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# The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process in Historical Perspective

**T**here is something surreal about current Arab-Israeli negotiations and our rapid assimilation of ideas and images recently considered fantastical. The overwhelming sense of awe at these direct contacts, perhaps best captured by that first public handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasser Arafat is symptomatic of how seriously the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts have degenerated over the years.

What is not generally appreciated, however, is the long history of Arab-Zionist negotiations, going back to the World War I era. In the next three decades leading up to Israeli independence, ranking Zionists and Arabs racked up thousands of encounters during which they debated, and sometimes negotiated about, the conflict developing between them. Zionist emissaries traveled unimpeded throughout most of the Arab world and secured audiences with principal Arab politicians, editors, religious leaders and businessmen, most of whom rejected the Zionist program in Palestine, but received their Zionist visitors hospitably, nonetheless.

In 1949, the first Arab-Israeli war ended with separate armistices negotiated directly between Israel and each of four “confrontation states”—Egypt, Trans-Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria—with the help of United Nations mediator, Dr. Ralph Bunche. The United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (or Palestine Conciliation Commission [PCC]) convened successive peace

conferences at Lausanne (1949), Geneva (1950), and Paris (1951), but then abandoned the quest for a comprehensive solution as overly ambitious and futile.

For the next two decades, there were very few points of political—as opposed to military—contact between Israelis and Arabs. From time to time, Arab, Israeli or third-party representatives sent out secret feelers to determine whether serious negotiations might be worth the political risks entailed. Almost inevitably, talks never got past the pre-negotiation phase, as the testing of the waters revealed little or no prospect of the other side being prepared to make sufficient compromise. In the aftermath of the 1967 war, the Arab refusal to deal directly with Israel became even more entrenched.

## The Historical Patterns

On the eve of Anwar Sadat's November 1977 visit to Jerusalem—a move that took all Middle East watchers and scholars by surprise—Neil Caplan published an analysis of the dismal record of pre-1948 Arab-Zionist negotiation attempts, suggesting that perhaps the Arab-Israeli conflict was not one that lent itself readily to rational resolution by normal methods of negotiation (*Jerusalem Quarterly* 6 [Winter 1978]: 3–19). While post-1977 (and especially post-1990) experiences have proven this assessment unduly pessimistic, we have chosen to examine, in the following pages, the current Palestinian-Israeli peace process as a test case against the characteristics identified by Caplan as responsible for the pre-1948 failures. Our hypothesis is that the more closely negotiations follow the historical model, the more likely the chances of ultimate failure, and that hopes for a resolution of this conflict rest upon deviation from those patterns in very specific directions. The success or failure of the Israel-PLO rapprochement can be better understood (although not always predicted) by assessing the ways in which contacts and negotiations diverge from—or mirror—past patterns.

The futile diplomacy of the mandate period may be examined under eight headings: (1) a wealth of experience, (2) dubious purposes and ulterior motives, (3) problems of timing, (4) negative impact of third-party involvement, (5) a wide gulf between proposed terms of agreement, (6) problematic status of negotiating partners, (7) dynamics of deadlock, and (8) psychological obstacles. We begin by reviewing each of these in turn, and then apply this paradigm to the recent Israel-PLO peace process.

### *A Wealth of Experience*

The record of multiple failed negotiations suggests that neither a lack of direct communication nor unfamiliarity with the enemy has been responsible for the

persistent failure to produce an Arab-Zionist (or an Arab-Israeli) accord. The record also shows that merely increasing the amount of contact between two sides does not increase the likelihood of negotiators achieving a working agreement. Many times direct negotiations only clarify for the protagonists just how far apart, even irreconcilable, their positions really are (Stein and Lewis 1991, v).

