

HOW PEACE BROKE OUT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A short history of the future

by Tony Klug

About the author

Dr Tony Klug is a senior Middle East analyst who has been involved in building dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians for three decades. He pioneered the idea of a two-state solution in a Fabian pamphlet in 1973.

For many years he worked at the international secretariat of Amnesty International as a campaign organizer and as head of international development and has served on the international boards of New Outlook and the Palestine-Israel Journal and as a trustee of the International Centre for Peace in the Middle East. He is a senior consultant at the Middle East Policy Initiative Forum and a special advisor on the Middle East to the Oxford Research Group.

tonyklug@compuserve.com

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to the countless victims, living and dead, on all sides of this bitter, tragic conflict and to individuals and combined groups like the Palestine-Israel Journal and the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information which, through unceasing research, publication and campaigning have continued to fly the flag for a fair peace and keep alive the hope that it is attainable. Indeed, that there is no alternative.

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Fabian Society
11 Dartmouth Street
London SW1H 9BN

020 7227 4900
info@fabian-society.org.uk

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Comments on 'How Peace Broke Out in the Middle East'

"A brilliant idea and a dream that is not beyond reach. The conditions are ripe - what is lacking is the political will and leadership."

- Professor Shlomo Ben-Ami, Former Israeli Foreign Minister.

"Tony Klug offers us a tantalising vision of what could be. It may not happen but, if it does, this is how it will unfold."

- Dr Ahmad Samih Khalidi, Former Palestinian negotiator and Senior Associate Member, St Antony's College, Oxford.

"What a great read. The plausibility of his scenario is just impeccable. A public debate of this scenario may very well prove to be the 'wild card' that would trigger the sequence of events predicted therein."

- Sherif El Diwany, World Economic Forum Middle East Director and Arab Business Council.

"We all know that a Middle East settlement, a peaceful Palestine living alongside a peaceful Israel, would not just change the lives of the people of the region, but transform the politics of our age. Tony Klug's essay sets out a vision of a better future. It challenges us and it inspires hope. It is of course for the people and leaders of the Middle East to do the for themselves and making peace is always difficult, but with courage and leadership it can be done."

- Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for the Environment, formerly Secretary of State for International Development.

"This is a stimulating and inspiring outline of what could happen if the politicians could become statesmen and look to the future rather than the past. Like most people I might not agree with every proposal but the overall strategy is both attractive and realistic."

- Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP, Former British Foreign Secretary.

"For those who see no shame in optimism, Tony Klug has dared to dream of how peace could at last come to the Middle East. But this no essay in impossible idealism: meticulously, he shows how the road to peace in fact consists of manageable, realistic steps - none of them extending much beyond moves the key players have already publicly countenanced. To read Klug is to realise this famously intractable conflict is not insoluble after all - it simply needs everyone involved to do what they know has to be done. A veteran and cool-headed analyst, Klug has provided an exhilarating read - and done us all a great service."

- Jonathan Freedland, Journalist and broadcaster.

"This is an extraordinary piece because it illustrates how a seemingly intractable situation could suddenly shift. It is not a utopian fantasy, quite the contrary. An act of leadership, a few courageous gestures - this could lead to a shift of mood and a momentum, despite inevitable setbacks, toward an equitable settlement for Palestinians and Israelis. Tony Klug has been a wise voice in the wilderness for the better part of three decades."

- Lady Ellen Dahrendorf.

"Tony Klug's knowledge of the history of the region shines through this nuanced approach to the current situation. This essay about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict left me feeling optimistic - a refreshing change when so many others leave the reader in despair."

- Sadiq Khan MP.

"This brilliantly comprehensive journal set out only too clearly where the touchstones to peace still lie. Read this and you may find yourself able to debate peace in the Middle East with the most hardened of hawks!"

- Jon Snow, Broadcaster and journalist.

"Tony Klug is one of the few experts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If his latest article is implemented, the conflict will find an immediate ending. Unfortunately, the leaders in the region are unable to go that road. In Israel-Palestine, we have two dysfunctional political systems, totally paralysed and unable to see the best interests of their two constituencies."

- Hanna Siniora, Palestinian Director, Israel-Palestinian Centre for Research and Information.

"Tony Klug combines long experience, great scholarship and a deep insight to show how, if the 'moderates' would combine to raise their voice and believe in themselves, they could guide their leaders to bring about an end of conflict and peace in the region. His piece is not only a delight to read, it is a pragmatic step toward a new Middle East."

- Lord Andrew Stone.

"This articulate and insightful description of the conflict provides a new road Map to peace in the Middle East and encourages renewed hope."

- Atallah Said, Chairman of the Arab Labour Group.

"For the past three decades Dr. Tony Klug has been a brilliant analyst and a sound and evenhanded consultant on the Middle East conflict, always aware and respectful of the needs and aspirations of all parties to this conflict. Here again is a rational, logical idea, and it is our responsibility to make our leaders listen to it and act accordingly."

- Dr. Varda Shiffer, Director of the Mandel Centre for Leadership in the Negev and lecturer at Ben-Gurion University.

"I enjoyed reading this innovative approach to describing out hopes and aspirations!"

- Dr. Edward Kessler, Executive Director, Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths, Cambridge.

"A brilliantly imaginative piece based firmly not only on Tony Klug's knowledge of the region over many decades, but at each point anchored securely on what the various protagonists have themselves clearly said or done in recent months. A splendid feat."

- Professor Oliver Ramsbotham, Professor of Conflict Resolution of the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford.

"I believe that this masterful article represents a major contribution to Israel-Palestinian conflict resolution. For once, we have not the usual, repetitive, static and largely futile set of unimplementable policy recommendation but a vision of a realistic dynamic sequence that can very well provide the impetus for change."

- Ahmed Bidawi, Project Director on Israel/Palestine, Oxford Research Group.

If Middle East peace came, how would it have happened? In this imagined - but entirely plausible - scenario, Middle East expert Tony Klug shows that it might not be as impossible as we think.

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Tony Klug

How Peace Broke Out
in the Middle East

<http://fabians.org.uk/publications/freethinking/klug-middleeast-07>

How Peace Broke Out in the Middle East

Date: to be determined

The greatest frustration and tragedy of the four decades after the 1967 war, when the Middle East conflict was so widely regarded as among the most intractable and destabilising of all global tensions, is that it was never difficult to discern the compromises on both sides that were necessary for Israelis and Palestinians to agree to live alongside each other in mutual peace, security and respect.

Yet as each effort at securing peace raised hopes but eventually failed, the mood of pessimism and despair deepened and the cycle of violence seemed unending. Those on both sides working for an equitable settlement were forever being told that theirs was an impossible dream.

Until, one day, at last, peace finally came to the Middle East...

Well not exactly the whole Middle East. And not quite a definitive peace. But the stunning proclamation of the end of conflict between the Israelis, the Palestinians and the wider Arab world, following a dizzying spell of reciprocal gestures, is not something to be scoffed at. And who's to say the mood won't be contagious?

The breakthrough was no more predictable - at least not in advance - than the Sadat initiative some thirty years earlier or the Oslo Accords of the 1990s. "With the advantage of hindsight", this writer remarked in *New Outlook* shortly after the Egyptian president's bolt-from-the-blue visit to Israel in 1977, "what President Sadat did was perfectly logical and should have been deducible... given his national objectives and the parameters of the situation, it would be but little exaggeration to say he had no alternative."

To survive as the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert had little alternative too. The Kadima party he inherited from the comatose Sharon didn't really exist and, following the abandonment of unilateralism, it had no policy either. His popularity rating following the Lebanese debacle and the stern conclusions of the Winograd Commission had plummeted while those of his right-wing rivals, Netanyahu and Lieberman - the latter quickly recruited into Olmert's government in October 2006 to broaden his coalition base - were soaring. While still ostensibly committed to the principle of withdrawals from the West Bank, Olmert ruled out any talks with the Islamist Hamas or substantive negotiations with the well-regarded but reputedly weak Abbas. He was boxed in and really had only one way to break free.

