

# The myth of Camp David: part of the US-Israeli disinformation campaign

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Justifying the massacre of Palestinian men, women and children by the Israeli Defence Forces has required an extraordinary propaganda effort from the pro-Zionist US media. Lies have become the norm in an attempt to turn reality on its head, portraying the victims of state terror as the guilty party, and war criminals as the victims.

One myth that is central to the propaganda campaign involves a grossly distorted presentation of the Camp David Israeli-Palestinian summit of July, 2000. The American media endlessly repeat the assertion that Yasser Arafat spurned a generous proposal for Palestinian statehood offered by the then Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, thereby precipitating the eruption of violence that has continued for more than 18 months.

To cite one example, the April 15 *Wall Street Journal* contains an article by Daniel Pipes and Jonathan Schanzer arguing against an Israeli military withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. In it they opine:

“Prime Minister Ehud Barak, in July 2000, convinced President Clinton to host a summit for Yasser Arafat and himself. At Camp David, he offered unprecedented concessions, hoping to close the Palestinian account like he thought he had just closed the Lebanese one. Trouble was, both Hezbollah and the Palestinians drew the opposite lesson from this retreat. Hezbollah crowed how Islamic forces in the ‘smallest Arab country’ had caused Israel to retreat in ‘defeat and resignation.’

“As for Arafat, rather than be inspired by Israeli goodwill, he saw an Israel weak and demoralized. Inspired by Hezbollah’s success, he and the Palestinian body politic lost interest in diplomacy and what it could bring—the partial attainment of their goals. Instead, they adopted the Hezbollah model of force in order to attain complete victory.

“Not surprisingly, then, Arafat flatly turned down Mr. Barak’s wildly generous proposals and did not even deign to make a counter-offer. Of course, complete victory here means the destruction of Israel, not coexistence with it. How could Arafat aspire for less, when he had turned down so handsome an offer at Camp David?”

Such claims are made in the full knowledge of their falsity. For since the Camp David talks in Maryland finally collapsed on July 25, 2000, a plethora of evidence has emerged disproving the efforts of the Israelis and the US to blame the Palestinian delegation for the failure of the summit.

As US president, Clinton announced that the talks had foundered over the future of Jerusalem, and blamed the Palestinians, stating, “The Israelis moved more from the position they had.”

The Palestinians said nothing at the time, because they were still pinning their hopes on further negotiations. This left the field clear for the far right in Israel to portray Barak as a naïve fool who had failed to understand that it was impossible to compromise with Arafat, who would stop at nothing less than the destruction of Israel.

It wasn’t until almost a year later that a number of articles appeared refuting the propaganda of the Zionists, at a time when the military conflict had been raging for ten months. The first to speak out was Robert Malley, the US National Security Council’s Middle East expert under Clinton and a member of the American team at Camp David.

He wrote an initial article for the July 8, 2001 edition of the *Times*, “Fictions About the Failure at Camp David,” in which he rejected a number of myths, including the assertion that Barak had all but sacrificed Israel’s security by making an offer that “met most, if not all, of the Palestinians’ legitimate aspirations.”

Malley wrote, “Yes, what was put on the table was more far-reaching than anything any Israeli leader had discussed in the past—whether with the Palestinians or with Washington. But it was not the dream offer it has been made out to be, at least not from a Palestinian perspective.

“To accommodate the settlers, Israel was to annex 9 percent of the West Bank; in exchange, the new Palestinian state would be granted sovereignty over parts of Israel proper, equivalent to one-ninth of the annexed land. A Palestinian state covering 91 percent of the West Bank and Gaza was more than most Americans or Israelis had thought possible, but how would Mr. Arafat explain the unfavorable 9-to-1 ratio in land swaps to his people?

“In Jerusalem, Palestine would have been given sovereignty over many Arab neighborhoods of the eastern half and over the Muslim and Christian quarters of the Old City. While it would enjoy custody over the Haram al Sharif [Noble sanctuary], the location of the third-holiest Muslim shrine [the Al Aqsa Mosque], Israel would exercise overall sovereignty over this area, known to Jews as the Temple Mount.”

He also acknowledged major concessions on the part of the Palestinians:

“The Palestinians were arguing for the creation of a Palestinian state based on the June 4, 1967, borders, living alongside Israel. They accepted the notion of Israeli annexation of West Bank territory to accommodate settlement blocs. They accepted the principle of Israeli sovereignty over the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem—neighborhoods that were not part of Israel before the Six Day War in 1967. And, while they insisted on recognition of the refugees’ right of return, they agreed that it should be implemented in a manner that protected Israel’s demographic and security interests by limiting the number of returnees. No other Arab party that has negotiated with Israel—not Anwar el-Sadat’s Egypt, not King Hussein’s Jordan, let alone Hafez al-Assad’s Syria—ever came close to even considering such compromises.”

