

The Failure of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process in 2000-2001: Was Arafat to Blame?

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Abstract

This Essay poses the question, of whether Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat was to blame for the failure of the Israeli and Palestinian Peace Process under the Clinton Administration and aims to answer it

The Essay reviews:

- the progress of the peace process at that time and the situation on the ground
- the key issues being negotiated
- the roles of the key players, Clinton, Barak and Arafat
- what went so badly wrong with the peace negotiations; and
- who or what was primarily responsible for the failure.

The Essay argues that Israelis and Palestinians came extremely close to concluding a final peace agreement in January 2001, more so than is often appreciated. It looks at why the efforts to secure that vital peace failed. In addressing the issue of who – if anyone - was to blame for this failure, evidence is provided to support the argument that Arafat was unfairly targeted for exclusive blame and that other players and issues contributed in a significant way to the failure of the peace process at that time.

In terms of methodology, efforts were made to examine the topic from both the Palestinian and Israeli point of view, using both primary and secondary sources. In terms of primary sources, I have drawn extensively on my own experience of living in Jerusalem for three years from the beginning of 2000 and my first hand (if very youthful) experience of the situation on the ground and the conflict. I have had the benefit of being able to interview my mother, who was the Irish Representative to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, as well as her colleague, the Irish Ambassador to Israel at the time, Ambassador Brendan Scannell. Both were briefed on a regular basis respectively by the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators involved in the talks as well as by some of the US mediators and followed the progress of the negotiations in detail. I have also talked to diplomats at the Israeli Embassy and the Palestinian Delegation here in Dublin to hear their perspective on the events of 2000/01. Not surprisingly, the viewpoints of Israelis and Palestinians are very different and these differences are hopefully reflected in the Essay, but I have attempted to reach some objective conclusions, based on the evidence. Details of secondary sources drawn upon appear in the Note on Sources and Bibliography at the end but, of particular value, were the published accounts of the some of the key figures who participated in the negotiations including President Clinton, his chief negotiator, Dennis Ross, his Special Assistant for Israeli-Arab Affairs, Robert Malley and Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who themselves have different interpretations of some of the events and interviews with Israeli and Palestinian participants

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- To the diplomats in the Israeli Embassy and Palestinian Delegation in Dublin who provided information and responded to my questions.

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The Failure of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process in 2000-2001: Was Arafat to Blame?

Introduction

With media for the last few years so often dominated by scenes of Palestinians killing Israelis, and Israelis killing Palestinians, it seems hard now to remember that not too long ago Israelis and Palestinians were sitting down at negotiating tables together. Harder still to imagine that they could ever have come close to a peace deal. But that was what happened in the six months or so between July 2000 and January 2001. But the negotiations in question failed and the individual blamed, almost universally and single-handedly, has been Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader.

This Essay will review:

- the progress of the peace process at that time and the situation on the ground
- the key issues being negotiated
- the roles of the key players, including Arafat
- what went so badly wrong with the peace negotiations; and
- who or what was primarily responsible for the failure.

The Essay will provide evidence to support the argument that Arafat was unfairly targeted for exclusive blame and that other players and issues contributed in a significant way to the failure of the peace process at that time.

The Oslo Peace Process 1993-2000

The Oslo Peace Accords were agreed in 1993 - the result of secret negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians negotiators near the Norwegian capital, following the first Palestinian Intifada or Uprising. The main elements of these agreements were officially endorsed by Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and PLO President Arafat, in the 'Declaration of Principles', signed in a euphoric ceremony on the White House lawn in September 1993. Hosted by the still-new US President, Bill Clinton, the ceremony witnessed Rabin and Arafat reluctantly agreeing to shake hands, after agreeing to work together to create a Palestinian State in the Occupied Territories and secure peace and stability in that 'Holy Land' they both claimed. Seven years later, the process was supposed to be coming to a close and an independent Palestinian State was scheduled to come into existence on 13 September 2000. But as the Millennium Year dawned, with extensive celebrations in the now Palestinian-controlled town of Bethlehem, there was little evidence that peace and stability were about to become a reality.

In the years that had followed the White House lawn ceremony, Yasser Arafat had been allowed to return to the Occupied Territories in 1994 and set up the Palestinian Authority (PA)¹. In addition to the Gaza Strip, eight West Bank towns, including Ramallah and Bethlehem had gradually been transferred to at least partial PA control, amounting to a about one-third of the area of the West Bank². Elections in January 1996 had endorsed both Arafat as President of the PA and the Oslo peace process/'two State solution'³. But deadlines for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from other areas in the West Bank, negotiated under the peace process, were repeatedly missed. Construction of heavily-fortressed Jewish 'Settlements', housing by then over 250,000 settlers in the West Bank and about 10,000

¹ Also known as the Palestinian National Authority (PNA)

² See Map 1 at web link: http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/MAPS/wbgs1.html

³ The 'Two-State Solution' was the idea of dividing the 'Holy Land' – demarcating the legal boundaries of Israel and permitting the Palestinians to create an independent State in the land area of and Israel's illegally 'Occupied Territories'.

in Gaza, had accelerated not halted, with a massive network of highways linking them to each other. Much of all this housing and road construction required the demolition on a large scale of Palestinian homes and agricultural land. Up to a hundred military checkpoints controlled Palestinian travel out of, and within, the Occupied Territories⁴. Gaza, ringed by a high border wall⁵ and tightly-controlled border posts, was a virtual concentration camp, with most of its population of 1.2 million refugees living in deplorable conditions⁶.

