THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE *for Near East Policy*

OSLO AT 30

Personal Perspectives from Washington Institute Experts

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30 Years Later, the Oslo Vision Can Still Be Revived

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"Oslo" has become a dirty word for its critics.

Things looked very different 30 years ago on Sept. 13, 1993, on the White House lawn. The iconic handshake between historic enemies Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, with President Bill Clinton spreading his arms to draw them together, was an extraordinary moment of hope.

The Declaration of Principles signed that day was the foundation of the Oslo agreements, named after the secret talks conducted in Norway between the Rabin government and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The declaration represented a psychological breakthrough: two national movements competing for the same territory recognized one another after years of denial.

From its outset, Oslo faced determined opponents who sought to subvert it. For the Israeli right, Oslo was dangerous and religiously illegitimate. It meant withdrawing from the heartland of Jewish history, the area of God's patrimony, and necessarily created a mortal threat in Israel's midst. The right drew little distinction between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, seeing both as two sides of the same coin.

For Hamas and secular Palestinian rejectionists, it meant surrendering their land to the Jews. For Hamas, it meant giving up part of the Islamic trust; for the national rejectionists, it meant giving up on the dream of Palestine from the Jordan River to the sea.

What created opportunities for rejectionists on both sides is that those who negotiated Oslo had different expectations, and even definitions, for what was being produced. Arafat viewed Oslo as giving birth to a state-in-waiting that could materialize rapidly, while Rabin saw it as a gradual devolution of Israeli authority to Palestinian rule designed to minimize the security risks involved. Moreover, Israel's concept of peace was reconciliation between societies, but Arafat's behavior over time suggested this was never his objective.

The conceptual hope for Oslo was that moderates on both sides would engage in reciprocal concessions to expand the political space for further accommodations. Sadly, the reverse happened, with achievements too slow in coming and extremist actions undermining the process. Terrorist acts by Hamas proved to Israel's right that Israel was being duped by Palestinian Authority officials supposedly colluding with the militants. For Palestinians, legal and illegal settlement activity highlighted their powerlessness and proof that Israel was not serious about Oslo.

Yet, for all of Oslo's detractors, critics were never able to put forward an alternative approach.

Critics of Oslo in Israel ignore that Palestinians launched the first intifada in the years before the agreement. Do they believe that Palestinians would have simply been quiescent for ensuing decades without a peace process? Moreover, Israel's high-tech-driven prosperity—the World Bank noted that Israel's per-capita gross domestic product in 2021 eclipsed that of Germany—had its origins in Oslo; on the hopes of peace, foreign investment surged and the economy grew significantly at a 7.1 percent clip. And with Israel open to the world, Oslo provided the springboard to mid-1990s diplomatic breakthroughs with Turkey and Jordan, as well as early openings with the Gulf region and North Africa.

Critics on the Palestinian side complain that Oslo left them under occupation. But how were they going to take a Palestinian national movement that focused only on symbols and actually create a proto-government in parts of the West Bank and Gaza?

Yes, Oslo has fallen far short of the hopes invested in it. Still, despite its shortcomings, it is noteworthy that cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has proved durable: the two sides regularly collaborate on security and economic matters. According to the World Bank, Palestinian economic growth and employment levels are higher than they are in Jordan. And Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas has publicly acknowledged security ties with Israel are not a favor to Israelis but are in Palestinians' self-interest. The Palestinian Authority has a degree of control over close to 40 percent of the West Bank (albeit far short of what many had envisioned).

Whatever its shortcomings, Oslo did not create the extremists whose actions discredited the moderates. And ironically, extremists on both sides seek a one-state outcome. Of course, their definitions of what that would entail are vastly different. For Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, Palestinians can either accept Israel's rules—meaning no political rights for them—or they can leave. For Hamas and other rejectionists, the Jews will either disappear or simply surrender their nationalist aspirations. Ahmed Gheim, a member of Fatah, once told us that in a unitary state, either the Israelis would try to impose their will on the Palestinians or the Palestinians would seek to do the same on the Israelis, making a one-state solution a guarantee of perpetual conflict.

So what can be done now? Obviously, the leadership dynamics in both Israeli and Palestinian camps make a breakthrough toward two states impossible. But the Biden administration's pursuit of a Saudi-Israeli accord could present an opportunity to put the conflict on a different trajectory. Because the Saudis want to show they achieved something realistic for the Palestinians, there is an opportunity as part of the breakthrough to improve the day-to-day realities, and also to take steps to preserve the possibility of a two-state solution eventually emerging.

Breakthrough is not a given. It will require reconciling U.S. and Saudi positions. It will require Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to prevail upon rejectionists such as Smotrich who have ruled out any gestures to the Palestinians as part of a Saudi deal. And it will require the Palestinians to not only embrace any agreed upon steps to improve their condition, but also to carry out reforms and act on security issues.

While surely difficult, Biden's efforts are creating momentum to give peace negotiations new life. On the 30th anniversary of Oslo's signing, we must all hope he prevails.

The Palestinian Authority 30 Years After Oslo

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As Palestinians and Israelis mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Oslo Accords, it is worth pausing to examine what remains of the original promise contained in the agreement (hint: something does remain). More than that, it is worth examining whether those remnants can survive the many challenges facing the Palestinian Authority, especially those likely to emerge "the day after" President Mahmoud Abbas exits the stage.

The PA's Struggles

For many years now—particularly the past decade—the PA has been a foundering institution, with Abbas bearing ultimate responsibility for its failure to realize a Palestinian state within the 1967 Arab-Israel ceasefire lines. Abbas has led the PA since 2005 and can take credit for presiding over relative stability in the West Bank and preventing a rise in terrorism after the second intifada. Yet given his advanced age, he may at any moment leave his post without claim to a worthy legacy. Moreover, he has failed to gain consensus for his nonviolent approach, which has drawn persistent challenges from the PA's Gaza-based rival Hamas, long an advocate of armed struggle.

Israel has played its own role in weakening Abbas and the PA, in part by enlisting them as counter-terrorism "subcontractors" (according to the Palestinian public) in portions of the West Bank, thus eroding the PA's legitimacy with local residents. In return, the Palestinian leadership has sought a lasting political arrangement with Israel. Yet the political horizon has dimmed over the past decade, replaced by a series of economic and civil benefits, with Abbas missing key opportunities to make progress on the political front.

More broadly, Israeli strategy since 1993 has entailed a shift from pursuing an arrangement with the PA to taking actions that are inadvertently conducive to its collapse, despite such an outcome not being in Israel's interests. This shift has been especially jarring in light of Israel's concomitant move toward accommodation with Hamas, precipitated by the 2018–19 "Great March of Return" protests along the Gaza-Israel boundary. Israel enacted this change by directing funds to Gaza and substantially easing the blockade surrounding the territory.[1] In effect, Israel's policy in Gaza is designed to buy time until the Palestinian political scene changes, whether through

the PA's reentry to that territory, a popular uprising by Gazans, or even moderation by Hamas. The policy also aims to prevent a humanitarian crisis—a goal it has achieved, but at the expense of strengthening Hamas. In the zero-sum game played by Hamas and Abbas's Fatah alliance, any emboldening of the former reflects a PA failure.

To be sure, the Gaza problem does not lend itself to easy solutions, and the likelihood of Hamas moderating is low, even if the group does show pragmatism from time to time. The associated tactical challenge for Israel is securing the Gaza frontier and preventing Hamas from sending arms to other theaters, especially the West Bank. This will require a strong PA that cooperates with Israel and shares a common attitude regarding Hamas.

60% West Bank residents see the PA as a burden

67% West Bank residents believe an intifada will erupt in 2023

51% West Bank residents believe that neither the PA nor Hamas deserves to represent the Palestinians

Trends in Palestinian Public Opinion

In the West Bank, the PA's weakness derives not only from Israeli obstruction and the absence of a political horizon, but also from manifold internal failures, including political stagnation, flawed governance, widespread corruption, an aversion to self-criticism, inadequate provision of public services, and a narrowing of Abbas's circle of advisors, which has sidelined the best Palestinian political minds. Discontent has thus surged in the Palestinian "street" and within the Fatah movement, which constitutes the PA's backbone.

Surveys conducted in March and July 2023 indicate a significant decline in public support for Abbas and the PA, and a corresponding increase in identification with terrorist attacks and their perpetrators.[2] According to the March poll, 60% of West Bank respondents see the PA as a burden and 49% favor dismantling it, whereas only 27% see it as an achievement. The July poll indicates that 67% of West Bank respondents believe an intifada will erupt in the West Bank by the end of 2023. In addition, only 40% reject a statement suggesting that Palestinians should initiate an intifada and that they regard armed struggle as a top priority. Two decades after the second intifada, the failure of that uprising appears to haunt middle-age Palestinians. However pronounced the public's dissatisfaction may be with Abbas and the PA's performance, it has not resulted in widespread protests or a significant increase in support for Hamas. According to the March poll, 51% of West Bank respondents believe that neither the PA nor Hamas deserves to represent the Palestinians. Moreover, past experience shows that in the West Bank, public identification with the use of violence against Israel does not necessarily translate into actual public mobilization to promote terrorism. This is important given the influence of Palestinian public behavior on security in the West Bank. Across Abbas's two decades in power, the public has generally refrained from actions on the level of an intifada and instead engaged in more limited protests. According to the July survey, 53% of West Bank respondents view the lack of "big street demonstrations" as a positive thing, and 49% disagree with the statement that the PA should stop security coordination with Israel "no matter what."

Such stances have endured despite repeated Israeli military operations in Gaza, political actions that most Palestinians deem objectionable (e.g., moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; signing the Abraham Accords with Arab states), perceived religious offenses in Jerusalem (e.g., a far-right politician ascending the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif; the Israel Defense Forces entering al-Aqsa Mosque), and other challenges. Relative Palestinian toleration of the status quo may reflect a desire to preserve the fabric of daily life and personal security. Even as the above poll results hint at a sense of irresolution regarding the second intifada, the failure of that uprising evidently forged a profound risk-aversion among some portion of Palestinians. No less crucial is their dependence on Israel's economy, with many Palestinians employed across the 1967 lines, others working in Israeli settlements, and still others employed at Israeli manufacturing plants in the West Bank.

Further explaining the West Bank's relatively low enthusiasm for violence is the absence of a viable leadership alternative or system that could realistically replace the current one. Much of the public therefore grudgingly accepts the status quo, granting Abbas and the PA what might be called "negative legitimacy" and the associated room to exercise action and control. But this legitimacy is fragile, as will be discussed below.

