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‘THERE IS A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY TO RESOLVE OUR CONFLICT WITH THE PALESTINIANS’ | AN INTERVIEW WITH FORMER MOSSAD DIRECTOR-GENERAL, SHABTAI SHAVIT

SHABTAI SHAVIT

Since 2013, Professor Cohen-Almagor has been conducting a comprehensive research project whose aim is to provide a detailed analysis of three decades of peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), from the start of the Oslo process in 1993 until now. The research project analyses the reasons for the failed peace process, the role of third-party mediation, and the keys for successful negotiations. The research is based on interviews with decision-makers and negotiators who were directly involved in the peace process, and on archival work. Professor Cohen-Almagor has interviewed 31 Israeli, Palestinian, American and British senior officials and peace negotiators. His book sheds new light on the proceedings, offering fresh insights and an in-depth explanation for the failure of the peace process. [1] Here we bring to print a small part of the interview with former Head of Mossad Shabtai Shavit. The interview was conducted on 2 July 2018.

Reinvigorating the peace process

Raphael Cohen-Almagor: *Can the Arab Peace Initiative (API) serve as a basis for talks?*

Shabtai Shavit: I think the API needs to be the main component of the peace process. Why? Because the API originated from Saudi Arabia, the wealthiest, strongest and most influential country among the moderate Arab states. Saudi Arabia wrote it and passed it to the Arab League whose 22 Arab states subsequently adopted it. I decided to take the initiative seriously the first time I read it. Why? Because it's very short. Every line is black and white – there's no type of sophistry with commas, brackets or legal terminology. It's simple. We demand such and such from you, and we will give you such and such in return. And there will be peace inshallah. Not only peace, but peace with the entire Arab world, and an additional 30 Muslim countries. I'm trying to imagine – and it's difficult – what diplomatic relations such as these would mean. But the initiative promises that the entire Muslim world will recognise the State of Israel and establish full diplomatic relations with us. Just think about the economic significance of such a thing; what it would give to the state.

When I speak to Israelis and reach this point, I say, 'If such were to happen, imagine Israel being economically ahead of states like Holland, Switzerland and all the Scandinavian countries.' But for Israelis, the most important challenge is always security and terror. Security, security, security.

Since 2002, the Saudis have periodically reminded us – including those Israelis who argue that the

offer was a dictate, a ‘take it or leave it’ ultimatum – that the offer still stands. And they explicitly say it’s negotiable.

There have actually been improvements and ‘upgrades’ to what was originally written in the original API. For example, it now recognises the principle of a demilitarised state, and land swaps, and the initial language on refugees was harsher than it is now. The API still uses legalistic language which states that it’s impossible to force Arab states currently hosting refugees to absorb them. And that remains a core problem. But when we speak practically about refugees, we speak about the understanding that the State of Israel will be prepared to absorb a symbolic number of refugees and that the main solution needs to be financial, via the international community.

A Post-ISIS Regional Architecture

RC-A: *How can peace be achieved?*

SS: You want peace. Let me explain to you how peace can be reached. The chapter of Middle East history which began with the Arab Spring uprisings, then went through the rise of ISIS, and now lies in the post-ISIS world, has created a window of opportunity to resolve our conflict with the Palestinians.

RC-A: *Can you please explain what you mean?*

SS: The Sykes-Picot agreements held for 100 years. By the way, in retrospect, these French and British gentlemen deserved a Nobel Prize for successfully drawing borders of nation states in the Middle East that lasted for 100 years. But that period is now over.

The new Middle East won’t be ‘Sykes-Picot’ but something else. In other words, we are in a period of an historic one-time opportunity to change borders in the Middle East. Show me one state in the world that is willing to change its borders – no such thing exists! But here, developments that have taken place in recent years have created a situation in which there is a widespread readiness in the international community to create something new, with the first expression of this being new borders. Iraq won’t be the same Iraq as under Sykes-Picot. Syria won’t be the same Syria. And the Kurds have a decent chance of receiving national independence.

RC-A: *Where?*

SS: The area in which I see the potential for a Kurdish state begins in northern Iraq, with their hope that it will expand westwards and constitute a barrier between Turkey and Syria. I’ll surprise you even more. What was Sykes and Picot’s mistake? That they didn’t create a Sunni state in the Middle East. And the Sunnis are the majority, and they don’t have national expression anywhere in the region. It’s possible that in the ‘New Middle East’ a Sunni state will be established.