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Yet, as with Sadat and Oslo, none of us saw it coming. In all three cases, we were too focused on the anticipated next round of hostilities (in this case, a re-match of the Israel-Hizbullah battle or, more speculatively, an asymmetrical war between Syria and Israel). There is a curious pattern in this region of both war and peace breaking out when least expected, and the Olmert initiative was no exception. In and of itself, there wasn't really much to it and, still today, we can't be certain whether he just blurted it out - triggering a flurry of spontaneous responses from other key actors - or whether it was part of a carefully planned and orchestrated strategy, involving one or more external players.

The comment that sparked it all off, during a flying visit to London, followed a run-of-the-mill, on-the-record lecture at the prestigious Chatham House, when the "security fence", the targeted assassinations, the detention of thousands of Palestinians and the deadlock generally in the peace process were all blamed on "Palestinian terrorism" and the constant threat to Israeli security. In response to a question from the floor - which some commentators believe was planted - he casually affirmed that in the hypothetical event that a full and genuine peace with the Palestinians and the Arab states were obtainable, Israel would "of course" be willing to withdraw fully from the West Bank subject to agreed minor land exchanges - a formula that would allow Israel to hold on to the large settlement blocs in close proximity to the old green line while relinquishing the more distant settlements. "This has always been Israel's position", he went on, "didn't we withdraw from Gaza - and Lebanon too? But we have constantly been forced to defend ourselves in the face of the other side's murderous attacks and their intention to destroy us".

The chair of the meeting, visibly perplexed, tentatively asked if Israel's preparedness to withdraw in exchange for full peace applied to all territories captured in 1967, "including on the Syrian front?" "Why not?" came the instant reply. "Of course we would insist on the demilitarization of the evacuated area, monitored by an international force, similar to the arrangement in Sinai which has stood the test of time. But if the Syrians and the other Arabs are serious at last about full peace and they stop attacking us, threatening us and bad-mouthing us, then we too are ready in principle for full peace".

It was just a statement. But at that moment the Middle East changed forever. The Bush administration was the first off the mark to welcome Olmert's "clarification" - sparking speculation, in the new mood following the mid-term elections, that it had engineered it - followed by Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and other EU powers. Russia, China, Japan and Canada soon added their support. So too did Egypt and Jordan. The UN Secretary General announced that the Quartet would convene within the week. Hamas in Damascus declared the

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move a “trap” and called for steadfastness. Hizbullah denounced Olmert for failing to mention the Sheba’a Farms. Palestinians in the occupied territories and throughout the diaspora did not know what to think. Had their time come at last? Or would expectations, if they allowed them to be raised, be cruelly dashed as so often in the past?

Their suspicions were challenged early on by the ferocity of the response of the Yesha Council of Settlements which accused Olmert of “playing into the hands of the terrorists”. The Yesha Council was in turn condemned as “traitors” by militant settlers for hiding behind slogans and failing to protest the arrests by the Israeli army of “true patriots” who had recorded their outrage by setting fire to scores of Palestinian-owned olive trees in nearby villages.

Thousands of orange placards and flyers started to hit the streets exclaiming: “We refuse to be evicted from our homes” and “Expelling Jews from holy Judea and Samaria is a mortal sin”. Public opinion was torn. On the one hand, the Israeli prime minister’s ‘no risk’ gamble – unlike the precarious unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza, it was no more than a declaration of intent – caught the imagination of a people desperate to break the logjam, get shot of the occupied territories, reclaim the moral high ground and normalize their relations, both externally and internally. On the other hand, their fears were rattled by the scare-mongering prophets of doom, and their emotions were disturbed by the moving sight of settler children pleading on television screens to be allowed to stay in the homes where they, and sometimes their parents, had been born and brought up.

And then came the second bombshell. “We invite the settlers to stay”, proclaimed a self-assured President Abbas on behalf of the Palestinian Authority in an interview on Israel TV’s Channel 1. “We want them to stay. Not as agents of an occupying power of course, but they are welcome as civilian inhabitants of the Palestinian state and to help us build it. All that we ask is that they are ready to live in peace with us. We offer them Palestinian citizenship but, if they prefer, they can retain their Israeli nationality or even have dual nationality”. When asked what he would say to those who challenged the sincerity of his intention, he pointed to the million-plus Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel and remarked that it is of equal importance to have a substantial number of Israeli Jews living in Palestine. “It is the best way to build bridges and make the peace work. It is so important. Also, it is against our ideals, our history and our law for our state to be without Jews. To exclude Jews because they are Jews would be unnatural and unthinkable”.

The effect was electric. For every Israeli commentator who instantly dismissed the offer as disingenuousness, numerous others cautiously – in some cases eagerly – welcomed it as a true signal of peaceful intent. It was a near-perfect response to Olmert’s offer and – everyone

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understood – conditional on it. With one brief statement, Mahmoud Abbas had pulled the rug from under the settlers' tear-soaked feet. No one was forcing them to leave either their homes or the land that was holy to the religious among them. They were free to stay or to leave – that was up to them. They could choose from a menu of options - but what was not on the table was the sovereignty of the territory.

Many settler families argued their lives would be in mortal danger without the long-term protection of the Israeli army and that Abbas's offer was therefore just a ruse. However, some settlers did not instantly rule out staying but wanted first to know what would be on offer from the Israeli government by way of compensation if they chose to evacuate and move back to Israel.

A small but articulate third group – comprising both orthodox and secular Jews with a deep love of the land they inhabited – welcomed the Palestinian president's offer and declared their intention to stay. In applauding the proposal, Rabbi Menachem Fruman of the Tekoa settlement deep in the West Bank said it accorded with the peace plan he had previously presented to the Palestinian Authority and had separately discussed with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the assassinated Hamas founder who, as reported by the BBC on 29 November 2005, had replied "I and you could make peace in five minutes".

Caught on the hop, the settler movement – representing less than five per cent of the Israeli population - and the broader Israeli right set about discrediting not just the "so-called offer" but also Abbas himself ("the Holocaust denier"), the "preposterous idea" of a Palestinian state and - echoing Golda Meir from another era - that there was even such a thing as a Palestinian people. They warned that a Palestinian state would be a dagger in the heart of Israel, the whole purpose of which was to enable the wider Arab and Islamic worlds to finish off the Jewish state once and for all. The influential evangelical Christian right in the US warned of "Armageddon" and accused President Bush and Secretary Rice of "acting contrary to God's wishes". While liberal Jews in the US and other countries claimed vindication, the numerically smaller but more influential right-wing American Jewish groups sought to undermine Olmert, just as they had done in the past in relation to Rabin following the Oslo accords.

The early indications were that the counter-offensive was having the intended effect of playing on people's fears. Olmert was portrayed in one Israeli newspaper as a string puppet controlled by Bush, dancing to Abbas's tune, with Arab wolves prowling the perimeter. Although a slim majority of Israelis, concerned this might be their last chance for a genuine peace, remained generally supportive, a growing number looked upon the initiative as a dangerous step towards the destruction of their state. Right on cue, a suicide bombing in the oft-targeted coastal resort of Netanya took 16 lives and left many more seriously wounded. Islamic Jihad proudly claimed the credit, prompting the

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Smelling victory, the Likud leader Netanyahu appeared on television to demand an early election "to save the nation and the country".

Israeli defence minister to vow to teach the militant group "a lesson they would never forget". Smelling victory, the Likud leader Netanyahu appeared on television to demand an early election "to save the nation and the country".

No sooner had he uttered these words than they were overshadowed, along with the defence minister's retaliatory plans, by an *Al Jazeera* broadcast of a brief announcement by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia that he was looking forward to an invitation from Israel to visit the holy city of Jerusalem to pray at the Mosque and talk peace with the Israeli people and their government. "It is time to end the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, and bring peace to the region we share", is how he concluded his statement.