Financial and Security Challenges

One cause of the PA's weakness is the pervasive financial stress under which it operates. Thirty years after the Oslo Accords, the PA still depends on Israel's economy and lacks engines of growth, while its debt stands at $3.3 billion. In addition to bank debts, it owes $4.7 billion to various suppliers and $400 million to the Israel Electric Corporation. The latter debt periodically leads to power cuts in the West Bank, harming both the Palestinian economy and citizenry.

The PA has taken dramatic steps to reduce these deficits, but the improvements have come at the short-term cost of compromising its capabilities and the welfare of citizens. Since December 2021, for example, it has been paying reduced salaries (75–80% of normal pay, sometimes with additions) to government employees who earn more than $500 per month, which affects the vast majority of the PA's nearly 150,000 workers. Salary increases have also been frozen for nearly a year.

In addition, the PA has made significant cuts to the budgets of various ministries, diminishing the services they provide to citizens. The West Bank economy has made nominal gains in terms of GDP, unemployment, and foreign trade, but these benefits have not substantially improved daily life for most citizens. Meanwhile, the cost of living jumped by 4.6%, the consumer price index rose by 3.74% in 2022 (the sharpest spike in about a decade, partly reflecting a global rise in inflation but increasing at a much quicker rate than seen elsewhere), and international organizations such as the UN Relief and Works Agency reduced their activity in the West Bank, especially in refugee camps.

Personal security, a primary concern for Palestinians, has likewise come under threat. Israel's intensive counterterrorism activity in the West Bank has resulted in many casualties this year: 181 Palestinians have been killed there as of August 2023, compared with 151 in all of 2022 and 79 in 2021. Further insecurity derives from the growing friction between Palestinians and Jewish settlers in the West Bank, triggered by everything from struggles over grazing rights to a rise in terrorist incidents from both sides, including revenge attacks. Whatever the outcome, no one doubts that certain Israeli political elements back the extremist portion of the Jewish settler community.

The PA's vulnerability is also reflected in the conduct of its security apparatus, its central arm for maintaining governance and stability. PA security forces have always suffered from basic shortcomings such as limited resources, problems

with officer hiring practices, failure to bring cases to resolution after arrests, and a reluctance to deal with rogue elements of the Fatah Tanzim paramilitary forces. True, they have largely fulfilled their official mandate over the years, growing more professional and helping anchor the PA even in preparation for the day after Abbas. Yet the situation has worsened since 2021 due to budgetary stressors and fraying public legitimacy. Overall PA governance and control have lagged as a result, with pockets of anarchy forming in peripheral areas, especially refugee camps in the northern West Bank. Indeed, data shows that since the beginning of 2023, 119 of the 174 significant Palestinian-initiated attacks originating in the West Bank came from the north.

New Palestinian Resistance

A lack of political, social, and economic mobility in the West Bank has prompted relatively small groups of young adults—mostly under twenty-seven years of age, below which Palestinian workers are not permitted to enter Israel—to effectively declare independence from the PA. Operating in areas where the PA is effectively absent, these groups have consolidated their military power under a "No Fatah, No Hamas" banner, with the goal of defending their homeland from Israel. Such elements are challenging the PA's political center along with its agenda and enforcement agencies.

This new generation of Palestinian resisters is more sophisticated than those of the past decade, who were largely limited to "lone wolf" actions (e.g., suicide attacks) and often used simple weapons such as knives. Many of today's young militants have better weapons and are more focused on improving their military capabilities and using social media platforms to expand their influence. To the PA's discredit, some of these individuals are former Fatah or Tanzim members who were once regarded as the movement's flesh and blood.

Added to the mix are Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and similar actors who have long sought to convert the West Bank into a battleground for anti-Israel resistance. Hamas continues to direct its operatives to promote terrorist attacks under the general principle of seeking escalation in the West Bank versus quiet in Gaza. Local actors—especially in the northern West Bank but also in the south—have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate instrumentally with more established organizations and conduct higher-level attacks such as car bombings, rocket strikes, and drone operations. This activity is often backed by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, who have flooded the territory with know-how, weapons, and money. Accordingly, some observers worry about the long-term potential for a so-called "Command Day," when disparate anti-Israel groups would hypothetically join forces and attempt to seize control in all of the territories. Any multifront challenge of this sort could be more difficult for Israel to fend off.

Conclusion

In the three decades since Oslo, a litany of crises has eroded public trust in the very idea of conducting political dialogue in the spirit of those accords, including two Palestinian intifadas, the fallout from Israel's 2005 Gaza disengagement, and even the 2006 Lebanon war. A real window opened during Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's tenure in 2006–08, but it eventually closed as well, whether because of Israeli politics or Abbas's hesitation.

Today, the PA has survived to carry out its work in the civilian, economic, and political spheres. But its inherent weaknesses have grown starker, and the West Bank governance system is eroding both ideologically and functionally as a result of political dormancy, distrust from the Palestinian street, and the crowding of the resistance space. This year has already been the most violent under Abbas's tenure—as noted above, 181 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank since January, while 30 Israelis and foreigners have been

killed by Palestinian attackers from that territory and East Jerusalem. The dysfunction and violence have raised questions about the PA's ability to navigate future crises, including the day after Abbas leaves the scene.

His potential successors are aware of this reality and the need to offer an alternative approach, including the formulation of national goals that help ensure the PA's viability. From Israel's perspective, their current options are not very encouraging. They include pursuing a political alliance with Hamas, returning to a strategy of popular violence and terrorism, and—in the worst case—abandoning the two-state goal in favor of "one state for two peoples." Because Israel prefers to have a single "address" for managing issues in the West Bank, it has long feared a PA collapse and has repeatedly taken actions to keep the institution functioning. These crutches—usually in the form of economic relief—have allowed the PA to hobble from one crisis to the next, without having to address the underlying problems causing ever-widening fractures. Economic initiatives alone are insufficient to empower the PA to create a conceptual framework that rebuilds a sense of national unity or facilitates a post-Abbas succession plan.

While Abbas is still in power, Israel has a vital interest in making a good-faith effort to facilitate the rise of effective and legitimate leadership for the Palestinian public. Such an outcome would benefit both sides; waiting for Abbas's demise will almost certainly be too late. Failure to focus on this pressing need now may produce a far more problematic scenario in the future, forcing Israel to deal with multiple "addresses" of power and authority or perhaps even administer the affairs of the West Bank population itself, with all the political challenges, financial costs, administrative headaches, and international diplomatic opprobrium that scenario would bring.

To help revitalize the PA, Israel can focus on a "state in the making" concept, which would include strengthening a multidimensional leadership responsible for the economy, welfare, health, and security of Palestinians in the West Bank. Rehabilitating the PA's internal legitimacy also requires Israel to avoid further West Bank settlement construction, refrain from additional land confiscation, and forcefully confront terrorism by radical elements within the Jewish settler community.[3] Such moves would necessarily be paired with a firm demand that the PA implement deep structural reforms in its institutions, agencies, and security sector. Successful rehabilitation that prevents PA collapse could give wavering elements of the population reason to distance themselves from violent activism, while also better preparing the PA for future challenges. None of this will be easy—either politically or in terms of implementation—but it is necessary to prevent a total breakdown of security and, potentially, a reversion to the heavy burden of the pre-Oslo era, when Israel bore responsibility for the daily lives of all Palestinians in the West Bank.

These recommendations aside, the unsettling question persists: why, thirty years after Oslo, has the diplomatic track gone so quiet? And why has Abbas, an architect of the Oslo paradigm, failed to establish a Palestinian state in his time? The answer, alas, is complex, relating to the history between the two peoples, interactions between their leaders, and internal developments in each national arena. After successive failures to achieve peace, Abbas may have given up on achieving his vision, settling instead for a (perishable) legacy that boils down to "I did not give up on my principles." Whatever the case, the prerequisites for any revival of diplomatic progress are clear: courageous leadership, public legitimacy for making difficult decisions, and persistent efforts to undermine opposition forces so they cannot stand in its way. ❖

NOTES

1 Government data and other sources indicate the extent to which Israel has facilitated this reopening in recent years. For example, it has issued about 18,500 permits to Gazans seeking work inside Israel, and all of them have been used. Each worker earns a monthly average of $1,800–2,000, totaling around $40 million per month. Moreover, about 74,000 trucks brought goods into Gaza in 2022, an average of more than 6,000 per month. This flow has increased in 2023, with 44,000 trucks entering as of July. Israel also enables Qatar to transfer around $30 million per month to Gaza, including $10 million in aid to needy citizens ($100 per month for about 100,000 families), $10 million for electricity supplies, and $3–7 million for Hamas officials. The latter assistance comes in the form of fuel that Qatar buys in Egypt and sends to Hamas, enabling the group to sell it inside Gaza and thereby pay its officials. In addition, up to $7 million is used for either reconstruction projects (mainly the purchase of equipment and materials) or the frozen G4G gas pipeline project.

2 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, "Public Opinion Poll No (87)," March 8–11, 2023, https://pcpsr.org/en/node/938; Frances McDonough, "Palestinians More Positive on Abraham Accords and Open to Vying Powers Than Arab Neighbors," *Fikra Forum*, August 23, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinians-more-positive-abraham-accords-and-open-vying-powers-arab-neighbors.

3 For maps and in-depth analysis of the West Bank settlement situation, see *Settlements and Solutions: Is It Too Late for Two States?*, an interactive project created by Washington Institute fellow David Makovsky, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/settlements-and-solutions-it-too-late-two-states.

The Palestinian Authority: A Flawed but Necessary Legacy of Oslo

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The Palestinian disenchantment with the Oslo process is understandable. After all, the appeal of the process to the Palestinian public centered on the promise of achieving independence and ending the occupation. Failing to do so, it has instead produced ongoing conflict with Israel and a divided Palestinian polity with two governments whose only commonalities are corruption, poor governance, and authoritarian policies and practices. (The Israelis, for their part, were promised security and acceptance, but feel they have received continued terror and delegitimization instead.) Yet for all of its shortcomings, the Oslo process served and continues to serve key Palestinian interests, and a collapse of its framework could deal a mortal blow to Palestinian national aspirations.

A Way Back to Relevance

As Israeli and Palestinian negotiators initially met near the Norwegian capital in 1993, the Palestinian national movement was at one of its lowest points. In the aftermath of the ill-advised decision of the Palestine Liberation Organization to support Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait, the PLO found itself regionally isolated and bereft of Arab financial and diplomatic support.

This marginalization was on vivid display at the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the ensuing Washington talks. Since assuming the leadership of the PLO in 1969, one of the core principles guiding Chairman Yasser Arafat was the struggle to gain recognition of the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" and to defend it against any perceived signs of Arab encroachment on Palestinian representation.

Yet by late 1991, the PLO was so weak as to accept the representation of Palestinian interests by non-PLO members as part of a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. While the PLO leadership maintained enough sway to instruct Palestinian delegates to these talks to adopt inflexible positions, this obstructionist approach was unsustainable. The Oslo Accords reversed this trend and placed the Palestinian issue back onto regional and global diplomatic center stage.