Where is the most natural place for such a state to be established? In the area between Iraq and Syria, where ISIS were in control. I don’t have a patent on this idea. National Security Advisor

John Bolton – when he was ambassador at the UN – published an article in the New York Times where he suggested – in very ‘Boltonesque’ language – something along similar lines; that there wouldn’t be Middle East peace without the establishment of a new Sunni state.

My working assumption is that this rearranging of the New Middle East will take between five to ten years, most likely closer to ten. Many things have happened which at the end of day will lead to a rearrangement of the states in the Middle East. And this is also the window of time to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

How do we do it? Historically, Israel’s negotiation strategy was that we wanted to speak to each Arab state separately: Israel vis-à-vis Jordan, Israel vis-à-vis Syria, etc. But in the current situation in the region, with the forecast I have described, Israel needs a multi-lateral strategy. What type of multilateral strategy? First, the US is key to this whole process. Without the involvement of the US it won’t work. There is conflict today between the Sunnis and Shia, between radical and more moderate Islam. But Israel has a peace treaty with Jordan and Egypt (by the way the interests between Israel and Egypt have never been stronger). Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, as well as the US, are the coalition that needs to lead the peace process with the Palestinians.

Speaking as a former member of the intelligence agency, I believe that the first phase of this process – whose timeframe will need to be determined – needs to be secret. Negotiating in front of the cameras – publishing communiques before the meeting and press releases after – makes it very difficult to make concessions.

The basis for negotiations has to be the API. Israel should do its own preparation after which we should sit with the Americans to set expectations, and to reach understandings with them over what issues we agree on, what we’re prepared to negotiate over, and where the gaps are. And on the assumption that vis-à-vis the Trump administration we’ll get what we ask for, it’s the Americans who need to sell it or to convince the Arab coalition.

Because everything is secret, the Americans should go to each one separately rather than all together. First, the Americans should call Mohammed Bin Salman, MBS, and say, ‘You told me on the record, bring a deal and I’ll bring Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas], so here’s the deal. Let’s discuss it, and if it seems reasonable then bring the Jordanians, and the Gulfies and Egypt. And if you need Washington’s help to convince them we’ll help you. And when we all agree then we call Abu Mazen and say this is the deal’. I’d like to see Abu Mazen reject something like that. MBS would say to him: ‘This is the deal – either you accept it, or all the Arab states will wash their hands of you.’

RC-A: *And these players will force an agreement on the Palestinians?*

SS: Yes, they will force an agreement on the Palestinians. Until this point, the process needs to be kept secret. After certain understandings are reached, the process should become more open, and negotiations will begin. Israel and the Palestinians sitting in a room and negotiating with the US and the others as observers. They only get involved when negotiations are stuck on a particular

issue. This model is how we conducted negotiations with Jordan. There were working groups that made progress and every time they got stuck on a particular issues they brought it to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein who would resolve things – either over the phone or in person.

Refugees

RC-A: *But how do we overcome the three obstacles of Jerusalem, refugees and Hamas?*

SS: Refugees is the easiest problem, in my opinion. The solution is financial.

RC-A: *Will the Palestinians accept it? After all, Abbas didn't accept Olmert's offer?*

SS: In my book [2] there is a chapter that deals with the issue of refugees. I gained access to the state archives and cabinet discussion protocols following each of the wars – 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973 – and I learnt the protocols relating to refugees. I believe we should recommend the Americans transfer all of their financial support that they today give to the UN Refugee and Works Agency (UNRWA) – 25 per cent of the budget and which according to a very rough estimate I calculate comes to \$16 billion since 1948. [3] I'd say to the Americans 'you define Hamas as a terrorist organisation, but today UNRWA is basically Hamas.' I'll give you proof. Out of the 30 members of UNRWA's board in Gaza, 95 per cent of them are identified with Hamas. I'd tell the Americans that there is no justification in the world that a refugee organisation dealing with Palestinians exists that perpetuates the problem rather than resolving it. According to UNRWA definitions, anyone who lived for two and half years in Mandatory Palestine before leaving – them, their children and their grandchildren, even those they adopt – can be classed as refugees.

Following the War of Independence, there were between 600,000 – 700,000 refugees. But 70 years later they talk about 5 million. Based on what logic? The parallel UN refugee agency, the UNHCR, was established around the same time as UNRWA. Since then UNHCR has resolved the cases of millions of refugees around the world. In Syria, the organisation that deals with refugees isn't UNRWA but UNHCR. What justification is there for the continuation of UNRWA? It should be closed – not immediately but we should prepare a plan to do it. We should establish a mechanism that will deal with ending UNRWA in an organised way. All of its budgets should be transferred to the UNHCR within two to three years; those Palestinian refugees who remain refugees according to the actual definition of refugee-ism can be dealt with by the UNHCR, and all the others will have to just cope.

