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the two weeks of the summit had been harder than the two months of the siege of Beirut and Israeli bombing during the summer of 1982 (2). Still, he could scarcely have turned down Clinton's invitation. After all, he had increased US links with the Palestinian Authority since 1993 and in December 1998 he had even gone to Gaza to make a speech to the Palestinian National Council. And, during his eight years in office, he had invited Arafat 22 times to the White House, far more than any other Arab leader. Clinton was counting on this special relationship to help Barak get his view to prevail.

At the summit Arafat explained several times why he could not accept the proposals put forward. When Clinton insisted, Arafat asked him if he was hoping to take part in his funeral (3). Clinton and Barak had already worked together to soften up another Arab leader, the late President Hafez al-Assad of Syria. But in spite of a Clinton-Assad summit in Geneva in March, it was a complete failure. Just before Camp David President Mubarak of Egypt had warned Arafat about a repeat of this manoeuvre, designed to make the Arabs seem intransigent.

'Take what you're offered'

Like it or not, Arafat had to go to the summit. Yet he knew the results of the side talks in Stockholm between Shlomo Ben Ami, Israeli minister for internal security and Ahmad Qurai (Abu Ala), head of the Palestinian Legislative Assembly. In spite of 20 sessions, there had been complete stalemate. The Palestinians had invoked international legality, i.e. the United Nations resolutions, as the starting point for any negotiations. They said that once the Israelis took the resolutions on board (particularly 242 calling for withdrawal from territory occupied in the June 1967 war, and 194 on the refugees' right of return), they would find the Palestinians flexible. To which the Israelis responded: "You need far more moderate positions before you can make any progress". Earlier on, the Israeli negotiator had said: "You don't have the power to get what you're asking for, so be realistic and take what you're offered". After this humiliating advice, Ben Ami declared the talks over and said it was time to get the leaders together to make the appropriate historic decisions. When Abu Ala commented that they had not yet made any progress whatever, Ben Ami replied that they were running out of time.

Clinton was, of course, the lead actor on the Camp David stage. He talked of thousands of dollars in aid to try and win over Arafat - while, Barak, who had instigated the gathering, systematically avoided any private conversation with Arafat throughout the summit. Meanwhile, four committees were at work - on refugees, Jerusalem, borders and settlements, and security. This last, which mainly addressed the question of control of the eastern border with Jordan, was the only one to make any headway.

Clinton boasted of his detailed knowledge of the streets of the Old City in Jerusalem. But none of his advisors

whispered in his ear that opening a synagogue on the Haram al-Sharif - esplanade of the al-Aqsa mosque which is the third most sacred place in Islam - might be a provocation: as was the suggestion of a horizontal division between Muslims and Jews across the hill it stands on, with the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa above, and the foundations of the Jewish Temple directly beneath them.

The extraordinary proposal of allowing Jews to pray on the Haram al-Sharif - forbidden hitherto by the Grand Rabbis of Jerusalem (4) - came from US security advisor Sandy Berger. Yasser Abed Rabbo, Palestinian minister for culture and information, amazed and angry, warned him that the repercussions from the entire Arab and Muslim world would be "a thousand times worse than the riots that took place after Netanyahu opened the tunnel in the Old City in 1996" (Israeli excavations near the Muslim holy places provoked rioting that left 80 dead and hundreds injured). Berger turned pale and forbade him to mention what he had just proposed. And Arafat declared with some bitterness that he would "refuse to concede any part of the Haram al-Sharif even in exchange for Haifa or Jaffa" (5).

In calling for adherence to Security Council Resolution 242, the Palestinians were demanding sovereignty over all the Arab part of East Jerusalem occupied in 1967, leaving Israel the Jewish Quarter within the Old City and the Western (Wailing) Wall. However, the Israeli proposal was to give the Palestinians sovereignty only over outlying villages and areas, with some form of self-rule over the Muslim and Christian Quarters of the Old City along with other Palestinian sectors outside the walls of the Old City. Israel also proposed handing over 87% of the West Bank and annexing the remainder - taken up mainly by the Jewish settlements.

Getting nowhere fast

The least productive of the committees was the one on refugees - those living reminders of the disaster of 1948 known as the nakba and its raw scars. The Palestinians expect some real gestures from the Israelis - especially since their responsibility for the expulsion of the refugees in 1948-49 has now been proved (6). Despite this, there were just the same old speeches: Israel immediately disclaimed all responsibility and refused to make any sort of apology. "The most we can do", said an Israeli official, "is to express our sorrow for the sufferings of the refugees, the way we would for any accident or natural disaster." According to Israel, those responsible for this tragedy, which has affected a whole people, are "the Arab countries who told the Palestinians to leave their home while they waited for the liberation of their country by the Arab armies". In the sitting room of Holly chalet, the committee heard the same old propaganda from the 1950s repeated all over again.