But Oslo was much more than a mere tactical maneuver to diplomatically rehabilitate the PLO. Palestinian self-determination, while long accepted internationally, had up to that point lacked any means for its realization. The Oslo process created such a pathway. Israeli recognition of the PLO as "the representative of the Palestinian people" created the legal and diplomatic framework for a negotiated settlement, while the creation of the Palestinian Authority established

the physical and institutional foundation for such a resolution. And even though a Palestinian state was not mentioned in the Accords, they nevertheless created a logic that ultimately led to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and U.S. president George W. Bush adopting the two-state solution as formal Israeli and U.S. policy and rendered the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel a matter of international consensus.

A Fleeting Moment with Some Tangible Results

It is a common sentiment to hear that Oslo is dead. And indeed, many of its provisions have become defunct while two of its core pillars, the two-state solution and the PA, are under extreme stress. One would be hard-pressed to find a single world leader today who believes that a two-state solution is at hand and, accordingly, there is no diplomatic appetite to invest in its realization. More worryingly, the Israeli and Palestinian publics are abandoning it, and significant leaders in both societies actively oppose such a vision. On the ground, senior ministers in the current Israel government are pushing policies that challenge the physical viability of a future solution, primarily through the unchecked expansion of settlements deep within the West Bank. Concurrently, terrorism from Palestinian factions and individuals is resurgent, with the PA unable to exert its security control in areas under its authority.

For its part, the Palestinian body politic is going through its own deep crisis of legitimacy. The question of Palestinian representation is being challenged, though from within Palestinian politics in the form of Hamas rather than from external actors this time around. Moreover, the PA is rife with corruption and poor governance—it operates like many neighboring dictatorships to limit the political space and is fiercely resistant to any efforts toward political rejuvenation. As a result, it is drifting gradually but inexorably toward domestic and diplomatic irrelevance. Most Palestinians today see the PA as a liability rather than an asset, while many international and regional actors view it as an unappealing interlocutor.

Yet for all those ailments, the basic structural components of Oslo remain alive. The two-state solution remains a subject of international diplomatic consensus. While this does not currently translate into any diplomatic initiatives, it continues to frame and inform the positions and policies of various international actors. It likewise puts some constraints on proposed policies that would undermine it and would have otherwise gone unchecked.

And for all its shortcomings, the PA continues as a framework for the Palestinians to govern themselves and build the institutional nucleus for any future statehood. While many Palestinians aspire to a cleaner, more efficient, and more responsive government, the PA is not particularly worse than many other regional governments that are unsatisfactory yet sufficient to run a state. Moreover, as the tenure of former PA prime minister Salam Fayyad demonstrated, reforming and upgrading the PA's institutions can be done reasonably quickly when there is the requisite political will. At a diplomatic level, despite the well-founded international complaints, the PA remains an address for international diplomatic engagement (albeit through the useful fiction of the PLO), ensuring a Palestinian presence on the international scene.

The Impact of a Collapse for Palestinians

While these Oslo structures have proven resilient and enduring, the possibility of the collapse of this edifice is becoming increasingly harder to dismiss. Were this to pass, it would be an unmitigated disaster for the prospects of Palestinian self-determination.

Today, the PA is the only remaining relevant Palestinian national political structure. A collapse of the PA would likely usher in the collapse of the Palestinian national movement. Palestinian identity remains strong. Yet absent political institutions, the ability to effectively translate this identity into

political and diplomatic gains will disappear. The former vehicle of the PLO became a diplomatically expedient shell alongside the inevitable diversion of financial, political, and human resources into the establishment and management of the PA. For its part, Fatah—particularly under President Abbas—has come to resemble many similar ruling parties in the region and beyond: too identified with and enmeshed in the PA to survive the latter's collapse.

It may be tempting to think that the whole-cloth collapse of these moribund structures would clear the way for the emergence of something better. Such an assumption, however, runs counter to both Palestinian history and experiences elsewhere. For one thing, there is no guarantee that the Palestinian national movement could reconstitute itself after a collapse. After all, history books are littered with the detritus of failed national movements. And even if something new were to emerge, such a process would take a generation at least, with no assured end result. The one certainty is that such a process would be bloody and disruptive, mainly for the Palestinians themselves.

For its part, Hamas may survive such a collapse—and may even benefit from it—but it has serious deficiencies that severely constrain its ability to develop into an effective and acceptable representative of the Palestinian people. Its ideological nature will always limit its ability to be a big tent, representative organization. Regionally, the Muslim Brotherhood label to which Hamas continues to adhere is not only publicly discredited but also proactively opposed by major Arab governments. And its continued use of terror makes it an international pariah.

Similarly, the collapse of a two-state solution as an end objective will be to the detriment of Palestinians. The two-state solution remains the only possible option for the realization of self-determination of two peoples, Jewish and Palestinian, who deserve this right. Any alternative will inevitably come at the expense of either or both national groups. The continuation of the status quo—which, despite all claims to the contrary, has proven quite sustainable for more than five decades—will mean the continued denial of Palestinian national aspirations. The newly resurrected "one-state solution" presupposes that one of the two nations will subordinate its self-determination to the other, or that both will abandon theirs in favor of a post-nationalist state—a rarity even in less contentious parts of the world. And while political and legal means may improve the rights of Palestinian individuals and communities, the conflict was never about civil and political rights. It was always about national aspirations. Any proposed solution that fails to take account of nationalism is at best ahistorical and at worst disingenuous.

Averting Collapse

Yet for all these arguments, the repeated setbacks of the Oslo process have come with a price in the form of lost credibility among the Palestinian public. To avert further erosion and possible collapse—which would harm Palestinians, Israel, and neighboring states alike—a number of policies need to be adopted.

First and foremost, policies that foreclose the future possibility of a two-state solution must be halted, be they policies that advance settlements in areas deep within the PA that make future separation physically impossible or ones that either purposefully or inadvertently lead to the collapse of the PA—and with it the collapse of a Palestinian address for future settlement.

Beyond avoiding harm, policies need to be put in place to rehabilitate the very idea of cooperation, particularly for younger Palestinians and Israelis. This generation has come of age after 2000 and has not experienced the hope and cooperation of the 1990s, witnessing instead Oslo's subsequent failures. Such a shift cannot be achieved through resumption of negotiations that will inevitably fail given the state of Palestinian and Israeli politics. Rather, it must be accomplished through concrete, politically viable spheres that can visibly demonstrate the feasibility and value of cooperation to both sides. In this regard, future expansion of the Abraham Accords could provide a vehicle for the implementation of such moves.

Finally, no matter how compelling the message is—and, let's be honest, arguing for Oslo is an uphill undertaking—it cannot be favorably received if the messenger is suspect. In this case, the PA as a governing body and Fatah as a political movement are the messengers, and unless they are reformed and rehabilitated, Oslo cannot be rehabilitated in Palestinian eyes. Within this context, the idea of Palestinian elections should be approached with extreme care. In today's environment, the loser in any elections—be it Fatah or Hamas—is highly unlikely to respect the result, and an election that fails to change reality will only deepen dissatisfaction.

For all its unfulfilled promise, and for its many shortcomings readily apparent in hindsight, the Oslo process was a historic breakthrough for the Palestinian quest toward self-determination. It created the first instance of Palestinians governing themselves on their own territory, established a future two-state solution as a subject of international consensus, and created diplomatic and institutional pathways toward its realization.

Today, many of these achievements persist. Yet the failures are also real, and disenchantment with Oslo is the overwhelming sentiment among Palestinians. Understandable as such disenchantment may be, a collapse of the Oslo edifice will come with a hefty price for the Palestinians, not only as individuals but also as a people seeking self-determination. The "burn-it-to-the-ground-and-start-anew" approach may be emotionally satisfying, but a wiser, more responsible course would dictate preserving Oslo's achievements and addressing whatever shortcomings can be addressed in today's environment until a more opportune moment for high diplomacy is reached. ❖

Oslo at 30: A Personal Perspective

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The Oslo Accords were seriously flawed but now must be preserved. Some of the mistakes can probably be fixed over time to make sure the historic agreement does not remain a breakthrough into a dead end, but paves the way toward a stable compromise between Israel and the Palestinians.

The main dilemma faced by Israel in its pursuit of coexistence with the Palestinians was whether to seek a deal with the "resistance"—then the PLO, today Hamas—or to instead reach out to the local population that had grown accustomed to dealing with Israel for the last 56 years. Invariably, all Israeli leaders up to now have refused to bet on the Palestinians living next to us. Honest disclosure: my entire career has been spent in the no-man's-land between Israelis and Palestinians. As a supporter of the two-state vision, I have always felt that the road not taken offered better prospects of success.

As a young junior assistant in the office of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan following the Six Day War, I was a witness to a still unpublicized and short-lived initiative undertaken by a handful of Mossad operatives to explore the prospects of promoting the establishment of a Palestinian state sponsored by Israel. Numerous conversations with local leaders, along with some businessmen and academics in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, yielded an impression that Israel could prudently try to press forward in this direction, even as all the Arab states were bound by the Khartoum Summit's rejection of negotiations for peace. Few Palestinian activists were loudly in favor of this idea pursued by the Mossad, although Yasser Arafat—who sneaked into the West Bank under different pseudonyms—was striving to build a Fatah-led armed underground to wage a "popular liberation war."

Yet by April 1968, Dayan decided to drop the experiment. He did not have confidence in the local leadership's ability to face both the radical Palestinian factions and President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt's opposition. Thus, the first opportunity to strike a partnership deal with our neighbors was not even tested. What followed was an ever-increasing pace of Jewish settlements and waves of terror attacks.

The second window of opportunity opened in the wake of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt (1979). Ministerial delegations of both governments held talks with active U.S. mediation through August 1982 aimed at establishing "self-rule" (often defined as "autonomy") for the Palestinians. Cairo quietly

kept the PLO informed, although Arafat had rejected the Camp David Accords (1978) that had outlined the concept.

After the suspension of these efforts, no attempt was made to fully analyze this process and the protocols with the draft proposals were never published. Even so, I had covered these negotiations closely for my TV network, shuttling between Alexandria and Herzliya, and had a number of off-the-record discussions with Egypt's President Anwar Sadat and his team as well as with the Israeli participants. I was convinced then—and now—that an agreement initially bypassing the PLO could have been within reach, allowing the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to gradually assume the administration of these territories. Yet Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, who had introduced this concept, was not truly interested in implementing this solution and the Egyptians did not exercise real pressure to move forward. Prior to his assassination in October 1981, Sadat told me privately: "Israel has chosen the Palestinians outside over those next to it." Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who would serve as UN secretary-general, likewise said to me: "You are voting for Arafat!" That was the end of the "self-rule" option.

