President Bill Clinton has now made public his ideas for a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He describes his proposal as a framework or parameters for ending the violence, resuming negotiations, and reaching a settlement. He has left the details to be negotiated by the two parties, with United States' help when necessary. Ehud Barak has accepted the parameters, though with some reservations. Yasser Arafat still has serious reservations, but some off his aides have been individually declaring rejection of Clinton's proposal, though it is not clear whether they speak on his behalf. It is probably tempting for the Palestinians once more to say "NO", even though it would wiser to break the pattern and say "YES". By doing so, they would sustain international support, especially of those countries that are urging them to accept. They would realize most if not all of their expectations. They would also save Palestinian life, material, and land, and for the first time begin to taste the potential fruits of peace.

The Palestinians have certain reservations, and justly so. They have little trust in agreements signed by Israeli officials. They believe Bill Clinton is biased in favor of Israel. They want details of the parameters before saying yes. Some believe that violence is the only language Israel understands. Others believe time is on their side and the longer they wait the more of their demands they will realize. Finally, they want support of their position by the Arab League members, which does not seem to be forthcoming. These are compelling reasons to say "NO" to Clinton's proposal. However, a careful review of the parameters, the history of the conflict, and the possible alternatives to achieve peace would suggest that it is time to say "YES," even at this late hour of Clinton's administration.

The Palestinians distrust Israel for its failure to implement past agreements, but the Israelis also distrust the Palestinians on similar grounds. Had there been mutual trust between them, there would probably be little remaining conflict. There is a risk in saying "YES" and proceeding to negotiate, but the Palestinians can and should be able to face that risk. The Palestinians complain that Clinton is biased in favor of Israel. So what? Is there any leader who is not biased one way or the other? It is the contents of Clinton's proposal and the feasibility of implementation that count. Bill Clinton has been blunt and candid in expressing his sympathy with Israel, but he also has been the most persistent and vocal United States president in recognizing the basic rights of the Palestinians, even those that may be hard to fulfill. He also has been the first president to publicly pressure Israel to accept the concept of a State of Palestine, to withdraw from close to 100% of the Occupied Territories, and to share sovereignty in Jerusalem. In fact Clinton's parameters address and support most of the basic demands of the Palestinians. Some of the
demands, however, may be considered unrealistic and unlikely to be fulfilled, short of a war that vanquishes the opponent—who shall wage that war, when, and at what price?

The parameters, at first reading, seem to meet the Palestinians' border and statehood expectations in terms of size of territory, contiguity, and sovereignty. Any potential loss of territory to Israel is to be compensated for by acquiring an equal area from Israel. The parameters meet the expectations on Jerusalem, at least in part, by formulating a general system of sharing land and sovereignty. It is true that the parameters do not offer the Palestinians all they want, but they do not offer the Israelis all they want either. In fact the parameters offer both parties more than UN Resolution 194 offers them which is internationalization. The Palestinians and Israelis seem to have implicitly ignore internationalization and conspired to share the city. President Clinton has paved the way for them to do so.

The parameters address the refugee question and offer a solution which certainly does not meet Palestinian expectations of their return to their original villages and homes within Israel. However, the parameters recognize the Palestinians' right to return to a homeland with compensation and help to make that right a reality, including partial repatriation to Israel. Strangely enough most Palestinian leaders have been aware of the extreme difficulty of repatriating the refugees to Israel. Some leaders have insisted that a recognition of the right of return is what counts, regardless of implementation, as if a moral victory is all they want. It is now in vogue to describe the right of return as "sacred". It is not clear, however, how it has become sacred, and by what power. Problem solving by peaceful means involves compromise, trade-off, and negotiation to reduce costs and maximize benefits. To claim that the right of return is sacred and immutable is to nullify any possibility of reaching a settlement by peaceful means.

The Palestinians hesitate in accepting the parameters partly because they have sought but not received full and explicit backing by members of the Arab League. The Arab countries have been consistent in declaring support for the Palestinians in vague and useless ways. They object to compromise on Jerusalem and the refugees right of return but they offer no viable alternatives. Apparently none of the Arab leaders wants to appear soft on Israel and none is brave enough to break the pattern and address the issues publicly in a pragmatic and realistic way. Yet they persist in blocking any compromise on Jerusalem and on the right of return, while the Palestinians pay the price. In a sense the Arab countries have been a part of the problem, not the solution.

The Palestinians should think twice before believing that time is on their side, or that violence is the only effective language with Israel. The more time has lapsed, the more life and material losses they have suffered, and the more land they have lost to Jewish settlements. And every time they have encountered Israeli forces they have suffered most of the losses and gained little in return. The current violence delivers the same lesson: more loss of life and material, while more settlement are being built. Violence is not the way, nor is it a waiting exercise to see who can outwait the other.

Finally, the Palestinians complain that the parameters do not offer enough detail. However, details are the subject matter of negotiation which the two parties must deliberate on. The Palestinians presumably have experienced negotiators and it is for them to bargain
as best as they can to maximize the benefits; the parameters leave the
door open.

Israel is preparing for the election of a prime minister. If not
Ehud Barak, it will be Ariel Sharon. By rejecting Clinton's parameters,
it is believed that they will be aiding Ariel Sharon, the way they
aided Natanyahu against Peres in 1995. Like Natanyahu, Sharon will be
thankful for Palestinian help and he too will express his thanks by
oppressing the Palestinians even more, and by appropriating their land
to build more settlements.

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