The impact in diplomatic and media circles was stunning. Probably never in the field of human conflict, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, was so much sparked off by one individual in so few words. News bulletins were interrupted, headlines were re-written and the corridors of the United Nations and capitals around the world were abuzz. It was left to the head of the Saudi National Security Council, Prince Bandar bin Sultan – who is reported to have met Ehud Olmert on at least one occasion – to fill in the blanks. Reminding reporters of the Arab Peace Plan authored by the Saudi king – which was endorsed by the Arab League in March 2002 and again in March 2007 – he referred to a speech delivered to the American Task Force on Palestine in Washington DC on 11 October 2006 by former Saudi Ambassador Prince Turki Al-Faisal, who said: "In Saudi Arabia, we believe that the path to peace begins with peaceful coexistence between a Palestinian state and an Israeli state, and peace between Israel and the entire Arab world".

"We are serious about this", Prince Bandar added, but lamented that many Israelis appear still not to be aware of the Arab Peace Plan and too many others don't believe a word of it. So it was decided that, if invited, an Arab League delegation comprising King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, the Emir of Qatar, and Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, the President of the United Arab Emirates, would visit both Israel and the Palestinian territories within the next few days to present their vision of a future of peace and normal relations among all the states of the region including the Israeli and Palestinian states.

Prince Bandar studiously avoided mentioning the controversial visit to Israel of the Egyptian President Sadat some three decades earlier – which had been unpopular in the Arab world – but the parallels were compelling. Prior to his visit – which similarly was forewarned by just a few days – Sadat had described the psychological dimension as 90 per cent of the problem. By providing an advance taste of the fruits of peace, he aimed to appeal not just to Prime Minister Begin and his

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government but, at the same time, over their heads to the Israeli people.

The euphoria of the Egyptian president's visit galvanized the Israeli public in a way that no Israeli leader could have done. On the eve of the ensuing 'peace conference' in Cairo, hundreds of thousands gathered in Tel Aviv to demand of the prime minister that he bring back an agreement or not bother to come back, an image that reportedly haunted a hesitant Menachem Begin throughout the negotiating process. The momentum eventually impelled him to withdraw from every centimetre of Egyptian territory. It was a cardinal lesson. But, because of the unilateral manner in which Sadat carried it out, the full impact of his action on the Israeli psyche was not picked up by the rest of the Arab world – until now.

The first senior Israeli figure to react publicly was the Housing Minister, Meir Sheetrit, who strongly welcomed the proposed visit and reminded reporters that he had told Israel Radio back on 4 October 2006 that Israel should accept the Arab Peace Plan. He would try to convince the government to issue an invitation without delay. But the government did not need convincing. Even if Prime Minister Olmert was not aware in advance of the Saudi king's proposal – which is unlikely – there was no possibility of him doing anything other than laying out the red carpet to such an important figure, a colossus in the region and a close ally of US President George W Bush, whose deep concern about Iran's spreading influence in the region was shared by both the Saudis and Israelis.

Besides, in a series of newspaper interviews on 30 March 2007, Olmert had spoken of "a revolutionary change in outlook" in the Arab world, adding: "there are things that are happening, which have not happened in the past, which are developing and ripening". While expressing reservations about some of the details of the Arab plan, he opined: "There is a real possibility that Israel can sign a global peace accord with its enemies within five years".

Among Israelis and Palestinians alike, an air of expectation mingled with an atmosphere of disbelief. People spoke of their feet not touching the ground as they busied themselves in preparation for the visit. When it came, there was no sense of anticlimax. Quite the contrary. The sight of the Saudi aircraft touching down on Israeli soil, beamed by television into almost every Israeli home, stirred deep emotions. Many Palestinians too, while still keeping their counsel, were caught up in the moment. The delegation prayed at the Al Aqsa Mosque, spoke at the Knesset in Jerusalem, delivered a very similar speech at the Palestinian parliament in nearby Ramallah, held talks with political leaders on both sides and addressed the people direct on both Israeli and Palestinian television. Then they left. And the Middle East will never be the same again.

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If Syria could be drawn away from its alliance with Iran and Hizbullah, the supply of weaponry to the militant Lebanese group would all but dry up.

Within 48 hours of their departure, Bashar Assad, the Syrian president, gave the first-ever live interview to Israeli television. Since the end of the July 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, Assad had been calling for the resumption of the Clinton-led peace talks that had almost established the basic parameters of a deal over the Golan Heights - including an offer by Bashar's father and predecessor, Hafez, of full normalization of diplomatic relations - before they broke down in 2000.

Reiterating the comments he had originally made in a BBC interview on 9 October 2006, Bashar told Israeli viewers that Syria and Israel could live side-by-side in peace accepting each other's existence and that Syria was ready to hold talks with Israel, preferably in the presence of an impartial arbiter. He concluded the Israeli TV interview by offering to host the talks in Damascus "where Prime Minister Olmert and the other Israeli negotiators would be made very comfortable". In a gesture that excited the imaginations of many Israelis, he suggested that the Israeli delegation might like to drive to the Syrian capital, "to show how easy it would be for ordinary Israelis and Syrians to visit each other's countries in the future".

Security Minister Avi Dichter (Kadima) and Education Minister Yuli Tamir (Labour) had each raised the idea of dialogue with Syria previously, so it wasn't surprising that they were among the first within Israel to urge a positive response to Assad's broadcast. According to a report in the liberal Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* on 7 May 2007, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was "conducting staff work" to prepare for the possibility of a renewed peace process with Syria. Secret talks had been held over several months between a former director general of the Israeli foreign ministry, Dr Alon Liel, and a well-connected Syrian businessman, Ibrahim Sulieman, as a result of which a new lobby group, 'The National Movement for Peace with Syria', was formed in Israel in January 2007 with heavyweight backing.

The reasoning of the proponents of this strategy was not hard to fathom. If Syria could be drawn away from its alliance with Iran and Hizbullah, the supply of weaponry to the militant Lebanese group would all but dry up. In one move, Syria would be converted from an enemy - with the ever-present danger of renewed bilateral hostilities - to a peace partner, the menace of Hizbullah would be blunted, the external wing of Hamas neutralized and the influence of Iran within the region diminished.

It was further argued that this strategy accorded with the new thinking towards Syria in Washington, desperately looking to Damascus to help the US extricate itself from the deepening Iraq quagmire. In early May 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had what was described as a "businesslike" meeting with her Syrian counterpart. Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi paid a visit to Damascus later the same month. So too did Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy chief.

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For Syria, peace with Israel would mean, above all, regaining the land and national pride forfeited in the 1967 war, a goal that Hafez was unable to achieve. This would be a huge feather in Bashar's cap. It also held the promise of an end to US sanctions and, with it, stepped-up western investment in the faltering Syrian economy.

The big question was how would Prime Minister Ehud Olmert react to Assad's initiative? The answer came quickly: "It's not a matter of how I respond to his initiative", he said, "this is Assad's response to my initiative", reminding the nation of what he had stated "in very clear terms" at the Chatham House meeting.

Everyone understood there was no point in negotiating with Syria unless Israel was prepared to relinquish the Golan Heights in full (and dismantle the settlements there) as its side of the bargain. Both Netanyahu from outside the government and Lieberman from within it, emboldened by the previously low rate of popular support for returning the territory, were quick to remind the country that, not long after the Lebanon war, Olmert had declared: "As long as I am Prime Minister, we shall not give up the Golan for all eternity". They demanded that Olmert – who indicated towards the end of May 2007 that he was willing to meet Assad – stick to his word. But public support for the Israeli 'rejectionist front' was by now evaporating. The incredible events of recent days had started to restore in Israelis a sense of future, a sensation they had almost forgotten on the back of many bitter battles.

