

NOTEBOOK

Driverless By Bernard Avishai

LIn late November, I visited the campus of Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, an eastern suburb of Jerusalem, to attend an international conference on Palestinian refugees. Numbers are hard to validate, but it is widely accepted that 5 million survivors and descendants of the 750,000 Arabs who fled (or were chased out) of Israel during the 1948 war, as well as the 500,000 who were displaced in 1967, remain refugees. Of those living outside the Palestinian Authority, about two thirds of registered refugees are in Jordan, where most qualify for citizenship, and 30 percent are evenly divided between Syria and Lebanon, where they generally do not. Palestinians will tell you that the right of return to their homes is sacred. As many as 40 percent of the refugee families still live in squalid camps, in leaking houses of cracked concrete and tin roofs. According to American University of Beirut sociologist Sari Hanafi, only a small percentage of camp dwellers marry people from the outside; the camps, he argues, are like bones misplaced in muscle, with no “connective tissue” to the urban centers where real life happens.

Israelis will tell you the refugee camps are just breeding grounds for Palestinian revanchist fantasies and should have been integrated into “the Arab states” two generations ago, the way Israel incorporated 600,000 Jewish refugees from neighboring countries. The Palestinian claim of a right to “their homes” is intolerable, even for veteran Israeli peace activists like

the writer Amos Oz. Jews have resisted being thrown into the sea, so should they now choose to be swamped? Does not the refugees’ right of return contradict Israel’s right to exist? The problem would seem intractable.

The drive to Al-Quds University should take no more than fifteen minutes from my apartment in the German Colony. It is on the next scatter of hills south of the Augusta Victoria Hospital, where Arab residents of this part of Jerusalem typically go for medical treatment. But it took almost fifty-five minutes in light traffic, since Abu Dis is now formally assigned to the territory of the Palestinian Authority and is just behind the “security fence” that snakes through Jerusalem and the West Bank. To get to Abu Dis—to find a checkpoint through the fence—we had to drive around the burgeoning Jewish suburb of Ma’ale Adumim several miles to the north. Imagine going from Wall Street to NYU via the Upper West Side. Imagine making the trip to the hospital from Abu Dis when the traffic is heavy, your identity card says you are no longer a resident of Jerusalem, the checkpoint guard got up on the wrong side of the bed, and your wife is in labor. It gives a whole new meaning to the phrase “right of return.”

I finally got to the conference building—as it happens, a stone’s throw from the wall and its defiant graffiti. The two featured speakers of the morning were Saeb Erekat, the intense, perennial Palestinian “chief negotiator,” still close to (and bringing greetings from) PA President Mahmoud Abbas, and Nabil Sha’ath, perhaps the most affable diplomat of the old brain

trust around Yasir Arafat. Sha’ath had managed the Palestinian negotiating team on refugees at the peace summit at Taba, the Egyptian resort town on the Red Sea, in January 2001. That summit, undertaken while the Al-Aqsa intifada burned in the background, was the last time Israelis and Palestinians formally tried to come to a “final status” agreement within the framework of the 1993 Oslo Accords. At the time, Bill Clinton had just surrendered the presidency, but his bridging parameters, negotiated in Washington in December 2000 and meant to close the gap that had emerged between Ehud Barak and Arafat at the failed Camp David talks six months before, served as the agenda. Israeli negotiators had reported progress, but the summit was rushed because of an impending Israeli election, in which Ehud Barak was widely expected to take a beating from Ariel Sharon.

Erekat spoke passionately. Using Arafat’s marquee phrase, he called for the “peace of the brave,” the release of prisoners on both sides: “a comprehensive calm—no Palestinian missiles, no Israeli shells.” He did not consider the refugees but rebuked “forces that sow division”—namely Hamas, which had accused Abbas’s Fatah party of having forgotten the refugees. He acknowledged that Hamas had been democratically elected but warned the party not to bypass the PLO, the national umbrella, which Fatah still controls.

After almost a year of Hamas trying to consolidate power in the PA—prompting international financial sanctions, political isolation, and so on—the PA was now stuck with tens of thousands of unpaid teachers, police, and

Bernard Avishai is a consulting editor of the Harvard Business Review and the author of The Tragedy of Zionism. His last article for Harper’s Magazine, “Saving Israel from Itself,” appeared in the January 2005 issue.

other civil servants. Fatah was rising steadily in the polls and now seemed assured a majority in any new election. The air was buzzing with talk of a “unity” government, led by Fatah’s own Abbas, and of the urgency of his meeting with Hamas’s Khaled Meshal to avoid civil war. (They finally reached agreement on a unity government in Mecca on February 8, but it is not yet clear whether its terms, including a cautiously worded call to “respect” the PLO’s previous agreements with Israel, will end Western sanctions.)

