Land For What?
How the peace process brought Israel to the brink of war
BY DANIEL PIPES

The election of Ariel Sharon allows us to look back with amazement at the last eight years. The Israeli government pursued a course without parallel in the annals of diplomacy.

The best known of its negotiations were with Yasir Arafat and the Palestinians, but these were paralleled by no less important discussions with the Syrians and Lebanese. In all tracks, the Jewish state pursued a similar approach, which might be paraphrased as follows: “We will be reasonable and will give you what you can legitimately demand; in turn, we expect you to have a change of heart, ending your campaign to destroy Israel and instead accepting the permanence of a sovereign Jewish state in the Middle East.” In brief, the Israelis offered land for peace, as the U.S. government had long pressed them to do.

This policy prompted Israel to take a series of steps which struck some observers as bold and others as foolhardy: to the Palestinians it offered a state, complete with Jerusalem as its capital and sovereignty over the Temple Mount. To the Syrians, it offered full control over the Golan Heights. To Lebanon, it not only offered but actually carried out a complete and unilateral withdrawal of Israeli forces from the southern part of that country in May 2000.

These concessions won Israel in return precisely nothing. Reaching out a hand of friendship won not Arab acceptance but ever-increasing demands for more Israeli concessions. Palestinians and Syrians disdained successive Israeli offers, always demanding more. Lebanese took everything Israel did and made more demands. What Israelis saw as far-sighted magnanimity came across as weakness and demoralization. Combined with other sources of Arab confidence—especially demographic growth and resurgent faith—this led to a surge in anti-Zionist ambitions and rekindled the hopes of destroying the “Zionist entity.” Steps intended to calm the Palestinians instead heightened their ambitions, their fury, and their violence. For all its good will and soul-searching, Israel now faces a higher threat of all-out war than at any time in decades. No doubt that is why Sharon was elected by so wide a margin.

Land-for-peace contained a plethora of errors, but the two most fundamental were economic. One overestimated Israeli power, the other misunderstood Arab aspirations.

First, the Oslo process assumed that Israel, by virtue of its economic boom and formidable arsenal, is so strong that it can unilaterally choose to close down its century-old conflict with the Arabs. Israel’s GDP is nearly $100 billion a year and the Palestinians’ is about $3 billion; Israel’s per-capita income of $16,000 is slightly higher than Spain’s, while the Syrian per-capita income of about $800 compares to that of the Republic of Congo. The Israel Defense Forces deploy the finest aircraft, tanks, and other materiel that money can buy; the Palestinian police force has rudimentary weapons.

This material strength, it turns out, does not permit Israel to impose its will on the Arabs. In part, it cannot do this because the Arabs initiated the conflict and have continued it; only they, not the Israelis, can end it. The key decisions of war and peace have always been made in Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, not in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

However formidable Israel’s strength is in planes and tanks, its enemies are
developing military strategies that either
go lower (to civil unrest and terrorism, as
in the recent Palestinian violence against
Israel) or higher (to weapons of mass
destruction, as in the Iraqi threat).

Finally, a high income or a mighty
arsenal are not as important as will and
morale; software counts more than hard-
ware. In this respect, Israelis do not
impress their opponents. In the words of
philosopher Yoram Hazony, Israelis are “an
exhausted people, confused and without
direction.”

Loud announcements for all to hear
that Israelis are sick of their conflict with
the Arabs—how they loath reserve mili-
tary duty that extends into middle age for
men, the high military spending, the
deaths of soldiers, and the nagging fear of
terrorism—do not inspire fear. How can
an “exhausted people” hope to impose its
will on enemies?

Thus is Israel’s hope to coerce its
enemies illusory.

A second assumption behind the
Oslo diplomacy was that enhanced eco-
nomic opportunity would shift Arab
attention from war to more constructive
pursuits. The logic makes intuitive sense:
satisfy reasonable claims so the
Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese can
look beyond anti-Zionism to improve
their standard of living. If they only had a
nice apartment and a late-model car, the
thinking went, their ardor for destroying
Israel would diminish.

A reporter in a Palestinian camp found no one willing to
take cash in return for relinquishing claims to Palestine.
“We don’t want compensation, we want our homeland.”

There is little evidence for this expecta-
tion. As shown by the Arab readiness to
accept economic hardship in the pursuit of
political aims, politics usually trumps eco-
nomics. The Syrian government has for
decades accepted economic paralysis as the
price of staying in power.

More dramatic is Palestinian refusal to
give up the “right of return.” To fend off
Palestinian claims to territory and build-
ings abandoned by their ancestors in Israel
over fifty years ago, the idea was some-
times bruited of buying them off, in
return for giving up of a distant and seem-
ingly impractical aspiration. No deal. A
reporter in Baqaa, a Palestinian camp in
Jordan, recently found no one willing to
take cash in return for forgoing claims to
Palestine. As one middle-aged woman put
it: “We will not sell our [ancestral] land for
to compensation, we as Palestinians can’t
agree to it.”

Israelis had devised an elegant
push-pull theory of diplomacy:
between Israeli strength and Arab
hopes for a better future, they figured
the Arabs would find themselves com-
pelled to shut down the long anti-
Zionist campaign. Both assumptions,
however sensible sounding, were dead
wrong.

In this, the Oslo process belonged
to a tradition of failed diplomacy that
relies on granting an opponent some of
what he wants in the hope that this
will render him less hostile. It did not
work for Neville Chamberlain with
Hitler; nor for Richard Nixon with
Brezhnev. The Israelis offered far more
than either of these and ended up with
even less.