



# Fathom Journal

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JOEL SINGER

HUSSEIN AGHA

ALAN JOHNSON

YAIR HIRSCHFELD

ORNA MIZRACHI

DAVID ROSENBERG

HAMUTAL GOURI

SHARREN HASKEL

ADI KEISSAR

NADAV EYAL

ERAN ETZION

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YOHANAN PLESNER

ALONA WINOGRAD

YAAKOV LAPPIN

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LIAM HOARE

JAMES SORENE

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GUNTER JIKEL

MARTIN JANDER

KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

TOBY GREENE



## **‘WE MUST LIBERATE OUR THINKING FROM THE OSLO STRAITJACKET’: AN INTERVIEW WITH HUSSEIN AGHA**

HUSSEIN AGHA

*Hussein Agha has been involved in Palestinian peace negotiations for three decades. A senior associate member of St. Antony’s College, Oxford, and co-author (with Ahmad Samih Khalidi) of ‘A Framework for a Palestinian National Security Doctrine’, Agha most recently carried out backchannel negotiations during the Obama administration’s failed effort to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. In August 2017 he co-authored, again with Khalidi, the much-noticed essay ‘The End of This Road: The Decline of the Palestinian National Movement’ in The New Yorker. Agha talked with Fathom editor Alan Johnson in London on 15 August 2018 about his life, the state of the Palestinian National Movement, the reasons for the failure of the old peace process and the shape of the new and very different peace process he thinks is needed.*

### **Part 1: A Life in the ‘Peace Process’**

**Alan Johnson:** *Please introduce yourself to the reader; tell us something about the more important personal and intellectual influences in your life, and your involvement in the Palestinian National Movement.*

**Hussein Agha:** I was raised in Beirut among Palestinians, though I am not Palestinian by origin. At school, the person who taught me Maths was to become second in command of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the lady who taught me English was also a Palestinian. In fact, most of my other teachers were also Palestinian. In my classroom at school, there was, above the blackboard, a map of Palestine inscribed with the slogan: ‘We are returning.’ I lived in an area not very far from Sabra and Shatila camps, and my best friend from early school days and colleague for decades, Ahmad Khalidi, was also a Palestinian from an ancient Jerusalemite family. So there was inevitably a strong Palestinian presence around me from a very young age. Later, when I went to university, I unwittingly found myself a member of Fatah.

**AJ:** *How so ‘unwittingly’?*

**HA:** Well, I did well at school, came from a middle-class background, and was popular with the other students. I was also elected to the highest ranks of the student bodies. The new Palestinian leadership had an eye for people like me! They came and talked to me about their cause [although in my case they didn’t need to because I was aware], and they invited me to meetings. I soon found out that these meetings were nuclei of Fatah political cells. Little by little I found myself

without realising it – hence ‘unwittingly’.

Unlike most other political organisations, Fatah was not a hard-line political party. It did not impose a high level of responsibilities on its members. You could think whatever you wanted to think, as long as you turned up to demonstrations, sit-ins or strikes and voted for Fatah lists in various student bodies.

The other thing about Fatah was that you had access to the leadership from an early age. At 18 I had access to all the leaders – Yasser Arafat, Khalil al-Wazir [Abu Jihad], Salah Khalaf [Abu Iyad] and others. They always listened and gave the impression that they took seriously what you were saying even when you contradicted them. This was not peculiar to me, but to most cadres of a multitude of backgrounds. It gave you a feeling of importance. They were both open-minded and masters of political recruitment.

In 1969 I went to Oxford University for an interview. I approached the leadership and told them I didn’t want to go to Oxford but to the front line in the south of the country. They laughed me off, were slightly upset with me and told me they didn’t need fighters, but people who could talk to outsiders about the Palestinian cause. So I came to Oxford; six months later I decided it was too ‘petit bourgeois’ for me. I had a lot of leftist notions and a quasi-Marxist outlook and pretensions mostly from my readings. So I went back to Lebanon. Soon after, both Arafat and my supervisor at Oxford requested my return.

**AJ:** *And were you active for Fatah in Oxford?*

**HA:** Yes, I started to talk to Israelis at the precise instruction of Arafat, Abu Jihad and Abu Iyad. They told me: ‘You talk with Israelis, you engage with them; try to find out if there are any ideas for peaceful ways and a political solution’ – this in 1969 and 1970. Imagine, even that early, the head of the movement, the symbol of struggle, the head of the military wing, and the head of security were convinced that ultimately, the answer to their plight was political. Only intellectuals and ‘theorists’ believed in a complete military solution.

One Israeli, Gabi Moked was studying philosophy and we had evenings at his digs to discuss the conflict. He had this grand idea of a federated or confederated solution along the Yugoslav model. I felt that he was sincere about finding a peaceful resolution, which was a revelation to me. He was the first Israeli I met and it was the first attempt to start talking.

Then I came across anti-Zionist Israelis from the Israeli revolutionary socialist group Matzpen, including Moshe Machover, Eli Lobel, Akiva Orr, Haim Hanegbi and Shimon Tzabar; all splendid

fellows full of energy and a willingness to tirelessly engage. I began going down to London for Marxist discussions about a solution to the conflict. But Matzpen split up when the idea of the Palestinian state started to be discussed: one group led by Machover was close to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFPL) and was in favour of the establishment of a Palestinian state. The other group, which was against the establishment of a state, was led by Akiva Orr, who was more aligned to Palestinian rejectionists. My trips to London eventually became a futile, albeit intellectually enjoyable, exercise. The most I did was to march on demonstrations against fascism, racism and discrimination.

**AJ:** *And when did two-state thinking emerge in the Palestinian movement?*

**HA:** In 1975 Said Hamami, the Palestinian representative to the UK wrote two articles about a Palestinian state in *The Times*. These were important articles; it was the first Palestinian articulation of the notion of the two-state solution. Said was a very dynamic and powerful personality. He managed to reach parts of society in London that were often closed to Palestinian representatives, mostly because of his open-mindedness and pragmatic outlook. He introduced me to many friends in London and visitors from the US, including Jewish figures like I.F. Stone and Paul Jacobs. Said also drew me into the circles that believed a two-state solution was the only viable option. At the time I was against two states and wrote an article in the *Journal of Palestinian Studies* arguing to that effect in 1975. My view then was that the solution lay in coexistence of peoples and not their separation; Said managed to mitigate those tendencies of mine.