Barak and the Israeli Government

The victory of Ehud Barak of the Labour Party over the hawkish, right-wing, Netanyahu in the Israeli elections of May 1999 had been celebrated jubilantly by the Peace camp. However, despite Barak's considerable political vision and courage at times, he proved to be a poor communicator and negotiator, not only with the Palestinians, but also with members of his own government and party. By early 2000, he was already displaying evidence of frequent changes of mind and backtracking on commitments. A decision to sidetrack into negotiations with Syria early in 2000, ultimately unsuccessful, set back negotiations with the Palestinians, delayed the return of territories promised to the Palestinians and seriously undermined Palestinian trust in his sincerity to conclude the final deal. Stung by his lack of success on the Syrian front and spurred on by increasing dissent within his unruly Government Coalition, Barak in the summer of 2000 decided to stake all on securing a rapid breakthrough in the peace negotiations with the Palestinians and a Final Status Agreement and persuaded President Clinton to host and mediate a high-level peace Conference between himself and Arafat to achieve this.

Arafat and the Palestinian Authority in 2000/2001

In the 1996 elections, Arafat had received 96% of the vote and a clear popular mandate to negotiate peace with Israel and independence for Palestine in the Occupied Territories. In signing up to the 1993 peace agreement, Arafat had agreed to recognise the State of Israel, and along with that, to set aside the traditional Palestinians claim to over 87% of the historic land of Palestine. In doing so, he and the Palestinians supporting the peace process thought they would automatically get all the remaining 22%, i.e. all of the Occupied Territories, but soon found that was not what Israel had in mind. Four years later, only the Gaza Strip and a little over one-third of the West Bank had been handed over to partial PA control. Meanwhile Israeli Settlements continued to spread throughout the Territories that were supposed to be handed back to the Palestinians. The peace process had not improved the lot of the ordinary Palestinian in any concrete way, in fact that many were worse off now than before. In addition to ongoing problems with Israel, disillusionment and frustration had set in among the Palestinians with Arafat and the new PA establishment, which was seen to be corrupt and mismanaged. Arafat's leadership style was autocratic and centralised, delegating nothing important to anyone else and constantly playing off one top adviser against another – characteristics that were very much in evidence during the peace negotiations.

When Clinton approached Arafat inviting him to Camp David, explaining that Barak was ready to make a historic breakthrough in the negotiations and to conclude a final peace agreement, Arafat pleaded against such haste and pressure. Essentially, he had lost faith in Barak and his will/ability to deliver a viable agreement and in addition, he argued with Clinton, more time should be given to negotiators to prepare the groundwork, to debate some of the key

⁴ This meant tens of thousands of Palestinians on foot or in vehicles queuing to have their IDs checked, often just for short journeys, the worst by far being the Erez checkpoint in Gaza, where over 100,000 Palestinian workers traveling to cheap-labour jobs in Israel had to queue up in cattle-pen-type lines from around 2 a.m. each morning awaiting clearance.

⁵ similar to what has since been made along/within the West Bank

⁶ as graphically described by Israeli author, Amira Hass, in her book *Drinking the Sea at Gaza* (1999) and her regular articles in *Ha'aretz* daily newspaper.

make-or-break issues that had not been discussed at all at that stage⁷, and to start bridging the gaps at that level before the leaders met in a glare of publicity. He also, prophetically, predicted that if things went wrong, he would be blamed, but Clinton totally rejected this as a possibility and, with his enormous powers of persuasion, charmed Arafat to come to Camp David, despite his deep misgivings.

The Camp David Talks, 11-24 July 2000

If anything at all is known about Camp David 2⁸ it is that it failed because Arafat refused to accept the historic peace deal offered to him there. A few key points can be made about what happened at Camp David and about the great 'offer' put to Arafat⁹. In outline, what happened was that Barak came to Camp David, presented a 'final' proposal to Clinton and his team orally¹⁰, for them to pass on to Arafat orally on an unconditional, 'take it or leave it', basis. He then withdrew to his private cabin, refusing to communicate with anyone or meet the Palestinians, saying that he would do nothing further unless he got Arafat's unconditional agreement in principle to his terms. For reasons that will be outlined below, Arafat felt he could not accept the details of the offer unconditionally so, being unable to 'take it' he felt he had no choice but to 'leave it'. Pushed hard by Clinton and his team to compromise, Arafat did what he always did when he felt cornered and scapegoated - dug himself in and refused to cooperate. Clinton and his team did everything in their power to break the stalemate, and put forward ideas themselves to bridge the gap between the two sides. Clinton tried hard to strike a balance, but he was not, and could not be, fully impartial, given the US connection with Israel¹¹.