The outbreak of the first intifada in December 1987 offered a different path. Within days after the eruption of a massive uprising that took the PLO completely by surprise, Palestinians had formed a "Unified Command" comprising all political factions to guide the strikes, demonstrations, and "days of rage" via circulating leaflets. Members of the different incarnations of the "Unified Command," who were regularly rounded up by Israeli security, kept some contact with the PLO headquarters in faraway Tunis but ran the operation on their own.

Recognizing that I was a journalist then spending much of my time in the field after writing the first book on Fatah, Prime Minister Rabin used to frequently invite me to review the rapid chain of events unfolding then. My advice to the beloved statesman was always the same: let's talk to the "Unified Command"—both those behind bars and those who are free. Let them handle relations with Arafat and check whether an outline of a new arrangement is possible.

By August 1, 1989, The Washington Institute had published my paper *Toward Israeli-Palestinian Disengagement*, which encapsulated the recommendations I had been suggesting to Rabin. Yet Rabin remained skeptical about the freedom of maneuver of the local leadership. He would not adopt my prescription from that period:

> The initiative would involve Israel's administrative disengagement from the territories following a series of narrow agreements with local Palestinian bodies. Institutional disengagement would end a situation in which the weakened Israeli Civil Administration and the PLO-affiliated Unified Command's shadow administration coexisted in the midst of confrontation. If elections do not take place, this process would bestow control over aspects of autonomy upon those Palestinians who would win elections were they held. Some of the burden of occupation would be removed, Israeli-Palestinian friction would hopefully be reduced and a new channel for negotiations would be opened.

Arafat was, of course, bent on preventing any progress toward this course. After the left-leaning *Haaretz* published a lengthy interview with me about these ideas, he sent messages reprimanding me and instructed his envoys in Cairo to sit with me and deliver his objections. The message was blunt: no deal without the PLO! Those meetings and many later ones with Arafat and his lieutenants were held in secret and never reported, since in those days my TV network forbade any contact with PLO-affiliated officials.

By August 1993, a very reliable source told me that Rabin was going to accept a "Gaza-Jericho deal" with the PLO. I did not believe Rabin would allow Arafat to enter the land. Together with my close friend, the late Ze'ev Schiff, I rushed to see the prime minister, arguing that—as I had just written in the *Jerusalem*

Report—"PLO—Not Now, Not Ever." Rabin neither denied nor confirmed the deal, shifting the conversation to other hot-button issues. The result was that I went, as planned, to Washington DC to cover the next round of Israeli-Palestinian talks ignited by the Madrid Peace Conference. For the first time, Rabin had agreed that Faisal al-Husseini, the most prominent East Jerusalem leader, would be able to join in. I was not aware of the fact, that across the Atlantic, the Oslo deal was about to happen.

Once the news of the agreement broke, few details were released. So—startled as I was—I began calling my PLO contacts in Tunis. Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) told me right away that the seven brigades of Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Army would be deployed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the first phase. In other words, Arafat was invited right from the start to impose full and exclusive control over the local Palestinian population. He was granted the armed forces, generous funding by international donors, and a free ticket to bring with him the PLO's culture of terror campaigns, corruption, and devotion to "liberate Palestine." Old friends from the Palestinian territories were calling me hoping to hear this would not be the case. Yet it was!

Arafat and his entourage were allowed to enter Israel in July 1994. When his convoy arrived from Egypt to the Rafah crossing, the Israelis quickly discovered that he was trying to smuggle in three major terrorists who Rabin had instructed him not to bring until further consultation. In fact, Arafat was sitting on one of them—Jihad Amarin—in the back seat of his black Mercedes. The second fellow was hiding in the trunk and the third in the next car. Arafat claimed it was a "misunderstanding." This moment was the real inauguration of the implementation of Oslo.

On September 13, 1993, before the signing ceremony for the accords at the White House, I had an exclusive live interview with Arafat at his hotel. After years of monitoring him, exposing his true name and biography, he sounded too cautious to celebrate peace, too vague about his vision for me to be confident in his intentions. At that time, I was broadcasting on the only TV channel in Israel, covering the South Lawn signing ceremony and speeches. I was vehemently criticized the next day by Israeli media and by family and friends alike for being "sour" in my coverage. An hour later, after an Oval Office interview, President Clinton asked me why I was so skeptical. My answer was that I had not heard from Arafat what I had heard years before from Sadat: "No more war, no more bloodshed!"

It was clear to me then and remains so: Arafat signed the Oslo Accords to gain a foothold in the land. He had never considered a long-term compromise, giving up the Palestinian "right of return" or separating himself from "armed struggle." For him, it was no more than an armistice for a limited period. By 1995, he had signaled to Hamas—according to its top leaders—that they could resume suicide bombings. He made sure his security agencies did not attempt to crush the terrorist attacks. Instead, they would arrest suspects and quickly release them through a "revolving door" model. The Palestinian National Authority established under the terms of Oslo came to be entirely dominated by the PLO returnees. None of the members of the Unified Command were nominated to a senior position. In fact, almost all of them retired from politics and a significant number left the country to live abroad.

By that summer, Rabin reached the conclusion that Arafat was cheating. He told Dr. Henry Kissinger—as the legendary former secretary of state disclosed to me later in New York—that he intended to opt for a "reassessment" of the Oslo process. Rabin shared his disappointment with a handful of close security advisors, confiding in them that he was going to serve Arafat with a "bend or break" ultimatum: curb the terror attacks or Israel will review its commitment to Oslo. They advised him to wait until after the first Palestinian general elections on January 25, 1996. The meeting between the two leaders was scheduled but did not take place—on November 4, 1995, Rabin was assassinated in Tel Aviv. His successor, Shimon Peres, was keen on maintaining the Oslo process as it was.

Since then, all efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, reduce the volume of violence—which peaked during the Arafat-inspired second intifada—and build the PA into an effective vehicle for diplomatic engagement and economic and social services development have ended in failure. The PA lost Gaza to Hamas in 2006 and is currently losing its control in several parts of the West Bank. It has become extremely unpopular amongst Palestinians and mainly operates as a patronage system to employ an ever-expanding public sector.

By now, the preservation of the PA as a potential partner for peace with Israel in the future requires an ambitious reform, replacing the PLO old guard who still maintain control with true representatives of the local population. The international donor community and the Gulf states, with Israeli support under a different coalition, can exercise influence to bring new figures to leadership positions who can in turn prepare the West Bank for whatever type of statehood with limited sovereignty may hopefully emerge from a potential fresh dialogue with Israel. Of course, such an endeavor will prove pointless as long as far-right-wingers seeking annexation remain an important part of the Israeli government. The Oslo Accords should not be discarded but corrected to serve as the foundation of a reinvigorated political platform. An overhaul of the security organs is imperative, as are investments in infrastructure. The division to zones A, B, and C should be revised and the Paris Protocol on the economic aspects deserves an update.

As Rabin came to realize that the PLO was not the best counterpart, so should we now: the PLO has degenerated since Oslo and lost its strength. There are strong—though mostly silent—forces within Palestinian society who are eager to serve their nation, disenchanted with "armed struggle," and believe in cooperation with Israel as their preferred course. We had better give them a chance and a helping hand. ❖

The Oslo Accords Held Promise; Extremists Derailed Them

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As we look back at the legacy of the accords, it is not the Oslo Accords that failed us, but Israelis and Palestinians who failed Oslo.

The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference brought a glimmer of hope that soon faded away. But that hope was revived in September 1993 when the Declaration of Principles was signed with a handshake between two historic enemies—PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. In 1994, the peacemakers were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of the weight of this moment.

I remember vividly the first time I heard the word Oslo in connection with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I was teaching at the Applied Science University in Amman, Jordan, when the news of the Oslo Agreement became public. Among Palestinians, the news was received with mixed feelings. Though it squashed their dream of liberating Palestine from the river to the sea, it was a dream come true that Palestinians would eventually have a state called Palestine.

The September 1993 Declaration of Principles and the agreements and protocols derived therefrom, namely the Oslo Accords, ushered in a historic peace process that the 1978 Egypt-Israel peace agreement had started. It showed that people, governments, and the international community desired viable peace.

The Oslo Accords accomplished much. They opened the door for diplomacy and dialogue. In her book, *The Vocabulary of Peace* (1995), Shulamith Hareven maintained that the Oslo Accords brought an essential change: "From now on, it is not automatically Jew against Arab and Arab against Jew; it is the Jews and Arabs who support peace, and Jews and Arabs both who oppose it…"

The Oslo Accords brought another essential change: from now on, it was not Palestinians against Israelis, but instead maximalist Palestinians and Israelis who believe in an exclusive state from the river to the sea (on one side) and moderate Israelis and Palestinians who support sharing the land in a two-state solution or confederacy (on the other).

Yet from its early days, the Oslo peace process lurched from one crisis to another, with no light at the end of the tunnel. Thus, life became a mixture of desperation and hope. When waves of violence and terrorism rose, people became distraught with

despair; when they subsided, they became hopeful.

Palestinian extremists immediately began waging war against the Oslo Accords to derail the peace train. The Oslo agreement stipulated to start with Jericho and the Gaza Strip. In response, extremists waged a nasty campaign saying, "Jericho first and last." The momentum of the Oslo peace process managed to overcome the skepticism that developed from this campaign. The return of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat to Gaza and his election in 1996 as PA president strengthened the peace process.

Nevertheless, the momentum of Oslo led only to limited results. In evaluating why this was the case, three components help explain its trajectory: the leaders, the people, and the hidden powers within the system. Israeli and Palestinian leaders, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, both came from a military background, and yet they ignited the Oslo peace process. Regrettably, the assassination of Rabin by a Jewish fanatic in 1995 dealt a serious blow to the Oslo peace process and erased from the political scene a solid pillar of the Oslo Accords and a staunch supporter of peace, leaving the other partner alone to become increasingly divorced from the process.

For his part, Yasser Arafat had adopted an odd Chinese-style military suit for the four decades prior to Oslo. He did not shelve this suit after Oslo, and could not shift, as Nelson Mandela did, from his role as a freedom fighter to that of a suave diplomat.

Under pressure from Palestinian extremists, Arafat came to feel that the Oslo Accords failed to fulfill his political ambitions of being the Saladin of this era. Thus, he shifted back to being a disrupter of peace rather than a peacemaker. In this way, the Oslo Accords lost both of their chief architects, weakening their ability to translate vision into reality.