Hamas

RC-A: *And how do we deal with Hamas and Gaza?*

SS: I'm not going to talk about the tactical level. But the onus should not be solely on the State of Israel. The State of Israel isn't able to fund everything that needs to be done to resolve the economic component of the problem. Firstly, the immediate problems of the civilian population

need to be dealt with. And this has to be an international effort, with Israel contributing her share.

RC-A: *Are you talking about contributing economically?*

SS: Yes, but there is also a strategic goal here, which is to create a rift between the civilian population and Hamas. In other words, you aim to create a situation in which they can say to Hamas ‘we don’t want you anymore’. Today, anyone who thinks that gets killed. How do you break that Gordian knot? You have the civilian population and a gang (Hamas) that rules. So give the population everything it needs in order to fundamentally change the distress in which it lives. And carry out a type of psychological warfare to try and create this rift.

RC-A: *And do you think that is possible?*

SS: I think it’s worth trying. Israel’s current strategy is one that turns the state – slowly but surely – into a prison. Fences here, fences there, soon there won’t be any place without a fence. For example, Israel just finished building a six metre high, 32 km long fence from Eilat northwards along the border. The Ramon airport [in the south near Eilat] has a fence around it that is 26 metres high! In the 1990s I walked around the area of the Caspian Sea to look at the barriers the Soviets built between themselves and Iran (which was then part of the Western world) during the Cold War. I never saw any fence of 26 metres.

RC-A: *Why are they building the fence?*

SS: The ideology is that the airport needs to be protected, although it’s still not protected against missiles. It’s an ideology that believes that in order to protect the airport from potential threats, we need a fence 26 metres high. So when you look at the State of Israel today what are we doing? Every place there are threats over our border we build fences.

On the tunnel threat, Israel is a global leader, and the best minds invest in finding technological solutions to the threat. But the tunnels are tactical threats rather than strategic, or existential. At the same time, you can’t force Israelis whose homes are near Gaza or the border with Lebanon to live under such threats. So we build fences. We spend huge amounts on enormous defensive systems – fences, mines, sensors, command and control systems and we train soldiers to deal with this threat. All of this encloses the State of Israel. But is this how we want to live? Why not try to invest all of this money and to try and reach our neighbours? Why shouldn’t it be possible to drive to Damascus and eat Hummus?

Jerusalem

RC-A: *And what about Jerusalem?*

SS: On Jerusalem, I’m a hawk.

RC-A: *You do not propose to divide Jerusalem?*

SS: I believe that a people that is willing to give up on the source of its historic sovereignty is not worthy of having its own independent state. Similar things could be said about other places too. It's true that Anatot and Shiloh and Bet El in the West Bank are also part of our Jewish heritage. But Jerusalem is the source, the heart of Judaism – not solely in a religious context but a national one. I don't know any nation that would be willing to concede its core, the heart of its existence. However, what am I willing to say is that one way of solving this is that sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Temple Mount should be ours, but on the ground, Israel should be willing to be as flexible as possible. Super flexible. Whatever they want, we should give them.

RC-A: *And where will be the Palestinian capital?*

SS: Abu Dis. Listen, what happened after the Six-Day War? The victors said, 'Let's take advantage of the situation and expand the municipal borders of Jerusalem'. Even then we saw the demographic threat to Jerusalem. So they took two generals who knew about military matters (I don't know what their understanding was of international affairs) to map out what became the current municipal borders of Jerusalem, which turned Jerusalem into the city it is today. Jerusalem actually has a minority of Zionist residents. So I say 'hold on, those areas that were annexed to Jerusalem after the Six-Day War can't be changed? Why not?'

REFERENCES

[1] Raphael Cohen-Almagor, *From Oslo to Jerusalem: A Critical Study of Peace Mediation, Facilitation and Negotiations between Israel and the PLO* (NY and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[2] Shabtai Shavit, *Head of Mossad* (Rishon LeZion: Miskal-Yedioth Ahronoth, 2018) (Hebrew).

[3] In late August 2018, the US State Department announced that it is ending all funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) after describing it as "irredeemably flawed". See "US ends aid to Palestinian refugee agency Unrwa", BBC (1 September 2018), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45377336>

