

Angling for a Comeback

by Meyrav Wurmser

DENNIS ROSS, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 840 pp., \$35.00.

Dennis Ross has undertaken a monumental task. A seasoned diplomat, he served for twelve years under both the Bush I and Clinton administrations, with one goal in mind: to obtain an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. Now, he has chronicled his experience in painstaking detail to explain just why the peace that he worked so hard to achieve has remained elusive.

Ross' book is not intended to be a light read. Over 800 pages long, it lays out in painstaking detail the events that shaped what has come to be known as the Oslo peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. Names, dates, events, and characters are all described in Ross's account—sometimes to the point of distraction. Among other minute tidbits, for example, the reader learns that Saudi Arabian ambassador Prince Bandar bin Sultan had Roberta Flack perform at his home in Mclean, Virginia during a reception for numerous officials.

With what is at times an overwhelming attention to detail, Ross describes the journey from the period prior to 1993 Madrid Conference to the year 2000 Camp David meeting where Arafat finally ended the peace process. Much of the book is an account of the haggling that took place along the way.

Ross' exhaustive recollection of the events, and his determination to reach a viable agreement, is evident throughout. He outlines the many channels initiated by him and successive administrations in their efforts to obtain anything resembling a lasting peace. The cast of characters rivals that of a Victorian novel. Ronald Reagan, George Shultz, George H.W. Bush, James Baker, Bill Clinton, Warren Christopher, Sandy Berger figure prominently on the American side. Of the Israeli participants, we have Yitzhak Shamir, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu, Yossi Beilin, Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon. As for the Palestinians, Ross outlines the involvement of Mohammad Dahlan, Hanan Ashrawi, Ahmed Qureia and current Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas.

There is, however, only one permanent fixture throughout the book, besides Ross: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. While the revolving door of negotiations leads both American and Israeli leaders in and out of the peace process, the Palestinian chairman is always present.

Arafat, of course, is the central figure in this book. And Ross, ever the diplomat, is reluctant to blame him squarely for the failure of the process. On the one hand, he writes that: “[h]ad Nelson Mandela been the Palestinian leader and not Yasser Arafat, I would be writing now how, notwithstanding the limitations of the Oslo process, Israelis and Palestin-



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ians had succeeded in reaching an ‘end of conflict’ agreement.” At other times, however, he equivocates that both sides failed to live up to their commitments: “Herein lies the main failure of Oslo: Transformation was required, but each side fell far short of what was required.” For readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of Israeli-Palestinian politics, Ross’ contradictory answers provide little insight into exactly what piece is missing in *The Missing Peace*.

And herein lies the problem. Despite its 800-plus pages, Ross’ work never satisfactorily explains why Arafat should have remained a part of the process for so long. If *The Missing Peace* highlights anything, it is how much of an institution Arafat truly was at the Israeli-Palestinian negotiating table. Ross fully and completely internalized the arguments of Arafat’s associates—that his stature and “moral authority” among the Palestinian people meant that he alone could compromise on the tough issues: refugees, borders, and Jerusalem. For Ross, Arafat was the sole representative of the Palestinian people, in spite of irrefutable evidence of his corruption, his tyrannical rule, and the repression of his own people.

As a result, what comes across clearly is that peace, not freedom for the Palestinian people, was the chief goal of Ross’ diplomatic efforts. For him, America’s founding principles took a back seat to short-term interests.

If certain questions ultimately remain unanswered, it may be because the author’s intentions are at least twofold. The first is, undoubtedly, to provide an insider’s view of a historical process. But Ross is also simultaneously seeking to claim his place in history and stage his comeback to the diplomatic scene. He seeks to remind those around him of his energy and talents, and instill the belief that there is no time like the present for a new peace process. Real-

ity does not seem to matter. Neither do the players and their actions. Instead, what matters are American diplomats who believe that they shape reality and make peace, even when facts on the ground dictate otherwise.

Ross therefore scolds the Bush administration for its initial reluctance to become embroiled in a new peace process, and later criticizes its failed attempt to bring democracy (and ultimately peace) to the Palestinian territories through the “Road Map.” The “Road Map,” in Ross’ view, simply needs to be negotiated in order for it to be implemented.

The rest of his thought is not hard to complete: Negotiations need negotiators, and the author, with his years of experience, is ready and willing. 