30 Years Later, the Oslo Vision Can Still Be Revived

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Leadership dynamics make a two-state breakthrough impossible at the moment, but an Israeli-Saudi accord could help—so long as everyone honestly acknowledges what the situation would be like without Oslo.

"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 hightech-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 protogovernment 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.

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