As regards the terms of Barak 'great offer' to Arafat, they were indeed courageous but severely problematic:

- Firstly, although Barak was offering to give the Palestinians Gaza and about 90% of the West Bank, the plan would have resulted in a Palestinian State composed of four separate blocs of territory – Gaza on the west coast separated from a West Bank divided into three blocks¹². The proposal would have produced a Palestinian State entirely surrounded by Israel, intersected by Israeli roads, with no international border-crossings and three Israeli military posts remaining in the West Bank. This could never have produced a geographically-, or politically- viable Palestinian State.
- Secondly, though Barak took the courageous step to propose dividing sovereignty over the city of Jerusalem between the States of Israel and Palestine, the offer required Arafat to accept Israeli sovereignty over the Temple

⁷ Including settlements, Jerusalem, the holy sites and refugees

⁸ Camp David I were the successful talks in September 1978 between Israeli Prime Minister Begin and Egyptian President Sadat, facilitated by President which led to a historic Middle East Peace Agreement, something Clinton hoped to replicate at the same location in July 2000.

⁹ The facts and analysis presented in this section of the paper is based on interviews with Israeli and Palestinian diplomats currently serving in Dublin and with Irish diplomats based in Israel and Palestine in 2000 who followed the detail of the negotiations closely. Also on a wide range of published accounts from participants in the talks, as set out in the Bibliography, especially *Albright, Agha/Malley, Clinton, Malley, Ross*, etc.

¹⁰ Barak insisted on the proposal being handled orally to make it clear that it was his own personal proposal and not an official Israeli Government one; so that it would remain informal and not a draft document that the Palestinians would start trying to negotiate and modify; and essentially so he could deny it all if leaks occurred.

¹¹ and the importance of the Jewish lobby in the US political system

¹² See Map 2, via weblink: http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/MAPS/wbgs_campdavid.html. Barak's proposal would have cut the West Bank in three by having two major east-west Israeli road arteries running through it, designed to link Israel with the Jordan Valley along the most of the eastern border of the West Bank, which Israel wanted to keep.

Mount/Haram al-Sharif¹³, a concession that no Palestinian leader - or any individual in the Arab or Muslim world - had any power to make, least of all without the opportunity to consult with the Muslim world.

· Thirdly, Arafat was called upon to renounce, irrevocably and without consultation, the right of all Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland - a right that is enshrined in international humanitarian and human rights law, a demand to which he had no power to concede.

Worst of all was the handling of the talks and their outcome. Disastrously, when the talks at Camp David reached stalemate, Clinton and Barak went public vilifying Arafat and blaming him exclusively for the failure of the talks, while Barak was warmly praised for his great statesmanship and the great offer he had made. Its main immediate effect was to totally undermine Palestinian trust in Clinton as an impartial mediator. Almost equally disastrous, rather than agreeing to continue dialogue behind the scenes to try to narrow the gaps on the various key issues and to resume negotiations at a later date, Clinton and Barak called peace negotiations off completely. Barak went back home, announcing, firstly that he would 'take time out of the peace process' and, secondly, that he would hold new elections in February 2001 – elections, ironically, he had little chance of winning without a peace deal.

So was Arafat to blame for the failure of the Camp David talks? Barak and Israelis said he was, Clinton and his team said he was and much on the outside world and media were told that he was. It is true that Arafat behaved badly at Camp David and failed to show the sort of political leadership that would have been necessary to secure agreement, but Barak behaved badly too and Clinton made some key mistakes and misjudgments. Others share the view that Arafat was unjustly targeted for blame. Former President Jimmy Carter, in his recent study of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, reinforces the view that Arafat was unjustly blamed for the failure to reach agreement at Camp David, saying: 'There was no possibility that any Palestinian leader could accept such terms and survive but official statements from Washington and Jerusalem were successful in placing the onus for the failure on Yasser Arafat'.¹⁴ Robert Malley, Clinton's Special Assistant on Israeli-Arab Affairs, who participated in the Camp David talks, shares that view, stating that: 'the failure to reach a final agreement is attributed, without notable dissent, to Yasser Arafat...For a process of such complexity, the diagnosis is remarkably shallow. It ignores history, the dynamics of the negotiations, and the relationships among the three parties. In so doing, it fails to capture why what so many viewed as a generous Israeli offer, the Palestinians viewed as neither generous, nor Israeli, nor, indeed, as an offer. Worse, it ...offers up a single, convenient culprit—Arafat—rather than a more nuanced and realistic analysis'.¹⁵

The truth is that the Camp David talks were badly prepared, rushed into, and badly handled. Instead of being declared a total failure and dramatically broken off, a less sensational, more constructive, spin should have been put on it and a commitment made to continue negotiations behind the scenes. By breaking off the talks completely and rushing to blame Arafat for their failure, vital months of negotiations that could have made the difference between success and failure some months later were lost. This was probably the single most crucial mistake in the whole process and it was the result of domestic political realities in Israel and the US, with Barak facing elections in Israel in six months time and the Democrats (and Hilary Clinton, who was heavily dependent on the New York Jewish vote) facing

¹³ The site of the ruins of the original and reconstructed Jewish Temple, over which the Haram-al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) with the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque was built in the early years of Islam in the 7th century

¹⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Israel and Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*, 2006, p. 152

¹⁵ Agha, Hussein & Malley, Robert. 'Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors, *New York Times Review of Books*, Vol.48, No. 13, 9 August 2001

elections in November. Surprisingly, however, despite the hysterical reactions of their leaders, Palestinians and especially Israelis – separately - discussed and debated the leaked details of the momentous Camp David proposals in relative calm.