#### *Dubious Purposes and Ulterior Motives*

Both sides in the Arab-Zionist conflict have tended to enter the negotiating process for purposes other than actually making concessions to and peace with one another. The historical pattern finds that the parties often came together when one or both wanted to avoid or forestall other, less appealing, initiatives. Most often they negotiated for appearances, trying to impress upon a powerful third party their willingness to resolve matters, as opposed to the extremist, uncompromising posture of the other side. A mercenary instinct often brought Arabs to the table in search of Zionist resources, and Zionists often invited or entertained them out of a desire to weaken Arab opposition by playing off rivals against one another. In the historic pattern, Arabs and Zionists sought to inverse von Clausewitz's dictum by employing "diplomacy and negotiation . . . as an extension of their basic 'war' by other (non-violent) means" (Caplan 1978, 6).

#### *Problems of Timing*

Timing refers to both those circumstances which propel an actor to the negotiating table, and those which advance (or obstruct) the search for peace. Both Arabs and Zionists proved reluctant to negotiate from positions of perceived weakness; unfortunately, they similarly lacked the incentive to make concessions from positions of perceived strength. Historically, Arabs and Israelis have come to the table not so much when conditions seemed ripe for peace as much as when "the status quo seemed more painful or dangerous than a potential negotiated compromise" (Stein and Lewis 1991, 14–15).

#### *Negative Impact of Third-Party Involvement*

Arabs and Zionists have consistently expected to advance their interests far better by turning to powerful outsiders, instead of to one another. Prior to 1948, both sides regularly petitioned the British to impose a solution wholly favorable to themselves. To the extent that His Majesty's government allowed Arabs or Jews to believe it might impose their maximum demands upon the other, neither side felt compelled to make the hard choices and difficult concessions needed for a negotiated settlement. Whenever British policy wavered, Arab and Zionist leaders displayed even greater hesitancy, wishing to avoid risks for a peace plan which might not enjoy the Mandatory's support.

*Proposed Terms of Agreement*

The historical record shows that would-be Arab and Zionist negotiators left themselves little room for any scaling back of their maximum demands. This refusal or inability to prioritize objectives and then compromise accordingly may reflect either the genuine incompatibility of the two sides' most basic goals, or the fact that the negotiators' aims were something other than a negotiated settlement.

The two most contentious and precious cards which the Zionists pressured the British to play during the Mandate period—and which are similar to the ones Palestinian negotiators now demand of Israel—were control over immigration and the conditions for future independence. Prior to 1931, Arabs and Zionists clung stubbornly to their original irreconcilable claims. During the 1930s, each side deliberated as to possible compromises, although neither produced a plan able to bridge the chasm between them. Clever strategists devised a variety of complicated principles for Arab-Jewish coexistence: cantonization, nondenomination, parity, binationalism, formulae for controlling Jewish immigration, and partition. It is difficult to imagine a scenario for today's situation which was not proposed, in some form, in the earlier period. The problem was not a lack of creative imagination in devising schemes for a solution, but rather a lack of flexibility in considering departures from entrenched positions.

*Status of Problematic  
Negotiating Partners*

Too often, Arab-Zionist peacemaking suffered from a "Groucho Marxian" political dilemma: "Anyone willing to negotiate with me can't be worth negotiating with." Arabs and Jews have often refused to meet with one another's hawks, while eschewing contact with the doves on the grounds that they were not truly representative or capable of "delivering the goods." Many times one or both of the people at the table simply did not have an adequate power base to carry out his side of a bargain.

From the start, Zionist diplomacy focused on non-Palestinian pan-Arab leaders, hoping to find someone prepared to concede Palestine to the Jews in exchange for certain services to the wider Arab world. The pattern was set early during the Mandate period by the abortive 1919 Weizmann-Faysal agreement; the makers of early Zionist "foreign policy" applied the same formula subsequently to Amir Abdallah of Trans-Jordan and other politicians from the neighboring countries. Such plans invariably fell flat when these Arab personalities from outside of Palestine proved unable to bypass the Palestinians or to "deliver" the latter's acquiescence in this sort of "exchange of services" (Caplan 1978, 13).

### *Dynamics of Deadlock*

The rigors of maintaining national cohesiveness and morale during their protracted conflict have encouraged the rise of Arab and Zionist leaders well suited to wage war, but not necessarily peace. By defining the conflict in existential terms, squelching dissent, and promising their people imminent victory, these leaders stifled political debate and silenced “unpatriotic” political opponents. In the process, they failed to prepare their communities for the difficult choices and compromises required for negotiating with the enemy, as opposed to obliterating him.

