

## Land For What?

How the peace process brought Israel to the brink of war

BY DANIEL PIPES

**T**he 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.

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Worse, the jaw-dropping array of Israeli concessions actually increased Arab and Muslim hostility. When the Oslo process, as that episode of diplomacy is called, began in 1993, Israel was feared and respected by its enemies, who were beginning to recognize Israel as a fact of life and reluctantly giving up their efforts to destroy it. But those efforts revived as Arabs watched Israel forsake its security and its religious sanctities, overlook the breaking of solemn promises, and make empty threats. The impression was of an Israel desperate to extricate itself from further conflict.

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 hardware. 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 military 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 economic 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.

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There is little evidence for this expectation. As shown by the Arab readiness to accept economic hardship in the pursuit of political aims, politics usually trumps economics. 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 buildings abandoned by their ancestors in Israel over fifty years ago, the idea was sometimes bruited of buying them off, in return for giving up of a distant and seemingly 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

all the money in the world. We are Palestinians and we’ll remain Palestinians. We don’t want compensation, we want our homeland.” The owner of a pharmacy concurred, adding, “Even if Arafat agreed

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 compelled 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. ↘