I asked Said if he was not scared that more radical Palestinians would say that what he was publicly arguing for was, from their point of view, bordering on treason. He told me not be naïve and asked 'Do you really think I am acting on my own?' Said told me that Arafat, Abu Jihad and Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) knew about it, and that was the protection he had. I asked why Abu Mazen (who was a distant figure residing mostly in Damascus away from the hubbub of Palestinian politics in Beirut)? Because, Hamami said, he had the file in Fatah of relations with Jews and Zionists. Soon after that Said was killed in his office in London by an Abu Nidal agent. He was careless about his security. I used to tell him to check under his car for any bombs before he got in, but he would dismiss my concern telling me that if there were a list of people to be assassinated, he would be number 465 on that list, so he would start looking under his car when the first 464 have been killed.

**AJ:** *What was your experience in Lebanon during the invasion in 1982?*

**HA:** I was in the country in the winter of 1982 and Abu Jihad organised for me to meet with his military cadres. I asked them if they were aware of an impending Israeli invasion in the spring or

summer once the winter clouds died out. They were very blasé and replied confidently, 'Of course, we know and we're ready for it. We're going to teach them a lesson they will never forget.' In fact when the invasion came, within 24 hours the Israelis were inside Lebanon and within few days they were in Beirut. The unpreparedness! I told the leadership I wanted no part of this and that I was leaving. They just chuckled and said 'Fatah you can join but you cannot leave'.

In time I got sucked back in by the charisma of Arafat and Abu Jihad. And I started corresponding again with Abu Iyad. I felt it was bad form to leave when they were down and out. Those leaders were amazing because they used to treat the cadres very seriously. I was not even a Palestinian, but they really valued other people's views and were hungry for ideas. In return, they received loyalty and commitment. That open collective thinking space shrunk with the passing of that generation of leaders. Abu Mazen is the last of the lot.

**AJ:** *You were at the Madrid peace talks. What was your role there?*

**HA:** I was assigned by Arafat to be on the periphery of the Palestinian-Jordanian delegation as he wanted someone to report to him independently on what the delegation was doing. He always did that; sending people to spy on his spies. Madrid was mainly ceremonial. We went to Washington to continue the talks. Most of the delegation came from the 'inside' and were very wary of me as I was from 'the outside'. They didn't know who I was; not that I was of any significance, only that I was not a Palestinian by origin. But I had an authorisation from Arafat, so they could not argue against my being there. My job was to send him reports of their performance. After the first round of talks I realised this was not going to be the place where peace was going to happen.

**AJ:** *Were you involved in the Oslo process?*

**HA:** No. I was aware of something happening away from Washington, but I was not aware of Oslo and did not know the people involved. I had nothing to do with it. Once I knew, my initial reaction was to be against Oslo. For me, the main Palestinian problem and the core of the conflict were the refugees. I was shocked that Oslo did not address that: 'How could this be a step toward a solution when it doesn't deal with the core issue?' I met the Foreign Minister of Norway, Johan Holst, in Oslo and I told him my feelings. He looked tired, said he agreed but that we had to start somewhere. He died few weeks later.

It was around then that I really met Abu Mazen. My colleague Ahmed Khalidi and I were tasked to start talks with the original Oslo team, to come up with a final-status agreement. This became known as the Stockholm track. I remember that half-way through I wanted to quit the talks, thinking my Israeli counterparts were not as well connected on their side as I was on mine. But Arafat

and Abu Mazen disagreed. I remember sitting with Arafat in his bedroom at The Grand Hotel in Stockholm when he was visiting and he burst out, 'Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think Yossi Beilin [Israeli Minister of Justice] would be doing this without Prime Minister Rabin knowing about it?' I said, 'Beilin claims Rabin doesn't know anything about it.' Arafat replied: 'Of course he would say this. And if anyone asked me if I knew you, I would say that I didn't.' Point taken. We had almost finished the final-status document in 1995, one week before Rabin died, when we briefed Abu Mazen on the text. We then took it to Arafat to get a green light to continue and finish it, but Arafat seemed unconcerned about the details. I was sitting next to him and he was continuously twitching his leg. I whispered into his ear: 'Abu Ammar, the first page of the Stockholm document talks about a sovereign, contiguous Palestinian state; at this stage everything else is of lesser significance.' He gave us the green light. One day later Swedish diplomats headed by former Foreign Minister Sten Andersen came to speak with Arafat to make sure everything was OK for them to proceed with the exercise. They asked him, 'You have been fully briefed by your teams, yes?' He responded that he had, but truthfully he was not fully briefed, as he was not interested in texts. They asked if they had a green light to continue and Arafat pointed to myself and Khalidi and said, 'If those spies agree to continue, then I agree.' Everybody laughed. He loved 'spies'.

After Rabin was assassinated, Beilin took the document to Shimon Peres, the heir to Rabin. Peres didn't have time for it. He wanted to concentrate on the Syrian track and winning the general election in Israel. As it happened, he didn't win the election. His opponents used the slogan 'Peres will divide Jerusalem.' After the elections, Dore Gold told me if that document had been made public before the elections Peres may not have lost, because it would have been clear that nothing in the document suggested dividing Jerusalem. Instead, it said that the city was to be a joint capital of both states, united in all aspects except there would be separate authorities in the Arab and in the Jewish neighbourhoods.

After Camp David in July 2000, some of the American peace team tried to revive with me a version of the unfinished Stockholm document, better and wrongly known as the Abu Mazen/Beilin agreement, thinking that this will lead to a Palestinian acceptance of some of the similar ideas that were discussed at Camp David, but it was too late. Other initiatives followed to no avail.

