HBO's 'The Oslo Diaries'

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Brief Analysis

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Oslo Accords, a panel of Americans, Palestinians, and Israelis offered an inside look at what went right and wrong with the negotiations depicted in a new film.

On September 12, The Washington Institute hosted a pre-release screening and discussion of the HBO documentary The Oslo Diaries*, a dramatic behind-the-scenes account of the historic negotiations from 1992 to 1995. The forum included two Oslo participants—Dennis Ross on the American side and Joel Singer with the Israeli delegation—along with Ghaith al-Omari and David Makovsky, who have advised Palestinian and U.S. negotiators at various stages. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

DENNIS ROSS

The film tells the story of Oslo based on the diaries of top negotiators and subsequent interviews with them and other participants. Although it takes some dramatic license with the timing and impetus of certain events, it is a generally accurate portrayal. It is also a poignant one, imbued with a dual sense of possibility and lost opportunities.

Yet the film presents a distorted picture of who was responsible for that failure and loss of hope. Not everything can be blamed on Israeli right-wingers; Yasser Arafat's blatant failure to fulfill Palestinian security obligations certainly played a role as well.

Looking back, those of us on the U.S. negotiating team made two key mistakes of our own. We should have insisted that Yitzhak Rabin enforce clear limits on settlements, since Israeli settlement activity made the Palestinians feel powerless. That feeling drove some of them to seek other ways of proving they were not powerless. It also became part of their rationalization for not acting on security issues.

That leads to the second big U.S. mistake: we should have pressed the Palestinians far harder on their security responsibilities. Arafat should have been warned that we would bring the process to a full stop and put the focus on him internationally until he acted on that front. Yet he never had to face the consequences when he failed to take these commitments seriously.

Today, there is little hope of progress on the peace front, and both parties are unwilling to budge. Yet doing nothing and waiting for a "one-state solution" to materialize will not work, since those Israelis and Palestinians who hope for that outcome tend to define the "one state" differently. In the end, such a result would lead to perpetual conflict—two national identities cannot be reconciled in one state. To make progress, each side will need to make some tough decisions. Their level of readiness for that difficult process should shape how ambitious U.S. objectives should be.

JOEL SINGER

The film accurately captured the negotiations, but it excluded the story of mutual recognition and committed a larger distortion by blaming Oslo's collapse entirely on Israel. The film told the truth, but not the whole truth. Both sides were equally responsible for the dissolution of the peace process.

Yossi Beilin, a key Israeli figure in the talks, took the distinct approach of trying to reach an agreement that addressed all of the core issues at once. That is not the preferred process, however; a phased approach is the best way to achieve peace. Given the gap between the two parties, one must delay the most difficult, fundamental issues to the end instead of presenting them up front. Trying to force a comprehensive deal before its time would be disastrous because neither side would implement it.

Security proved to be a major issue as well. As Rabin said, if everything succeeds but security fails, then the agreement will fail; if everything else fails but security succeeds, then the agreement will succeed. Israel's desire to maintain significant control over security was not a ploy to preserve control over the Palestinians; on the contrary, Rabin really wanted to give them more control. In the end, though, what was too much for the Palestinians was too little for the Israelis.

What is needed today is incremental, reciprocal action, with both sides offering each other more and more at each phase rather than continuing to spiral downward with tit-for-tat reprisals. That means starting with the easier issues. For instance, Israel could freeze settlements and begin removing isolated ones sooner rather than later, in the same way Ariel Sharon decided to withdraw from Gaza and small parts of the West Bank. Yet any such removals should be done by giving settlers incentives to leave, not by force. As for the Palestinians, they must develop a police force and take more responsibility in preparing for the day when they will fully govern themselves.

GHAITH AL-OMARI

This film provoked a personal and emotional reaction in me, as the Oslo Accords were truly a moment of hope for those invested in peace. What had been unthinkable a month earlier—even a week or a day earlier—suddenly became possible. Such is the hope that fuels people to work toward peace, then and now.

