Oslo Still Relevant at Twenty

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Despite its shortcomings, the Oslo process has benefited Israelis and Palestinians, and its focus on nationalist frameworks remains more relevant than unfeasible binational proposals.

This article focuses on Oslo's impact on the two parties and its advantages over other peace plans. An upcoming PolicyWatch will discuss the U.S. role in the peace process.

Capped by a White House handshake twenty years ago this past Friday, the Oslo Accords marked a historic breakthrough: mutual recognition by two national movements that had fought each other intensely for decades, and mutual agreement to pursue a transitional approach that would lead to a peaceful outcome. Given past expectations that the process would spur Israelis and Palestinians to quickly shift from enemies to peace partners, there is ample reason today for each side to focus on the agreement's shortcomings. Yet its actual legacy is more varied.

BENEFITS FOR BOTH SIDES

Among Oslo's landmark accomplishments was that it clarified who the negotiators were. Until 1993, the conflict was marked by decades of failure to define a Palestinian interlocutor. Many people forget that Oslo never mandated two states -- an outcome on which there is wide agreement today among Israelis, Palestinians, and the international community. One of Oslo's best legacies is that the majority of each population now favors a two-state solution, though each is convinced that the other does not share its convictions.

Moreover, the Palestinians now have a government -- the Palestinian Authority -- that runs the affairs of close to half of the West Bank, including all of its Arab cities. This administration works with Israel on security and other issues -- something that was inconceivable before 1993. The Palestinians have been able to use this proto-government to attract billions of dollars in economic support and enhance their international position.

Israel has gained as well. Its peace treaty with Jordan was a direct result of Oslo, and it has also established quasi-diplomatic and economic relations with several Arab countries. Despite the hiatus in those ties during the second

Palestinian intifada (2000-2004), a modicum of quiet economic relations between Israel and Persian Gulf states has returned. More broadly, the post-Oslo gush of foreign investment into Israel has been key to the country's high-tech boom, which remains central to its economy.

Meanwhile, despite ongoing tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and widespread turmoil in the region as a whole, violence has dropped sharply in the West Bank as a result of Oslo, especially since President Mahmoud Abbas came to office eight years ago and Israel constructed its security barrier. Of course, if the nonviolent approach is somehow discredited and Abbas fully leaves the political stage, this relative quiet could end.

SHORTCOMINGS

Oslo's shortcomings are not to be dismissed, of course. The Palestinians would note that a two-state solution has yet to materialize in part because Oslo deferred the core issues (e.g., the final territorial contours of a West Bank state). In addition, the accords did not stop Israeli settlement activity, thereby bolstering Israeli spoilers.

For their part, Israelis would note that Oslo failed to create peace education programs to foster new attitudes among the next generation of Palestinians, dashing hopes that reconciliation between the two peoples could accompany final negotiations between the two governments. Oslo also failed to prevent a bloody four-year intifada that claimed many Israeli and Palestinian lives and increased the potency of Palestinian rejectionism.

Indeed, this mixed legacy has implications for negotiators today, most notably deep skepticism of the other side's intentions. In a recent "Peace Index" poll by Tel Aviv University and the Israel Democracy Institute, 41 percent of Israeli Jews said that the two-state solution is dead, and 78 percent did not believe that the Palestinians would see the signing of a peace agreement as the end of the conflict. Likewise, according to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 69 percent of Palestinians believe that they will still be stateless five years from now, while 82 percent believe that Israel's long-term goal is to annex the West Bank.

In light of these attitudes, leaders on both sides have been risk-averse. Instead of counting on the type of visionary leadership seen in the past (e.g., by Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin), Israelis and Palestinians will have to change the cost-benefit analysis of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and President Abbas if they truly want an agreement. Wary of going too far out ahead of their publics, the leaders will need to engage the people and address the other side in order to improve public support and, in turn, give themselves sufficient political confidence to make tough policy decisions.

MORAL BANKRUPTCY OF "ONE-STATE" PROPOSALS

Oslo's relevancy has also endured because those who dislike its core idea -- partitioning the West Bank into two entities, one Israeli and one Palestinian -- have been unable to come up with a viable, just alternative. Jordan adamantly refuses to negotiate territorial issues on behalf of the Palestinians for fear of being sucked into the vortex of Israeli-Palestinian tensions, so a more radical proposal has emerged in some academic circles: a one-state solution. According to this idea, Israel would agree to its own destruction, as would the Palestinian Authority. In their place would be established a binational, democratic state of Israeli Jews and Arabs from Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Currently, polls indicate that only around 8 percent of Israelis support the one-state model (largely from the far left and far right), while Palestinian support stands at 29 percent. Neither number carries significant political weight given the nature of Israeli and Palestinian politics. In contrast, clear majorities on both sides support a two-state solution, while prominent figures have vehemently dismissed the one-state idea. In June, for example, Oslo architect and leading Israeli dove Yossi Beilin called the notion "deranged," saying that no Zionist leader would accept a one-state arrangement: "Any such leader will prevent a situation in which a Jewish minority rules over a Palestinian majority. I predict that a center-left leader would prefer to cut the Gordian knot through a peace treaty with the

Palestinians, based upon the spirit of the Clinton Parameters from 2000 and the Geneva Initiative of 2003, whereas a center-right leader would prefer to do so through a unilateral withdrawal to the security barrier built by former Likud leader Ariel Sharon."

Similarly, Israeli statesman Abba Eban ridiculed the one-state idea during his lifetime, noting that Israelis and Palestinians speak different languages, come from different cultures, and do not share common daily experiences. Moreover, they have been traumatized by each other via Palestinian terrorism and Israeli control of the West Bank.

Some academics have attempted to argue that the emergence of binationalism is part of a wider trend to end longstanding strife between ethnic states. Yet there has been no movement to combine states in clearly similar situations, such as India and Pakistan. And the binational state of Lebanon has largely been a failure -- its people have suffered a fifteen-year civil war and growing sectarian tensions despite being Arab and speaking a common language.

Indeed, the odds are that a one-state solution would only intensify the far more obvious differences between Jews and Arabs rather than resolving the conflict. Both groups would surely seek to gain the upper hand in such a state. For example, one can easily imagine Palestinians seeking to open the shared state to descendants of Palestinian refugees in the hope of spurring Jewish citizens to flee, just as other minorities have been forced out of the Middle East by intolerant forces. In this regard, binationalism dovetails with the idea outlined in the original PLO Charter, which called for a secular democratic state but declared that Jews who did not live in Palestine before 1917 were to be expelled. It also fits with the ideology of many Islamists, who believe that Jews should have no rights to the holy land. Even Edward Said, a leading intellectual proponent of a one-state solution, expressed concern about its potential impact on Israeli Jews: "It worries me a great deal. The question of what is going to be the fate of the Jews is very difficult for me. I really don't know." In short, far from solving the problem, binationalism would be a recipe for constant bloodshed and endless conflict.

CONCLUSION

Although one can look at Oslo at twenty and bemoan its shortcomings, a fuller appreciation emerges when one honestly assesses its achievements and compares the likely consequences of its alternatives. Destroying Israel and the Palestinian nationalist movement in the hope of building a new binational state is not only morally repulsive, but also a nonstarter. Any solution must account for the fact that nationalism remains a powerful force in the Middle East and cannot be ignored.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. His publications include the 1995 book Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/making-peace-with-the-plo-the-rabin-governments-road-to-the-oslo-accord)** . ❖

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