## **Part 2: Why the old peace process failed**

### *Intentions*

**AJ:** *As you say, those initiatives failed. Let's talk about why. You tend not to focus upon on this or that misstep and you reject the simplistic view that the process failed because of 'an extremist*

*leadership in Israel or because the Palestinians are natural and serial rejectionists.’ You point out the hugely significant fact that this peace process failed over a 20-year period and under ‘countless different configurations of policy and power’. As I read your writings I get the sense that you believe the fundamental design and operative assumptions of the peace process were faulty. Is that correct?*

**HA:** Looking back, I have concluded that Oslo was more than anything else an attempt by Israel to resolve its security predicament by making the Palestinians responsible for Israel’s security in the territories and saving Israeli money allocated for basic services in these areas. That required giving up some already-Palestinian areas that they were not interested in keeping, like Gaza. The idea was that instead of Israel being in the front line of containing Palestinian violence, it would be the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). It didn’t work out perfectly, but that was the idea. I don’t think Rabin had clarity about a Palestinian state. He sometimes hinted it would be a state, sometimes less than a state, sometimes a very limited form of sovereign state – it was never clear. There were some Israelis around the Oslo process who really did want a Palestinian state, but I think for the majority of mainstream Israelis it was not about ending the conflict, but about defusing the violence that they feared the First Intifada would develop into and saving resources spent to upkeep Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza. Rabin’s concern was above all Israel’s security and not a historical resolution of the conflict. He was not averse to it, but only if Israel’s security was the focus. All other historical outstanding issues were of lesser importance to him.

I believe the Palestinians entered Oslo with good intentions, hoping for an independent, sovereign state. After the assassination of Rabin, Arafat felt that was no longer going to happen. When news of Rabin’s death reached Arafat he was with a close confidante. He was silent for a long time and then he told his friend, ‘This evening they did not only kill Rabin, they killed me as well.’ Arafat knew it was the beginning of the end for Oslo, and for himself. He was right. He used to say, ‘With Peres, if he says yes or no, you still don’t know where he stands. With Rabin, “yes” meant yes and “no” meant no.’ I sensed in the weeks prior to Rabin’s death that there was something developing between him and Arafat that Arafat felt could be a basis for making Oslo what it was supposed to be. After Rabin’s death, Arafat felt exposed; he was not prepared to continue with the alternative version of Oslo.

1948

**AJ:** *Reading your essays, a dominant theme is that the peace process was fixated on the ‘1967 file’, but no secure peace was possible without taking up the ‘1948 file’. This was Oslo’s basic design flaw, so to speak. You have written: ‘Oslo sought to trade 1967 against 1948 — that is, to*

*obscure the historical roots of the conflict in return for a political settlement that offered a partial redress that focussed solely on post-1967 realities. Current circumstances have begun to undo this suppression. Oslo could not bypass history, and its limitations have only highlighted the difficulty of ignoring the deeper roots of the struggle over Palestine.'*

*What's inside 'the 1948 file' – much more than simply the right of return, if I understand you correctly – and why must a successful peace process find a way to open it up, in your view?*

**HA:** Oslo pretends that 1948 never took place, but ask yourself what is the origin of this conflict? It was not 1967 or the absence of a Palestinian state. I was a school kid in Beirut before 1967 and everywhere you looked and everything you heard constantly reminded you of the conflict and the suffering of the Palestinians. The Palestinians were present on the territory between 1948 and 1967 and they did not create a state. Their focus was on 'liberation' and 'return'. To try to find a solution that fantasises that these '48 issues do not exist, well, it's problematic at best, because it does not address the core of the conflict. Resolving 'occupation' does not resolve 'dispossession' and 'dispersal'. Am I calling for the destruction of Israel? No! I am calling for recognising both historical and current realities and acknowledging the nature of the beast, rather than hiding behind one's finger. That is the only way to reach a genuine peace and coexistence.

In every negotiation the Israelis say to the Palestinians, 'Oh, we can't go back to 1948!' Israel was willing to resolve the issues of 1967 and occupation on its own terms but didn't want to touch the ghosts of 1948. It is something very difficult for Israelis to come to terms with. They want to delete the memories of what happened from Palestinian consciousness. It cannot be done. For, in a sense, that is what defines a unified Palestinian nation.

*Truth and reconciliation*

**AJ:** *So how should the '48 file be opened up?*

**HA:** Well, having lived through the experience of discussing these issues over and over for decades, I have started to become attracted to something I have always not found relevant: a 'truth and reconciliation' process. We have to start getting to grips with the conflicting narratives and try to find some reconciliation of the narratives. In all the negotiations I was involved in I argued that Israelis had their narratives and Palestinians had their narratives and we shouldn't waste time disputing them. My thought was 'let's find out the arrangement that will make these two cherished narratives irrelevant to a solution.' I now think that approach does not work. You keep being pulled back into the original issues and so into narratives, identities, feelings,

psychologies. The only way to deal with all that is not just through elite-level negotiations but through a more public process, perhaps a truth and reconciliation process. I am not sure it will produce results, but I know that the other well-trodden road of denial has not worked; trying to sweep '48 under the carpet, or deal with it in small group negotiations in closed rooms, has not worked. I have only recently started to think this through. I do not know yet how such a process can be put together or begin, whether it is a prerequisite for a settlement or a parallel process or something that can only take place after a peace agreement has been reached. In all cases, like reality, it's going to be messy. By providing a 'neat' model, Oslo distorted the untidy and chaotic reality.

**AJ:** *The Northern Ireland experience is also interesting to study. Sinn Fein people, Mitchell McLaughlin and others, worked for years on the questions of narratives, identities and history.*

**HA:** History has become a bad word in our conflict. 'Let's not go back to history; we have a problem today, so let's try to solve that' is a recurring theme with the negotiators. The implication is not just that if you bring history in you will not be able to resolve anything, but it is usually treated as a sign that you are not truly interested in resolving anything. Paradoxically, it's the right wing in Israel that is more attentive to dealing with the 48' issues than the Left.

**AJ:** *Why do you think that is?*

**HA:** The Right seems to understand the issues better than the Left. The original historical Right, the Herut and its ilk, did not believe in separation. I remember a fascinating meeting I had with the late Elyahu Ben-Elissar, a member of Irgun, a Likudnik who became Ambassador to Egypt, the US and France. This is what he told me: 'I have no problem being in a state with you guys. As a matter of fact, Jabotinsky once said that Israel could have a Jewish president for one term, then an Arab president for another term. I know this is not possible in the current circumstances, but this is where we come from. The Israeli Left are racists who look down on you and just want to separate from you by giving you territory. I want to fulfil my Jewishness but I do not want you to suffer because of it. For me, Hebron is much more important than Tel Aviv. For someone on the Left, Tel Aviv is more important, and they are willing to give up on Hebron. They are not the true carriers of the flame of the Jewish people.'