Outbreak of the Second Intifada

On 28 September 2000, Ariel Sharon - head of the right-wing Likud Party, Opposition leader and leading opponent to peace negotiations with the Palestinians, marched into the Temple Mount/Haram-al-Sharif complex, accompanied by hundreds of Israeli police – and sparked off the Second Palestinian Intifada. In doing so, Sharon was accused of deliberately aiming to provoke a Palestinian uprising and destroy the peace process. But the official enquiry into what exactly happened to start the Intifada, headed by the much-respected facilitator of Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement, George Mitchell¹⁶, concluded that Sharon had not deliberately set out to provoke a Palestinian insurrection, though recognizing that Sharon would have been well aware that the situation on the ground was explosive.

Israelis generally, and their international supporters, especially in the US, claim that the Intifada was orchestrated and instigated by Arafat, and that he and the Palestinians were looking for an excuse for a violent uprising, that they were planning anyway, 'after failing to get what he wanted at Camp David'. But George Mitchell's report was very clear that there no prior Palestinian plot to orchestrate an uprising – that it was completely spontaneous¹⁷. Despite all the danger signals and warnings of simmering tensions below the surface, the suddenness of the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada or uprising, and the scale of deaths that occurred in its first few days and weeks - most of them Palestinian - took Arafat unawares. Essentially from then until his sudden death in November 2004 he was largely 'riding the tiger' of the Intifada, trying to control it, but never really succeeding. There were times, especially in the early stages of the Intifada, when Arafat could have done more to control the militants but doing so would have been extremely risky politically and likely to result in the sort of near-civil war that we are seeing there today. Then the Israelis, defying all logic, set about destroying all the PA police stations and equipment, making it impossible for Arafat and the PA to rein in the militants.

Tragically, Palestinian violence – however much provoked at times - convinced most Israelis, and much of the international community, that Arafat and the Palestinians were not 'partners for peace' and wanted only to destroy Israel and Israelis. It allowed Israel to justify reverting to a military solution to the conflict, despite all previous, and subsequent, evidence that Palestinian aspirations for Statehood could not be quelled by Israeli bombs and bullets – no more than Palestinian bombs and bullets were going to persuade Israelis to give in to Palestinian demands. Very much less has been said about the extent of the Israeli violence against Palestinians and the systematic Israeli attacks, targeted not only on the militants, but also against civilians, but this had a totally polarizing effect on Palestinians, convincing them that Israel, the US and international community had no interest in justice and peace for Palestinians.

Sweden, the Clinton 'Bridging Proposals and Taba

Peace talks resumed a couple of months after Barak's 'time out' and , building on the offer put on the table at Camp David, made remarkable progress in addressing virtually all the contentious issues by the time they were forced to

¹⁶ Report of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee, report completed on April 30, 2001, published 20 May 2001

¹⁷ based on the belief that Sharon's actions were a sacrilegious, provocation, deliberately designed to doom the peace process

conclude, uncompleted, at the end of January 2001, on the eve of the Israeli elections. The negotiations took place in some acknowledged meetings locally, but more important initially was a secret channel opened in Sweden – eventually uncovered by the media. Negotiations at this crucial stage were conducted by professional negotiators and diplomats on the principle that ‘nothing was agreed until everything was agreed’. The terms were officially not the positions of the political leaders, but there is no doubt whatsoever that the negotiators were reporting the details to their political masters and receiving feedback from them. Drafting work on individual chapters of a final status agreement was undertaken and maps prepared by both sides, attempting to tie down specific details of land and people transfers, borders, religious sites and security interests. These detailed behind-the-scenes negotiations which culminated in Taba bridged crucial gaps between the two sides, including on many of the make-or-break issues. The final lap of the negotiations was greatly helped by ‘Bridging Proposals’ put forward by President Clinton in mid-December 2000 after the US elections, drawing together the strands of the two previous months of secret negotiations, and putting forward some compromise elements to bridge the gaps.

