and public will act accordingly and will endeavor to consolidate the achievement of an independent State rather than undermine and endanger it. Consequently, the motivation to initiate hostile confrontation against Israel will decrease. In the cur-

rent and near-future equation, the nascent Palestinian State will probably stand to lose most from such actions.

Israel could score points against the Palestinians – and perhaps even prevent the establishment of a State – but this will ultimately sabotage the potential success of the Peace Process and undermine Israel's security. The intensive Israeli preoccupation with symbols of Palestinian sovereignty is both excessive and essentially irrelevant, since the Palestinian Authority currently fulfills most of the functions of a State, and has achieved near-State standing in the International Community.

Guidelines for a Permanent Status Arrangement

The aim of a Permanent Status Agreement is peace between the Palestinian and the Israeli people on the basis of coexistence, mutual respect and good neighborly relations, using cooperation and coordination on a vast number of issues, with an emphasis on security and the fight against terrorism. The following set of principles regarding a possible Permanent Status Agreement represents the author's position. However, it is based on Israeli-Palestinian track II understandings that were drafted and updated from 1995 and that culminated in the Clinton Proposal and the Taba Negotiations.

These understandings are underpinned by the working assumption that a demilitarized Palestinian State will be established between the River Jordan and Israel and that its borders will be determined in an Agreement between the two sides. These borders will be based on the Armistice Line that preceded the Six-Day War (1967), but will reflect changes that have occurred since in the West Bank. This will lead to minimal changes of the borderline, whereby Israel will annex some five percent of the territory from the West Bank and an equalized Israeli territory, adjacent to the Gaza Strip (the area with the highest population density in the world), will be transferred to the Palestinians. The Israeli settlers within the annexed areas (comprising over 70 percent of the settlers in the West Bank) will become part of Israel. The rest of the settlers, in over 100 settlements which are not included in the settlement blocs to be annexed, will return to Israel and receive a compensation

package that will include new housing. Their present settlements will become property of the Palestinian State.

From a security standpoint, the sides will have to agree on arrangements that allow Israel to hold a limited military presence, in time and scope, in the territories of the Palestinian State, without compromising the sovereignty of the latter. The River Jordan will therefore continue to serve as the eastern security border of the State of Israel, even after the transfer of sovereignty of areas adjacent to the River to the Palestinians. As mentioned earlier, for many Israelis, withdrawing from the territories of the West Bank and conceding sovereignty to the Palestinians is unacceptable unless accompanied by visible security measures. Thus, an agreement should allow the Israeli armed forces to maintain military intelligence capacities at current levels. The Palestinian State will not have any army and the presence of any other army on its territories will be prohibited. A strong police force will be active in order to maintain security and to prevent terrorism. The Palestinian State will not be able to sign pacts of military cooperation that may endanger Israel. An international observer force will be invited to ensure and monitor the implementation of these security understandings.

Clearly, the refugee issue is extremely sensitive to the Palestinians. We, as Israelis, must understand and address it as such. On the one hand, any solution proposed to the refugee issue that appears to pose even the slightest threat to the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish State will not be accepted and will result in the collapse of negotiations. On the other hand, if the refugee issue is not resolved it will undermine the agreement and will effectively destroy any prospect of historic reconciliation between the two peoples. If the refugee population, constituting about half of the Palestinian people, was to oppose the Permanent Status Agreement, peace would not last. However, it is quite clear to anyone interested in the conclusion of an agreement that accepting all refugee claims, especially the right of return, is fundamentally impossible. According to negotiators participating in the final chapter of negotiations, held in Taba, the conclusion of this extremely sensitive issue of refugees was practically within reach.

Jerusalem should not be divided as a result of an agreement. The city, or at least its Holy Basin,

should continue to serve as one open city and as the capital of both States. Two sovereign areas should be defined – one Israeli, one Palestinian – based on demographic-geographic considerations (i.e. all the Jewish neighborhoods will be under Israeli sovereignty and all the Arab neighborhoods under Palestinian sovereignty). A third area, that should be limited to the region of the Holy Basin, should be supervised by a special joint regime. Two separate municipalities should supervise and manage the day-to-day activities in the City, based on their sovereign areas of jurisdiction. Above these municipalities, a joint coordinating body should be established to manage and coordinate activities at the level of the municipalities.

What Went Wrong?