It was fascinating to hear that. Lots of people told me later that he just said it to impress me. I don't know, but it was intriguing. What he clearly understood was that the Palestinians, like the Jews, can never 'give up' on the whole of Palestine. People on the Left, by contrast, say 'Yes, the Palestinians have reconciled themselves with the 22 per cent.' There may be something worth engaging on between the Israeli Right and the Palestinians. I am trying to find out exactly what.

This is important because Israeli society has shifted to the right and to engage it one has to be sensitive to the new sensibilities. I know that the current climate is not conducive to that and the right feels triumphant and believes that their total victory is at hand. But once they realise that that is not the case and costly chaos and dear uncertainty are around the corner; maybe there will be a possibility to consider some positive consequences of their ideological roots. I am not sufficiently naïve not to recognise that although some of the Right, sometimes, talk about ‘equal rights,’ a la President Reuven Rivlin, they will not compromise on the need for the state to remain in Jewish hands.

It is unfortunate that the awareness of the centrality of the 1948 issues is often used by the right-wing in Israel to highlight the impossibility of reaching an agreement. I will not be surprised at all if some will point to this interview to argue: ‘See, they (the Palestinians) will not be satisfied with dealing with the consequences of 1967, they want to go back to 1948 and claim the whole land!’ By contrast, the Left’s approach is to deny our feelings. You see, the Palestinians feel an attachment to the whole land. Whether you’re a two statist or a one statist, or whatever, the attachment is still there. You cannot deny that. You have to deal with that attachment in a truthful way if you want to have genuine peace. Pretending that things are not what they are is no basis for peace. The eternal challenge remains whether there are ways to reconcile both peoples’ attachment to the totality of the land through a mutually acceptable peaceful arrangement. Please do not misunderstand me; I am not calling for a one state solution. It is much more complicated. I can even foresee how a two-state solution could be a more appropriate route to this objective.

### *The Right of Return/End of Conflict*

**AJ:** *Of course a major part of the ‘48 file is the question of ‘the right of return’. You have discussed this with nuance. On the one hand you have said it is a right, therefore the demand is principled. On the other hand, you point out it has been a difficult issue to deal with in terms of a ‘two states for two peoples’ solution. In short, any successful peace process will have to acknowledge and mediate what Palestinians feel is their inalienable right and what Israelis feel is the existential basis for the very continuation of the Jewish state. It’s a really difficult question, and there are no neat answers, but can you talk about what you think the best approach is?*

**HA:** In the past 10 years I have tried to avoid, sometimes successfully, a discussion of rights. I don’t want you to recognise my rights; don’t expect me to recognise your rights. Let’s leave rights aside and try to solve the problems. A consideration of rights inevitably leads to complex philosophical, historical and legal deliberations that are not always conclusively settled. Although of utmost importance, such debates do not always lead to workable realistic outcomes; let’s put those aside and let’s talk about a problem we have, which is how to pragmatically address the

the plight of the refugees.

Second, there are certain things that can't be ignored. If a person has documentation that a property is theirs, and meanwhile nothing has legally negated that deed, but that plot has gone to someone else, then that issue has to be resolved on a legal basis. There should be recourse to a neutral body to which the first person can say, 'This is my land, these are the deeds.' Yes, the other person will then say, 'That was many years ago. I am there now.' OK, so now we have a legal dispute between two parties over a property that has to be settled by an acceptable and legal authority. Private property is an essential pillar of modern society and ought to be protected. Third, if you agree on two states, a Jewish state and a Palestinian state, then any resolution of the refugee issue, of the right of return, has to be consistent with the existence of these two states. So you cannot have Jews in a Palestine overwhelmingly taking over a Palestinian state, just as you cannot have Arabs or Palestinians doing the same in Israel. We do not know how demographics and laws will change in 50 years and who will be the majority and where, but for the time being, if you accept two states for two peoples, it should be the guiding principle.

Fourth, in the two states case, the refugee must be offered alternatives. One possibility is some form of psychological restitution and material compensation. But to feel comfortable with the idea of reparation you need a public recognition that a wrong was committed in the first place. That is very, very important, emotionally. The second thing is that the person must have the freedom to choose; it should not be decided on his behalf and shoved down his throat. It means that he should be part of the process from an early stage, his views should be listened to and an agreed menu of options should emerge from which to choose.

In all cases, the refugee should feel that he is at the centre of negotiations (not on the sidelines), that his voice is heard, that the injustice is recognised, and that a semblance of fairness is restored. The refugee should feel that he is at the heart of a resolution; that by his agreeing to be a part of it, he will be contributing not only to a better life for himself and his family, but also to regional and global peace. Rather than be treated as the wretched of the wretches, the refugee should feel himself / herself to be a positive contributor to humanity. His forgiveness and generosity of spirit in agreeing not to summon the past for the sake of peace and a better future should be publicly commended and highly valued. I think such an approach will reassure the refugee of a humanity he/she has been denied and encourage him/her to be more flexible in response to concrete material proposals. This has not happened before. If you resolve the refugee problem in a manner that is agreeable, albeit grudgingly, to the refugees; you would be extracting the poison of 1948 and going far in truly ending the conflict.

Right now we are not dealing with this issue. Until we do, talk of 'end of conflict' is bogus. Many

are totally focused on the *text* of an agreement. They will say ‘Oh, we know the psychological issues are really deep and profound, and all that,’ but they do not *really* take them into account. They think that if you have a document that says ‘End of Conflict’ it means end of conflict. But that is not the case. Of course, signing a document could help facilitate an end of conflict. There are many steps that after the signing would be much more possible than before the signing. But, if one only relies on the agreement to end the conflict; sadly, he or she will be disappointed. An agreement does not end the conflict, but could be the first step in a long and often painful course to achieve that goal.

### **Part 3: The outline of a new peace process**

**AJ:** *Let’s talk about what a new peace process might look like. It seems to me that you think the process has been too slight to successfully deal with the huge issues it confronts. So, the process tries to shrink everything to ‘67 but it really needs to broaden it out to ‘48; it tries to shrink the discussion to a room but it really needs to involve two peoples; it involves only elite level negotiators but it really should involve refugees, settlers, two civil societies, and so on. Is the existing peace process model not fit for purpose?*

**HA:** You know, I don’t think there ever was a serious peace process. People talk about ‘25 years of negotiations’. But when you look at when negotiations were actually taking place during those 25 years, I don’t think they amount altogether to more than one year. So there is a kind of an illusion of a peace process. This serves purposes: there is a peace process going on so behave, wait, it’s going to get there.