The Clinton Bridging Proposals, as followed up at Taba in January 2001, covered all key issues necessary for a final peace agreement and went a long way towards establishing common ground between the two sides¹⁸ In brief outline, the proposals that emerged from the negotiators’ efforts at Taba included the following key elements:

- On **territories and borders**¹⁹, almost 97% of the West Bank, all of Gaza, and some additional ‘land-swaps’ in Israel adjoining the Gaza strip would be given to the new State of Palestine. A number of Israeli Settlements along the border with Israel and around Jerusalem, housing 80% of the Israeli Settler population, would be retained by Israel but, otherwise, all the other Settlements in the West Bank and Gaza would be evacuated.
- On **Jerusalem and the holy sites**, the principle was set out of the Jewish areas going to Israel and Arab areas to Palestine. In the Old City of Jerusalem, the Jewish Quarter and possibly the adjacent Armenian Quarter²⁰ would go to Israel and the Muslim and Christian Quarters to Palestine, with arrangements planned for some kind of jointly-administered ‘open city’,²¹. As regards the holy Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount complex, Clinton’s proposal was that the upper level with the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque would be transferred to Palestinian sovereignty, while the lower levels, especially ‘the Western Wall’ would be confirmed as Israeli²².
- On the intractable issue of **Palestinian refugees** and their ‘**Right of Return**’, important progress was made by the Taba negotiators, especially Israeli Justice Minister and Oslo negotiator, Yossi Beilin, who drafted a complete chapter for a final agreement document. This draft expressed regret for, the ‘suffering’ and displacement of the

¹⁸ And which were to resurface again in the well-intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful initiative that culminated in the ‘Geneva Accord’ in 2002, spearheaded by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators from the Taba talks

¹⁹ See Map 3 via weblink: http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/MAPS/tab2001.html

²⁰ During the Taba discussions, negotiators had to take on board representations from the Armenian community in the Old City demanding that their Quarter not be tied to Israel but to Palestine and considerable progress was made in narrowing down the GOI claim to that quarter to a limited group of houses occupied by Jewish families.

²¹ The details of this were not fully worked out but the idea was to avoid having an international border running through the city

²² This extremely emotive subject was not wrapped up fully The two key issues were the definition of ‘the Western Wall’, which involved not only the visible part known as the ‘Wailing Wall’ but another, hidden stretch which ran into the heart of the Muslim Quarter; and who would have sovereignty over all or parts of the holy complex, with various ideas emerging in that regards, including ‘UN auspices’, ‘international sovereignty’ and even the ‘sovereignty of God’.

Palestinian people following the creation of the State of Israel; acknowledged the right of all Palestinians who had suffered to compensation for their loss; provided for claims to be processed by an International Commission to be headed by Sweden; welcomed Palestinian refugees in the diaspora to exercise their Right of Return by returning to the new Palestinian State, rather than Israel²³, making available homes to some returning refugees in the evacuated settlements.

But the much-hoped for peace was not to be. Was Arafat the culprit once again, as so many claimed? Had he done yet again what had so often been said about him – that he ‘never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity’²⁴. It is indeed true that Arafat did not give his official blessing to the package of measure his and Israeli negotiators had worked so hard to achieve in Taba. But what is rarely said is that neither did Barak. In fact Barak had formally stated towards the end of 2000 before the Taba talks that he would not rush into concluding negotiations before the elections – elections that by that stage he was clearly going to lose. And though all the blame was put on Arafat at the time for failing to agree to the peace deal, Barak himself later admitted that he had no intention of signing up to the Taba package, declaring ‘It was plain to me that there was no chance of reaching a settlement at Taba. Therefore I said there would be no negotiations, and no delegation, and no official discussions, and no documentation’²⁵. Israeli negotiator and Oslo architect, Yossi Beilin, stressed that the Taba talks were broken off, not because of Arafat or any specific issue in the talks, but ‘because of the Israeli election’²⁶. Clinton’s Special Assistant, Robert Malley’s conclusion was that Barak contributed more to the collapse than Arafat. In fact, the Israelis and the US Administration got Arafat and his intentions badly wrong, believing erroneously then – and for the remainder of his life – that he had no real interest in peace, but this was not the case²⁷.. Though part of Arafat’s problem in the final stages of the negotiations in late January 2001 was his general indecisiveness, Macchiavellian leadership style, and his instinctive distrust, other parts relates to the way he was handled and his wily – in fact correct – assessment that Barak would not follow-through on his part of the bargain.

Conclusion

Robert Malley sums up the importance of the negotiations that took place between July 2000 and February 2001, saying that they constitute ‘an indelible chapter in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict...taboos were shattered, the unspoken got spoken, and, during that period, Israelis and Palestinians reached an unprecedented level of understanding of what it will take to end their struggle’²⁸. The Taba package would have meant very significant,

²³ Although Beilin inserted a provision to allow a limited quota to be permitted to return to Israel. Beilin talked of around 50,000. The Palestinians wanted a lot more but at least they prepared to consider a pragmatic formula to break the impasse on this very difficult issue. If millions of Palestinians were able to exercise their right to return to Israel and reclaim the homes and lands they were dispossessed from, it would have meant tens of thousands of Israelis being dispossessed from these same properties, which to them was inconceivable, so this was one of those ‘make-or-break issues – for both sides.

