

Present: Israeli side : Yossi Beilin, Ron Pundak, Daniel Levy, ???
Palestinian side : Yasser Abed Rabbo, Ghaith Al-Omari

YB : The Palestinian side is virtually unheard in the Israeli media. Your appearance yesterday with Yossi Sarid had great impact in Israel. You need to address the Israeli media and people.

YAR : The Israeli media is blacking us out. They are not interested in giving us a voice. I have a list of twenty Palestinians who are willing to talk to the Israeli media ranging from officials to civil society activists. All we need is access. I will be happy to provide you with the list, including contact information and short biographies, if you will help them have access to the media.

YB : I will be happy to facilitate that, informally of course.

We are trying to continue work in the ECF on permanent status issues with Palestinian counterparts. These talks are not secret but they are also unofficial. We hope to come up with a blueprint of an agreement that we will present to the Israeli people as the shape of the solution to come. I understand that officially the Palestinians cannot hold systematic all-inclusive negotiations with an NGO, so we are meeting with officials and non-officials on various issues separately.

RP : We are doing these meetings via NGOs as a cover for Palestinian officials. Someone like Faisal Hussein or Samih al-Abed obviously have an official role.

YAR : For the success of such initiatives, certain Palestinian officials must give it their blessing.

What can we do next?

YB : I am trying to promote the Egyptian-Jordanian initiative. Sharon is attacking me strongly for that. He is saying that I wrote it!

YAR : Sarid was clear in his support for the Egyptian-Jordanian initiative and in his insistence on playing no games regarding the settlement freeze.

YB : I told Arafat that I need him to prove to the peace camp in Israel that he is still a partner.

In a Labor Party meeting in Haifa yesterday, the people who were there were grasping for answers, and I felt that I could not provide them. The peace camp is angry. They felt that Barak went a long way in his proposals, and that the Palestinians started the Intifada and introduced the issue of the right of return. Now they feel that there is no distinction between good guys and bad guys on the Palestinian side. Alternatively, some say that Arafat felt too weak to sell the deal to his people so he decided to wait and see if the situation changes in the future. This is the new discourse on the left.

The right is adopting the attitude of "we told you so" and that giving the Palestinians land and weapons was a mistake. The left also agrees that it was mistaken in assuming that there is a partner for peace on the Palestinian side, but regards ending the occupation as a goal in itself, and the answer they are providing now is unilateral separation.

Ron came up with the idea of getting 20 notable Israelis from the left to discuss separation and to tackle the issue in depth. We need to restore there hope in partnership.

YAR : I hate the word separation. Why not do something like this together? We can get 20 intellectuals from each side who can look beyond the current situation with a forward-looking vision. People like Mahmoud Darwish from our side. Someone like that has more credibility than me as a politician. He is the conscious and soul of the people. Of course, we need to be careful in controlling the message they produce. Intellectuals can sometimes come up with unpleasant surprises.

YB : Yes, some great intellectuals who are masters of their fields can have very superficial understanding of politics and thus can come up with destructive positions and statements. However, this superficiality can be the very thing that can help us sway them with convincing, well-considered arguments. We do not need them to say anything too elaborate. It is enough that they say that there is a partner for peace and that there is a plan for peace.

YAR : The polls in Palestine show contradicting and confused opinions regarding peace and the political process. Our political parties are not functioning as proper parties but are being populist. We need to present our people with a political alternative to the present reality.

YB : I was interested in jointly writing an article with a Palestinian, but that was not possible. However, we should do something directed at the Jewish peace camp in Israel and United states to show that there is a Palestinian partner. One can do politically uncostly acts with great results. One can be surprised with how acts that sound risky can actually be fairly low-cost. These acts can include statement, joint activities and appearances in Israel and abroad, etc... It is possible to change the trend in the peace camp. There is a hunger there for answers. However, I also believe that the Intifada has permanently changed the relationship. It is like a heart attack. You can either spend your time wondering why it happened, or you can proceed with life. However, you will always be afraid of it recurring and you will have to change your lifestyle as a result.

I have a number of ideas on how to get out of the current situation:

First is the Egyptian-Jordanian initiative. There is still potential in that, but the hardest issue in it is the permanent status negotiations.

YAR : Peres was talking about Israel deciding when to resume the negotiations, and under what framework and to what aim!

YB : I will do my best to promote the initiative, but I don't know if Sharon can accept it.

Second, there are a number of ways using third parties that can provide a "hook" out of this situation and give you something to justify an end to the violence:

1. Reconvene the Sharm meeting of October on the pretext of discussing the recommendations of the Committee.
2. Convene something on the 10th anniversary of the Madrid Conference. We do not have to wait till October, we can still create a preparatory committee to draft the conclusions, which will serve as a vehicle. This can be attractive for Bush, who will be seen as following on his father's footsteps, for Sharon who will be seen as following in the footsteps of Shamir, and for Arafat who was not invited to the first Madrid Conference.
3. Use the mechanism created by the March 1999 European Berlin Declaration. The declaration called for no unilateral action, negotiation for a year, after which the Europeans will seriously consider recognition of a Palestinian state. If the Europeans were reminded of the declaration, the focus is shifted towards ending the violence and resuming the negotiations, and the Europeans promise something for each party, this might fly. However, this must be very high profile if it is to have any chance of success.

With the Egyptian-Jordanian initiative, I fear that Sharon will drag his feet and use the initiative to play for more time. This will be disastrous. I have my own selfish reasons for wanting this to succeed. I do not want to see the peace camp die.

Palestinians ask why should we give this gift to Sharon even though we denied to Barak. I personally want to see Sharon win this one. This is the only way to enable reasonable voices on both sides to have constructive talks.

The "hook" needs a third party. I think that the easiest would be the Berlin declaration.

YAR : Mitchell might actually be the best way to proceed. It will be a report by the US president with his full weight behind it. We are planning to respond positively whatever the report contains.

YB : If I may offer an advice, I think that you should only show your support to the committee after a high-profile hot, tense internal debate, even if you have to stage such a debate. This will make it seem that you have made a painful decision in a democratic way. This will push the Israelis to a corner.

YAR : Interesting, but our international image is so negative that we cannot afford to harm it further.