There have been attempts at negotiations; some more successful than others. For example, the Olmert/Abbas engagement had good chances. I feel that it had the potential of being concluded. But of course to be successful you need three things. You need the acceptable content, you need the right *politics* and you need the precise *moment*. Synchronicity among these three considerations is of utmost importance; if one of them is lacking and not in the right place, a deal becomes difficult to get to.

In the Abbas/Olmert talks the *content* was the strongest part of the three factors, but the *politics* were wrong because Olmert was on his last legs, and some in his team were going to Abbas and telling him if he makes a deal with Olmert he should know that Olmert does not represent Israel, he does not represent the Israeli government and so on. And the moment to seal a deal vanished quickly because of Olmert’s predicament, because of the 2008 war in Gaza, and because of the end of George W. Bush’s tenure. If it had been one year earlier, without Olmert’s legal problems and with some kind of cohesion within his camp, it could have produced something. It wouldn’t

have ended the conflict, but it could have produced an agreement, a good first step. Even now, we don't have a better alternative.

Another missed opportunity was under President Barack Obama. Again the *content* – the substance of an agreement – was almost there, but the *politics* in all three camps, Israel, Palestine and the US deteriorated at the expense of an agreement. And the **moment** was missed as Abbas lost confidence in the seriousness of American efforts and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu got exasperated with the ways of the US administration. Martin Indyk was correct when he observed that as Prime Minister Netanyahu 'moved into the zone of a possible agreement,' Abbas 'shut down,' and by March 2014 he 'had checked out of the negotiations'. Former Secretary John Kerry invested enormous and unprecedented energy in trying to advance the negotiations; he should have been given a better chance by all the parties, but the odds were against him. Again, the synchronisation did not happen.

AJ: You wrote something that I would like to invite you to elaborate on. 'If the whole diplomatic process is formulated so that finding a state is part of a bigger project, then I think that is the first step toward dealing with the heart of the conflict. This has not been done.' This, to me seems to be a very important idea indeed, but can I ask what you mean by 'a bigger project'?

HA: We can't simply go back to all the things we have been trying to do, over and over, and have 'one more heave'. They don't work. They do not have any life in them. Even with the negotiators, they don't have any resonance anymore, not to mention the people outside the room. If you go out in the street and you say 'they are negotiating the future of Jerusalem', nobody would pay any attention; nobody would believe you, on the Palestinian side or on the Israeli side. They don't think it's serious anymore. The whole notion of a 'peace process' has become an obstacle to real peace.

We have to look at other ways of doing things, we really do. I do not have a readymade blueprint but it's definitely worth deliberating about what could replace the current self-styled so-called peace process. For a long time, beginning with trying to establish two states seemed to be sensible, pragmatic and acceptable to both the local parties and the international community. This process has failed. We must liberate our thinking of the Oslo straitjacket and consider other ways. Most probably two states will still be the best model; we have however to consider achieving it through a different route than the much rummaged current framework.

**AJ:** *Should a new peace process include Hamas?*

**HA:** Theoretically the natural partners for a kind of 'peace' now are Hamas and the Israeli right-wing. They are the only two parties that can reach an agreement that will be acceptable to both

of them and at the same time fit their respective ideologies. Neither side believes in a permanent resolution of the conflict so they can each accept interim agreements stretching over long periods of time. In contrast, the PLO and Fatah, the non-religious parts of the Palestinian national movement, are totally fixated on a final deal, but there is no partner in Israel for the kind of deal they have in mind. And Netanyahu does not have a partner on the Palestinian side for the kind of final deal he wants. He might find one in Hamas, because for Hamas it doesn't matter what they get at any particular point in time; finality, closure and end of conflict are not issues that bother them. They believe in accumulating assets, of building an Islamic society. So they are flexible. For a long time they did not believe in a military confrontation with Israel. Instead, they wanted to build an Islamic society and consolidate and achieve victory through the power of their faith and beliefs. They are fatalists who believe that Israel will inevitably disappear, so it does not really matter as long as you do not compromise on your fundamental tenets and have the capabilities to build up your power and create a solid Islamic society. Not unlike some in Israel who believe that the totality of the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River will eventually belong to Israel.

Unlike Fatah, Hamas has ideological roots and beliefs that it can rely upon without the need for 'armed struggle'. Compare that to Fatah who, when you take away 'armed struggle,' has no unifying ideology. There are Marxists, Islamists, liberals, democrats, rich businessman, poor camp dwellers, ideological hybrids and unclassifiables, like myself. This makes Hamas, again theoretically, a better candidate for the kind of deal Israel wants.

That's why it took the precursors of Hamas a long time to join the armed struggle, which only happened after the First Intifada started. They founded Hamas because they feared not being able to keep the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood movement from haemorrhaging after seeing it split twice before. It split in the 1950s when some left and founded Fatah and a second time in the early 1980s when Fathi Shiqaqi split and founded Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In 1987 the Gaza-based Muslim Brotherhood created Hamas because it felt that if they didn't create a new armed wing, then there could be another split.

The problem with an interim deal with Hamas is not whether it will abide by it; I think it would. The problem lies in the fact that Hamas does not and cannot, as long as it is an Islamic movement, represent the majority of Palestinians who, while being on the whole devout Muslims, are not attracted to political Islam, especially after the experience of recent years. So there is an intrinsic instability in an interim deal with Hamas and a vulnerability to the whims and conduct of other significant segments of Palestinian society who may choose otherwise.

That is why the real prize for Hamas is the PLO through which it can include more sectors of the

Palestinian political scene and replicate the role of Arafat. For that to succeed on the ground Hamas has to establish itself as the authority in the West Bank either through a creeping process or otherwise.

Another difficulty with an interim deal with Hamas is the nascent fragmentation of a movement that prides itself with its internal cohesion and the abiding of its members to decisions once they are tortuously made. There have always been various currents in Hamas that have co-existed and managed to keep its unity. It is not clear that with a momentous decision of going for a deal with Israel, even if only interim, this unity could be maintained. For example, some in the military wing may feel alienated from such a deal and concerned about the curtailment of their influence in the new circumstances.

