

Building Peace:

The Israel-PLO Breakthrough (Part II)

Oct 15, 1993



In-Depth Reports

The change that took place in Oslo is of historic dimensions. This process is irreversible; the Middle East will never be the same.

The spirit of the accord was summarized in its preamble. In that preamble, the two parties agree that it is time to put an end to decades of confrontation and conflict, recognize their mutual legitimate and political rights; “mutual” is the key term here.

In 1974, the PLO adopted a political program which accepted the two-state solution. In 1979, the Palestine National Council endorsed the two-state solution; and, in 1988, the Palestine National Council adopted a political program on the basis of a two-state solution.

Our position was partly ideological and partly a response to the ideological positions that were inherent in the positions of the Israeli governments at that time. We were very glad to see the new Labor government elected in Israel and we expressed our interest in working with this government from its inception.

We knew when the Madrid peace conference started that it would be extremely difficult to reach an agreement under the Madrid formula. Policymakers in the United States and around the world knew that a delegation from the West Bank and Gaza, excluding Jerusalem and the leadership of the Palestinian people, would be hamstrung and would not have the legitimacy to sign an agreement on behalf of the Palestinian people.

The Significance of Mutual Recognition

Mutual recognition is the most important part of this accord. This is the first time that Israel recognizes a national leadership of the Palestinian people, a leadership that can deliver, that can sign an accord on behalf of the Palestinian people.

It was Israel’s recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, and its willingness to sign an accord with the PLO in its capacity as the representative of the Palestinian people that made the Oslo accord possible. The PLO was never merely a political organization for the Palestinian people, and not just a military organization. The PLO is the embodiment of the national aspiration of the Palestinian people—whether they agree with Yasser Arafat or disagree with him. In fact, many people do disagree with him, some dislike him, and some disapprove of the leadership of the PLO and their policies.

But that is not the issue. The issue, rather, is that my generation of Palestinians, who grew in the aftermath of 1948, knew that we were Palestinians, but could not live as Palestinians. We lived either as Jordanians or Syrians or Lebanese, and could not identify ourselves as Palestinians. The PLO, during this transition, provided us with the framework to live as Palestinians and exercise our Palestinianism.

If this accord is perceived by the Palestinians as limited to autonomy without moving toward a national identity—and specifically toward an entity that provides the Palestinians with a national identity, it is going to have a hard time in

the future.

We are committed to every comma in this accord and will not spare any effort in implementing it. But this accord, by its own terms, requires going beyond the text, especially when we come to the final negotiations—to determine status.

Regarding the thorny issues of the Palestinian refugees, borders, settlements, and Jerusalem, we ask our partners in peace, the Israeli government, to be understanding and to be generous in its interpretation of this accord.

Mutual Security

The need for security is mutual. We recognize that the growth of the Palestinian national entity should be consistent with Israeli security needs and with Palestinian security needs. These two sets of needs should not be mutually exclusive; in fact, they can even be harmonious. But it is very important that we should not abort the possibility of the growth of this nascent Palestinian entity.

It is also important for the success of this effort that the Palestinians who are not in the West Bank and Gaza feel that they are not disenfranchised by this accord, that they belong to this emerging Palestinian entity, because this feeling of fellowship within the Palestinian community will provide strength to our effort to achieve peace.

This accord should not be seen by our Arab brothers as an alliance of the PLO and Israel, or as a block against any other party in the region. This should be viewed as a partnership signed by the Palestinians and the Israelis for peace which endeavors to incorporate other parties in the region in this partnership. It is extremely important that there be no misunderstanding on this issue by any of our Arab brothers. They must feel that this is an open invitation and that we will endeavor—the Israelis and the Palestinians—to incorporate the other Arab parties in this peace, so that peace will come regionally rather than bilaterally and move beyond an Israeli-Palestinian relationship as such.

We have to think in terms of new economic and political relationships in our region as a whole. It may begin with just three parties—Israel, the Jordanians, and the Palestinians—but it has to be open for other parties to join in.

Nurturing the Accord

This latter point is extremely important because this accord is fragile. It needs a great deal of nurturing before it can stand on its own. We face problems and we will have to be prepared to deal with them with vision and with persistence. The PLO has committed itself to this accord. It was not an easy step to take, especially because the PLO, unlike Israel, is not a government.

The PLO acquires its legitimacy from the support of a Palestinian community that is scattered inside the occupied territories and outside the occupied territories. What power does Yasser Arafat have over a Palestinian in Lebanon or in Syria or in Egypt or in Kuwait, except that this person knows that Yasser Arafat represents his interests?

This is not the case for Israel. It has a government with territory, an army, police, agencies and a parliament. In our case, it is different and we need our partners in this peace process, the Israelis, to realize this.

Many of the issues that can be harmful to the process can be easily resolved. With steady attention, persistence and vision, we can achieve our goals.

A terribly important issue is economic development in the occupied territories. This peace accord may be understood by those who drafted it, those who study it, those who analyze it. But the average Palestinian—in Ramallah, in Nablus, in Khan Yunis—needs to see the fruits of this accord. He needs to see that his children can go to school in the morning, that their universities are open, that he can participate in the election of his own representatives. In other words, the Palestinians need a total change in their actual lives at this time. They need to see that there is a real change in their situation, in their realities. This can be achieved only when the international

community makes good on its commitments.

Finally, inasmuch as Israel is required to assure our people of the fulfillment of their national aspirations, we also need to reach out to the Israeli public to build the kind of trust that is needed to make this accord succeed. We want to make them feel secure. We would like to assure them that we are not engaged in tactics and that peace is a strategy for us.

We also need to build a modern, pluralistic, democratic government for the Palestinian people which will become an example in our region. This is our responsibility. The Israeli government must help facilitate this in order for us to conduct our business in the way we want as we establish this kind of entity, this kind of structure. But it is also our responsibility to involve all the available capabilities within the Palestinian community in order to build a modern, pluralistic, democratic political system for our people.

I believe that this is possible, it is doable, it is achievable. And, with the help and the commitment of all of us who are capable and willing to work together, we can achieve it.

Uri Savir addressed the conference on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=219\)](#) ❖

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