Whatever Sha’ath’s real mission at the conference, he seemed to give encouragement to new negotiations by claiming that the past negotiations at Taba had almost succeeded and implying that Hamas was only making a bad situation worse. He did not disappoint. The refugee negotiations at Camp David got nowhere, Sha’ath said, because the Israelis had been stalling. But at Taba, he said, refugees were not shunted aside, and their troubles would have been resolved according to a number of “modalities.” He roared them out in bullet form: There would be financial compensation for lost property. There would be paid relocation to the Palestinian state. There would be contributions by donor countries, and even by Israel, to that state. (One economist present cheerfully put the amount of reparations at \$137 billion.) There would even be a program of limited family reunification in Israel, up to a number “acceptable to the Israeli government,” say 10,000 a year over five years. Nobody could say

justice of a kind was not being exacted.

When Sha’ath finished, however, the applause was merely polite. It was as if everybody had heard it all before. And, of course, we had. For these “modalities” were entirely familiar, basically identical to the principles that had been incorporated into the Geneva Initiative, a document signed by a team of Israeli and Palestinian politicians, writers (including Oz), and others, in October 2003. Geneva’s organizers, Yossi Beilin, the former Israeli justice minister, and former PA Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, had both been at Taba and wanted to complete

its work. Their document amounted to a comprehensive peace deal:

There would be a Palestinian state established in the West Bank and Gaza, joined by a bridge or tunnel, and using the 1967 borders as the starting point. Land swaps (e.g., from the Negev to Gaza) would allow densely populated Jewish settlements around Jerusalem and Hebron, some 150,000 people, to be annexed to Israel, but Israel would evacuate Jewish settlements on the hills around major Palestinian cities. (Of all major urban settlements, only Ariel in the north and Qiryat Arba in the south would be evacuated, since access to them required long fingers of land to jut into Palestine, making a contiguous state impossible.) Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem, including those in the Old City, would be absorbed into the Palestinian state, with the Haram al-Sharif and its mosques coming under Palestinian sovereignty. The Jewish Quarter and the Wailing Wall would stay under Israeli sovereignty. International forces, mainly under U.N. auspices, would help police the Old City and the shared border. Israel would maintain a three-year security presence in the Jordan Valley, and security cooperation under U.S. mediation would continue beyond that date.

That was the deal—that’s still the deal—and Sha’ath could only restate it. The refugee problem, which was supposed to prompt new study and declarations of steadfastness, was actually resolved four years ago. The border was resolved. Jerusalem was resolved. The placement of international forces was resolved. As King Abdullah of Jordan put it recently, “You have the road map, you have Taba, you have the Geneva Accord. So, we don’t have to go back to the drawing board.” According to a December poll, more than half of Israelis and about half of Palestinians already accept the terms of this agreement. And Abdullah might have added that we also have the Saudi plan, adopted by the Arab League summit in March 2002, declaring that all regional states will simultaneously recognize Israel in return for the 1967 border Geneva calls for. I put the matter point-blank to Sha’ath. Had the Palestinian Authority formally accepted the terms of the Geneva Initiative? “Well, that depends who we’re talking to,” he told me. “If I were talk-

ing to current Israeli negotiators and I said I accepted Geneva, they would say, ‘Great, let’s start from there and negotiate a compromise.’ If I were talking to Beilin, the attitude would be different. It would be a short negotiation.”

This raises a vexing question: If the framework for a full peace has been negotiated, why are we still killing each other? The short answer is the vendetta logic of violence itself: the Oslo process was supposed to yield, first, a period of confidence building, and second, final status talks to produce an agreement. What has actually taken place since 2000 is, first, a final status agreement, and second, the catastrophic erosion of any confidence to implement it: pro-settler provocations, suicide bombings, assassinations, missiles, shells, hollow ultimatums—and then Lebanon.