Lately, there also appeared constituencies within Hamas that have built their own close relations with some states in the region. Some of these groupings depend for their very sustenance on powers outside the immediate Palestinian scene that have their own agendas, and these may not always be in support of an interim agreement with Israel.

The transformation from the culture and codes of conduct of 'resistance' to one of quiet and effective coexistence with Israel under an interim deal will not be an easy task. Hamas will unavoidably shed some members that will either join other organisations or start their own with external sponsors. They may actively pursue a policy of undermining a Hamas/Israel deal, further contributing to its fragility. Fatah is still suffering from this tension between 'resistance' and 'partial peace' 25 years after Oslo.

We are all familiar how brittle and delicate even a 'ceasefire' between Hamas and Israel is. To have a full 'interim peace agreement' poses formidable challenges that may make the whole project a bridge too far.

### *The concepts of the past*

**AJ:** When it comes to vision, the leadership of the Palestinian National Movement have been thrashing around for some time: now seeking negotiations, now going for internationalisation, now flirting with 'popular resistance,' now threatening to dissolve the PA, now appearing to be open to a binational state, and so on. You have rather brutally pointed out that 'not one of these ideas has been well thought out, debated, or genuinely considered as a strategic choice'. Why has there been such strategic uncertainty?

**HA:** The Palestinians are a very able people. The problem is that they are still living with the

concepts and the notions of the past, which have consistently failed them; even when these conceptions were the currency of their times. They still speak the language of a world that no longer exists. There is no correspondence anymore between their discourse and the current zeitgeist. It is paradoxical that while more than ever before, the world is aware of the Palestinians' plight and sympathy to their cause is unmatched; at the same time, the rest of the world is not willing to do much to really help fulfil their aspirations. Even the BDS movement has more to do with punishing Israel for continued occupation than to actually get the Palestinians what they want.

When we talk about the 'liberation' of Palestine, what does that mean today? Can you still talk about a 'contiguous and fully sovereign Palestinian state' and see clearly that it is no longer possible: what does it mean? Talk about 'ending the occupation' has no clarity as to *how*. People feel that the old framework of ideas is less in tune with reality, is less and less a guide for action, but they are also aware that nothing has yet emerged to replace those ideas.

We are passing through a transition period during which there will be many breakdowns. In the beginning, most of these breakdowns will not be political in nature. Eventually, however, they will crystallise around a new political outlook. What do I mean by that? Take the car-rammings and the stabbings. They are not attached to a political programme. Nobody goes and stabs an Israeli, or rams a car into an Israeli, because he or she thinks that will liberate Palestine or help create an independent Palestinian state. It is the result of the impoverishment of the old political outlook. It reminds me of the early days when Palestinians used to fire a Katyusha rocket into Israel and then run and hide. It wasn't going to change anything but over time it consolidated into the so called 'armed struggle' which, whilst failing to achieve its military objectives, created enough political impact to start a diplomatic process.

We are at the end of an era and have entered an undefined and turbulent period in which the old notions are being gradually undermined, and not only for the Palestinians. These changes are global. To ask a rhetorical question reminiscent of Tom Friedman's style; would the Palestinian people rather be Kosovo or Google? Which is more powerful? These are questions we need to ask. We have to channel nationalist feelings into new directions and concepts and explore unfamiliar and uncharted territories.

As I wrote in 2017 – a little cryptically, maybe – 'the Palestinians may need to acknowledge that yesteryear's conventional nationalism and "national liberation" are no longer the best currency for political mobilisation and expression in today's world, and that they need to adapt their struggle and aspirations to new global realities ... old-style nationalism and its worn-out ways may no longer be the vehicle for their empowerment'.

**AJ:** *You have noted – with some regret, I think – that ‘the PLO ... was not a state-building movement, unlike Zionism’. If I read you correctly, you argue that it must become so, in so far as the status quo will allow it to be. So can I ask what relationship your ideas have to what was known as ‘Fayyadism,’ after the state-building and nation-building efforts identified with the former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad? What are the lessons of the failure of Fayyadism? Should Fayyadism be rebooted?*

**HA:** Fayyad tried very hard to build a state but it’s very difficult to do that when the Palestinians are geared toward something else: ending the occupation. Of course they want to have clean water, basic infrastructure, better health services and new schools, but for the majority of Palestinians that is not their main focus. So Fayyad ended up, so to speak, shouting and hearing back echoes of his own voice. It is very difficult to build a state under occupation when, at each turn, your freedom to decide is curtailed and you are faced with imposed restrictions.

Some Palestinians were supportive of Fayyad and his ambitious plans. But the Americans and Israelis buttressed him only verbally as a way of pacifying the Palestinians. They did not give him what he needed. Making dirty roads a bit less dirty was never going to impress that many people. He tried hard but the odds were very much against him. Also, he was viewed by many as an outsider imposed on the Palestinian leaders, so there was also an element of suspicion and mistrust. The leadership was always worried about Fayyad – where he was going, who was behind him, whether he was making deals behind their backs, etc. I think Fayyad and people like him do have an important role to play in the future, but as part of a more cohesive political leadership.

**AJ:** *Many genuine friends of both Israel and Palestine think that one reason the Palestinians have not secured statehood since 1948 is that the Palestinian National Movement failed to grasp that it faced a Jewish national movement with national aspirations and, then, a Jewish nation-state with what Rashid Khalidi called ‘strong roots in international legality’. Instead of facing up to that, Khalidi argued that there had been what he called an unfortunate ‘flight from reality’. Is a paradigm shift in the Palestinian position needed: towards recognition of the Jews as a people, not just a religion, and the recognition of Israel as the Jewish nation-state, with full rights for the minority, alongside a Palestinian nation-state recognised as the homeland of the Palestinian people? You seemed to argue for this, and anticipate the Palestinian fears that would have to be addressed, when you wrote the following:*

*Israel needs to know that its presence in this region is legitimised and secure, that it is genuinely accepted by the other states of the region. That is the payback for Israel. If you want a solution, you have to find ways of addressing that without jeopardising both the history and the aspirations of the Arab peoples. Otherwise, you have to go on fighting till*