²⁴ Originally said by Israeli Abba Eban in 1978

²⁵ Quoted in *Israel and Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*, 2006, p.5

²⁶ Akiva Eldar, ‘“The Moratinos Document”: The Peace that Nearly Was at Taba, *Ha’aretz* newspaper, 14 February 2002

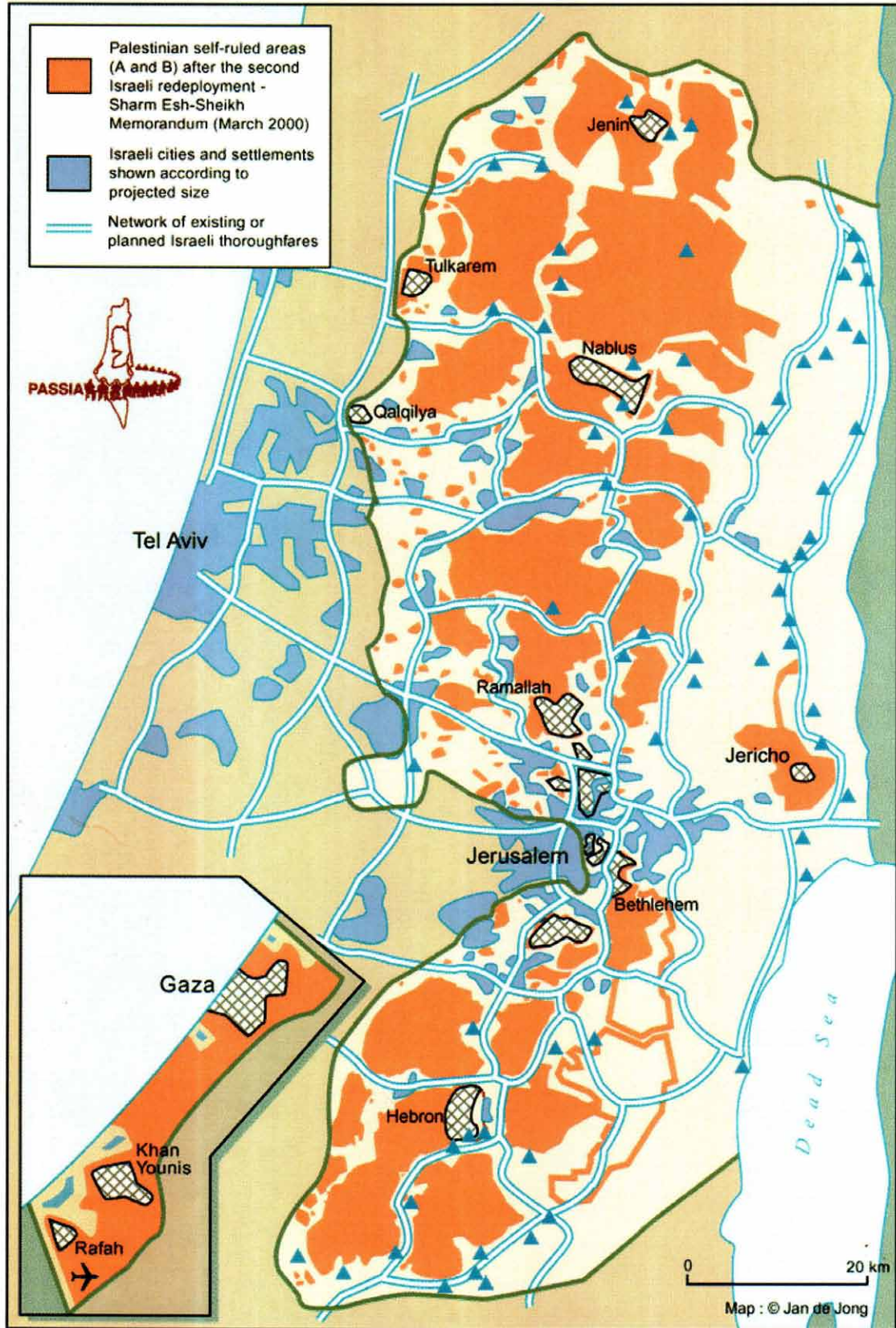
²⁷ It is now known that this was in large part due to seriously flawed and distorted Israeli intelligence which was widely shared with, and believed, by US intelligence and the Administration. Veteran Middle East reporter, David Hirst, in his article ‘Don’t Blame Arafat’, *The Guardian*, 27 July 2004, reports on revelations by former Israeli intelligence chief, Amos Malka, that the evaluations of Arafat’s intentions and actions on which Barak, and later Sharon, were ‘erroneous, and deliberately so’ – the work of the disgruntled and heavily-biased head of the Israeli Intelligence research department, Amos Gilad.

²⁸ Malley, Robert & Agha, Hussein, op cit.

historic, concessions by both sides but, if agreed, these terms could have provided for a viable Palestinian State, an end to the Intifada and good prospects for peace. For Israel, it could have brought the security and normalized relations with its Arab neighbors it so desperately needed. Instead the failure of the peace negotiations led to the Palestinian Intifada becoming more intense and violent and Palestinian society becoming more radicalised. It directly contributed to Ariel Sharon's election and, as a result, to the heavy-handed Israeli military campaign that in turn provoked ever-more serious retaliation by the Palestinian militants and suicide-bombers – an unmitigated spiral of death and destruction. It also generated a deeply-felt sense of injustice in the Arab and Muslim world directed against Israel and its unquestioning US and western supporters. Agreement at Taba may not have prevented what happened in the US on 9/11 but it would certainly have slowed the pace of radicalisation of young Arabs and Muslims around the world, which fuelled support for the likes of Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. A success by Clinton in orchestrating a historic peace agreement in the Middle East would likely have provided the extra handful votes the Democrats needed to conclusively win the US Presidential elections in November 2001, which in turn would have kept George Bush out of the White House, and thus very probably prevented war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The 'What Ifs' are tantalizing but, sadly, it is not possible to reverse the clock to that time at the beginning of 2001 when peace in the Middle East was within such close grasp.