The uprising, which began the morning after the visit of the then opposition leader and now Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount on September 28, 2000, did not begin with the first rock thrown by a Palestinian youth, or shooting by a »Tanzim« activist. The rock and the rifle, and in particular the demonstrations and clashes of Palestinians with Israeli forces, are tied to the events of the past seven years since the signing of the Oslo Agreement. Sharon's visit, and the killing of worshippers on the plazas of Jerusalem's mosques on the following day, was the match that ignited the powder keg which had been threatening to explode for years.

From the moment when the five years of the Interim Agreement period expired and a Permanent Status was not even visible on the horizon, the clock began to tick towards the explosion. For Israel, the only way to prevent the detonation would have been to effect the agreements signed with the Palestinians rapidly and seriously and to embark promptly on intensive Permanent Status negotiations. Prime Minister Ehud Barak failed to understand this. Indeed, his error was twofold: he decided not to implement the third redeployment, which represented the single most important element in the Interim Agreement; and although he entered into negotiations on Permanent Status earnestly and in goodwill, he did so on the basis of faulty assumptions which caused their collapse.

The tenure of former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (1996–1999) made it clear to the Palestinians that an elected Israeli Government might actually not be interested in reaching a peace agreement on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. This, together with the immense gap between the expectations raised by his successor Ehud Barak and the grim reality (the continuation of accelerated settlement activities, having to live in the shadow of humiliating Israeli checkpoints, an unstable economic situation and a drastic decrease of standard of living, water shortages, no release of prisoners, etc.) had an unmitigated effect on Palestinian public opinion. The Palestinian public and the »street« leadership – which originally was an enthusiastic supporter of the peace process and of the need to reach reconciliation with Israel – came to the (wrong) conclusion that Israel did not in fact want to reach a fair agreement to end the occupation and grant the Palestinian people »legitimate rights«. The Israelis, on the other side, felt a Palestinian insensitivity to the daily threat of terrorism to every Israeli individual as well as to the destructive effect of anti-Israeli incitement and propaganda in Palestinian media and schools.

After September 2000 the peace process paradigm collapsed. The second Palestinian Intifada left both publics deeply shaken and led to Barak's downfall as well as to the breakdown of Permanent Status negotiations. This is first and foremost the result of a double misperception. The Palestinian side reached the mistaken conclusion that the Israeli public and Barak were not prepared to pay the price necessary for a genuine agreement and peace. Both the Israeli public and the Prime Minister were in fact willing to go the necessary distance, on the condition that the Palestinians expressed publicly the conciliatory positions which they had stated privately and that they demonstrated non-tolerance and determination in combating terrorism. The Israeli side, for its part, reached the mistaken conclusion that the Palestinians did not want peace, and were instead bent on destroying the Zionist State both from within and from outside. Israel concluded that there was no partner for peace on the Palestinian side, or at least not one who had the ability or the will to pursue it. In reality, the Palestinians had not altered their basic position held since 1993.

Conclusion

Since Fall 2000, a new reality has unfolded on the ground. The two sides have moved from a peace process to a low-intensity armed conflict. Although both still have the interest of moving back from conflict to political process the hurdles will probably be too high to reach a Permanent Status agreement – even if the current conflict does soon change course. A crippled Palestinian entity will meet an Israeli government led by a Prime Minister who totally opposes any peace plan leading to the Permanent Status objectives described above.

However, in contrast to the immediate hostile reactions of the two publics to each other, deep down the possibility of reaching an agreement remains. The Palestinians are willing to pay the necessary price of peace, to live side by side with Israel, provided Israel ceases to play the role of the conqueror to the conquered and instead bases its relations on equality and fairness. The Israelis, likewise, are willing to pay the requested prices of peace, provided the Palestinians do not present either a demographic or a security threat.

The Oslo Agreement, which brought about an historic change in the Israeli-Arab conflict, represents the link between the era of conflict and the era of peace. The majorities within the two sides still believe in the path, which leads to a political separation – two States for two peoples – based on the 1967 borders. The question is just how much time will pass, and how much blood will be shed, until we will wise up and work together in order to create, strengthen and consolidate the feeling of partnership and understanding, that coexistence based on equality, peace and security can bring.

The foundation of this process began to form under Barak's government, but it was distorted. This did not result from a lack of willingness of the Israeli and Palestinian publics to reach an agreement, but from poor management of the process. If the two sides are able to recognize their mistakes it will be possible to renew the negotiations and to reach a Permanent Status agreement which, in turn, will represent the first step on the long and difficult journey to reconciliation between the two peoples and peace between their two States. ◀