The article was followed by further revelations, which were denounced by the right-wing Israeli media as “Camp David revisionism”.

On July 23, Ahmed Qureia, the Palestinians’ top negotiator at Camp David, gave a press conference echoing Malley’s remarks and describing the claim that “Barak offered everything [and] the Palestinians refused everything” as “The biggest lie of the last three decades.” The *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times* and the Palestinian negotiating team all published accounts of Camp David that contained material contradicting the claims of the Zionist myth-makers.

Barak had come to office in July 1999 and pledged to carry out final-status talks with the Palestinians. Negotiations began secretly in late March 2000, during which Barak made a number of initial promises. In mid-May, however, the substance of the talks was leaked to Israeli

newspapers and was met with a hostile campaign by Likud, other right-wing parties and the Israeli media. In response, Barak pressed for a US-sponsored summit, against the advice of Arafat and the Palestinians, who feared that insufficient preparation had been made. Clinton persuaded Arafat to attend, despite Arafat's reservations, and Camp David began.

The *New York Review of Books* of August 9, 2000 ran a comprehensive account of events, "Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors", co-authored by Malley and Hussein Agha, who has played an active part in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

According to their account, Barak refused to implement a number of interim steps to which Israel was formally committed by various agreements, "including a third partial redeployment of troops from the West Bank, the transfer to Palestinian control of three villages abutting Jerusalem, and the release of Palestinians imprisoned for acts committed before the Oslo agreement."

Though the authors are exceedingly diplomatic in their own formulations, they make it clear that Barak did so in order to present the Palestinians with an all-or-nothing offer: Either peace on Israeli terms or the implicit threat of renewed violence. Central to Barak's plan was the enlistment of the Clinton administration and Europe to isolate Arafat and place enormous pressure on him. According to the account of Malley and Agha, the Western powers were asked "to threaten Arafat with the consequences of his obstinacy: the blame would be laid on the Palestinians and relations with them would be downgraded." The article continues: "Likewise, and throughout Camp David, Barak repeatedly urged the US to avoid mention of any fall-back options or of the possibility of continued negotiations in the event the summit failed."

This left Arafat in an untenable political position, under conditions of rising anger amongst the Palestinians and disillusionment over the failure of the Oslo Accords to improve their social position. As the two authors write, "Seen from Gaza and the West Bank, Oslo's legacy read like a litany of promises deferred or unfulfilled. Six years after the agreement, there were more Israeli settlements, less freedom of movement, and worse economic conditions."

They conclude from this, "Camp David seemed to Arafat to encapsulate his worst nightmares. It was high-wire summitry, designed to increase the pressure on the Palestinians to reach a quick agreement while heightening the political and symbolic costs if they did not.... That the US issued the invitations despite Israel's refusal to carry out its earlier commitments and despite Arafat's plea for additional time to prepare only reinforced in his mind the sense of a US-Israeli conspiracy."

The one thing Clinton did promise Arafat in order to get him to Camp David was that the Palestinians would not be blamed for a failure of the summit—a promise that proved to be worthless.

As to what was offered by Barak, the authors note that he never put anything in writing. The Palestinians were in fact asked to endorse a vague series of promises that could have been amended at any time. They write, "Strictly speaking, there never was an Israeli offer. Determined to preserve Israel's position in the event of failure, and resolved not to let the Palestinians take advantage of one-sided compromises, the Israelis always stopped one, if not several, steps short of a proposal. The ideas put forward at Camp David were never stated in writing, but orally conveyed... Nor were the proposals detailed. If written down, the American ideas at Camp David would have covered no more than a few pages. Barak and the Americans insisted that Arafat accept them as general 'bases for negotiations' before launching into more rigorous negotiations."

Barak's proposals were a far cry from "wildly generous" concessions to Palestinian aspirations. His offer would not have provided a viable basis for a Palestinian state, but rather the framework for an Arab ghetto dependent on and subordinate to Israel.

The Oslo Accords were based on the Palestinians having recognised

Israeli sovereignty over 78 percent of historic Palestine on the assumption that the Palestinians would be able to exercise sovereignty over the remaining 22 percent. In contrast, Barak's supposed generosity at Camp David amounted to a rejection of United Nations Resolutions 242 and 338, which had been accepted as the basis for the Oslo Accords of 1993.

Amongst the most pertinent facts regarding his offer are the following:

\* Barak's proposal divided Palestine into four separate cantons surrounded by Israel: the Northern West Bank, the Central West Bank, the Southern West Bank and Gaza. A network of Israeli-controlled highways and military posts would in turn, divide these cantons. It would make no part of Palestine contiguous and put Israelis in charge of both the movement of people and goods, internally and externally, thus ensuring the subordination of the Palestinian economy to its more powerful neighbour.

