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## The Vanishing Peace

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“Peace, peace,” they say, when there is no peace.

—Jeremiah 8:11

**Rioting erupted** on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem on September 29, 2000. Soon the violence spread to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and even into Israel proper. At the time, it was thought that these disturbances would be settled quickly and Israelis and Palestinians would make a rapid return to the peace table. That did not happen. Instead the fighting escalated from rioting to terrorism and, finally, all-out guerrilla war.

For four years television news brought the carnage of terrorism into our homes on almost a daily basis, with images of the dead and the wounded being evacuated from bombed buses, pizzerias, cafes, and hotels. Often those scenes were followed by video of Israeli soldiers and armed Palestinians fighting on the streets of the Holy Land.

How did this outburst of violence develop when just seven years earlier a remarkable peace agreement had been reached?

On September 13, 1993, Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Yitzhak Rabin, prime minister of Israel, signed a historic peace accord at the White House.

“Enough of blood and tears. Enough!” Rabin declared in his speech. Then, with a gentle prod from U.S. President Bill Clinton, he shook Arafat’s hand. Arafat, who claimed to have sworn off terrorism and to have

recognized the state of Israel, promised to lead his people in a democratic government at peace with Israel.

The historic Declaration of Principles, also known as the Oslo Peace Accord, provided for Palestinian autonomy on the West Bank and Gaza and set in motion a new plan for peace and security in Israel. Despite the ups and downs of the peace process, there was a growing expectation that peace would reign in this troubled region.

In July 2000 President Clinton had hosted then–Prime Minister Ehud Barak and PLO Chairman Arafat as they sought to hammer out a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Then, just two months after those final status talks ended (without an agreement but the stated commitment to continue negotiations), violence erupted once again.

The Oslo Accords are dead today, as are multitudes of Israelis and Palestinians. Pitched battles have been fought in the ancient Holy Land and despite the decrease in violence, all attempts at mediation seem to have failed. Meanwhile the surrounding states are edging closer to a regional war, and the continual danger of a potential world war looms. What exactly happened? Why had all attempts at mediation failed to restore the Israelis and Palestinians to the peace process?

Newspapers, journals, cable news networks, and Sunday morning talk shows endlessly discuss these questions but rarely give insight. These three opening chapters will attempt to clarify what has been dubbed the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, or the War of Palestinian terror (the Terror War), by looking behind the headlines to the reality of events and their actual causes.<sup>1</sup>

### A Shattered Plan: Behind the Terror War

Israeli political leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount on September 28, surrounded by one thousand Israeli security agents. The next day riots erupted between Palestinians and Israeli troops. Many believe that this violence broke out as a spontaneous response to Sharon's walk on the Temple Mount. Yet the facts do not seem to bear this out. The situation was brewing for months and ready to erupt at any moment. A number of factors came together to set the violence in motion.

#### *The Oslo Slowdown*

The first element that led to the Terror War was the slowdown of the Oslo peace process. When the Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed the

Oslo Accords in 1993, they agreed to take gradual steps over time toward Palestinian autonomy in order for the parties to overcome the years of hostility. They needed to work together in order to become true partners. The Declaration of Principles called for a final status agreement to be made by May 4, 1999. As time passed, it became clear that the final status deadline would not be met.

The previous year, Israel had relinquished administration of 40 percent of the West Bank territory and all of the Gaza Strip to Palestinian Authority oversight. Security cooperation continued between the Israel Defense Forces and the Palestinian Preventative Security Police. Yet Israel was reluctant to proceed much further because of the Palestinian Authority's failure to carry out some of their Oslo commitments. In violation of Oslo, the Palestinian Authority had not revised the Palestinian National Charter, which called for the destruction of Israel, nor had it prevented incitement and hostile propaganda and was not active in systematically fighting terrorist organizations and infrastructure.

