

# The Future of the Oslo Accords: A Palestinian Assessment

Dec 2, 1994



## Brief Analysis

On November 23, 1994, Faisal Husseini, member of the Palestinian Authority and head of the Palestinian delegation to the bilateral peace talks, addressed The Washington Institute's policy forum on the implementation of the Oslo Accords. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his off-the-record remarks.

### Islamic Fundamentalism and the Oslo Accords

Before the Oslo Accords, fundamentalists in the West Bank and Gaza had already gained strength. Israel did not object to the increasing mobilization of fundamentalist opposition because they thought groups such as Hamas would create new obstacles for the PLO. One of Israel's many mistakes was the deportation of more than 400 Islamic leaders to southern Lebanon at the end of 1992. By sequestering the Islamic leaders together, Israel created a golden opportunity for them to gain popular support and further strengthen their position.

But, when people live under the shadow of fundamentalism they are eager for change. Even Hamas was willing to give the Oslo Agreement a chance when it first began and there were no violent demonstrations against the Accords. However, as Israel consistently takes steps that undermine the Accords, the opposition of Hamas and other fundamentalists grow stronger and more apparent.

### Pressuring the Oslo Process

The cause of the current crises in Gaza is largely due to Israeli policy. Israel has adopted a set of policies that erode the ability of the Palestinian Authority to exert control and to reap the political dividends of the Oslo Accords. These include the following:

- maintaining settlements in Gaza and soldiers to guard them;
- isolating Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank;
- closing the territories and limiting the transit of Palestinian workers to Israel;
- continuing expansion of settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem;
- delaying negotiations for elections and further military redeployment in the West Bank;
- intensifying Palestinian internal politics, such as making it difficult for qualified Palestinians outside of Gaza-Jericho to join the new Palestinian administration;
- and attempting to "implement [security] operations" inside Gaza.

The internal unrest that results from Israel's violations of the agreement increases pressure on the Palestinian Authority and gives legitimacy to those who oppose the peace process. In practice, Gaza is not under Palestinian control. Israel controls at least 30 percent of Gaza and Jericho. For example, Israel can block the roads at any time and this ends up dividing Gaza into several pieces. In turn, the Palestinian Authority is not allowed to investigate Israeli actions.

Elections are the only way to give legitimacy to the Palestinian leadership, but Israel persists in delaying their implementation. Rabin refuses to discuss re-deployment of Israeli troops and Palestinian elections, and has delayed early empowerment. He asked the Palestinian Authority for proof of financial resources to fund elections, but without the authority to collect money, the Palestinians cannot obtain the required finances.

A vicious cycle ensues in Gaza; uncertainty leads to instability, instability means no security, and no security means chaos -- precisely the environment in which fundamentalists make headway.

#### Palestinian Politics

Israel errs when it seals Gaza after terrorist attacks on Israelis. The Israeli objective of weakening fundamentalists through isolation actually backfires because these areas are economically dependent on Israel and closure only intensifies opposition to the peace process.

Also, Israel should avoid telling the Palestinians how to control opposition forces. The Palestinian Authority reached a tacit understanding with Hamas and the Islamic Jihad not to violate the Oslo Accords. In return for their cooperation, the Palestinian Authority offered them protection from the Israelis. But now Israel has forced the Palestinian Authority to take steps against Hamas, potentially unleashing a civil war that is bad for all partners committed to the peace process.

Israel reacts to terrorist attacks along two lines. In one sense, it seeks dialogue with the political arm of Hamas. Yet, it also tries to deter Hamas violence by mounting revenge attacks, which only succeed in provoking a violent reaction. Instead of causing more instability, Israel should rely on inter-Palestinian cooperation.

The Palestinian Authority attempted to restrict the activities of the opposition on Friday and violent clashes resulted. Hamas used the rally to demonstrate their popular support in Gaza and prove that they are not an isolated movement. Hamas attacks against restaurants and cinemas reveal their social as well as political agenda. Currently, there is strong support in favor of the Palestinian Authority but it is uncertain how long it will last.

#### Final status of Jerusalem

One success of the peace talks is the recognition of the significance of Jerusalem. Due to the gravity of the issue, talks on Jerusalem are scheduled for the second phase of negotiations, the "final status" talks. One condition for delaying Jerusalem until "final status" talks is agreement that no party can make any changes that will affect the status of the city. However, Israel continues to build in Jerusalem, isolate the eastern half of the city, and weaken the Palestinian institutional and economic infrastructure in Jerusalem.

On a positive note, talks on Jerusalem could open the door for the entire Arab world to reach a full peace with Israel. On the negative side, unsuccessful talks on Jerusalem could create a "black hole" that will swallow everything, including the hopes of reaching comprehensive peace in the Middle East. If the Palestinians are not included as equal partners in the peace process negotiations, the fundamentalists will prevail and cause disastrous consequences for all parties.

This special policy forum reported was prepared by Shira Vickar. ❖

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