As far as Israel is concerned, UN Resolution 194, affirming the refugees' right of return, still means the destruction of the state of Israel. Even so, Israel put

forward its "contribution" to the committee towards a solution of the problem: absorbing 5-10,000 refugees over 10 years, or else several thousand in one go.

What about the compensation also expected under Resolution 194? At one session of the committee, the following exchange of views took place:

Yasser Abed Rabbo, for the Palestinians: "We expect to be repaid for the property of the refugees, administered by the Israeli official responsible for abandoned Palestinian property. In 1949 a tripartite committee [British/French/Turkish] estimated the value of this property at £1,124,000,000 sterling [today's value is several hundred billion dollars.- A.K.]. The refugees must start to receive compensation by using those funds."

Elyakim Rubinstein, for the Israelis: "These funds no longer exist. We have used them up. It is up to the international community to create funds for this."

Return of the refugees' property was also categorically refused. What is more, only a part of the international funds would go to the Palestinian refugees. The other part, according to Israel, should go to compensating "Jewish refugees who fled the Arab countries" after 1948. This met with stupefaction and bitterness on the part of the Palestinian team: "Not only did these new immigrant move into the houses whose owners had been thrown out or had fled the massacres, but they want to indemnify them at our expense."

Abed Rabbo: "Why did you not ask Egypt for reparations during the peace talks?"

Rubinstein: "We decided to keep this subject for the talks on the Palestinian refugees."

Abed Rabbo: "I protest. This problem has nothing to do with us. Bring it up with the Moroccan authorities, the Yemenis and so on."

It would be a difficult task, for the Jews who emigrated from the Arab countries did so with strong encouragement and massive aid from Israel. Shlomo Hillel, a former Labour minister and president of the Knesset who himself comes from Iraq, has declared several times that he was by no means a refugee, but a Zionist immigrant (7). A year ago the World Sephardi Federation distributed, in collaboration with the office of the Israeli prime minister, tens of thousands of forms to register the property of Jews left in Arab countries. It was said in the clearest possible terms that the aim of this exercise was not to indemnify the immigrants, but to give the government a card for the talks with the Palestinians.

Who is responsible for the failure?

After the summit ended, a propaganda campaign began with a triple aim: to put the responsibility for the failure on Arafat; prepare international opinion for a new meeting between the three leaders, "this time a decisive one"; and

give a false picture of the Palestinian position to put Arafat in difficulty. For instance, Barak said, quite contrary to the facts, that the Palestinians had agreed to associate the question of the "Jewish refugees" to the funds destined to indemnify the Palestinian refugees.

Clinton took part in this campaign. He criticised Arafat at length in a long interview on Israeli television (8) despite solemn promises on the eve of the summit not to put the responsibility for an eventual failure on him. He also threatened Arafat with reprisals if he unilaterally declared an independent Palestinian state, saying if that happened, he would reconsider the whole of their relations, and go even further. And he talked of moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

With the approach of a new "last chance" summit, Israel and the US are clamouring even harder for Arafat to show greater flexibility. Among their arguments is the risk Barak is running on account of the disintegration of his coalition.

These arguments are rejected both by Arafat's office, and by the refugees in the camps and the people of the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinians are pointing out that it was they who made the historic concessions in Oslo by agreeing to build their state on just a fifth of their fatherland. They are also pointing out the great flexibility shown by the Palestinian Authority, even though they are insisting that international legality be respected. They are still saying that the United Nations resolutions must be accepted, and then all the unresolved issues could be debated in a realistic way.

Last, without denying that Barak has internal problems, they are saying that peace could have been concluded if Barak had had the courage on his election in May last year, while the Israeli right was in shock over its electoral defeat.

The Palestinians have run out of patience. The flagrant violations and systematic delays in implementing the Oslo accords over seven years have exasperated them. Their officials now say that any new agreement will have to be accompanied by iron-clad assurances and guarantees on the part of the international authorities. Any violations should be taken before them, or even the Security Council.

* Journalist, Jerusalem

(1) See Meron Benvenisti, ex-deputy mayor of Jerusalem, *Haaretz*, Tel Aviv, 7 July 2000.

(2) *Al Ayyam*, Ramallah, 28 July 2000.

(3) Cited by Akram Haniyah, member of the official Palestinian delegation to the summit and director of the Palestinian daily *Al Ayyam*, in a series of seven articles on Camp David (29 July-10 August 2000).

(4) Rabbinical ban dating from the Middle Ages,

supported by all the main spiritual authorities. It has to do with the lack of means for ritual purification before entering the holy site of the Temple.

(5) *Al Ayyam*, 5 August 2000.

(6) See Dominique Vidal, "The expulsion of the Palestinians re-examined", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English internet edition, December 1997.

(7) See "The changing pattern of Israel immigration", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English internet edition, November 1997.

(8) Israeli television, 28 July 2000.

Translated by Wendy Kristianasen

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