On the popular level, both the Palestinians and the Israelis were seated in the audience watching the play. Both wanted peace but could not play an active role in achieving it. With the eruption of violence by extremists, fear filled the air and trust was its first victim, paralyzing what could have been a popular movement to realize the goals of the accords. The Hamas suicide bombing campaign against Israeli civilians severely undermined the Israeli peace camp, shifting the moderate Israeli voters to vote for the extremist parties. The right-wing extremist parties took control of the Israeli government and were determined to bring to a halt the Oslo peace process train. On the Palestinian side, the status quo seemed to favor those in power to remain in power, disenfranchising those who sought a brighter future.

There are still signs that the Oslo Accords have left an impact. In August 2020, the Oslo Accords eased the way for the signing of the Abraham Accords, bringing to the peace process five new Arab states in addition to Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority.

And as we look back at the legacy of the accords, it is not the Oslo Accords that failed us, but Israelis and Palestinians who failed Oslo. How can we advance peace when none of the Arab universities has a center for teaching the thought, practice, and study of peace? When most of the publications focus on conflict rather than peace-building? When the educational curriculum teaches hatred, enmity, and death rather than celebrating life, moderation, and reconciliation? When terrorists and extremists are celebrated and peacemakers and moderates are labeled traitors? We need to change our mindset and culture to achieve peace.

The Oslo Accords set the foundations for peace, but it is up to both peoples to achieve it. The way ahead is diplomatic dialogue, normalization, and nonviolence to end the occupation and achieve justice. The Oslo Accords brought a fresh peace initiative full of hope to end the protracted conflict, but unfortunately, extremists derailed the train. Now, it is up to the moderates to get the train back on track. There are the good and bad, peace lovers and warmongers, extremists and moderates on both sides of the wall. When moderates unite, flowers of peace will blossom. ❖

Beyond Oslo: Reflections on Peace, Promise, and Possibility

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As the tumultuous wave of change swept across Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall, hope surged in various corners of the globe. This was the time when I was coming out of secondary school and felt excited about the prospects of democracy and freedom sweeping through post-Communist Eastern Europe and inevitably, or so I thought, across the world. Against this backdrop, we heard the news that Israelis and Palestinians had secretly met in Oslo to end one of the most divisive conflicts of our time. The news and the buzz that accompanied it seemed even further validation of the march of peace sweeping the planet. Little did we know that the rising threat of radicalism and extremism, which would soon hit the Western Balkans, would also mark the years ahead for Europe, the Middle East, and beyond.

To a student of international politics interested in the Middle East, Oslo I and Oslo II were years of elation. I became obsessed with studying conflicts, conflict resolution, and mediation, inspired that through negotiations—not wars—nations and peoples could sort out their differences. What I and many others from the outside failed to grasp was that the realities on the ground left some on both sides deeply disappointed with the Oslo process. As this disappointment spilled over into violence, over 400 Palestinians and 250 Israelis were killed in the five years after the signing of the Oslo Accords.

The assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 was a profound shock to the world, as it laid bare the opposition to peace with Palestinians in vocal segments of Israeli society. It also highlighted the growing strength of national and religious identities and their impact on politics. In hindsight, if national uniqueness and religion were driving the wars across the remnants of former Yugoslavia, why would emotions have been any different elsewhere? Unlike in the Western Balkans, however, where conflicts erupted after decades of a relatively high degree of peace and coexistence under communist oppression, the Oslo process came after many long years of horrendous violence between Israelis and Palestinians that had peaked in the first intifada.

The Oslo Accords' interim nature appeared promising to outsiders like me because it charted a way forward. It allowed both sides the time and breathing space to address the most controversial questions—such as borders, refugees, the status of Jerusalem, and settlements—after trust had been built through a time-limited transition process. But as trust quickly evaporated, and violence and terror surged during the second intifada, the growing divide between Palestinians and Israelis limited the political space for leaders to pursue any form of confidence-building. Slowly, the peace process came to a standstill.

Little did I know then that some eighteen years later, I would find myself thrust in the middle of all this as I took on the job of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East peace process. Nor did I have any inkling that in this role, I would have to state publicly that the Middle East peace process was no more. But as I arrived at Government House in Jerusalem to take up my position in 2014, I quickly came to the realization that despite their public statements of support and commitment toward the peace process, both Israelis and Palestinians preferred to speak to their constituency and friends rather than come back to the negotiating table.

Faced with this challenge, I went back to the basics. I worked to develop relationships with all stakeholders built on trust, even as I warned of the risks on the ground to peace and focused on alleviating the threat of war in Gaza. These priorities reflected how the prospect of Israeli-Palestinian peace had dwindled from the high hopes of the 1990s to conflict management, preventive diplomacy, and the grinding work to avert the constant threat of further escalation and increased violence.

The reasons behind this change are complex and multifaceted—terror and incitement to violence, settlement expansion, and Hamas control of Gaza, to name just a few. More broadly, however, two factors stood out in my mind upon my arrival. On the one side, it was the loss of belief within Israel that peace could be achieved through handing over land—a principle that had been the basis of Israeli policy since the successful peace treaty with Egypt in 1978. In response to violence, that belief was being replaced by the new doctrine that peace could come only through strength. On the other hand, it was the utter disappointment within Palestinian society that the enshrining of its national aspirations for statehood in international law via UN Security Council resolutions and a push for full UN membership had failed to deliver statehood. In response to these frustrations, Israelis and Palestinians had charted political strategies in relation to each other that made the return to meaningful negotiations close to impossible at that point.

During my five years as UN Special Coordinator, I had hardly met an Israeli who did not believe that the peace process only resulted in more violence, rockets, or terror, just as there was hardly a Palestinian who didn't see it as always resulting in the loss of land, more settlements, and checkpoints. Within Israel, the belief in achieving peace through Palestinian statehood had waned, replaced by a narrative emphasizing security. The Palestinian side, meanwhile, was wary of losing more ground, both literally and metaphorically.

And yet in spite of its massive challenges, the 30-year journey post-Oslo era is not without its achievements. The Palestinian National Authority governance structures established in the West Bank are a testament to the accords' legacy. The subsequent reforms to these structures that began with Prime Minister Salam Fayyad strengthened service delivery and introduced reforms that were critical for bolstering the economy. Many of these developments have subsequently been stunted as the Palestinian political process has stagnated, but to say that "Oslo is dead" and call for dismantling established institutions would be both premature and detrimental to the future prospects of peace and stability. The solution isn't in unraveling what has been built during the past three decades but building upon what has been achieved.

As the Middle East peace process survives in the talking points of Foreign Ministries around the world when they visit the region, its basic premise endures—that a two-state solution, achieved through negotiations, is the reasonable way forward. This premise, along with the shifting dynamics of geopolitics in the Middle East, may indicate some potential avenues for reviving or reinventing a peace process that may ultimately engage both peoples in a peaceful resolution to this conflict.

Though noble, the notion of a one-state solution, with a diverse populace coexisting harmoniously, is fraught with complexities. No critic of the two-state solution has come up with a convincing explanation of how a one-state resolution that grants full and

equal rights to Jews and Palestinians would ensure that the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples will be met. Jews are unlikely to agree to live in a state where they are a minority, and neither would Palestinians agree to live in a state where they don't have equal rights. So, a foundational assumption of Oslo—the idea that there needs to be a separation between the two peoples—remains alive.

The second element—the evolving geopolitics of the Middle East and the rising role of middle powers—is being written as we speak. The Abraham Accords signaled the Arab world's evolving stance toward Israel. Outside of the political and economic messaging of the accords, they contained a very subtle message to Jewish Israelis—the acknowledgment that "Arab and Jewish peoples" are not only descendants of a common ancestor but are committed to the spirit of coexistence. This subtle acceptance that the Jewish people are not foreigners to the Middle East, but a historic and ancestral part of its mosaic, was an important recognition that had not been present in other peace treaties.

The history of the Balkans, marred by wars over holy sites, religion, national myths, and historical claims, has taught me to read and understand the importance of such subtle messages in politics. They are key when dealing with competing national narratives, which we in Southeast Europe have more than enough of for generations to come. My part of the world has lived through peaceful and forceful population exchanges, two Balkan and two World Wars, and most recently the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Borders have been drawn, re-drawn, and re-drawn again in the search for ethnic clarity. But we have learned the hard way that peace will never be just about shifting a border; it will always require the involvement of identity, history, faith, and the right to live in dignity.

Drawing from the initial spirit of the Oslo Accords, where Palestinians and Israelis proactively sought a peaceful path forward, there is a desperate need for new leadership today. If bolstered by international support, this leadership can refocus on mutual recognition and mutual respect to the right and aspirations of partners in peace. And part of the process to rebuild trust is for the world to openly recognize that Jews and Palestinians have the historical, religious, and national right to statehood in the Holy Land—the right to statehood of one does not negate the right of the other. Nevertheless, leadership must start at home, within the domestic political landscape of Israel and the Palestinian people.

Israel is a vibrant democracy; its political leaders should be able to develop a compelling narrative that brings the focus back to peace and acceptance rather than on preserving today's dangerous status quo. A whole generation of young people has grown up after the signing of the Oslo Accords; it is time for them to be part of developing a new narrative. They can now travel freely to Dubai, Manama, and Rabat, plan their holidays in Egypt, or visit the sites of Jordan and expect warm welcomes all around. Their country is strong and has firm partners across the region and beyond.

The Palestinian people are as vibrant and resilient as they come. They must be free of occupation and benefit from a fully inclusive domestic political process. They need to be able to elect their leaders freely and debate openly the future of their national project. I have often said that the division between Gaza and the West Bank is like a cancer that eats away at the Palestinian national dream. As long as Hamas controls the lives of two million people in the Strip, as long as there are no elections that unify Gaza and the West Bank under one democratically elected and accountable leadership, the goal of a state will most certainly wither away.

Such efforts will not be easy; just as the wars of the 1990s profoundly reshaped the political landscape of the Western Balkans, the waves of violence between Israelis and Palestinians have reshaped the political landscape of the Middle East. The younger generation of Palestinians—who have grown up in an environment dominated by walls, checkpoints, and the omnipresent Israeli military—harbor anger, resentment, and despair. On the other hand, the

younger generation of Israelis has grown up in a world dominated by rocket attacks, suicide bombings, and a narrative that portrays the Palestinians as the eternal enemy. This generation has not grown up with the ideals of Oslo. All they know is the reality they live in now.

In fact, the very term *peace process* conjures skepticism. There is a palpable fear that attempts at dialogue might exacerbate tensions. Yet the vision of the 1990s, although it might seem distant, serves as a reminder of the possible. In a world where the ground realities shift and national narratives diverge, the legacy of the Oslo Accords must not be forgotten. It is a testament to what visionary leadership and international support can achieve.