According to Dennis Ross, who was the chief U.S. negotiator under the first President Bush and President Clinton, the United States turned a blind eye to serious violations by the Palestinians. According to Ross, the Palestinians had 40,000 troops although Oslo only permitted 30,000, with weapons forbidden by the Oslo Accords. Also, when the Palestinian Authority would arrest those engaged in terrorism against Israel, they would frequently release them shortly thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

A case in point was the response of Palestinian police after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 opened an exit to the Hasmonean Tunnel, which runs along the base of the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This opening would do no damage to any aspect of the Temple Mount and would merely allow tourists to exit the tunnel without retracing their steps. It would benefit Palestinian shopkeepers as the departing tourists would then pass and most likely frequent their shops. The opening of the tunnel had been negotiated by the previous Labor government and approved by the Palestinian Authority.

When Netanyahu came to office, he proceeded to open the tunnel. Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Authority, called for protest marches, declaring the tunnel opening a "big crime against our religion and holy places." Although no Muslim holy places were actually threatened by the tunnel opening, Arafat made this charge to incite Palestinian violence. Historian Efraim Karsh has noted the rioting offered Arafat several benefits and concluded, "The tunnel was but a handy pretext that could be

disposed of once it had outlived its usefulness (the new exit has remained open since September 1996 to the benefit of tourists and local merchants), with the PA dropping the issue from its agenda after a few months.”<sup>3</sup>

After Arafat’s call for action, violence ensued for five days, with fifteen Israeli soldiers and sixty Palestinians killed. Most troubling was that Palestinian police, encouraged and authorized by Arafat, turned their weapons on the Israeli police and military which were trying to restore order.

Historian Itamar Rabinovich then described the significance of this action: “For many Israelis it was proof that the Palestinian Authority could not be trusted to be a genuine partner in protecting Israeli security, that Arafat gave his cooperation only so long as his expectations were met, *that if final-status negotiation were deadlocked violence could be expected*” (italics added).<sup>4</sup>

By 1999 most Palestinians were frustrated that a final status agreement, as envisaged by the Oslo Accords, was not yet in place. There was a widespread belief among Palestinians that Israel would continue to drag its feet to avoid such an agreement. Israelis, on the other hand, felt compelled to slow the process to wait for Palestinian compliance with Oslo. Although the Israelis did continue to turn land and civil administration over to the Palestinians, they tended to take a more cautious view of their Oslo requirements. Israel showed considerable reluctance regarding the release of land to Palestinians. Also, restrictions of Palestinian commercial freedom continued, along with barriers to Palestinian fishermen spreading their nets in agreed-upon waters.

Nevertheless, by September 2000, the Palestinian Authority had 40 percent of the West Bank and ruled over 98 percent of Palestinians. In exchange for these substantial transfers, Israel had received the mere promise of continued peaceful negotiations. The United States and many Israelis overlooked Palestinian violations of Oslo because they were convinced that they were on the path to peace and they hoped that in time a final peace accord could and would come.

### *The Election of Ehud Barak*

The second factor leading to the outbreak of hostilities was the 1999 election of Ehud Barak as prime minister of Israel. Barak had been the chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces and was the most decorated soldier in Israeli history. Despite this background as a warrior, Barak was a protégé of Yitzhak Rabin, the assassinated prime minister who had been the

Israeli architect of Oslo. As leader of the left leaning Labor party, Barak was elected on a peace platform. He promised to negotiate and make hard concessions to bring about a final status agreement with the Palestinians. He also promised to resolve the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and to make peace with Syria.

Hopes were high in Israel for a final peace settlement for Israel with its Arab neighbors. Nevertheless, the actions taken by the Barak government led not to a peaceful, final status arrangement but an outbreak of violence in less than two years. The reason: Palestinians viewed his commitment to peace as a weakening of Israeli resolve which could be exploited.