On their part, the Palestinians were also by now succumbing to a restored hope – for the first time since the initial optimism of Oslo gave way to a deep sense of betrayal and despair (intriguingly, many Israelis, particularly on the left, felt they had been betrayed by the Palestinians following the collapse of the peace process and the outbreak of the intifada). So the sudden promise of a better future that Israelis were daring themselves to hope for was now making an impression among Palestinians too.

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Ismail Haniya, the Palestinian Prime Minister and a leading Hamas member, announced his support for President Abbas's stance on the settlers. He reminded his interviewer that in the same paper, on 26 February 2006, he had stated: "We do not have any feelings of animosity toward Jews. We do not wish to throw them into the sea. All we seek is to be given our land back, not to harm anybody". Asked how he could reconcile this sentiment with the virulently antisemitic statements in the Hamas Covenant, he declared that the covenant is in an advanced stage of review and he expects that some parts of it, "especially those parts", will be revised or even excised and intimated there had been a lack of consultation when the document was originally drawn up.

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In response to the perennial questions about whether the Hamas-led government would recognize the state of Israel, abide by past agreements and cease all violence, he repeated the offer of a long-term mutual *hudna* (truce), reiterated the aim to establish “a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital within the 1967 borders”, observed that it was up to the PLO to conduct the negotiations, and affirmed that Hamas’s decisions would be determined by what was “in the interest of the Palestinian people”. “Could this include recognizing Israel?” the interviewer persisted. “Whatever is in the interest of the Palestinian people”, came the cryptic but telling reply. In any event, any permanent-status agreement “would have to be endorsed in a public referendum”.

A short time before Haniya’s interview, Dr Ghazi Hamad, a PA government spokesman, told Israeli reporters in Hebrew that the Islamic Jihad bombing in Natanya was “an atrocity too far” and that such roguish actions could no longer be tolerated in the new climate. He said it was up to all the PA security forces - “working together” - to prevent this sort of attack in the future, but he hoped the cessation could be achieved through voluntary agreement with all parties. More explicitly than in the past, he condemned all forms of terrorism, both “state terrorism” - including targeted assassinations and military raids into the occupied territories - and the “terrorism of armed groups that target ordinary civilians”.

Events moved rapidly in the wider region too. For a period, it seemed like the whole population of Israel had one ear permanently glued to the radio, riveted by the declarations of intent by one Arab state after another to upgrade their future relations with the Israeli state. First off the mark was Morocco, then Tunisia, followed successively by Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. While each of these announcements was eagerly welcomed within Israel, they were not altogether surprising. In the wake of the Oslo Accords, the first five of these states had established ties with Israel, only to downgrade them following the failure of the Camp David summit and the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000.

What convinced most Israelis that the Arab world as a whole was earnest about making peace were the subsequent pronouncements by Algeria, Kuwait, Yemen and Libya. From time to time, in recent years, unconfirmed reports had appeared in Israeli or Arab newspapers of informal meetings taking place between the leaders of each of these countries and Israeli leaders. But nothing had come of these alleged feelers, which were routinely denied on the Arab side. Now everything was out in the open. Egypt, Jordan and Mauritania already had diplomatic relations with Israel and now even the once most hostile Arab states were overtly confirming their support for normalizing ties on the clear understanding that the current moves were irreversible and would lead to a permanent peace that included the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Palestinian territories (subject to

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All bids were off, though, when the canny Saudi King Abdullah called for a special Arab League summit in Riyadh to which the prime minister of Israel would be invited

equitable land swaps) and the Golan Heights.

Only the Islamist government of Sudan, the embattled government of Iraq and the unstable Lebanese government - which had vowed that Lebanon would be the last Arab state to make peace with Israel following the July 2006 war - remained silent. However, according to the *Beirut Daily Star*, the Lebanese government reacted positively to a report in *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's largest circulation newspaper, that the Israeli government was preparing to hand over the disputed Sheba'a Farms to the United Nations pending negotiations over the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. Indicatively, the Lebanese parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, leader of the Shi'ite Amal party and considered to be a strong ally of both Syria and Hizbollah, used the occasion to reiterate a statement he made on 17 October 2006 to the Dubai-based *al-Arabiya* channel when he had said "now is the time to return to peace negotiations with Israel... based on the Saudi peace initiative of 2002".

As bold stroke followed bold stroke, governments of countries around the world tried to get in on the act. While the US government seemed to take it for granted that 'Camp David III' would host the peace talks, competing offers came in from Spain, France, the UK, Germany, Russia and China. All bids were off, though, when the canny Saudi King Abdullah called for a special Arab League summit in Riyadh to which the prime minister of Israel would be invited (an idea that had initially been mooted informally when a revival of the Arab Peace Plan was first being considered in the last months of 2006).

The Abdullah proposal may be summarized as comprising three main elements. First was the proposed Riyadh summit itself where, in a beefed-up echo of Oslo, 'Irrevocable Declarations of Principle' would be signed by all participating parties. Secondly, permanent-status negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians - within the parameters of UN Resolutions 242, 338 and 1397 - would be organized, outside of the public spotlight, with the Saudi king, on behalf of the 'Arab Quartet', offering to complement the US-led Quartet in the role of honest broker. And thirdly, once the bilateral agreements on the main questions - including the stages and methods of implementation - had been concluded, an international conference would be held to endorse them and determine the processes necessary to resolve all outstanding issues of a regional dimension.

Elaborating on the proposal, Prince Bandar, who - as a former ambassador to Washington himself - was believed to be acting in close liaison with the US administration, spoke of the imperative of speed. "Past initiatives", he opined, had failed "in part because the many interim stages had allowed the perpetrators of violence on both sides to sabotage the process ... this must be avoided this time". He added: "All parties must commit - and indeed have committed - to seeing the process through to the end with the achievement of full peace, justice

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and normalization of relations and will not be blackmailed by violence from any quarter. We are determined, and the forces of darkness must know their actions will not deter us, any of us. They will be wasting their time”.

His use of the word ‘justice’ provoked many questions, and some suspicion, particularly among US and Israeli columnists who saw the term as code for the Palestinian right of return. Was the cat out of the bag? Were the Israeli hawks right all along that Arab talk of peace was just a device to eradicate the Israeli state through stealth by eroding its predominantly Jewish character? In response, Bandar emphasized that the Palestinian refugees did indeed have a right of return under the relevant UN resolutions, which he expected would be exercised mainly in the new Palestinian state.

This interpretation accorded with an emerging international consensus that the refugees, like the settlers, would be offered a ‘menu of options’ - first floated at Taba in December 2000 - with differentiated inducements. Surveys had indicated that while most refugees would take up citizenship of the Palestinian state, some preferred to settle permanently in their host country if invited (unlikely en masse in Lebanon with its own fragile population balance) while others showed an interest in emigrating out of the region altogether (favoured destinations were Canada, the US, Sweden, Australia and Latin America). A fourth category would be permitted at the discretion of the Israeli government to settle in Israel in limited numbers under the ‘family reunification’ scheme. It was assumed this would be spread over several years.

Under all these options, there would be generous compensation, rehabilitation and re-training packages, financed by a special international fund for which, according to some reports, donations were already being sought. Japan, the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arab states were said to be among the first to pledge contributions. The English-language Egyptian weekly *Al Ahram* reported that a separate international conference to discuss the details of alternative solutions to the refugee question, “with the participation of all relevant parties”, would be convened following the Riyadh summit.

Unsurprisingly, the diplomatic dividends that were flowing Israel’s way as a consequence of Olmert’s initiative boosted his domestic standing. From a single-figure rating prior to his Chatham House speech, opinion polls taken after Abdullah’s invitation to attend the Riyadh summit showed over 70 per cent support for him continuing as prime minister, the mounting corruption allegations against him notwithstanding. With his prestige at such a high level, his authority to make the deals necessary to secure peace with Israel’s neighbours, sideline his political opponents and neutralize the settler lobby was considerably enhanced.