But there is a long answer, which is that nothing stands in the way of an agreement, except for a reciprocal reluctance of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Abbas, both openly committed to a two-state peace like Geneva advanced, to act boldly in the face of righteous domestic opposition. Fatah’s wariness of Hamas—its shows of force and erratic exploitation of international pressure to gain the upper hand—is only one side of the equation. Olmert, too, has an opposition: several hundred thousand settlers in the West Bank and around Jerusalem, ultraorthodox parties, Russian immigrant hawks, combat officers nervous about losing “deterrent power.” He is understandably reluctant to take them on for the sake of a peace process that could at any time be subverted by either the Palestinians’ weakness or their “unity.”

In any case, given Olmert’s impulsive performance during the Lebanon war, his political survival is hardly assured. His approval ratings hover somewhere around 15 percent. For most of his career, Olmert has professed an attachment to Greater Israel, and everybody knows that he favored pulling out of Gaza mainly because he thought this would make it easier to unilaterally annex large parts of East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Nevertheless, the government Olmert (or his successor) will lead until 2010 is not resisting a deal like Geneva for ideological reasons. This may be the most pragmatic government Israel has ever had, for the elites that organized this government have made a huge bet on Israel's economic globalization. They are counting on levels of growth like that of the Asian Tigers to mitigate ugly inequalities—repair a dysfunctional educational system and integrate Israel's own increasingly restive Arab minority, who make up one fifth of the country. The economy is booming at the moment, but its growth is led by hundreds of software companies, components companies, and so forth, which need to have open markets in Europe and Asia, where about half of Israel's foreign exports go. Another war, or the revival of the intifada—leading to a shunning of Israelis—will send the economy south and the elite's children west.

The great challenge is to get each side—Israel and Palestine—to trust in something without having to trust the other. What the Israeli prime minister needs is a dose of what the Palestinian president has been getting: great powers forcing the issue, bringing the sides to an endgame that leaders and majorities will accept and do not have the courage to “sow division” over. Paradoxically, the last thing Israel needs is exactly what Olmert has been asking for—the gradualism of the Road Map without pressure, a free hand to deal with “terror,” more confidence-building measures. The only thing that will build confidence today is a clear commitment of Americans and Europeans to a definite plan like Geneva. In the absence of such a plan, Olmert and Abbas become hostages to every Islamist terrorist or hard-line Israeli officer who makes the decision to pursue “militants.” Olmert must be able to say what Abbas has been compelled to say to those who oppose him: “You are alienating the world. We have to choose between our old dreams and American support.

Our economy cannot survive isolation.”

It need hardly be said that the Bush Administration, friends to the end, do not subscribe to this view. Secretary

of State Condoleezza Rice has spoken vaguely of bilateral negotiations moving to a “political horizon.” She is reportedly looking again at Geneva. But how to get from talk about process to talk about a deal? Rice, like her boss, seems to believe mostly in evil people being beaten into joining, or in an ownership diplomacy in which the U.S. speaks best by speaking least. As I write, she has left Jerusalem after an inclusive Olmert-Abbas summit. “The real value here was that they sat down to talk with each other,” Rice said. In January, however, newspapers reported that informal (and, by all accounts, productive) negotiations between Israelis and Syrians had been curtailed due to administration disapproval. States that abet terror must stand in the corner.

But as we approach the U.S. primary season, the world-famous fatuousness of the Bush Administration is not the only danger. What “electable” Democratic presidential candidate in 2004 even raised the question of West Bank settlements? American Jews are more dependable contributors to the Democratic Party than almost any other “demographic,” and elections are still fought largely by brand managers. What consultant will allow a candidate to prejudge the outcome of Israel's negotiations or limit Israel's freedom of action? Will Barack Obama risk stories about Jews in New York or Los Angeles questioning his friendliness to Israel? Will Hillary Clinton risk endorsing “bridging parameters” that carry her own name? Think of the reaction to Jimmy Carter's recent book.

Clinton's statements on the matter are especially unsatisfying, given how far her husband took the negotiation process in 2000. If she endorsed his proposals, which yielded the Geneva Initiative, she'd liberate the Democratic field to do the same. Instead, she told the Council on Foreign Relations in October 2006 that there is “no reliable partner on the Palestinian side,” that progress depends on Hamas recognizing Israel, which America must remain in “close coordination with”—in all, a policy as cunningly opaque as the circles around Richard Perle's eyes. The point is, the Road Map leads, if anywhere, to Geneva. With no American driver, the wars continue. Do we need new refugees to tell us where that leads? ■

END