### *Psychological Obstacles*

Persistent insecurity, recurrent war, wanton destruction, and an enormous loss of life have psychologically scarred Israelis and Arabs. Whole generations have grown up in fear and distrust of one another, tutored as to the virtue of their own cause and the evil intentions of the other side. There exists an enormous reservoir of mutual hatred between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East from which the opponents of peaceful compromise have drawn freely over the years. Proponents of peace have had little to encourage them in counteracting this legacy.

### *Breaking the Negative Pattern*

Several systemic changes have occurred since the 1970s to enhance the likelihood of successfully negotiated solutions to the Arab-Israel conflict. The Middle East in the last quarter century has witnessed not only a number of violent disruptions of the status quo which have brought with them much uncertainty, but also new opportunities for peacemaking, resulting in a series of plans and initiatives emanating from many quarters but bearing—until recently—little fruit. Since 1973, a number of Arab-Israeli negotiation episodes have shown evidence of interesting deviations from the long legacy of failed peace attempts and counterproductive negotiating habits, notably the Camp David peace process (1977–1979), the 1991 Madrid conference and subsequent Washington talks, and the Israel-Jordan peace process, 1993–1994. Most dramatic and unexpected of all, however, was the Israeli-PLO rapprochement that became public in September 1993.

### *The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process, 1993–1996*

A comparison of the current Israeli-Palestinian peace process with the traditional patterns of unsuccessful Arab-Israeli diplomacy reveals a combination of old and new elements. The following examination of the expanding diplomatic process between Israel and the PLO takes into account the September 13, 1993 Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government

Arrangements (DOP; also the "Oslo Accord"); the Cairo Agreement of March 4, 1994; and the September 28, 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip ("Oslo II"). Our analysis raises a few questions: Will new approaches triumph over old habits? Or have Israelis and Palestinians finally come to sit together at the table, only to have it collapse under the weight of a century's worth of unreconciled goals and unproductive negotiating techniques?

### *A Wealth of Experience*

When measured against Israel's bilateral relations with neighboring states, the track record of Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic encounters is less than impressive. The Weizmann-Faysal attempt to sidestep the Palestinians carried over into the post-1948 period, when Israelis preferred to deal with the Arab states, or with nonpoliticized refugee committees, rather than with the hardline remnants of the Mufti's "Arab Higher Committee." Between the creation of the PLO in 1964 and the mid-1980s, an active "non-dialogue" existed between Israelis and Palestinians, consisting of two interlocking approaches: (a) PLO efforts to weaken and delegitimize Israel, which included a ban on all contacts with the Zionist enemy; and (b) Israeli efforts to bypass and discredit the PLO by exposing its "politocidal" intentions, highlighting its murderous modus operandi, and challenging its political credibility and representativity.

Neither rare secret encounters between officials nor public meetings between self-styled do-gooders did much to promote a sense of trust between the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships or their people. This dearth of shared diplomatic encounters did not mean, however, that Israel and the PLO were unfamiliar with each other's goals. This is not a conflict of misunderstood intentions which needs only straightforward talks to clear the air. One can argue, however, that if a background of peace efforts does not guarantee a successful negotiated settlement, neither is it a prerequisite. If circumstances have somehow conspired to persuade Israeli and PLO leaders that an end to the conflict will advance their interests more than its continuation, their lack of experience negotiating together need not obstruct reconciliation.

### *Purposes and Motives*

Here we have evidence of an important break in the pattern of a century of mutual avoidance and mutual animosity between Palestinian Arabs and Palestinian Jews/Israelis. During the June 1992 Israeli election campaign, Yitzhak Rabin built his platform on two interrelated goals: normalization of relations with the Arab world, and an agreement with the Palestinians on the future of the territories. Once elected, Prime Minister Rabin surprised all pundits by working relatively harmoniously with his rival-turned Foreign Minister Shimon Peres toward reaching a peaceful settlement with the Arabs (Keren 1994,

149–63). The new Rabin government applied itself diligently to the various Arab-Israeli talks taking place in Washington under the Madrid peace process, gradually showing greater flexibility than its predecessor and reconciling itself to the evolution of the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation into separate Palestinian and Jordanian negotiating tracks.

