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Yitzhak Rabin Was Always a Realist. How Would He Have Handled the 2020 Mideast?

by [Dennis Ross](#), [David Makovsky](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[David Makovsky](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



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For starters, he would have used the new ties with Gulf states as a bridge to the Palestinians, not a bypass road.

It is hard to believe that it is the 25th anniversary of the loss of Yitzhak Rabin. He was the embodiment of modern Israel. He was the first Israeli leader who was native-born. He fought its wars and built the Israeli military from the time he was a young commander in the Palmach, defending Jerusalem in 1948, to being chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces in the 1967 war. But Rabin led his country not just in war, but also in peace-making.

The sad anniversaries of his assassination have been an occasion to salute his leadership and his political courage. Whether in the pursuit of peace or war, it is important to recall that his actions came from the same place: his assessment of reality. He saw the world as it was, even as he sought to change it. Rabin was highly analytical and his analysis was informed not only by developments, but also by Israel's ethos of self-reliance—and his actions were always guided by what he believed Israel's national interest required.

That, not the needs of his political base, determined his decisions. No political leader, including Rabin, likes to make

decisions that will trigger fierce opposition. But if the reality required him to act, he did so, believing that to do otherwise was simply irresponsible. And he never shied away from taking responsibility: whether it was readying a resignation letter in case the Entebbe rescue mission failed; or actually resigning as PM in 1977 over the minor scandal of his wife's bank account; or taking the blame in 1994 for the military's failed raid, which resulted in the death of Nachshon Wachsman, a young Israeli corporal who had been kidnapped by terrorists.

The decision to pursue the Oslo process and recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization—an organization whose leader, Yasser Arafat, was responsible for the deaths of many Israelis—marked Rabin's effort to end the conflict with the Palestinians. The First Intifada, or uprising, in the late 1980s told Rabin, then the defense minister, that there was no military solution to the conflict with the Palestinians.

As he put it at the time, Israel could not put its head in the sand and pretend that it did not have to deal with the PLO. No one else could represent the Palestinians. He knew the risks and had his doubts. He told one of us in February 1995 that he did not know if it was possible to reach an agreement with Arafat to end the conflict, but that he would build a separation fence in order to partition the land if a peace agreement proved impossible to achieve. He knew the risks of trying, and also the risks of doing nothing.

He was not naive. If agreement was not possible, he would act unilaterally, but in a way that preserved both Israel's security and its character and identity.

Rabin would not let Israel slide into a binational reality—one state for two peoples, the antithesis of a Jewish and democratic homeland. These were the twin engines of Zionism that he fought to safeguard. Only partitioning the land, which later became known as the two-state solution, would do this.

Rabin believed that nobody would help Israel if Israel did not help itself. Israel had no cushion. It had to be proactive, even if the steps would not be popular at home.

Unfortunately for the Palestinian national movement, its leaders have relied on others to produce for them. They have preferred symbols to facts. They have never acknowledged their mistakes or taken responsibility for their errors. And now they risk being left behind, as the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan make peace, as Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan exposes their failure to take advantage of historic opportunities, and as the Arab League rebuffs their effort to condemn those Arab states who are normalizing relations with Israel.

There are those in Israel today who see the Palestinians being left behind as a reason for Israel to ignore them. They see the Palestinians losing and Israel winning, and believe that Israel need only keep building its ties with the Arabs and others will follow the UAE example.

In a world where the US seems less likely to stay in the Middle East, COVID-19 wreaks economic and health damage, and drought produces acute water and food security problems, Israel looks more and more attractive as a partner, and Arab states are signaling that their interests come first. So the trend is clear and should require the Palestinians to look in the mirror and adjust their behavior.

But Rabin, the realist, were he here, would understand that the Palestinians losing did not mean Israel was winning. Rabin the Zionist would not allow Israel to be held hostage to the irresponsibility of the other side. He would recognize that the Palestinians are not going anywhere. That Israel will still have a Palestinian problem. He would act on the basis of Israel's interests. He would recognize that Arab states could be a bridge for the Palestinians and not a bypass road. He would have pursued ties with the Gulf states, while also relying on the US to broker understandings in which, as Arab states move toward normalization, Israel could take steps toward the Palestinians to help restore a sense of possibility and break the stalemate.

Ultimately, if the Palestinians remained unwilling to respond, Rabin would have found a way to separate from them.

His north-star was the Zionist ethic of Jewish democracy, and he would have acted to preserve it.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. David Makovsky is the Institute's Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and creator of the podcast [Decision Points](#). Together, they coauthored the 2019 book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny](#). This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website](#). ❖

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