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The strong swing in public opinion was not without precedent. A study of Israeli opinion polls over the decades shows that acts of decisive leadership that restore a sense of direction and hope for the future often gain strong backing - even when the act itself is not popular. While there are numerous examples of this, the most obvious parallel with the Olmert initiative was the abrupt unveiling to the Israeli public of the Oslo initiative in 1993 – complete with the mutual recognition of Israel and the previously despised Arafat-led PLO – which radically lifted public confidence (for a while) in the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

In that case, the turnabout in public opinion was arguably even more remarkable, for there had previously been widespread support for the government policy of outlawing the PLO. By contrast, in the more recent case, opinion polls over a period of years had consistently shown 60 to 70 per cent of Israelis supporting a policy to establish a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel, a figure closely mirrored by polling data from the West Bank and Gaza.

A buzz of activity marked the days leading up to the Riyadh summit, contributing importantly to a build-up of mutual confidence among the parties. Even the most minor gestures played a role. But what really fuelled the momentum were a few key announcements and deeds that had immediate political or psychological impact on one side or another.

The first significant move in this round came from the Palestinians, in the form of a joint Hamas-Islamic Jihad declaration of a unilateral ceasefire for a period of one month, with a prospect of extending this indefinitely depending on Israel's response and broader developments. For the first time since Israel evacuated its settlers from Gaza in August 2005, the lobbing of Qassam rockets onto Israeli soil came to a halt. Released of the daily threat, the residents of Sderot, the main target town, breathed more easily and relaxed the incessant pressure on the government to hit back massively.

In response, the Israeli government declared that for as long as it was not being attacked, it would suspend its "security operations" in the Palestinian areas "from immediate effect". For almost as long as anyone could remember, targeted assassinations ceased, military incursions stopped and mass arrests ended. Palestinians were able to walk the streets again without fear of what lay around the corner or dropped from the sky.

To coax the Palestinians into extending and consolidating the ceasefire, the defence ministry announced that, as long as it held, construction of the "security barrier" in the West Bank would likewise be put on hold. The barrier gates would be open for longer and the number of internal checkpoints and roadblocks steadily reduced. The operating principle would be "security for security". In the Gaza Strip, the Karni and Erez

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crossings into Israel and the Rafah crossing into Egypt (which Israel also had the ability to shut down) were all opened up.

At around the same time, Israel released 500 prisoners to a drop-off point just outside Ramallah, made up of women, under-18s and other detainees “without blood on their hands”. Among those freed were PLC speaker Aziz Dweik, a member of Hamas, and a number of other Hamas lawmakers, ministers and mayors arrested in June 2006 and May 2007. Yet, as gestures go, it was not the grandest. Prisoners enjoy a special place and are a deeply emotive issue in Palestinian society – an estimated 630,000 Palestinians, roughly 20 per cent of the population of the occupied territories, had been detained at one time or another by Israel since 1967 - and letting out just 500 (out of an estimated ten thousand) was little more than a drop in the ocean. But it was a gesture nonetheless and kept the momentum going.

An unconfirmed report in the Fatah-controlled daily *Al-Ayyam* indicated that a much larger number, including long-term prisoners, would soon be let out as part of a prisoner exchange deal being mediated by Omar Suleiman, the head of Egyptian Intelligence, to include the return to Israel of the abducted Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit. This accorded with an earlier pledge of Olmert’s prior to the launching of his initiative.

Meanwhile, indirect negotiations for a prisoner swap between Hizbullah and the Israeli government, which a UN-appointed delegate had been mediating since October 2006, reached fruition with the release of four Hizbullah guerrillas captured during the July war, plus three other Lebanese prisoners held for several years, in exchange for the return of the two wounded Israeli soldiers whose capture on 12 July 2006 had sparked off the 34-day hostilities.

In a separate move, Israel handed over detailed maps of the areas their forces had targeted with cluster bombs, to enable them to be rendered safe by the Lebanese authorities. The move was publicly welcomed by the Lebanese Red Cross as well as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Soon afterwards, came the all-important statement by Olmert about the future of the settlement-building programme. Professing fidelity to the dormant Road Map, he announced an immediate freeze on all further construction everywhere in the West Bank, including areas on the outskirts of Jerusalem where building had been continuing at a frenetic pace. Even the expanding settlement of Ma’ale Adumim, the largest in the West Bank, situated between Jerusalem and Jericho, was caught in the freeze. If the Quartet-sponsored plan was more pretext than reason, the real motive was probably a combination of three or possibly four main factors.

First, there was a concern to head off future domestic or international

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repercussions of a Peace Now survey of November 2006, which reported that the majority of West Bank settlements had been constructed entirely or partially on private Palestinian land, rather than on state land, as had been claimed. The finding – based on official data of the Israeli Civil Administration – was dubbed “daylight robbery” by the Peace Now report. It was one thing within Israel to ignore international law or maintain it did not apply to the settlements, but to flagrantly violate the country’s own laws - and specifically a 1979 Israeli High Court ruling - was quite another matter. The revelation placed a huge question mark over the future of the whole settlements enterprise and was a harsh indictment of the role all Israeli governments had played in it, including Olmert’s government.

The prospect of a general overhaul of US policy and priorities in the Middle East, in line with the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) report, was a second important factor, particularly after President Bush - having initially disregarded its counsel - reportedly remarked in May 2007 that he would be guided in the Middle East by the report, which included a call for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts.

Olmert was well aware that the financial cost of sustaining the Israeli occupation generally and expanding the settlements in particular was not possible without the huge US annual subventions and he was canny enough to anticipate the inevitable before it was forced upon him. He was presumably mindful that the ISG report’s co-author was the same James Baker, when secretary of state under the first George Bush’s presidency, who proposed to deduct whatever money Israel spent on settlements from the financial assistance provided by the US government.

A survey of public opinion in 35 countries that found Israel to have by far the worst image of the 36 countries listed, published in the US on 22 November 2006, would also have rung alarm bells. Of particular concern would have been the revelation that Americans themselves ranked Israel beneath all the other countries in the study bar China regarding its conduct in the areas of international peace and security.

The third consideration was the inescapable corollary of the initiative that bore Olmert’s name. The more distant settlements, although still the beneficiaries of government subsidies - at least for now - were spontaneously contracting (as were the unauthorized outposts) as many of their inhabitants trickled back to Israel or took up residence in those settlements thought likely to be retained by Israel in a land swap. However, nothing was definite at this stage and even settlements close to the old green line were experiencing enough uncertainty to put major expansion plans on hold.

The vigorous construction of new luxury complexes on the West Bank hilltops surrounding Jerusalem came to an abrupt halt when the Israeli

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The neglect was similarly felt by Israeli children, nearly 770,000 of whom, as reported in *Ma'ariv* on 20 November 2006, lived below the poverty line.

government caught up with itself and realized that it was, in effect, gratuitously building the new Palestinian state. In a decisive switch of priorities, it reassigned the seemingly plentiful resources that were being used to develop confiscated land – an open wound that every day intensified the resentment of its Palestinian owners – and redeployed them mainly to the impoverished (and missile-damaged) Galilee and Negev regions in the northern and southern parts of Israel respectively. It was a shift that was widely applauded in the country, for these regions had been curiously neglected for many years – a running sore that had cultivated a growing sense of alienation among their deprived inhabitants.

The neglect was similarly felt by Israeli children, nearly 770,000 of whom, as reported in *Ma'ariv* on 20 November 2006, lived below the poverty line. While nowhere near the level of Palestinian poverty (the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food found that half of Gazan families survived on one meal a day), it represented 35% of all the country's children – the highest percentage in the so-called developed world. In the four decades since the war of 1967, the Jewish state had moved from one of the most egalitarian nations in the world to among the least egalitarian. Increasingly, Israel was waking up to the intense harm that had been done to its own infrastructure and social fabric while it had busied itself colonizing the occupied territories.