Israeli aims under the Rabin-Peres team included the end of the occupation of Gaza and significant parts of the West Bank, and an accommodation with the Palestinians which would diminish the threat of terrorism, end the disruptive intifada, and allow for normal interstate Arab-Israel relations. Although Rabin and company would have preferred achieving these aims without having to deal with the PLO, they finally realized that only the PLO had the manpower and legitimacy to take on the tasks of administering areas from which Israel might withdraw (Makovsky 1996).

The PLO, technically excluded from the Palestinian portion of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation to Madrid, worked hard to control the Palestinian agenda from behind the scenes. The PLO's goals were the resolution of the Palestinian plight in all its aspects, ideally consisting of an independent Palestinian state under PLO leadership; recognition by Israel; recognition, diplomatic relations with and economic support from the U.S.; and a victory on Israeli-occupied ground with which to turn back the growing popularity of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic movement based in Gaza.

### *Timing*

The intersection of PLO and Israeli purposes was such that both felt they would be well served by a Palestinian-Israeli compromise, something which neither had been prepared to accept before. Why now? By the fall of 1992, a wide range of events converged to convince Israeli and PLO leaders that the time was finally right for exploratory talks.

Although the emphasis would soon shift, the protagonists had begun by repeating the historic pattern of directing their primary attention to influencing outside powers rather than each other. Especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the U.S.-led coalition's defeat of Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War, the Americans became the sole superpower able to influence regional developments. Using effective pressures and incentives, American Secretary of State James Baker had assembled together the delegations of Israel, several key Arab states, and the Palestinians at Madrid in late 1991, breaking at last the historic stigma against direct talks and setting into motion follow-up bilateral talks in Washington and multilateral talks in various world capitals.

The PLO particularly needed American favors and goodwill. By 1992, the *Intifada* was exhausting itself and no longer attracting the same positive international media attention it had initially generated for the Palestinian cause. Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories had meanwhile intensified,

confirming the prospect that the longer one waited, the less there would be to negotiate about. The fall of the Soviet Union had stripped the PLO of a large source of its diplomatic and military support. Angry at Arafat's support of Iraq during the Gulf War, the PLO's wealthy Gulf-state patrons' "financial siege" forced reductions in essential Palestinian social, educational, medical, and cultural programs, with devastating repercussions for both Palestinian society and the PLO's leadership role within it. With the Palestinian condition deteriorating and the PLO estranged from many of its natural Arab supporters, Arafat knew that a growing number of Palestinians were finding the PLO increasingly bankrupt, politically as well as financially. Hence, Arafat's increasingly desperate need to produce results from the seemingly endless rounds of Washington talks in which Palestinians and Israelis had become mired (Khalidi 1994, 64–65; Mansour 1993, 5–7, 30–31).

Yitzhak Rabin assumed office in June 1992 keenly aware that he would be judged by history—and the Israeli electorate—on his ability to fulfill his campaign promises to deliver an agreement with the Palestinians and normal relations with the Arab states. Paralysis on the Palestinian question and the collapse of a peace initiative had happened many times before, without an Israeli government resorting to actions as risky as a clandestine rapprochement with the PLO. But this time domestic Israeli politics, independent of the peace process, brought repeated threats of defections from Rabin's Labor coalition. The government needed something as spectacular as the possibility of peace with the Palestinians to pull itself above the internal political fray and to enhance its chances of making good on the most difficult of campaign promises.

The rise in popularity and power of Hamas further caused Arafat and Rabin to look upon each other through new eyes. Both men feared that Hamas might soon overtake the PLO as the object of the people's loyalty and standard-bearer of their cause. Absolutely rejecting any Israeli-Palestinian compromise, Hamas unwittingly pushed the PLO and Israel into an awkward embrace. Rabin and his advisers calculated that between Arafat and Hamas, Arafat was clearly the lesser of two evils. The time had to come to strike a deal with Arafat, while he was still inclined to deal and before he became irrelevant.