The international community has a role to play now as well, but it is not to draw lines on a map or cajole both sides into photo opportunities of conferences that do not breed results. It was not the collective will of the international community that brought Yasser Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin, and Shimon Peres together in Oslo. They did it on their own, away from the cameras and microphones. The international community should instead support Israelis and Palestinians by creating incentives for peace and protecting them from those who will seek to disrupt a negotiated resolution of the conflict. To this end, it is worth considering the partners who have leverage with both sides and can speak truth to power when need be. A new formula needs to be found, one that brings the United States, Europe, and key Arab countries working together for peace. Perhaps new Asian actors can also contribute to the process. The work itself, however, needs to start at home; it cannot be imposed from the outside.

In the end, the Oslo Accords succeeded in forging a path toward mutual recognition. However, the aftermath of the accords emphasized that mutual recognition cannot exist in a vacuum. It must be nurtured and sustained through constant dialogue, understanding, and compromise. A series of missed opportunities, mistakes, and a lack of political will have marked the decades since Oslo. And as we stand at this juncture, it is essential to recall the original spirit of Oslo—one of hope, cooperation, and mutual respect.

I hold fast to a vision where leaders of both sides, driven by a deep conviction and responsibility toward their people, will chart a path toward peace. For peace to be sustainable, it cannot be based on constantly managing tensions but instead must address the fundamental root causes of the conflict. This involves recognizing the deeply held beliefs, the traumas, and the hopes of both peoples and working tirelessly to bridge the gap of mistrust. In this endeavor, international mediators have a pivotal role—not imposing solutions but facilitating dialogues that lead to mutual understanding and respect. It's a monumental task, but history shows that leaders who are genuinely committed to peace can overcome even the most insurmountable challenges. ❖

Implications of the Second Intifada on Israeli Views of Oslo

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On September 28, 2000, just seven years after the signing of the Oslo Accords, the second intifada broke out. Over the course of five years (2000–2005), Israel faced hundreds of terror attacks and attempted attacks, including several dozen suicide bombings in the heart of the cities. As a result, more than 1,200 Israeli citizens lost their lives and thousands more were injured. The attacks triggered Israel's re-entry into Palestinian cities in Area A with the Israel Defense Forces to restore order and reduce the level of terrorism, negating the withdrawal that had been initiated through Oslo. And for Israelis, these years became the main stumbling block to the Oslo process, leaving it stuck in its initial stage years after a peace settlement was supposed to be achieved.

I have served in various roles in the Israeli intelligence and security community, during which I have had dozens of professional and friendly conversations with my American and European counterparts. There was a prevailing trend in these conversations; almost all of them underestimated the impact of the second intifada on Israeli society and the erosion of trust among millions of Israelis in Palestinians—an attitude that could not be corrected quickly and has subsequently impacted all later attempts to negotiate piece.

The impact of this period on Israeli society is pervasive: for Israeli adults, the second intifada is remembered as a period of fear for their children after dropping them off at school, never knowing whether their child's school was the target of a suicide bomber when they heard warnings of attacks through the media.

The sense of helplessness that deepened during the course of the intifada was accompanied by the need to find a source of the blame. In the eyes of the Israeli public, that blame was placed squarely on the Palestinian leadership. According to the Israeli public, the PLO had received international and Israeli recognition through Oslo, but chose to channel their funds and political legitimacy toward bloodshed and terrorism rather than economic development and support for the Palestinian people.

Leading up to the intifada, Israeli extremists' efforts to stop the Oslo process had not been successful. After Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish Israeli terrorist in 1995 to stop the Oslo process, Shimon Peres continued his path and pursued the implementation of the Oslo agreement as de facto prime minister until the elections. When Binyamin Netanyahu was elected in 1996, he also continued Oslo, including by returning the territory of

Hebron to the Palestinians over January 17–19, 1997. Ehud Barak, elected in 1999, likewise met with Arafat under the auspices of President Clinton for the Camp David summit (July 2000), although the efforts failed for a variety of well-documented reasons.

Not least among these, however, was that Yasser Arafat was preparing an alternative strategy—to promote violence in the West Bank in order to put pressure on the Israelis to make additional territorial concessions. A preliminary signal for Israelis of what was to come was the violence that followed the opening of the Western Wall (Hakotel) tunnel in September 1996, when Arafat called on Palestinians to violently oppose the Israeli move during the three days of fighting. The IDF was caught off guard when Palestinians—including the Palestinian police force established through Oslo—opened fire. Seventeen IDF soldiers were killed including a colonel, and at least 59 Palestinians were killed with many more injured. As a result, the IDF reversed its initial accommodating post-Oslo approach to the Palestinians and their security services, now viewing them more as rivals and less as partners.

About four months before the outbreak of the second intifada, on June 1, 2000, I was given responsibility and command of a counterterrorism arena in the military intelligence branch of the IDF (Amman). From this vantage point, I came to see the extent to which violence and terrorism were part of the Palestinian strategy, especially that of then leader Arafat. I realized then that the second intifada is what stopped the Oslo process and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

About a year after the outbreak of the second intifada, the United States was hit by the largest and deadliest act of terrorism ever—September 11, 2001 (a fact unrelated to the Palestinians but that dramatically affected the Oslo process and led to the global war on terror). The United States lost patience with those who support terrorism, including the Palestinian Authority at the time.

Operation Defensive Shield (2002) began on the night when a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in what became known as the "Seder night massacre" at the Park Hotel in Netanya. Thirty Israelis celebrating Passover were killed and dozens more civilians were injured. The IDF received instructions from Prime Minister Sharon and retook control of the Palestinian cities and Area A, which had been transferred to Palestinian control only a few years earlier. Circumstances on the ground in the West Bank have been mostly frozen for the subsequent 20 years.

Sharon, however, did advance his disengagement plan right after the second intifada. Israel decided for the first time since 1967 to close down settlements, and evacuated all settlements and the IDF presence from the Gaza Strip (although this was done unilaterally and not tied to a diplomatic or international process). The fall of the Gaza Strip to Hamas in 2007 only added to the political and practical death of Oslo, as the Palestinian system was divided into two separate Palestinian entities. This process further confirmed for many Israelis that the consequence of giving up territory was more terrorism.

Over the years, Hamas as a terrorist organization has managed to build a huge arsenal in the Gaza Strip, which includes tens of thousands of rockets and missiles capable of reaching Israeli cities and hitting Israeli citizens in their homes. Hamas conducted heavy rounds of armed conflict by launching and shooting and using violence against Israelis with the aim of harming civilians. In response, the IDF has launched several operations to suppress Hamas, including 2008 Cast Lead, 2012 Pillar of Defense, 2014 Protective Edge, 2021 Guardian of the Walls, and others. As far as the Israeli public is concerned, Gaza remains a dangerous vulnerability without any solution.

In the West Bank, the stagnation and corruption of the PA leadership under Mahmoud Abbas has left Israel with limited options for negotiations and Palestinians without a say in their own future. Abbas was elected in 2005 and the 2006 legislative elections were never fully realized after Hamas won

the majority of seats. Consequently, a younger generation has been unable to develop or produce an alternative to the existing leadership. The PA also failed to develop institutions of governance after Abbas forced out former prime minister Salam Fayyad. The economic dependence on Israel and on the financial contributions of the international community has inhibited growth, and the Palestinian public has suffered as a result of the al-Aqsa intifada since it inhibited any of the political or economic reforms envisioned by Oslo.

Oslo laid the initial foundation for a territorial settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, which was carried out fully in Gaza and partly in the West Bank. But it failed to create two entities living side by side in peace, and split the Palestinian entity in two. Beyond the physical dimensions of the conflict, the initial hopes of Oslo followed by the trauma of the intifada ironically had similar psychological effects on both parties. For Israelis, it killed the idea of peace through territorial concessions. For Palestinians, the idea of political gain through violent resistance failed, at least for the time being. The best hope is for Israel to one day reach a decision for a separation of the two peoples with international recognition of the outcome, unlike what occurred with the Gaza disengagement. ❖

New Polling on the Legacy of the Oslo Accords

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When examining the legacy of the Oslo Accords, one clear outcome is the way in which diplomatic breakthroughs—along with their failures—have deeply shaped public attitudes toward the conflict. Thirty years later, fresh polls emphasize the deep erosion of trust and support for the two-state solution in Palestinian (along with Israeli) society, but a lingering hunger for some kind of breakthrough.

In the 1990s, efforts to move forward the peace process via the principles of the Oslo Accords opened up a window of hope in Israeli and Palestinian society, visible in public opinion polling from this time. Polling results from Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki and his team show that support for the "peace camp" rose during the years that the Oslo process appeared to be viable, even as setbacks emerged—reaching a height of 72% support for Oslo II in 1995.

But the legacy of Oslo has since soured; when polled in 2018 by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, the large majority reported that the Oslo Accords were either harmful to Palestinian national interests (47%) or made no difference (34%). And attitudes among both Israeli and Palestinian publics have likewise turned against the foundational assertion of the peace process—a two-state solution.

Over the intervening years, public opinion polling has demonstrated that support for a two-state solution—the principal end point of the peace process—dipped into the minority among both Jewish Israeli and Palestinian publics after 2017 and has shown few signs of recovery. Ironically, trends in Israeli Jewish and Palestinian attitudes on this question from 2016 to 2022 are almost statistically identical. In the latest Palestine/Israel Pulse from Shikaki, conducted in December of last year, just 33% of Palestinians (28% of West Bank and 41% of Gazan Palestinians) and 34% of Israeli Jews expressed support for a two-state solution. Israeli Arabs, at 60% support, stand out as an outlier population.

And when it comes to trust, 88% of West Bank respondents and 81% of Gazans disagree that it is possible to trust Israeli Jews, with 85% of Israeli Jews saying the same about Palestinians. Arab Israelis are again the outlier, with half agreeing that it is possible to do so. This overarching lack of trust is easily visible on both sides in a slew of polling responses about the intentions of the other side or their likelihood to honor any future commitments.

More recent Washington Institute polling of Palestinians conducted in July highlights some of the challenges underscoring this shift in Gaza and the West Bank, and specifically the violence that characterizes the incomplete disengagement from

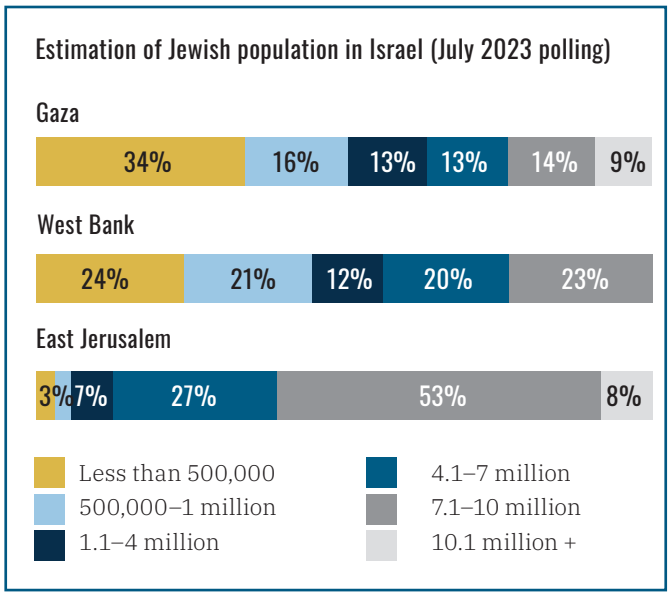
the West Bank and helps shape Palestinian attitudes there. First is the widespread expectation of Israel's imminent military involvement. In Gaza, 65% believe it is at least "fairly likely" that there will be a large military conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza this year. A similar percentage of West Bank Palestinians (61%) say the same about a larger Israeli military operation in the West Bank—a view likely impacted by the Israeli military incursion into Jenin immediately preceding the poll fielding period.