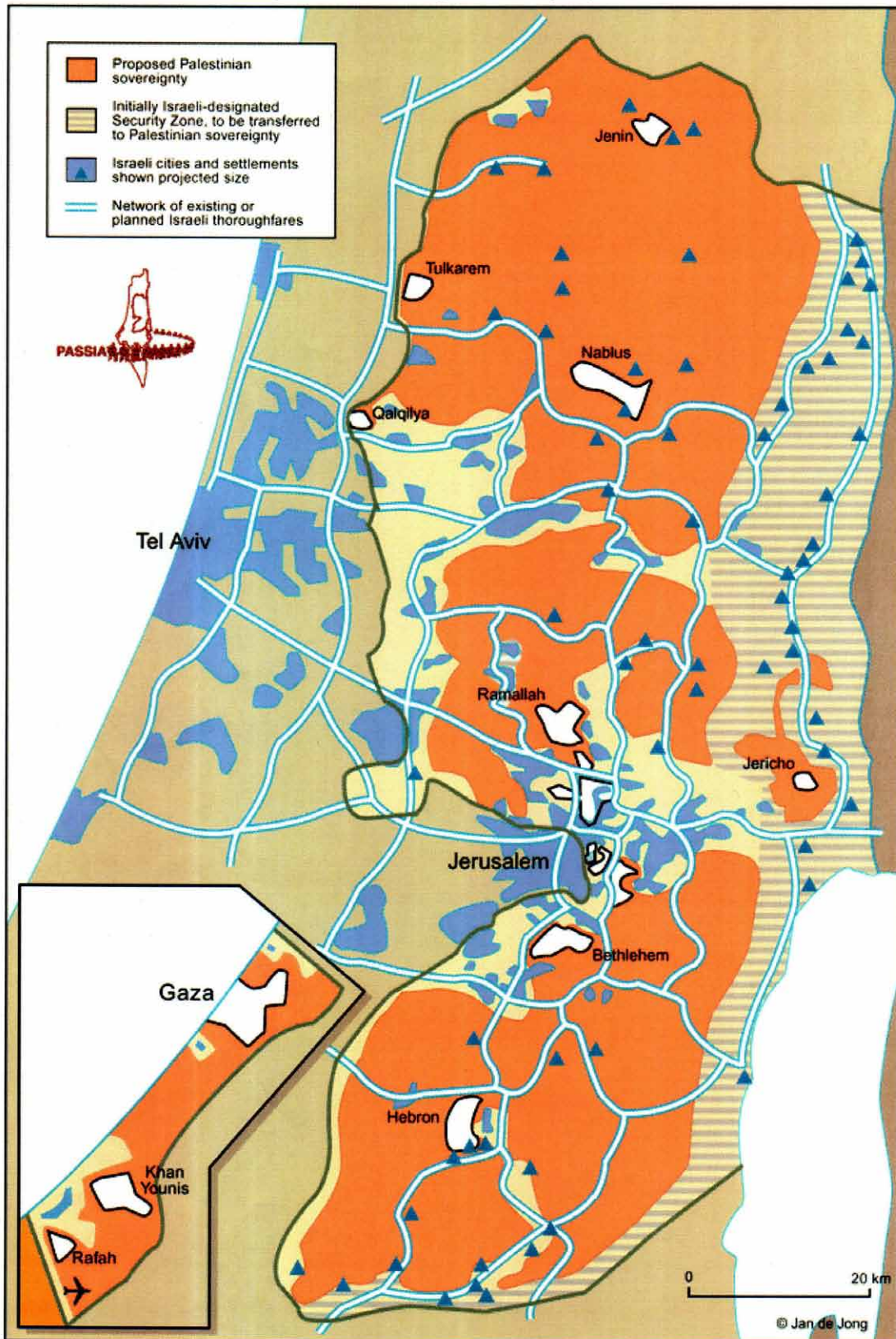
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The West Bank and Gaza Strip, March 2000



Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA)
Map courtesy of PASSIA, Jerusalem