In a major departure from the historical model, Israel and the PLO came, at the same time, to perceive immediate benefits with only short-term costs in a preliminary negotiated settlement between them. Both the PLO and Israel hoped that a deal, which allowed Arafat to claim responsibility for an initial Israeli withdrawal, would pull the rug out from under Hamas and pave the way for a mutually acceptable resolution to their conflict. The PLO calculated that the recovery of some land from Israeli control, along with Israeli and American legitimization of the organization, would counter the anticipated backlash from those Palestinians who had consistently rejected any compromise with Israel.



This confluence of conditions—the rise of an Israeli government specifically committed to a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, the impotence of the Palestinian negotiating team in Washington, the financial woes of a PLO desperately in need of a tangible victory, and the growth of a mutually threatening common enemy in Hamas—combined to create a unique moment in Palestinian and Israeli history. Veering sharply from the historical pattern, sworn enemies simultaneously realized that, without the other's cooperation, each lacked both the power to impose its own solution against the other's objections and the wherewithal to overcome internal opponents.

### *Third-Party Considerations*

To the already complex U.S. involvement in the various post-Madrid talks, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process added a new and unexpected third-party participant: Norway. In fifteen sessions between January and August of 1993, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators in Oslo succeeded where their counterparts in the parallel negotiations in Washington D.C. failed. Norway, a "middle" rather than a "great" power, away from the main currents of international politics, was able to contribute to the peacemaking effort in ways that differed from the usual patterns of third-party involvement. Hidden away from the public eye, Israeli and PLO negotiators could float trial balloons, dispense with dramatic posturing, and work uninterrupted on trying to reach an agreement.

Norway also provided a helpful break from the historical pattern by which a powerful third party inadvertently perpetuated the conflict by permitting one or both sides to maintain unrealistic hopes of having its preferred solution imposed on the other, rather than accepting a negotiated compromise. With no expectations whatsoever that the government of Norway would dictate a one-sided accord, Israelis, Palestinians, and their Norwegian facilitators got down to the business of driving hard, but ultimately workable, bargains among themselves.

Immediately following the September 1993 announcement of the Declaration of Principles (DOP) however, the U.S. resumed its accustomed third-party role. By coming to shake hands in Washington, Prime Minister Rabin and Chairman Arafat signaled to their respective constituencies that the fragile accord between them would depend on the support of the United States. The role of the U.S. as interested third party remained crucial throughout the complex follow-up negotiations leading to and beyond the Cairo Agreement of May 1994 and the September 1995 Oslo II Agreement, the latter of which was signed with great ceremony at the White House.

### *Proposed Terms of Agreement*

The Israeli-PLO peace process has been accompanied by a flurry of documents, beginning with an exchange of letters between Rabin and Arafat, dated

September 9, 1993, followed by the Oslo I, Cairo, and Oslo II Agreements, as discussed above. Given the volume and density of outstanding issues, we can expect to see the production of many more documents on the long road to a definitive agreement. Checked against the historical record, the two Oslo Accords and the Cairo Agreement suggest that both sides have dramatically scaled back their apparently irreconcilable demands. "Mutual denial" has given way to "mutual recognition" (Shlaim 199, 25).

It took almost eight months of difficult negotiations after Oslo to produce the follow-up Cairo Agreement, a hefty document including four annexes and containing almost three hundred pages dealing with the implementation of only the first ("immediate") phase envisaged in the DOP. In accordance with the agreement signed in Cairo, the IDF withdrew from most of the Gaza Strip and from a sixty-five-square kilometer area around Jericho, a sleepy West Bank Palestinian town that served as a symbol of the negotiators' intention to extend Palestinian control throughout the West Bank, bringing the territory and its Palestinian inhabitants under Palestinian rule. The Agreement also detailed arrangements for security, legal affairs, economic relations, and the transfer of two dozen spheres of administration to a Palestinian Authority (PA).