At the time, a permanent-status solution could not have been reached for political and substantive reasons. Politically, each leader struggled to sell even the most basic, necessary move of recognizing the other. The film captures Israel's internal struggle with this decision especially well, though it fails to show the Palestinians' equally contentious dynamics on recognition. Each side would go on to describe Oslo in terms suitable to their populace. For the Israelis, it was important to show that the accords were just a step, and that they might or might not lead to a Palestinian state. For Arafat to sell the agreement to his people, however, he had to show that it was an assured road to creating a state.

On the substantive front, views regarding the core issues did not really mature until the George W. Bush era, and even then both sides were still testing new ideas. Coupled with the political dynamics and the short timespan available for negotiations, this need for maturation ensured that the Oslo Accords were about as far as the two sides were prepared to go at the time.

Security was another potential deal-breaker for Arafat—if the Palestinians had not been given some security control and responsibility, no deal would have been reached. The Palestinian Authority would not have survived without controlling at least some territory via security forces on the ground. When Salam Fayyad became prime minister in later years, he quickly reconstituted the security forces with American and Jordanian support. These forces remain effective today, capable of holding territory.

Critics such as Hanan Ashrawi have argued that the accords perpetuated the occupation, but such claims ignore the fact that Oslo was the best available option for Palestinians at the time. Despite their obvious imperfections, the accords were a moment of optimism amid a distinct downward trajectory. In previous years, the Palestine Liberation Organization had supported Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and been forced to relocate to Tunisia, among other setbacks. Meanwhile, PLO authorities were beginning to lose their grip on the ground: the first intifada came as a surprise to them, not just to Israel.

Going forward, a permanent peace deal is seemingly impossible anytime soon. Yet Oslo showed that under the right conditions, Israelis and Palestinians can quickly partner up to achieve important results in security, economics, and other sectors that affect people's lives substantially.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Despite problems with its portrayal of certain events, the film makes excellent use of original speeches and interviews with negotiators, capturing the human drama and sense of possibility at the time. Yet possibility does not mean inevitability. The Oslo Accords electrified the world, but while Palestinians interpreted them as signaling the conflict's imminent end, Israel felt compelled to continue deferring many core issues.

Unfortunately, the documentary does not fully present the period between 1993 and 1995. Yes, the Israeli right made a concerted effort to undermine Oslo, and the filmmakers mention Binyamin Netanyahu as a spoiler many times. Yet they do not acknowledge how Palestinians played the spoiler as well. The bus bombings and other violence that erupted during this period were not simply a reaction to Baruch Goldstein's February 1994 massacre of Palestinians in Hebron. And Arafat took no action against Hamas attacks; at times, in fact, he suggested that violence was a legitimate negotiating tool.

In the end, the complex domestic political environment shaped what leaders on both sides were willing to agree to,

since they needed to sell the accords to their publics. In Israel, bus bombings affected people's perception of the accords in many ways, but they were still able to recognize and draw hope from Oslo's political and economic achievements.

Today, moving forward will require leaders to respond to the gut fears of each public. Oslo has been durable—it has survived terrorism, assassination attempts, and right-wing pressure. For instance, Jewish Home Party leader Naftali Bennett has spoken of dissolving the Palestinian Authority, yet he still believes it would be disastrous for Israel to simply annex the 40 percent of the West Bank it currently controls, indicating that Oslo is irreversible for even the most right-wing factions. While not everyone wants to accelerate toward a two-state solution, there are clearly no good alternatives to partition.

To ameliorate the current situation, Israel should take the important step of halting settlement construction on the Palestinian side of the security barrier, thereby maintaining the viability of the two-state approach. For their part, the Palestinians need to address terrorism and incitement, including what they teach in schools.

This summary was prepared by Madison Rinder. ❖

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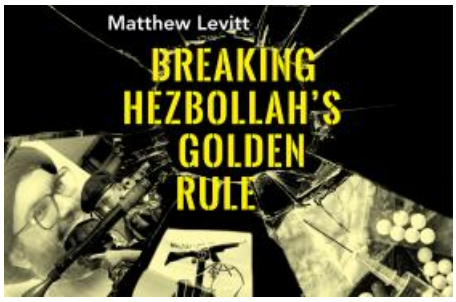

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