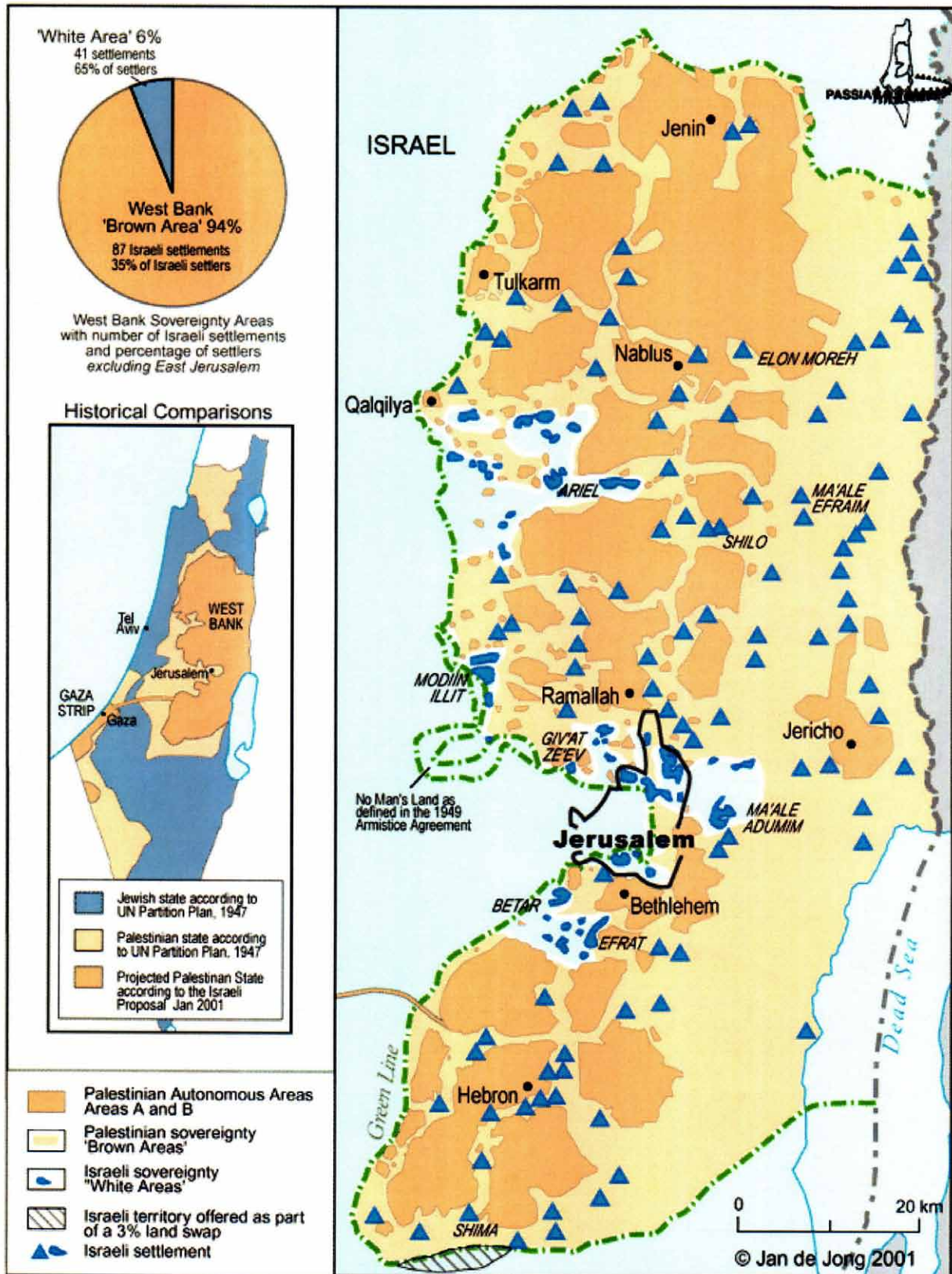
Projection of the West Bank Final Status Map presented by Israel, Camp David, July 2000



Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs
Map courtesy of PASSIA, Jerusalem (**PASSIA**)

Final Status Map Presented by Israel - Taba, January 2001

Based on a 6% West Bank Territorial Transfer to Israel



Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs

Map courtesy of PASSIA, Jerusalem (PASSIA)

Note on Sources

Primary Sources

Primary sources include my personal experience of living in Jerusalem for three years from early 2000 and direct experience of the situation on the ground and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although very young – 10 to 13 – the topic was the main subject of conversation of all the adults I knew and a major issue discussed in the school I attended, where international, Jewish and Palestinian students and their parents were all to some extent affected by the political situation – as were I and my family. All this provided me with a serious interest in the region and the subject and much of the basic background information to this Essay.

By way of original research, I interviewed two senior Irish diplomats serving in Israel and Palestine at the time covered by this essay – Ambassador Brendan Scannell, who was Irish Ambassador to Israel at the time; and Isolde Moylan, who was the first Irish Representative to the Palestinian Authority, both of whom were able to provide very useful information about the peace negotiations in 2000-01.

I also contacted both the Israeli Embassy and the Palestinian Embassy in Dublin, asking a range of questions about what went wrong with the peace negotiations in 2000-01 and obtained both written information and additional responses to questions from them.

Secondary Sources

Finally, I consulted a wide range of books, articles and websites – see Bibliography immediately below - to fill out background details and the details of what went on during the negotiations. The most useful were the accounts written by the negotiators and facilitators, especially Robert Malley, and also those by President Bill Clinton, his main negotiator, Dennis Ross, and EU special envoy Moratinos.

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