*total victory or total defeat and surrender. There is no other way. You cannot avoid addressing the issue by saying it's a latter-day excuse that Livni or Netanyahu came up with. From the Israeli point of view, it's the crux of the matter. The Israelis want to be accepted as a Jewish state, no matter how you define that Jewish state. This is not a tactical manoeuvre to make things difficult and escape an agreement. These are genuine feelings. (...) The challenge is how to get there without rendering the Arab version of history meaningless and declaring it bunk, without compromising the rights of Palestinian refugees and without saddling Israeli Palestinians with the status of second-class citizenship.'*

*How should each actor – Israel, the Palestinians, the international community, global civil society – act to make it possible for that challenge to be met?*

**HA:** I am an Arafatist on this matter. Arafat is on record that he recognises a Jewish state; that Israel is a Jewish state. There is a [video](#) on YouTube from 1988. He also said it in an interview that has since been conveniently forgotten or dismissed as not being enough, with David Landau and Akiva Eldar in Haaretz published on June 18, 2004. I quote: "Definitely," says Yasser Arafat, waving his arm for emphasis. He definitely understands and accepts that Israel must be, and must stay, a Jewish state. The Palestinians "accepted that openly and officially in 1988 at our Palestine National Council," and they remain completely committed to it. Thus, the refugee problem needs to be solved in a way that will not change the Jewish character of the state. That is "clear and obvious."

My concerns about 'Jewish state' are threefold.

First, it should not jeopardise the rights of the Palestinians that are already living in Israel. It should not result in the Palestinians in Israel becoming second-class citizens, as they feel they are now after the Nation-State Law.

Second, it should not jeopardise the Palestinians' right to keep their narrative. If the Palestinians have to give up their narrative of what happened to them in 1948 and after as a result of recognising a Jewish state, then we have a problem. The Palestinians will never give up their narrative. What matters is how they behave not what their narrative is.

And third, it should not jeopardise the rights of refugees, however these rights are defined. Refugees should not be allowed less or suffer more because Israel is a 'Jewish state'.

If these three concerns are addressed an agreement on this matter could be reached. But if you deny the Palestinians these privileges as a consequence of defining Israel as a 'Jewish state,' any

agreement will be phoney and unsustainable, agreed to under coercion and, because of the imbalance of power, it will eventually be reneged on.

In the Palestinian political literature from the extreme Left to the extreme Right, Israel has always been referred to as *aldawla alyahudiyya* [the Jewish state], or *aldawla ali'briyya* [the Hebrew state]. It became an ideological issue of dispute only when it was posed as a demand by the Israeli team in the negotiations of the Annapolis process. Now it is a real issue; I understand that. As I wrote before, Israel wants to be accepted in the region as a Jewish state. I feel that that acceptance was already there despite the hostility; if you ask any old Arab from any country, 'Is Israel an Arab state?' he or she will say, 'No, it is a Jewish state'! Once you pose it as a demand and you aim to codify it in a formal text, then you start having problems. We should not concentrate on texts, but rather on realities. I do not want to go into late 19th century and early 20th century discussions about the right of nations for self-determination, which is anyway an outdated notion that has lost a lot of its meaning in today's globalised and inter-connected world. This is part of the problem of defining a sovereign Palestinian state today – what does it actually mean now? We talk about a 'fully sovereign state,' but which state is really fully sovereign today? Not one. Do the British sovereign bases in Akrotiri and Dhekelia make Cyprus less sovereign? Are Britain, Germany, Japan and many other countries less sovereign because of the presence of American bases on their territory? Does the European Union not automatically curtail the total sovereignty of its member states?

#### **Part 4: America, Trump and the 'deal'**

*AJ: You have argued that the reliance on US ideas and leadership needs to end. You have offered several reasons. First, 'There is no precedent for a successful start-to-finish American effort to bring about peace in the Middle East.' Second, 'All such endeavours that came to something initially were rooted in local dynamics that the US could influence but did not produce.' Third, there are no 'notable examples of the US forcing an Israeli government to take sustained action that it believes to be fundamentally at odds with its core interests'. Fourth, that 'US mediation has also inevitably blurred the two sides' vision, distorted the nature of their bilateral dealings, and — intentionally or not — enabled the status quo to be perpetuated.' Finally, 'Too often, both [sides] display greater interest in gaining America's support than in persuading each other.' That's quite a list! Putting the singular figure of Trump aside for now, how do you think the US should conduct itself in a new peace process?*

**HA:** For a long time, the Palestinians thought that the Americans could impose a solution on Israel. That was such a waste of time. They don't think that anymore. They see that the Israelis use the Americans to shield them from the rest of the world and to help them sustain the image

of being fully engaged in a peace process, without actually making the concessions that the rest of the world expects of them.

After the Obama years, the Palestinian reached the conclusion (rightly or wrongly), and I have heard this clearly from many in the leadership and outside, that no US Administration, whatever its colour and inclinations, ever will or really wants to resolve the conflict and extend to the Palestinians some of their rights. They are all, in one way or another, totally on Israel's side. They may have different styles of dealing with Israel, but their support is unwavering. It reminds me of the early days of the Palestinian national movement in the 1960s and 1970s when the US was viewed as a threat and an enemy of the Palestinian people. This comes after a quarter of a century dependence on the US to deliver a deal. It even precedes President Trump's controversial measures.

As you point out, I have said before that all the processes that have led to positive outcomes in our part of the world were indigenous, and that is still the case today. The Israelis and the Palestinians have to talk to each other and reach understandings. The Americans can help, providing the parties with the kind of support that is needed for any kind of local agreement to become a reality. But the Americans can't substitute for local dynamics and a local agreement.

**AJ:** *Does the degree of American control of the process prevent that local dynamic developing?*

**HA:** Well, to take one example of what the Americanisation of the process has done, it made the really big issues into side issues. As I argued earlier, a central problem on the Palestinian side is that of refugees. But has that issue been the focus of negotiations? No. I know of no serious negotiations where refugees were the focus. Similarly, a big issue on the Israeli side are the settlers. But while most Israeli negotiators are sensitive to settlers' demands and reactions, there is no direct engagement with them in the negotiations. There is not a settler's voice as such. The settlers and their supporters are the dynamic elements in Israeli society today. When people say, 'Hold on, 70 per cent of Israelis want a two-state solution' I say yes, those are the 70 per cent that stay home and watch television. Those against two states are the ones that go out in the street, that organise and act, that make a difference. You cannot ignore them.