For many West Bank Palestinians, putting a halt to military or security incursions in Area A cities (26%) or settler violence (29%) would be key signals of an Israeli desire for a two-state solution. Support for these two options is significant as compared to the preference for Israel sharing Jerusalem as capital (10%), allowing more freedom of movement (16%), or freeing more Palestinian prisoners (17%).

But support for Palestinian attacks against Israelis is also high—a significant departure from the immediate post-Oslo years. In August–September 1995, Shikaki measured Palestinian support for attacks on Israeli civilian targets at just 15%. In contrast, according to current TWI polling a majority of Gazans and West Bank Palestinians (59% in both locales)—but not East Jerusalemites—say it is good for Palestinians to attack Israelis, with little change in percentages of those who say Palestinian attacks against the IDF, settlers, or "all Israeli Jews" are good. Meanwhile, the percentage of those who reject this view has steadily decreased in the West Bank in particular—with those who say such attacks are "good" increasing by seventeen percentage points since 2019.

The factors driving popular support for armed struggle are many. In the West Bank especially, this disconnect reflects the failures of Oslo to guide the two sides toward an understanding or even basic knowledge of the other. Such attitudes are clearly demonstrated in the leadership of governments theoretically committed to a two-state solution. A small sampling includes recent and earlier comments by Mahmoud Abbas repeating well-worn anti-Semitic tropes denying Jewish connection to the land and the intrinsic anti-Semitism of the Holocaust and comments from Israeli finance minister Bezalel Smotrich labeling Palestinians "an invention" and calling to "wipe out" the West Bank town of Huwara after a terrorist attack. Armed groups such as the Lions' Den are also drawing support.

But another underlying issue that may be contributing to this attitude is a profound lack of information among a significant proportion of Palestinians as to some of the basic realities of neighboring Israel, as demonstrated in Palestinians' responses to questions on population estimates. When asked to give their best estimation of the population size of Israeli Jews, most East Jerusalemites had a sense of the correct number (latest census estimates from 2021 are approximately 7.4 million). In contrast, 45% of West Bank and approximately half of Gazan Palestinians believed that there were fewer than a million Jews in Israel today.



For many West Bank Palestinians—especially those living in the north rather than the relatively connected locales near Jerusalem—their only exposure to Israeli Jews is through settlements and military incursions. The accompanying violence is a pervasive part of West Bank society; 56% of West Bank Palestinians report in PCPSR polling to have personally witnessed a killed or injured Palestinian as the result of an Israeli attack. Lacking basic

knowledge of Israeli society is also correlated with support for attacks on its civilians; in TWI polling conducted in the West Bank, there is a twenty-two percentage point increase in those who say that attacking "all Israeli Jews" is a bad thing among those West Bank residents who have a more realistic perception of Israeli Jewish demographics.

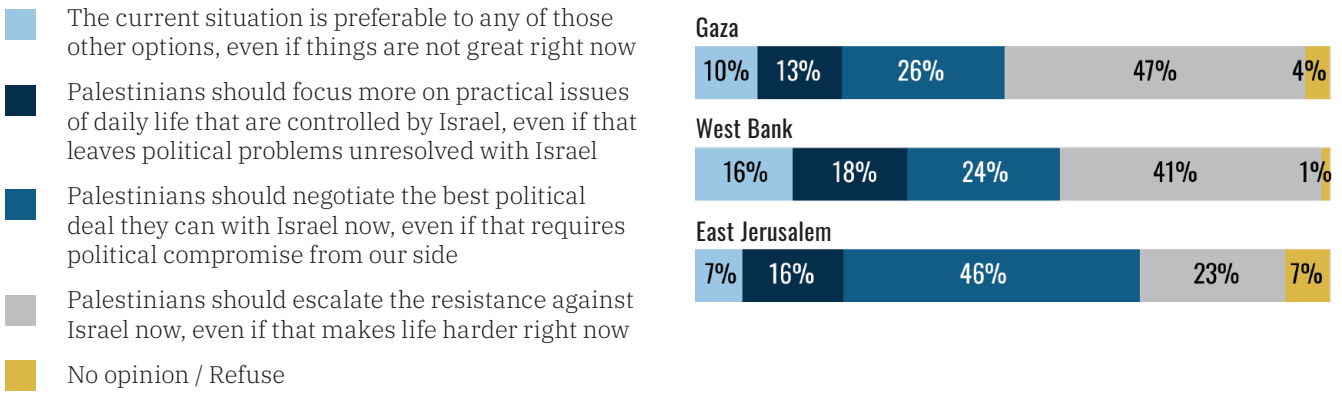
In fact, the sub-sample of East Jerusalem Palestinians in TWI polling provides an instructive window into the difference that actual contact outside of conflict can have on popular opinion. This Palestinian community—living with a much deeper connection to Israeli society while still navigating significant challenges within it—has in many ways a much different approach to the conflict and relations with Israel than those in the West Bank and Gaza.

In contrast to a plurality of other Palestinians who support a Palestinian national priority to "escalate the resistance against Israel, even if that makes life harder right now" (41% in West Bank and 47% in Gaza), the plurality of East Jerusalem Palestinians—46%—believe the focus should instead be on negotiations. And when asked whether they agree that "I hope someday we can be friends with Israelis, since we are all human beings after all," about two thirds of East Jerusalemites (63%) say that they do, as compared to 42% of Gazans and just 29% of the West Bank respondents. When it comes to accepting the core belief underlying a two-state solution—"two states for two peoples"—if it might help end the occupation, a similar 64% of East Jerusalemites would do so.

And there is an openness to increased contact with Israelis among many Palestinians alongside the popular support for armed conflict. When presented with the suggestion that "Palestinians should encourage direct personal contacts and dialogue with Israelis, in order to help the Israeli advocates for peace support a just solution," 55% of West Bank Palestinians, 64% of Gazans, and 74% of East Jerusalem Palestinians agree. And while the majority of Palestinians (and Israelis) may now reject a two-state solution, significant numbers of Palestinians (47% in Gaza and 42% in the West Bank) agree like most East Jerusalemites that Palestinians should "accept the principle of two states—for the Palestinian people and the Jewish people" to help end the occupation.

In public opinion polling, the hope visible in the immediate post-Oslo period is now clustered within Palestinian/Israeli Arab communities living in the context of a broader Israeli society, with few signs of life among either Israeli Jews or other Palestinians. Nor is there the expectation on either side that the kind of political will that led to the Oslo Accords exists at present. Nevertheless, attitudes in East Jerusalem help emphasize that engagement outside of a militarized context does make a difference in support for nonviolence. ❖

July 2023: Now, in the short run, there are different views about the approach Palestinians should take toward Israel these days. Which comes closest to your own view from the following ideas.



Oslo at 30: Looking Back and Ahead

Policy Forum Report

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Despite predictions to the contrary, the PA is still functioning as an authority and address that provides civil services to its people. Yet it is structurally weak, economically unstable, and corrupt. The resultant decrease in the PA's legitimacy has eroded public trust in the very idea of a two-state solution with Israel.

While the political horizon has dimmed, a second chapter of Oslo is still possible. Three critical elements must coalesce to revive the peace process. First, both sides need brave leadership to break through the diplomatic deadlock. Second, both publics must legitimize their political leadership to validate each government's decisionmaking. Lastly, voices that oppose peace must become weaker or irrelevant in the political conversation.

Yet President Mahmoud Abbas has failed to leave a real legacy (i.e., a Palestinian state dedicated to nonviolence), while Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu did his part to advance a "manage the conflict" policy instead of ending the conflict. In this climate, rejectionist voices have gained relevance and radical views now dominate key aspects of decisionmaking. For a peace process to rematerialize, some changes in both leaderships will be necessary.

Resuming political dialogue will also require a smooth leadership transition once Abbas exits the arena. Until then, it is in Israel's strategic interest to strengthen the PA; otherwise, a vacuum could emerge post-Abbas, enabling figures who support violence to take center stage. Rehabilitating the PA will require substantial Israeli and Palestinian steps—not just real reforms, but also measures that preserve the possibility of dialogue and the wider political horizon. Israel will need to halt West Bank settlement expansion and increase security cooperation with the PA in a manner that curbs terrorist

acts by extremists on both sides. Although restoring the PA's legitimacy and effectiveness will not be easy, doing so is essential to the future of the peace process.

Substantial progress in the political arena is unlikely in the near future, but it is incorrect to say that Oslo is irrelevant. The accords created a reality that is impossible to reverse, and all parties should do what they can to sustain the belief that Oslo's next chapter will be written soon.

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Historical reflection on the post-Oslo years can sometimes lead observers to construct an idyllic pre-Oslo past. Yet both parties need to bear in mind the actual status quo when the accords were signed.

In 1993, the Palestinian national movement was at one of its weakest moments, and the Palestine Liberation Organization found itself isolated after siding with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. With no diplomatic or financial resources to draw on, the PLO was deeply constrained, and Oslo essentially saved the Palestinian cause as an organized national movement.

Oslo also laid the foundation for two crucial structures that are still with us today: the PA and the two-state solution. Although the PA is currently mired in internal issues, it has created an address for the movement to exercise its political aspirations and an institutional framework for the realization of a Palestinian state. Moreover, the two-state idea would not exist in the first place if Oslo had not realized the possibility of mutual recognition. Achieving a viable two-state solution is still far away, but the concept of "two states for two peoples" has become a matter of diplomatic consensus and the preferred framework through which the international community approaches the conflict.

Even so, Oslo's foundations are under extreme duress. The PA has yet to meet its initial purpose—to create a Palestinian state—and public confidence in a two-state solution is waning. To move forward, the parties should focus on four core policies:

Do no harm. In Israel's case, this means halting the unchecked settlement expansion that is largely designed to collapse Oslo's two-state paradigm. Rehabilitate the PA, since its collapse would render the two-state solution obsolete. Currently, the PA is the only available Palestinian address for realizing a state, since Hamas is tainted by terrorism and lacks the international legitimacy to further the cause. Leaders on both sides should do more to inspire cooperation among the younger generations, who have been demoralized by decades of dysfunction. Pursue regional integration in a manner that improves the lives of Palestinians and creates the framework for greater Arab-Palestinian engagement. For instance, an Israel-Saudi deal could be a vehicle for revived economic support in the West Bank.