### *Withdrawal from Lebanon*

A third factor contributing to the outbreak of violence in September 2000 was the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May of 2000. Israel had entered Lebanon in 1982 because of the Palestinian terror campaign waged against Israel from bases in Lebanon. Dubbed "Operation Peace for Galilee," the Israel Defense Forces had sought to clean out the terrorists from that area. They then established a security zone in conjunction with their Christian Maronite allies. This was designed to keep Israeli civilian targets from being shelled by Palestinian terrorists in southern Lebanon. What followed was a long-term guerilla war against the Israel Defense Forces by Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Palestinian-Muslim terrorist group sponsored by Iran and Syria. The continuing casualties sustained by Israel made many of its citizens call for the government to get out of the morass of Lebanon. Israel had been assured that the Lebanese army would guarantee security along the border. Therefore, on May 24, 2000, Israel withdrew its military to the border as established by the United Nations.

Hezbollah then claimed that there was still more land that belonged to Lebanon, an area called Shebaa Farms, so its members continued to wage a guerilla terrorist war against Israel. The Lebanese army allowed Hezbollah to take up positions on the border with Israel and continue their attacks.

Rather than interpreting the Israeli withdrawal as a desire for peace, Hezbollah viewed it as a sign of weakness. They boasted that they had defeated the vaunted Israeli army. The Israeli withdrawal gave Palestinian terrorist groups and the Palestinian Authority itself confidence that they could achieve their aims more effectively with terror and violence than

with negotiations and compromise. In August 2000, even prior to the outbreak of Temple Mount violence, journalist Khalil Osman wrote in *Crescent International*, the magazine of Global Islam, that Arafat

has been coming under increasing pressure since the liberation of south Lebanon, which had the effect of a match thrown into the tinderbox of accumulated Palestinian fury. Hezbollah's example has given Palestinians a powerful and attractive contrast, an example worthy of being emulated. In Lebanon, the Islamic resistance's unwavering determination succeeded in bringing about total liberation with no strings attached.<sup>5</sup>

The Palestinians had come to believe that the Israelis comprised a weak and corrupt society that did not have the stomach for continual violence. Thus, terror and violence would be the chosen method of obtaining a Palestinian state.

### *The Failure of Camp David II*

The fourth and most significant cause of the outbreak of hostilities was the breakdown of the peace process at the Camp David II meetings. Israeli Prime Minister Barak and U.S. President Clinton desperately wanted a final peace accord with Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians, each for different reasons. Barak believed that the state of war in which Israel had existed for more than fifty years was sapping the country's strength. Moreover, he believed that continued oversight of Palestinian areas would only serve to incite Palestinians and lead to violence. Therefore, he was committed to a final status agreement even if it required painful Israeli concessions.

Clinton had other reasons for wanting to conclude a final peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Certainly foremost in his mind was that a final peace accord would stabilize the dangerously volatile Middle East. With the United States increasingly dependent on Middle Eastern oil and with dangers presented by dictators (e.g., Saddam Hussein) and extremist governments (e.g., Iran), it was in the U.S.'s strategic interest to foster peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Additionally, Clinton was facing the end of his term. Potentially, his legacy as president would be chiefly the Monica Lewinsky scandal and his being only the second president ever impeached. Resolving the seemingly endless Arab-Israeli conflict and winning the expected Nobel Peace

Prize as a result would go a long way toward rehabilitating the Clinton presidency. The election of Barak on a peace platform gave President Clinton the opportunity to press for a final status peace conference at the Camp David presidential retreat. Significantly, he chose the location where President Carter had brought Israel's Menachem Begin and Egypt's Anwar el-Sadat together to negotiate a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt more than twenty years earlier.

It seemed that Palestinian leader Arafat would have also desired to reach a final settlement, since he would be negotiating with a moderate Israeli prime minister. He could have expected a far better negotiated settlement from the left-of-center Barak than the previous conservative Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Moreover, since Arafat's ultimate goal was the establishment of a Palestinian state, it appeared that the time was right for reaching a final settlement. Nevertheless, the Palestinian leader was reluctant to come to Camp David and had to be pressured by President Clinton to accept the invitation.

President Clinton convened the conference on July 11, 2000, with Barak, Arafat, and their negotiating teams present. The conference extended beyond the original time allotted to fourteen days of marathon negotiations. Although no official record of the negotiations has been released, participants have leaked the substance of the discussion. Barak moved dramatically from his opening position to accepting most of President Clinton's bridging proposals.