In the light of the shambles of the Lebanon war, a fourth consideration may have been the long-term damage exacted on the Israeli military as an effective fighting force by obliging it to act as an army of occupation throughout the West Bank. Removing the requirement to protect the far-flung settlements and their often militant inhabitants would dissolve a major cause of the soldiers' daily struggle with the civilian population there.

But whatever the motives that underlay the initiatives of each party, it is doubtful if the Riyadh summit would have met with the success it achieved without the advances in goodwill each of the moves helped to generate. The summit itself was a low-key affair that lasted less than 48 hours. All Arab countries were represented, most of them by heads of state or government. Also present were Israel, the US, UN, EU, Russia (the Quartet parties), the Arab League and, indicatively, China. The meeting steadfastly avoided detail and, as the ground had been carefully prepared and the mood was congenial (rather than warm), agreeing the 'Irrevocable Declarations of Principle' was relatively straightforward.

The principles were largely drawn from the 2002 Arab Peace Plan and the Clinton/Taba parameters but, in broad terms, they had been common to myriad other initiatives over the years, including the proposals of the Rogers Plan, the Oslo Accords, the Nusseibeh-Ayalon Plan, the Geneva accord, the Mitchell, Tenet and Zinni reports, the One Voice movement, the Road Map and the Iraq Study Group. Even the

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the contours and major ingredients of a final settlement had been self-evident for decades. It was just a matter of getting all the principal parties to acknowledge them at the same time.

2006 prisoners' document drawn up by Palestinian detainees held by Israel contained many of the same elements. This is hardly a coincidence, for the contours and major ingredients of a final settlement had been self-evident for decades. It was just a matter of getting all the principal parties to acknowledge them at the same time.

In sum, there was unanimous agreement at the summit that a comprehensive resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict would embrace the following seven irrevocable principles:

- Full Israeli withdrawal from all the Arab territories captured in June 1967 subject to agreed, minor, equitable land exchanges around the Israeli-Palestinian border.
- A full peace agreement and the establishment of normal relations between all Arab countries and Israel with security provided for all the states of the region
- A sovereign independent Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel.
- Jerusalem to be an open city with free access by all religions to their holy sites.
- East Jerusalem to be the capital of the future Palestinian state and West Jerusalem to be recognized as the capital of Israel. (It was understood that this formula would not exclude the alternative of Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states if this were the choice of the two principal parties.)
- A just, agreed solution to the Palestinian refugee problem based on UN General Assembly Resolution 194.
- The mutual termination of all boycotts and sanctions and of all forms of vilification.

The summit called for urgent reconciliation between the Hamas and Fatah components of the Palestinian government and urged the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to conclude a permanent-status agreement "in as little time as realistically possible", at which point the Arab countries would officially "declare the Arab-Israeli conflict ended" at an international conference which would formally approve and ratify all the agreements.

Mindful of the tough and varied challenges that would inevitably confront the putative Palestinian state, summit participants considered a proposal for a temporary, UN-authorized, international protectorate to assist the provisional Palestinian government during the transition phase, as elaborated in a document prepared by the Middle East Policy

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Initiative Forum (www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-2-97-1207.jsp).

While the prospective benefits of the envisaged international role commended themselves, the summit decided to leave it to the Palestinians and Israelis in consultation to make their own assessments about the shape and form of the external assistance that would be required based on their respective needs and common goals.

In line with the new spirit, events moved quite swiftly following the summit. By now, the momentum was self-generating and almost everyone was caught up in it. Certainly, nobody wanted to be the one to be blamed for derailing it. In any event, a palpable excitement infected the region. 'Reciprocal gesture' leapfrogged 'reciprocal gesture', as the countdown began to the permanent-status negotiations.

The essential first move - as urged at Riyadh - was the reconstitution of the Palestinian government of national unity and an end to the bitter internecine strife, one of many achievements that once seemed beyond reach and, in the new climate, all of a sudden became possible. The government protocol confirmed that President Abbas would conduct any future negotiations with Israel and it reconfirmed the commitment of the Mecca Agreement of February 2007 that the unity government would 'respect' past Israeli-Palestinian accords, a formula that allowed Hamas to sidestep the crucial issue of whether the new administration would officially recognise the Israeli state. The fudge was pretext enough for the international community to end the very damaging and increasingly discredited diplomatic, economic and financial embargo of the Palestinian Authority, which had anyway been fragmenting for some time.

Rather than be left on a limb, the Olmert government bowed to the inevitable and participated in the consensus. Repayment commenced of the hundreds of millions of dollars of tax monies legally owed to the PA by Israel - about half of the total PA budget - but withheld since February 2006 following the election of Hamas. For the first time since March of that year, 160,000 civil servants could rely on routinely receiving their monthly salaries.

Although Israel did no more than restore the status quo ante, it received plaudits from around the world for this move. The elevation of its international standing was reflected in a surge of inward investment, a burgeoning stock exchange and a tourism boom that spilled over into the territory of the Palestinian Authority, facilitated by a significant easing of movement across the borders.

However, the inevitable price was tragically paid for the general relaxation of security measures when a busload of German Christian pilgrims was blown up on the road from Bethlehem to Hebron, resulting in 11 fatalities, including the Israeli driver and two Israeli

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many Palestinians spontaneously marched through their own towns and villages to denounce the act and its perpetrators, scenes that had not been witnessed since the bombs on the buses during the Oslo period of the 1990s. The purveyors of violence were losing the street.

guides, and serious injuries to 23 others. What differentiated this atrocity from the many previous ones was the nature and mood of the reactions. Not only was it instantly condemned by the Fatah and Hamas leaderships – the PA government called it “a crime against the Palestinian people and against humanity” – but many Palestinians spontaneously marched through their own towns and villages to denounce the act and its perpetrators, scenes that had not been witnessed since the bombs on the buses during the Oslo period of the 1990s. The purveyors of violence were losing the street.

According to the prestigious *Al Quds* Palestinian daily, the killings were blamed by PA security sources on rogue elements within Islamic Jihad – the official leadership of which denied all knowledge of the incident – who were said to have close links with Iranian Intelligence. An outraged Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, warned that if Iran were found to be implicated in the attack, her government would suspend all formal relations between the two countries and sponsor a resolution at the Security Council calling for comprehensive international sanctions, a stance that was backed by all other EU-member states.

In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, President Ahmedinejad – who had previously cast doubt on the Nazi extermination of the Jews and had called for the eradication of Israel – not only furiously denied any Iranian involvement in the bombing but maintained Iran would never act against the wishes of the Palestinian people and that “everyone can see that this act was against Palestinian wishes”. He suggested that “Zionists seeking revenge on the German nation” were more likely culprits. Clearly feeling the heat, he took the opportunity to refer to a past interview with *CNN.com*, on 21 September 2006, when, in answer to a question about whether he believed Israel had a right to exist, he remarked: “let Palestinian people decide for themselves. We support the vote of the people. And whatever the result is, we must all accept”. He told *Der Spiegel* that if the present moves lead to a peace that the Palestinians accept, then that would be the end of it: “Iran of course would do nothing to disrupt such a peace”.

Israel’s reaction to the atrocity did not follow the usual pattern either. In part, this was due to the widespread condemnation the act received from almost all other parties. But, more importantly, holding the PA or Hamas responsible was neither credible nor purposeful. Violent retaliation or other harsh measures at this point could be only counterproductive. Instead, the Israeli government and the PA, with the support of most other regional powers, joined forces to assert that violence would only make them more determined to achieve the longed-for peace and they vowed to step up the pace.

This resolute response contrasted with the more timid attitudes associated with past initiatives – characterized by pedestrian ‘incremental-steps’ and hollow ‘confidence-building’ measures – that

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gave ample scope to the wreckers to do their worst, which they invariably did to great effect.

Meanwhile, following the pooling of intelligence between the Israeli and Palestinian security services, five suspects were rounded up by the Palestinian police and charged with homicide.

The pace did indeed step up as different parties, in advance of the permanent-status negotiations, started to contemplate the implementation of agreements yet to be reached.

