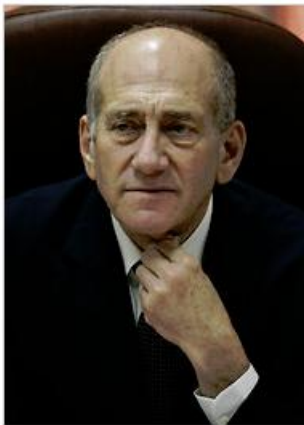


Olmert Memoir Cites Near Deal for Mideast Peace

By **ETHAN BRONNER**

Published: January 27, 2011

JERUSALEM — Ehud Olmert, the former prime minister of Israel, says in new memoirs that he and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, were very close to a peace deal two years ago, but Mr. Abbas's hesitation, Mr. Olmert's own legal troubles and the Israeli war in Gaza caused their talks to end. Shortly afterward, a right-wing Israeli government came to power.



Sebastian Scheiner/Associated Press
Ehud Olmert in 2008. The Israeli war in Gaza that year ended the peace talks, he says.

In excerpts from the memoirs published Thursday in the Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharonot, and in an interview with The New York Times, Mr. Olmert provides details on negotiations that have been the focus of attention and Arab anger this week because of leaks to Al Jazeera, the television network, of Palestinian documents with minutes from related meetings. The leaks may well make it harder for concessions to be offered in the future.

Mr. Olmert said the two sides had agreed on key principles: the state of Palestine would have no military; an American-led international security force, not Israeli soldiers, would be stationed on its border with Jordan; Jerusalem would be shared, with its holy sites overseen by a multinational committee; and a limited number of Palestinian refugees would be permitted back into what is now Israel, while the rest would be generously compensated.

The two agreed that Israel could keep some land in the West Bank on which settlements had been built, but disagreed over how much. Mr. Olmert wanted 6.5 percent of the area but would go as low as 5.9 percent; Mr. Abbas offered 1.9 percent.

In a separate interview, Mr. Abbas confirmed most of Mr. Olmert's account. Both said they hoped at the time that American proposals would settle the differences.

"We need the Americans to bridge the gaps in a fair way," Mr. Abbas said, speaking a week ago in Amman, Jordan.

Israeli elections in early 2009 brought Benjamin Netanyahu in as prime minister, and he has rejected renewing negotiations at the point where they had left off, especially on security.

"What does he mean by security? That Israeli troops should remain in the Jordan Valley and on the heights for 40 years. This is his concept," Mr. Abbas said. "I answered him that the occupation for me is better than your solution."

Mr. Netanyahu also hopes to keep Jerusalem unified under Israeli sovereignty, rejects any absorption of Palestinian refugees and appears to want to hold on to much more territory in the West Bank.

The interviews with Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas were conducted by Bernard Avishai, a writer under contract with The New York Times Magazine, two days before the leaked Palestinian documents were published by Al Jazeera and the British newspaper The Guardian. The documents highlighted Palestinian concessions and put the Palestinian negotiators on the defensive, but gave little sense of what Israel had offered in return.

Mr. Avishai's article is scheduled to be published in The Times Magazine next month.

Mr. Olmert notes in his memoirs that his last meeting with Mr. Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, took place on Sept. 16, 2008, in Mr. Olmert's Jerusalem home. He had presented the Palestinian leader with his map of Palestine minus the 6.5 percent that would stay with Israel. Alongside it was a map of Israel with the equivalent amount of land to be annexed by Palestine.

"Abu Mazen said that he could not decide and that he needed time," Mr. Olmert writes. "I told him that he was making an historic mistake.

" 'Give me the map so that I can consult with my colleagues,' he said to me. 'No,' I replied. 'Take the pen and sign now. You'll never get an offer that is fairer or more just. Don't hesitate. This is hard for me too, but we don't have an option of not resolving this.'

"I saw that he was agonizing. In the end he said to me, 'Give me a few days. I don't know my way around maps. I propose that tomorrow we meet with two map experts, one from your side and one from our side. If they tell me that everything is all right, we can sign.' The next day they called and said that Abu Mazen had forgotten that they needed to be in Amman that day, and they asked to postpone the meeting by a week.

"I haven't met with Abu Mazen since then. The map stayed with me."

By the time of that meeting, Mr. Olmert was mired in corruption investigations. He resigned days later. Elections the following February brought Mr. Netanyahu to power.

Mr. Olmert said he had suggested to Mr. Abbas that Jerusalem's holy basin, meaning the walled Old City and nearby areas, would be held in trust by a consortium of five nations: Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Mr. Abbas said in his interview that while he considered the holy basin to be limited to the Old City, in principle he could agree with the international trust approach.

On security arrangements, where there is great disagreement today, the two sides had largely come to terms two years ago. Mr. Abbas said his state would have no military — “We don't want an air force or tanks or rockets” — and an American-led force would be stationed on its border with Jordan.

Mr. Olmert said he had accepted that the force in question would not include Israelis. Israel, in turn, wanted to stipulate that Palestine could not enter into military treaties with countries that did not have diplomatic relations with Israel, and wanted commercial and military overflight rights over Palestine.

Mr. Abbas said he accepted those requests. “This file was closed,” he said. “We do not claim it was an agreement, but the file was finalized.”

On Palestinian refugees, Mr. Olmert offered to take 1,000 a year for five years into Israel. Mr. Abbas rejected that number as far too low.

Mr. Abbas said the refugees and their descendants, who now number five million, could not all move to Israel because that would, in effect, destroy it. A creative solution was needed, and he believed one could be found.

Two large settlements posed a problem. Mr. Olmert wanted to hold onto Ariel, deep in the West Bank, and Maale Adumim, near Jerusalem. Mr. Abbas said no, but welcomed American bridging proposals.

Mr. Abbas ended his interview saying that President Obama had promised the framework of a Palestinian state by this September, yet negotiations had stopped because of disagreement over settlement building, and he would not stay in his job beyond then without progress.

“I am committed to peace, but not forever,” Mr. Abbas said. “I don't mean I will turn to violence — never. In my life, I will never do it. But I cannot stay in my office forever doing nothing.”

He said Washington needed to play an active role, or “hopes for peace will collapse and the region will be controlled by extremists.”