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One critical lesson of the Oslo Accords is that the two sides had very different expectations about what the declaration of principles represented, and this gap contributed to future tensions. Many Palestinians perceived Oslo as giving birth to a state-in-waiting that would end the occupation and facilitate independence. In Israel, Oslo was largely viewed as a gradual devolution of authority to the PA in order to minimize security concerns. Thus, while both leaders showed enormous creativity in overcoming some of their differing expectations during the first two years of talks, the process largely failed to meet either people's hopes. This created an opening for extremists on both sides to subvert the process and discredit moderates.

Prior to Oslo, decades of two peoples mutually rejecting each other and fighting for the same land had rendered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict intractable. Oslo represented an end to the conflict's existential nature by replacing the legacy of mutual rejection with mutual recognition. It also created an address for the Palestinian movement.

Today, however, the PA's eroding credibility is perilous to diplomacy, and violence is beginning to take on a life of its own amid complete paralysis between the two governments. If no change or sense of possibility emerges before Abbas leaves the stage, many Palestinians will remember his preference for nonviolence as a failure and increasingly favor those who claim that violence is necessary and negotiations lead nowhere. Such conditions would only hasten the drift toward a one-state outcome, which is a prescription for enduring conflict.

Although current Israeli-Palestinian leadership dynamics would seem to make any change in the current trajectory impossible, an Israeli-Saudi deal could change that. The Saudis want to achieve something meaningful for the Palestinians—something that changes their lives in practical terms such as their daily movements, economic well-being, and diplomatic horizon. More specifically, this would require Palestinian economic access in Area C of the West Bank, limitations on the territorial expansion of Israeli settlements, and, perhaps, greater territorial responsibility for the PA. Yet without genuine PA reform on governance issues and corruption, foreign donors will not invest in infrastructure, and the Palestinian security services will be unable to substantially improve their performance—a sine qua non for any transfer of "C Areas" to "B areas." Bottom line: while an Israeli-Saudi deal is still only a possibility, it has the potential to preserve the peace process and beneficially transform the geopolitics of the Middle East and beyond.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Ziegler Distinguished Fellow, Director of Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Oslo fundamentally changed the conflict's trajectory. The two parties had not dealt directly with each other prior to Oslo, and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin seized the moment to usher in a new chapter of Israel's history. Newly declassified documents from a 1993 cabinet meeting highlight his strategic thinking on the eve of Oslo and his belief that the process would be a devolution of powers based on proven Palestinian security performance. ❖

(Note: For expanded insights and commentary from Makovsky, see the next section, "An Inside Look at Rabin's Oslo Expectations.")

An Inside Look at Rabin's Oslo Expectations

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Recently, Israel declassified the transcript of the landmark 1993 cabinet meeting at which ministers debated the first Oslo Accord, the product of secret negotiations with its avowed enemy, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Held August 30 of that year, days before the agreement was signed, the meeting lasted five-and-a-half hours and ended with officials approving the proposed terms by a 16–0 vote (with two abstentions). The previously unseen debate adds to the public understanding of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's thinking at this historic juncture and underscores the depth of his subsequent evolution.

How Oslo Fit with Rabin's Strategic Priorities

Rabin saw himself as a strategic thinker, and nothing excited him more than contemplating the direction of the Middle East and its wider implications for Israel. In his view, the end of the Cold War and U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf represented a strategic windfall of historic proportions. He generally saw the Palestinian issue as second-tier in terms of national security, albeit still critical to Israel's future. He was more drawn to a potential peace deal with Syria given its potent armed forces and history of war with Israel. Yet the Syria track did not advance as he hoped.

More broadly, Rabin felt a need to limit Israel's conflicts with its neighbors before Iran went nuclear—an issue he focused on before many others did. As such, he linked Israel's inner circle of potential regional conflict with the outer circle, recognizing that failure to reach understandings with actors in its immediate vicinity could embolden Tehran to make trouble on the periphery.

Regional implications were not the only reason why Rabin eventually prioritized the Palestinian issue, however; he also realized that failure to solve this conflict would endanger Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Moreover, he saw the rise of Hamas in dire terms, regarding the group as fanatical, opposed to any compromise, and poised to gain ground against the main Palestinian national movement (due in part to the latter's support for Saddam Hussein during the 1990-91 Gulf War). As he noted at the 1993 meeting, "The rise of Hamas in particular and radical Islam in general in the Arab world is a problem. I think we are seeing this rise among the Palestinians as well. I believe that, in most of the elections in the territories today, Hamas is rising." (The full Hebrew transcript is available on the Israel State Archives website.)

Rabin was associated with the school of territorial compromise advocated by his mentor and colleague

Yigal Allon after the 1967 war, when the hoped-for interlocutor was Jordan. Yet Amman took itself out of the picture in 1988 because of the ongoing first Palestinian intifada. Rabin then hoped to cut a deal with local Palestinian factions in the West Bank, though he candidly admitted they would not move without the entity that was spearheading the national movement, the PLO. Ultimately, he came to believe that the only way to counter Hamas was by reaching a deal with the PLO.

Rabin Saw Gaza Pullout as Reversible

Another key takeaway from the 1993 transcript is that Rabin—virtually alone among the cabinet—viewed Oslo as reversible at first and repeatedly stated that "Gaza is a test case." In his view, if the Palestinians did not handle the terrorist element, Israel would have to tell them, "Gentlemen, then we are taking care of security." Understanding this point is important because it highlights each leadership's sharply different views on what Oslo's ultimate goal should be: to define a state-in-waiting (as favored by the Palestinians), or to progressively devolve powers based on proven Palestinian security performance (as favored by Israel).

In contrast to Rabin, several cabinet ministers saw Oslo as a vindication of their view that Israel needed to fully extricate itself from the West Bank. Yet the prime minister agreed with them on another crucial point: that the deal would be considered a failure if terrorism continued and Israelis felt unsafe. In that sense, they knew they were betting their government on Oslo's success; as Rabin bluntly put it, this was a "to be or not to be" moment for his administration. They correctly predicted that massive pushback would emerge from right-wing Israeli settlers and their supporters, and they pledged to conduct a massive public relations campaign on behalf of the deal they were about to strike. Yet they also realized these efforts would matter little to their political survival if Israelis felt unsafe.

The Consequences of Keeping the IDF Out

During the 1993 meeting, Rabin told the participants—who included Ehud Barak, the Israel Defense Forces chief of staff at the time—that he had kept the IDF leadership out of the Oslo backchannel talks because he believed it was wrong in principle to involve the military in a political decision. Had he involved them, his right-wing opponents would presumably have seized upon it as evidence he was politicizing the army. He may also have feared that expanding the circle of officials with knowledge of the talks would risk leaks that could torpedo the process. Moreover, Rabin was known to have great confidence in his analytical judgments and may have believed he did not need the IDF.

Whatever the case, Rabin paid a price for excluding the security establishment. The August 30 cabinet deliberations spent strikingly little time on internal Palestinian politics, perhaps because Israel's intelligence agencies were not involved in the Oslo process until the implementation stage. This contributed to a crucial misjudgment: although many in the cabinet correctly identified the importance of addressing how the PLO would deal with Hamas, they tended to view this as a question of capacity alone, largely ignoring calculation and political will. Ministers seemed to assume that militarily overpowering Hamas was clearly in the PLO's interest, and that PLO leaders would therefore prioritize that mission once they were given the necessary resources.

Yet what if PLO officials made a different calculation: namely, to manipulate security cooperation with Israel and increase their leverage in negotiations while simultaneously avoiding deep confrontation with Hamas? No real Israeli conversation materialized about this possibility or related questions of Palestinian political will, so no plans were made for changing the PLO's cost-benefit calculations on Hamas if necessary. Perhaps Oslo was so much of a seismic paradigm shift that the ministers were unable to see all of the complex permutations waiting just around the corner.

Having seen the agreement for the first time shortly before the meeting, Barak did raise questions about the security arrangements on Gaza and West Bank roads, delineating the myriad challenges of ensuring settler freedom of travel once a new Palestinian entity was given authority over large swaths of territory. Rabin acknowledged these difficulties but argued, "Today you have total control, [but if the Palestinians are granted] autonomy, you have a partnership, and the test is about the partnership. I don't suggest blurring this."

The prime minister also noted that he wanted IDF officials involved in future deliberations so that they could provide "professional" assessments of the security implications stemming from Oslo-related political decisions. Indeed, he gave deputy IDF chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, his close confidant, a key role in subsequent implementation talks.

Mincing No Words on Final Status

The meeting left no doubt as to Rabin's views on several other sensitive peace questions. When one minister suggested that Israel might negotiate immediately on the disposition of the territories, Rabin responded that "final status" was impossible at the moment given the parties' wide differences over Jerusalem, and that forcing negotiations on this issue at the start could lead to an "atomic explosion" politically speaking.

He also understood the political benefits of citing the 1978 Camp David agreement with Egypt as precedent for an interim agreement with the Palestinians, particularly since a right-wing government led by Menachem Begin had negotiated that deal. At the same time, however, Rabin knew that Camp David was at best a limited model for Oslo because there had been no Palestinian representation in those negotiations. Going forward, he understood that direct talks with the PLO would force him to go well beyond the Egypt agreement's useful but vague formulations.

Rabin was similarly dubious that the Palestinians would hold elections. He told the cabinet that the probability of this happening was "small."

Rabin's Subsequent Evolution

By 1995, shortly before his assassination, Rabin no longer spoke of Oslo as reversible. In fact, he warned that if the process failed, the PA and Hamas would join together to fight Israel rather than each other. In an interview with *Haaretz* that April, he stated, "The alternative to the peace process is its suspension. If that happens, all the Palestinian forces will unite for an enormous effort at terrorist attacks." He also seemed more concerned about the shortcomings of an interim agreement, telling the interviewer he would prefer separating the populations under a final-status deal: "The reality of mixed populations in which Palestinians from the territories come to Israel and Israelis live in the territories over a wide-spread area…provides thousands of Israeli targets for terror acts daily."

Although Rabin's thinking evolved in some ways, one of his central assessments persisted: that Oslo was the best way to prevent Hamas from dominating West Bank politics and eliminating any peaceful outcome. He concluded, "[If you] leave the situation intact, in which the extremist Islamic elements would increase their power and seize control over the Palestinians in the territories, [it] would leave us without any chance for a political solution." ❖

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