At the top of many people's agenda was the construction of a safe-passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Old plans were dusted off as animated debates ignited in both the Palestinian and Israeli media. Some went for Ehud Barak's ambitious 1999 proposal for a 47 kilometre, four-lane elevated road. Some preferred to burrow and favoured a tunnel link. Others argued for the much cheaper option of a dedicated land corridor, to be accessed by a magnetic security pass.

Concrete evidence – literally – was observed of preparations to repair the Yasser Arafat International Airport (formerly Gaza International Airport), the home airport of Palestinian Airlines and one of the main symbols of an independent Palestinian state of the future. Originally opened in 1998, with President Clinton as the guest of honour, the Moroccan-designed airport was capable of handling 700,000 passengers per year. It was forced to close down in 2001 after the radar station and runways were heavily damaged by Israeli military action shortly after the second intifada broke out, but the main terminal building remained intact. The original funders – Japan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Spain and Germany – were reported to be willing to repeat their investments, in a significant gesture of confidence in the future.

In parallel, there were reports of France and Holland being ready to renew the commitment they had made in 2000 to finance and provide the know-how to build a seaport on Gaza's Mediterranean coast, as had been agreed initially by the Israelis and Palestinians at that time and again five years later, but never implemented. Its construction would not only be a further manifestation of Palestinian sovereignty but, together with the re-opening of the airport, the project could provide huge employment opportunities and help to kick-start the Palestinian economy.

Tough restrictions on where Gaza fishermen may ply their trade - imposed after the capture of an Israeli soldier on 25 June 2006 - were relaxed, giving a further boost to the local economy. The jobs of 35,000 Gazans depended on the estimated 3,500 fishermen being able to take to sea and bring back their catch.

The Japanese government announced an acceleration of its plans, originally floated in July 2006, to create an agro-industrial park in the West Bank as part of its concept of a 'corridor for peace and prosperity'

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When the Oslo Accords were first made public, they sparked considerable interest among ordinary Palestinians and Israelis and some excitement about what they foretold. But in practice, there was relatively little involvement in the process at non-official levels.

in co-operation with Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians.

At around the same time, the Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli governments took steps themselves to establish such a corridor by reviving consultations about creating a Red-Dead Canal, a massively ambitious project linking the two seas - exploiting the 400-meter drop - that would both depend on and embody the permanence of peace. Apart from saving the evaporating Dead Sea and its ecosystem from an imminent environmental catastrophe, the additional benefits of the project - for which the World Bank had prepared terms of reference in 2003 - could potentially include the generation of hydropower and the provision of desalinated fresh water for use in agriculture, fish ponds, industry, recreation and tourism around artificial lagoons or lakes.

When the Oslo Accords were first made public, they sparked considerable interest among ordinary Palestinians and Israelis and some excitement about what they foretold. But in practice, there was relatively little involvement in the process at non-official levels. This was widely regarded as one of Oslo's flaws and probably contributed to its ultimate failure. Determined not to repeat this mistake, the EU-funded 'Israeli-Palestinian NGOs Forum' - an alliance established following a conference in Spain in November 2005 and comprising more than 100 Israeli and Palestinian organizations dedicated to peace and human rights - devised a strategy to engage both civil societies in the push for peace and reconciliation among the two peoples, with a strong emphasis on the grass-roots level.

Plans were laid for an Israeli-Palestinian civil society peace summit, with broad-based participation, to launch and coordinate a far-reaching programme of activities. In the meantime, an appeal was issued to the 170 Palestinian civil society organizations which, in July 2005, had called for a global boycott and sanctions against Israel, to consider suspending this standpoint pending the outcome of the present moves, and to link up with the Forum not only in giving peace a chance but also in helping to make it happen. In the same spirit, civil society groups in Arab countries were invited to reassess whether shunning all contact with Israeli civil society in the circumstances was the most productive way of delivering support for the Palestinian cause and peace for the region.

The new mood in the region was reflected by a sharp reduction in the rhetoric and official propaganda hostile to Jews as a people, to Judaism as a religion and to Israel *per se*. According to leading Jewish research institutions, "a general lessening of antisemitic pressure was recorded" in countries around the world. The last time they occasioned to make such an observation was during the Oslo period.

Just days before the commencement of the permanent-status negotiations, everything nearly came unstuck. Had the plans of an extremist underground faction on the far right of the Israeli political spectrum to blow up the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem not been

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Had the plans of an extremist underground faction on the far right of the Israeli political spectrum to blow up the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem not been discovered shortly before its intended execution, the whole peace process may have been derailed.

discovered shortly before its intended execution, the whole peace process may have been derailed. Despite the official pledges not to be blackmailed by acts of violence, such an act would so have inflamed Arab and Muslim opinion, that everything accomplished up to that point may have been sabotaged. When Israeli Jewish terrorists succeeded with their plans in preceding years – such as the killing of 29 Palestinians by Baruch Goldstein in the Hebron mosque in the Machpela Cave in 1994 and the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhaq Rabin in 1995 - the results were very far-reaching.

In the past, had they achieved their aim of killing several Palestinian mayors in 1980 or managed to carry out just one of at least four previous schemes to set fire to or bomb the Al Aqsa mosque, the consequences would doubtless have been similarly devastating. The foiling of the latest plot in a combined operation by the Israeli and Palestinian intelligence agencies was a second major triumph for the security forces working in co-ordination, following the previous arrest of the five suspects accused of bombing the German tourist bus.

In one of the most significant acts of all, that occurred shortly before the plot was discovered - and which must have infuriated the plotters who were already outraged by government policy – the majority of Palestinian political prisoners held prior to the launch of the Olmert initiative were released, including all administrative detainees and virtually all long-term political prisoners convicted in Israeli courts of acts of violence. The number let out was far in excess of that demanded or expected by the Hamas or Fatah leaderships. Excluded from the amnesty were common criminals (who on previous occasions had disproportionately been the principal releasees). In the other direction, Corporal Shalit was returned to the Israeli authorities amidst huge publicity and scenes of jubilation.

This was probably the largest down-payment on peace Israel had made or could have made and was recognized as such on the Palestinian street which similarly flooded with tears of joy. Predictably, it was denounced as an act of suicide by the Israeli political right (one cartoonist depicted Olmert as a suicide bomber) and it caused a good deal of unease across the political spectrum. However, the impetus by then was virtually unstoppable and Olmert's standing in the country was sufficiently high to withstand the doubts.

The most prominent and politically significant prisoner to be given his freedom was the senior Fatah figure, Marwan Barghouti, sentenced in 2004 to five consecutive life terms plus forty years, having been charged with murder, attempted murder and membership of a terror organization. His leadership credentials were about to be put to the severest of tests as he had just a few days to unify the Fatah factions around one negotiating platform and obtain the acquiescence of Hamas and other smaller groups before taking on the role of a principal PLO negotiator with Israel. Both the Palestinian media and

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sections of the Israeli press got a little ahead of themselves in hailing him as the Palestinian Mandela.

Released alongside the Hebrew-speaking Barghouti were his co-signatories to the 2006 prisoners' document, Khaleq al-Natsheh of Hamas, Bassam al-Sa'di of Islamic Jihad, Abdul Rahim Mallouh of the PFLP and Mustafa Badarneh of the PDFLP. The PFLP General Secretary, Ahmed Sa'adat, arrested in connection with the assassination of the right-wing Israeli minister for tourism Rehavam Zeevi in 2001, was one of the few political leaders not freed. In part, the remaining detainees were a sop to the Israeli right and in part insurance against the breakdown of the talks about to get under way.

How those talks will work out is of course yet to be seen. But the omens could hardly be better. The framework and the political horizon are set, the momentum is strong, expectations are high (probably realistically so) and important steps have already been taken. The whole world is watching and failure is not an acceptable option. Most importantly, the principal parties themselves are determined to achieve the peace that has consistently escaped their predecessors and they know what is needed to get there. Possibly for the first time, we can look forward with confidence to peace in the Middle East.