By the end of the two weeks, Barak had agreed to recognize a Palestinian state within the Gaza Strip and almost 95 percent of the West Bank. Barak was willing to give up the Jewish settlements that were in the territory allotted to the Palestinian state. Israel would allow up to 100,000 Palestinian refugees to return to Israel proper for family reunification and would help remunerate other Palestinian refugees for land and homes that they had lost. Barak was also willing to share sovereignty in Jerusalem with the new Palestinian state. In return, he expected Arafat to recognize the end of the conflict with nothing further to negotiate. Although Barak's mentor (Rabin) had been assassinated for offering even less, Barak was willing to risk his life for the sake of peace.

Arafat's position was that Israel should allow all Palestinian refugees the right to return, not just to the new Palestinian state but to Israel proper. He also demanded that Israel withdraw completely to the 1967 borders<sup>6</sup> and transfer sovereignty of the Old City of Jerusalem to the Palestinians.

He even tried to convince President Clinton that there was no historical Jewish link to Jerusalem.

Although Prime Minister Barak had moved dramatically from his opening positions, Chairman Arafat refused even to offer a counterproposal. Moreover, it was impossible for Barak to agree to the return of nearly four million Palestinian refugees to Israel proper. Their return would cause such a demographic shift that it would spell the end of the Jewish state. Further, Israelis would never again tolerate Arab control of Jewish holy sites and neighborhoods in the Old City of Jerusalem. When Old Jerusalem was under Arab rule between 1948 and 1967, Arab rulers forbade Jewish people from worshiping at the Western Wall (the outer wall of the ancient holy temple), considered the holiest site in Judaism. Also, Arab rulers had destroyed the Jewish neighborhoods of the Old City and desecrated the ancient Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives. Barak moved far but would not concede any further.

Arafat had several reasons for his intransigence. He believed that he had already conceded Israel's right to exist and therefore should not be expected to make any further compromises. Since he believed that Israel existed on land that was part of historic Palestine, he saw no reason to make any further adjustments to the border. Furthermore, Arafat had failed to prepare the Palestinian people for any compromise. He had so frequently promised the Palestinian people that the end result of Oslo would be a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital that the Palestinians would view any concessions as a defeat. He also knew any shared sovereignty of Jerusalem with the Jewish state would be despised throughout the Muslim world. If Arafat would sign a final peace accord on terms other than his opening position, he risked assassination by Muslim extremists.

The result was that despite marathon negotiations, a final status agreement could not be reached. Furthermore, while not seeking to place blame, in his statements after the summit President Clinton clearly identified Yasser Arafat as the negotiator less willing to compromise. For example, President Clinton said, "Prime Minister Barak showed particular courage, vision, and an understanding of the historical importance of this moment. Chairman Arafat made it clear that he, too, remains committed to the path of peace." In explaining his commendation of Barak, President Clinton added, "I think it is fair to say that at this moment in time, maybe because they had been preparing for it longer, maybe because they had thought through it more, that the prime minister moved forward more

from his initial position than Chairman Arafat, on . . . particularly surrounding the questions of Jerusalem.” He summarized his praise for Barak by saying,

My remarks should stand for themselves, because not so much as a criticism of Chairman Arafat, because this is really hard and never been done before, but in praise of Barak. He came there knowing that he was going to have to take bold steps, and he did it. And I think you should look at it more as a positive toward him than as a condemnation of the Palestinian side.<sup>7</sup>

### A Prelude to Violence

Doubtless, these comments gave Israel a short-lived public relations bonanza in the eyes of the world, but they also served to embarrass Chairman Arafat publicly. Moreover, it appears that Arafat decided that he had achieved as much as possible through negotiations and that any further Israeli concessions would come as a result of Palestinian violence.

Nearly seven years after the historic Rabin-Arafat handshake at the White House, the stage was set for an outbreak in violence. Prior to going to Camp David, Prime Minister Barak had warned that failure there would likely lead to a violent confrontation. Amazingly, most of the world, including Israel, was then taken by surprise by the outbreak of hostilities that followed less than three months later.