In September 1995, after continued frustrations and missed deadlines, Arafat and Peres finally moved to the next phase by signing the "Oslo II" Agreement, comprising almost four hundred pages and seven annexes. Oslo II transferred further administrative powers to the PA and brought about the withdrawal of the IDF from all of the principal Palestinian villages, towns, and cities in the West Bank, and the establishment of areas "A," "B," and "C" to be under Palestinian, Israeli, or joint jurisdiction. The only exception was Hebron, whose tiny and militant Jewish enclave made it an especially difficult case.

The terms of agreement proposed and accepted indicate both encouraging deviations from and worrisome repetitions of traditional patterns. A strikingly new feature is, of course, that PLO and Israeli leaders agreed on anything at all. Although the intent of the DOP and subsequent agreements have been subjected to conflicting interpretations, most analysts argue that, in essence, all documents recognize the principle of partitioning the Land of Israel/Palestine between Jews and Arabs (Heller 1994, 56; Friedman, *New York Times*, July 9, 1995).

Originally committed by its 1968 National Charter to the liberation of all of mandatory Palestine through armed struggle, the PLO's official goal has been since the Palestine National Council meeting of November 1988, (Algiers) an independent Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank coexisting with Israel within its green line boundaries (Muslih 1990). In April 1996, Arafat convened the PNC in Gaza and won the required two-thirds vote to change those articles in the charter which called for Israel's destruction or otherwise contradicted the peace process.

The Rabin government's stated goal was an Israeli withdrawal from the territories and coexistence with some type of less-than-sovereign Palestinian entity there. In response to the PNC vote to amend the charter, the Israeli Labor party, under Prime Minister Peres, voted to remove from its platform the plank rejecting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Thus, for the first time in decades of struggle, the parties' respective definitions of their national goals seemed to allow for some common ground. In coming full circle to the partition concept, the DOP is "a powerful testimony to the limits of perversity in politics. . . . [B]oth the Palestinian leadership and Israel had tried and exhausted every other alternative, including stalemate, and had been left with nothing but what might be called the default option of their history" (Heller 1994, 56).

The Israeli elections of May 1996 brought the Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu to power. With its absolute opposition to the eventual creation of a Palestinian state, however, Netanyahu's government seemingly returns to the previous historical pattern, where the chasm between the minimum terms of the parties does not facilitate the identification of a common ground.

#### *Status of the Negotiating Partners*

Important breakthroughs in the status-of-negotiator element have permitted the latest Palestinian-Israeli talks to progress further down the path towards a negotiated settlement than ever before. Unlike the historical pattern in which only mavericks or dissidents dared to make contact with the other side, the Oslo talks took place with the knowledge and blessing of Israeli and Palestinian leaders of the highest echelon. The key Israeli actors overseeing the conduct of the secret negotiations in Norway were Foreign Minister Peres and Deputy Foreign Minister Beilin. Yitzhak Rabin clung until the last moment to the traditional Israeli desire to avoid the PLO; as late as May 1993 he was hopeful of reaching a settlement with the West Bank Palestinian negotiators in Washington and skirting the PLO leadership in Tunis. But, once convinced that the D.C. negotiating team simply could not make grand decisions without Arafat, Rabin reluctantly boarded the "PLO-Express" and ordered stepped-up negotiations with the PLO itself (Susser 1993, 18; Makovsky 1996, 23–24, 50, ch. 7).

This triumvirate of high Israeli officials prepared to negotiate with the PLO deviated dramatically from Israel's long-standing strategies of seeking out non-Palestinian interlocutors or talking only with so-called moderate (i.e., non-PLO) Palestinians. Once Prime Minister Rabin endorsed talks with the PLO, the Israeli negotiators in Oslo were fully empowered to make difficult compromises that no Israeli representatives had ever been ready or able to make before. Prime Minister Peres gave his negotiators even wider latitude than had Rabin before him.