\* Israel sought to annex almost nine percent of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and in exchange offered only one percent of Israel's own territory.

\* Israel sought control over an additional ten percent of the Occupied Territories in the form of a "long-term lease", of unspecified duration.

\* The Palestinians were asked to give up any claim to East Jerusalem, which they had designated as the future capital of a Palestinian state. The Palestinian negotiating team accept that this was amended in subsequent talks, with a proposal to allow Palestinians sovereignty over isolated Arab neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem. But these neighbourhoods would be surrounded by Israeli-controlled neighbourhoods and separated not only from each other, but also from the rest of the Palestinian state. In a calculated insult, the Israelis offered to build tunnels so that Arafat could visit Palestinian neighbourhoods without setting foot on Israeli territory.

\* Israel would retain control of 69 Zionist settlements on the West Bank, where 85 percent of the settlers live. The building of illegal settlements had increased by 52 percent since Oslo was signed, and the settler population, including those in East Jerusalem, had more than doubled.

\* The Palestinians would abandon any right of return to Israel for those displaced since its creation in 1948.

And all of this was offered as a threat, rather than a proposal. As the Palestinian negotiators note, "Prior to entering into the first negotiations on permanent status issues, Prime Minister Barak publicly and repeatedly threatened Palestinians that his 'offer' would be Israel's best and final offer, and if not accepted, Israel would seriously consider 'unilateral separation' (a euphemism for imposing a settlement rather than negotiating one)."

In their account, Malley and Agha portray the Palestinians as only having a perception of being set up, and this creating problems for the US in its posture of "honest broker." But the episodes they cite show instead that Clinton worked with Barak in an attempt to force the Palestinians to accept an arrangement equivalent to the tribal Bantustans in Apartheid South Africa.

They write, for example, that when Abu Ala'a, a leading Palestinian negotiator, balked at Barak's proposals, "the President stormed out: 'This is a fraud. It is not a summit. I won't have the United States covering for negotiations in bad faith. Let's quit!' Toward the end of the summit, an irate Clinton would tell Arafat: 'If the Israelis can make compromises and you can't, I should go home. You have been here fourteen days and said no to everything. These things have consequences; failure will mean the end of the peace process.... Let's let hell break loose and live with the consequences.'"

This was the ultimate threat hanging over the heads of the Palestinians—either sign up to Barak's offer and sign away any possibility of achieving a viable state, or incur not only Israel's wrath, but that of the United States.

The *New York Times* of July 26, 2001 ran an extended article by Deborah Sontag entitled, "And Yet so Far", which contains interesting

additions on Camp David, but is more important for its detailing of what happened subsequently. She writes of the events following Camp David:

“Few Israelis, Palestinians or Americans realize how much diplomatic activity continued after the Camp David meeting appeared to produce nothing. Building on what turned out to be a useful base, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators conducted more than 50 negotiating sessions in August and September, most of them clandestine, and most at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem....

“During August and September, [chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb] Erekat and Gilad Sher, a senior Israeli negotiator, drafted two chapters of a permanent peace accord that were kept secret from everyone but the leaders—even from other negotiators, Mr. Erekat said.

“At the same time, American mediators were pulling together Mr. Clinton’s permanent peace proposal. It appeared in December, but Martin Indyk, the former American ambassador to Israel, disclosed recently that they were already prepared to put it before the parties in August or September.”

Sontag’s article is important in that it not only exposes the myth of Palestinian intransigence—even after the Camp David ultimatum failed, intense negotiations continued—but also draws attention to the great unmentionable as far as the pro-Zionist media is concerned: that Ariel Sharon, not Arafat, deliberately blew up any possibility of achieving a negotiated settlement.

She notes that it was “Sharon’s heavily guarded visit to the plaza outside Al Aqsa Mosque to demonstrate Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount [that] set off angry Palestinian demonstrations. The Israelis used lethal force to put them down. The cycle of violence started....”

Even then, discussions continued into December. However, “The negotiations were suspended by Israel because elections were imminent and ‘the pressure of Israeli public opinion against the talks could not be resisted,’ said Shlomo Ben-Ami, who was Israel’s foreign minister at the time.”

Sontag concludes, “In the Israeli elections in February [2001], Barak lost resoundingly to Sharon. It was then that peace moves froze—not six months earlier at Camp David.”

One can question the extent to which any of the negotiations following Camp David were conducted in good faith on Barak’s part. The Clinton administration summoned negotiators to Washington on September 27, 2000. On September 28, Sharon made his deliberately provocative visit. Barak never once criticised Sharon’s actions, and Arafat insists that Barak was conspiring directly with Sharon “to destroy the peace process”, choosing Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif as “a vehicle for what they had decided on: the military plan.”



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