In years to come, historians will doubtless be better placed to explain why this initiative ultimately succeeded when so many others had disappointed. But even now there are enough indicators to throw some light on what was distinctive about this process. What counted most was the momentum, set off by the decisive initial declarations - in quick succession - of the Israeli prime minister, the Palestinian president and the Saudi king. Everything else was consequential.

The importance of the individual post-holders should not be overstated. For instance, before the event, several commentators felt that Ehud Olmert had neither the strength nor the imagination to do anything out of the ordinary. Where they miscalculated was that it was precisely the weakness of his position, coupled with a keen instinct for survival, that was key in his case. Another leader - had it been Olmert's heir apparent Tzipi Livni, or the Labour Party contenders Ami Ayalon or Ehud Barak - could have trodden a similar path with possibly other considerations uppermost. Even Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu, however unlikely this may seem, may have been propelled into following such a course. Any Israeli leader would eventually have had to face the choice of ending the occupation and grasping the nettle of peace and acceptance based on the 1967 borders, with minor adjustments, or casting the county into a pariah state embroiled in perpetual strife.

The ceasefire between Israel and the PA, the reconstructed Palestinian government of national unity, a settlements freeze, Israeli-Palestinian talks, and an exchange of prisoners were not the critical triggers. Along with some other steps, they were important - even vital - landmarks

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and catalysts, but they stoked the process rather than ignited it. On their own, they may not have led very far without the dynamic qualities of the three ingredients that really drove the process. Just setting up negotiations, for example, in the fuzzy hope that something may happen, would probably have been more harmful than helpful.

A common vision of the parameters of the destination was one element that needed to be crystal clear from the outset. But some things were best left imprecise, to be dealt with substantively as developments progressively unfolded under their own momentum and produced a shift of mood. Clear processes for discussing and agreeing the remaining issues, whether 'final basket' or questions of implementation, completed the picture. Some matters of detail that did not lend themselves to speedy resolution were judiciously phased. This prevented them from holding up a settlement of the larger issues. The failure to distinguish these elements properly and categorize them appropriately caused many past peace initiatives to be stillborn.

The reason why Olmert's opening gambit was so crucial was that it put security back at the heart of Israel's concern and acknowledged that the Palestinians had made their great historic compromise in agreeing to build their scaled-down state in the territories captured by Israel in June 1967, thereby relinquishing 78 per cent of the land they had previously claimed. This had been agreed, after a long painful struggle, at the Algiers Palestinian National Council in 1988 and reaffirmed with the PLO recognition of Israel in the Oslo Accords in 1993. Any encroachment on the remaining 22 per cent would be regarded as plunder. Mutually agreed land exchanges - a legitimate subject for negotiation - were acceptable, provided this did not diminish their overall share or undermine the viability and essential requirements of the future Palestinian state.

At Camp David in 2000, the Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak dubbed his proposal to hand over to the PA between 88 and 92 per cent of the West Bank (extended to roughly 97 per cent at Taba six months later) a 'generous offer'. What appeared in Israeli eyes as a magnanimous territorial concession was, in Palestinian eyes, a flagrant erosion of an unequivocal right. While it remains a matter of controversy, it is clearer in retrospect to many observers that the alleged inflexibility of the Palestinians was not the only cause of the deadlock at Camp David. Mistaken assessments by the Israeli and US delegations of the vital Palestinian sticking points, and their consequent illusions about what realistically was open for negotiation, also played a critical part.

Now it was Israel's turn to confront its great historic dilemma. It could have the spoils of war or the fruits of peace but not both. It appears that Olmert finally recognised this and grasped the nettle of peace and Arab acceptance of Israel rather than hold out for the last few per cent - or, with regard to Syria, a few metres of land width below the Golan Heights in the north-east corner of the Sea of Galilee. He showed

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statesmanship that few had detected in him before.

Thus the soon-to-be negotiations would be not about percentages but, *inter alia*, about the location of equivalent Israeli territory to be exchanged for the three-to-five per cent of West Bank land Israel was intent on annexing to extend its sovereignty over the large settlement blocs near the old green line.

As the Palestinians and the Syrians had their immutable red lines, so too did the Israelis, in their case the predominantly Jewish character of the state. For them, this was a fundamental, existential question, a matter of identity and of survival. To most Israelis, the Jewish state was the embodiment of a proud nation re-born from the ashes of the Nazi holocaust - the culmination of centuries of contempt, humiliation, discrimination and periodic bouts of murderous oppression. Becoming a minority once again in someone else's land was beyond contemplation. If the price of peace was a massive influx of Palestinian refugees and their descendants (now approaching five million) to Israel, there would be no peace, as many in the Arab world had increasingly come to realize with the passage of years. And without peace, there would be no solution of any type to the refugee problem.

Yet nor could the refugees - the knock-on victims of Nazi crimes who lost out in the subsequent geographical lottery - be expected to give up their rights and status of decades in exchange for vague promises of what an uncertain future may bring. They understood as well as anyone that the almost universal commitment to two states was incompatible with an extensive exercise of the right of return to what became Israel and, moreover, that the homes and villages they yearned to go back to had in many cases disappeared years ago or radically changed their character. But they had no concrete incentive to acquiesce in a final settlement unless and until alternatives - at once minimally acceptable and imminent - were on offer.

Previous proposals that required the refugees to relinquish their rights as a precondition to negotiations - or that required Palestinian or other Arab leaders to renounce the rights on their behalf - were not capable of achieving that aim. The current initiative progressed because the refugees - who increasingly regarded themselves as part of a nation-in-waiting seeking self-determination and statehood - were offered a menu of practical options, including return to their historic homeland (the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea), but were not required to make their choices in advance of their availability. Coupled with the broad acceptance of the Arab world that immigration to Israel was ultimately the sovereign decision of its government, this package transformed apparently incompatible demands into an issue capable of being resolved in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement.

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definitive principles agreed at Riyadh set a clear framework, and problems that - in a climate of hostility - once seemed intractable become resolvable when the parties themselves are politically and psychologically ready to do a deal.

An encouraging sign is the extensive consultations by both the Israeli and Palestinian governments with various NGOs from both sides, including the Jerusalem Policy Forum - a joint project of the Israeli Ir Amim and the Palestinian Peace and Democracy Forum - the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) and the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, all of which have developed extensive expertise on the future of Jerusalem and its environs within a peace setting. Policy papers have been commissioned in such fields as municipal functioning, economics, social welfare and security, on the understanding that their recommendations will help guide the negotiators in their work.

There are of course other outstanding issues to be resolved, including the problems of water and energy, to what extent the Palestinian state will be demilitarized, whether the 'security barrier' will be dispensed with or moved to the final agreed border, freedom of movement and trade between the two states, questions of currency and a customs union, whether to set up something like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and so on. But no one expects these matters to threaten the whole process. On the contrary, once they reach the table it would be a sign that the big issues have been resolved and the age-old conflict brought effectively to an end. Once this is accomplished, and a definitive agreement between Israel and Syria is secured, all the states of the region, including Israel and Palestine, will then have to face up to a raft of pressing internal problems that, owing to the conflict, have long been neglected.

Often, it had been said that the time was not ripe for a final settlement, as if a more auspicious moment would spontaneously arise at some future unspecified date. Yet postponing peace indefinitely merely promised interminable ferment. If the time was never ripe for peace, it was always ripe for peace. For peace was not really a function of time, nor was it a mere pipe dream. Primarily, it was a matter of political will - focused and resolute - and we have now seen that it was indeed perfectly feasible.

Why exactly now is difficult to say for certain. A similar question could be asked about the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, the crumbling of the Soviet Union or the recent settlement in Northern Ireland, all of them far-fetched developments at the time. In the case of the Middle East, maybe the principal parties - at the local, regional and international levels - looked deep into the abyss, saw the point of no return and, with great good sense, took fright.