Again, while the Palestinian refugees' voice has not been heard as the political focus shifted to the West Bank, you can't get away from the fact that the majority of the Palestinians do not live in the West Bank. Does a purely West Bank solution provide for the majority of the Palestinians? They might look to the West Bank as their state; those who can might decide to go and settle there. But are the concerns and experiences of the majority of the Palestinians really addressed in repeated 'peace processes'? No. Can you have a genuine end of conflict agreement that excludes the majority of Palestinians?

These are the kind of problems created by an overly Americanised process. The central issues become the side issues. But the refugees and the settlers are not side issues. They are at the heart of the conflict. They really are. You cannot resolve the conflict if you do not hear their voices directly. You *have* to hear their voices.

And as I argued before, Americans are text-oriented. Everything for them has to do with wording and a kind of a contract. This might be appropriate for some disputes, but for heavily emotional and historical conflict, such as ours; it is not fit for purpose. Americans recognise the weighty emotional dimension, but ignore it.

**AJ:** *What have you made of the approach being taken by Trump and his team?*

**HA:** I think Trump is serious in seeking a deal, but the way his team are going about securing that deal is not always apt. I'm not cognisant of what they're doing, but when I read between the lines, I think it is clear that their matrix appears to be mostly economic and material. They are concentrating on steps on the ground that will make real and positive changes to Palestinian and Israeli lives. I do not think this by *itself* is going to produce the outcome they seek. They seem to believe that improving their economic situation will make Palestinians politically compliant, 'moderate', acquiescent and satisfied with much smaller objectives than they have hitherto. I think they are wrong to expect that.

I suspect that the team are suspicious of seeking a framework agreement on general principles, arguing that this path had been tried for 25 years and has got everyone precisely nowhere. I believe this is also a mistake: a framework agreement is still needed. Why? Look, if you have an agreement on general principles, and you withdraw from five per cent of Area C under such principles, the impact and meaning of that very limited disengagement – because it is part of a process of implementing the agreed principles for a final deal – will be far greater than withdrawing from 10 per cent of Area C without any agreement on general principles.

We need that umbrella: a one pager that agrees two states for two peoples, two capitals in Jerusalem, a fair and agreed resolution to the refugee problem. Yes, it will not produce a peace agreement overnight; yes, it will not immediately produce dramatic changes on the ground; and yes, it will not mean the complete end of conflict. But it would provide a psychological breakthrough that will restore hope in the two peoples. Hope is a rare commodity in the region right now; it is essential to restore some appearance of it to make people believe again. True, many will be cynical, but a framework agreement will be a dramatic and unprecedented step forward. Instead, the US is probably considering a list of projects to improve conditions on the ground without having that political cover. All that will happen is that those projects and policies will

either not happen because backers do not know the ultimate destination and are averse to uncertainty or they will be pocketed and the conflict will go on.

We should not forget that, historically, the most radical elements amongst the Palestinians have always been the better off, not the poorest. The leadership of the Palestinian left often came from well-off families, people who could have easily had a comfortable middle-class existence, but they chose the radical left and armed struggle. Hamas's leaders are all engineers, doctors and professionals. You cannot dull people's political feelings by throwing money at them. In fact, after people take the money – of course they will not reject it – they often become even more extreme.

**AJ:** *Why?*

**HA:** Because once you have the money you don't have to run around trying to make ends meet. You have more time to think of your dignity; of the injustice, be outraged by it and act upon it. It's paradoxical but true that nationalistic consciousness increases rather than decreases once the economic situation is relieved. I've seen it first hand, with George Habash and Wadi'e Haddad who were middle-class (both medical doctors), and related to well-off Palestinian families who could have provided them with comfortable lives. But no, they chose to found and lead the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, hijack airplanes and stage dramatic operations. Why? Because in our region and despite appearances, motivation is not just about money.

I am sure that the Trump team know there are deep psychological impulses; they are not dumb. But it is like the economics classes I took at college. The teacher used to say that the 'perfect competition model' did not exist in the real world, but then we go and spend three years discussing the perfect competition model. This is what the Americans may be doing. That is my concern.

Perhaps the Trump team has to learn from President Trump. Maybe he is developing a methodology, a kind of Trump Doctrine, that could work here. In North Korea he didn't do anything on the ground. Rather he had a general paper that created a breakthrough and opened up talks about what to do next. It may or it may not work, but it opened the door. In the case of Israel/Palestine, they are trying to change reality on the ground, without having the much needed political umbrella that will nurture those changes, protect them and give them meaning; without resorting to the political key that will open the door. I hope I am wrong.

**AJ:** *But is there still the space to put together a framework agreement that both sides could agree to?*

**HA:** Yes. I have a framework agreement in my pocket that does not trespass on Israeli or Palestinian red lines. But as well as the content, you need the right political context. I have the content but we don't have the context. I sense that Netanyahu was capable of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians four years ago but right now it's not worth his while. He can do without it at little cost; so why bother, why take the risk?

Here we touch on the bottom line – which few people are willing to discuss honestly and develop answers to. In a deep sense, an agreement has not been reached so far because in this long and bitter struggle between the two national movements, Palestinian defeat is not complete and Jewish victory is also not complete. What do I mean? As long as the Palestinians do not surrender – and they have not and there is no indication that they would any time soon – Jewish victory and Palestinian defeat can never be whole. The desperate acts of stabbings and rammings are unprompted Palestinian reminders to Israel that we are here; we have not given up; your project is incomplete.

So consider the psychology. When Palestinians are close to reaching an agreement and are genuinely faced with giving up 78 per cent of their homeland, they feel surrender, so they recoil. Whenever Israelis find themselves at a similar point and try to justify giving up material assets in return for mere words, i.e. promises about future conduct, they recoil. After all they consider themselves the victors. Whenever both sides get close to a deal, their consciousness of their respective realities becomes paramount and they retreat. This pattern has repeated itself over the last 25 years. Yes, the only party able to make both sides not recoil was the US, but as the Americans, with their eternal optimism, never really fully appreciated the psychology of the two parties nor how to address their deep fears and dark hesitations, they repeatedly missed the opportunity to lead them towards a deal. So now we need something else.