Arafat dispatched trusted senior associates Hasan Asfour, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), and PLO treasurer Abu Alà to meet the Israelis in Oslo, and for the first time ever, the Palestinian case was presented and negotiated by an authentic Palestinian leadership. Israeli and PLO readiness to take the plunge into full mutual recognition constituted an important step in overcoming the historic futility of lower-status or unauthorized contacts.

The Palestinian elections of January 1996 legitimated Arafat's status as the president of the Palestinian Authority. But if his status as a negotiating partner was partly a function of Rabin's and then Peres' readiness to accept him as an equal at the bargaining table, the cold shoulder of the new Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, could mark a return to the traditionally Israeli preference for either bypassing the Palestinians en route to agreements with the Arab states or trying to dictate a settlement to them, rather than reaching a negotiated compromise.

#### *Dynamics of Deadlock*

Having broken the "dynamics of deadlock" by embarking on an Israel-Palestinian peace process, both Rabin and Arafat were left to defend the course they initiated, as well as their political careers, from critics who manipulated those very "dynamics" in efforts to oust them and undo the DOP. Yitzhak Rabin faced stiff opposition from the Jewish settlers in Gaza and the West Bank. Although the settlers are a small percentage of the electorate, their "concerns and actions resonate with Israelis in the ideological hinterland on the right of the national political spectrum" (Heller 1994, 59).

In an unprecedented challenge to the democratically elected civil authority, a group of rabbis, led by former Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapira, adopted a *halachic* (religious) ruling in July 1995 prohibiting the "uprooting of IDF bases [in Judea and Samaria] and transferring the sites to Gentiles." The rabbis urged religious soldiers to disobey such orders (Keinon 1995, 1). On November 4, 1995, Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated at a peace rally in Tel Aviv by a young Israeli ultranationalist. The assassin, Yigal Amir, argued that Jewish religious law permitted him to kill the Prime Minister in order to stop a greater harm from befalling the Jewish people, namely, Rabin's continued negotiations with the PLO and the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

Shock and repugnance caused dramatic increase in Israeli public support for the legacy of Rabin's peace process and the policies of his successor, Shimon Peres. But that burst of support was soon offset by fear and anger over recurrent terrorist attacks by fundamentalist Palestinians opposed to Arafat's dealing with Israel. A particularly deadly wave of terrorist bombings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in February and March of 1996 created a predictable backlash, hardening significant portions of the Israeli public against further concessions to the Palestinians, as called for in the agreements.

The Israeli elections of May 1996 were, in effect, a national referendum on the fate of the still unfinished peace process. Peres' challenger, Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, built a successful campaign by emphasizing Israel's security needs ahead of continuing the pace of the peace negotiations. Netanyahu's razor-thin victory reflected the virtually even split within the Israeli body politic for and against the delicate peace process. The internal Israeli split constrains the new Prime Minister as much as it did his predecessor: neither man could claim a popular mandate for his position vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Netanyahu will have to work hard to persuade the other half of the Israeli population to follow his diplomatic lead, a feat which eluded Peres.

Arafat's opponents come from a wide spectrum within the domestic Palestinian constituency. Hamas opposition, while expected, has proved violent and formidable. Arafat's status among mainstream Palestinians also declined, despite his election in January 1996 as President of the Palestinian Authority. The unchallenged leader and symbol of Palestinian national resistance, Arafat is having trouble making the transition from globe-trotting revolutionary to statesman and governor. The opposition and dissatisfaction of PLO members such as Faruq Qaddumi, Hanan Ashrawi, and Edward Said bode ill for Arafat's continued command of broad Palestinian loyalty. In passing over qualified administrators from within Gaza and the West Bank by staffing the PA with cronies from Tunis, Arafat has alienated that portion of the Palestinian population potentially most supportive of his deal with Israel and with the most to gain from its success. The Palestinian elections saw the use of local personalities opposed to Arafat's program, his authoritarian style of leadership, or to alleged human and civil rights abuses under his regime. It is likely that the PA will try to impose a system of checks and balances against its President's more controversial policies.

Mark Heller has noted the historic irony that Rabin and Arafat, who once symbolized "the conflict of absolute contradiction" between Israelis and Palestinians, became united after September 1993, either succeeding or failing together (Heller 1995, 28). Rabin and Peres took the same significant gamble in placing all the diplomatic eggs in the basket of a negotiating partner whose very incentive to compromise is his own increasing weakness within his community. The Palestinian-Israeli peace process thus locked into a novel vicious circle replacing the traditional "dynamics of deadlock," in which Israeli leaders have limited public support for making concessions to Arafat until he demonstrated that he could govern his people and make good on his promises.

Throughout the 1996 election, Benjamin Netanyahu had objected to what he saw as his rival's overly generous gestures to Arafat, and promised that a government under his leadership would be severely circumspect in its dealings with the Palestinian Authority. Arafat, meanwhile, will need continuing

concessions from Israel in order to secure his role as the leader who can deliver what his followers are seeking.

### *Psychological Factors*

Arafat, Rabin, and Peres could not expect their negotiations to be crowned with success without waging a vigorous battle to break down the psychological walls reinforced (if not created) by leaders like themselves over the years. The Palestinian-Israeli dispute has left millions of Palestinians and Israelis with a profound legacy of mutual fears and indoctrinated hatred. By negotiating the end to their conflict in secret, and then springing it suddenly upon their people, PLO and Israeli leaders made their task of winning public support that much more difficult, as the results of the May 1996 Israeli elections attested. As the promoters of the historic Israeli-PLO reconciliation have surely realized, selling the peace to their respective communities requires deep transformations in popular attitudes and world views. Such changes are unlikely to be accomplished quickly, and random acts of violence can easily set back the delicate and fragile process of mutual confidence-building. Slick marketing strategies interchangeably used for selling consumer products or political candidates have proven ineffective in meeting the challenge of persuading the Israeli public of the safety and reliability of the current peace process. In fact, it was this point—personal security—which Netanyahu exploited to defeat Peres.

## **Obstacles Ahead**

Although the September 1993 DOP constituted an important conceptual breakthrough, it fell short of providing an operational guide for actually establishing interim Palestinian self-government. By postponing negotiations over the territories' final status, as well as the difficult issue of Jerusalem, the framers of the PLO-Israeli agreements imitated the deferral tactics used at Camp David, banking on the passage of time and a successful trial run at co-existence to produce more flexibility than is currently available among the negotiating parties.

But the DOP's ambiguity also camouflaged the persistence of disagreement, allowing unrealizable expectations to fester and leading eventually to renewed and more bitter conflict. The successive Cairo and Oslo II accords address many of the outstanding issues, but each document proved significantly more difficult to negotiate than the one before, despite a basic agreement between the two sides on broad principles. Netanyahu's election will necessitate further wrangling just to reestablish a general understanding, without which negotiations cannot proceed. The Palestinians will insist upon holding Israel to the letter and spirit of the agreements to date; the new Israeli

government will insist upon reinterpreting much of the fine print. There is no guarantee that the two sides will reach a point of mutual understanding again. Israeli-Palestinian relations threaten to revert to protracted and sporadically violent stalemate if their evolving minimal positions remain incompatible.

The new Israeli Prime Minister has, however, vowed to uphold Israeli obligations assumed by the former government. These include the Oslo and Cairo agreements, which endorse a partition-based solution and attempt to implement it between the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. Thus, despite the changes wrought by the Israeli elections of May 1996, the Oslo and Cairo agreements still represent an important and encouraging departure from the historical record of mutually exclusive Zionist-Israeli and Palestinian-Arab claims to the land.

The immensity of the PLO-Israeli rapprochement to date lies mainly within the psychological realm, but so does its vulnerability. Meetings between Arafat and his lieutenants and top Israeli officials have since become routine, but any psychological reconciliation between ordinary Palestinians and Israelis is still fragile at best. The success of the process which began with the DOP depends upon the success of PLO and Israeli leaders at reading and molding their public opinion. It is not yet clear how Netanyahu will rally a divided populace behind his not-yet-operational slogan, "peace with security."

With no specific mention of the 1948 refugees, and negotiations on the general refugee issues postponed for two years, Arafat failed to take into account the mood in the Palestinian diaspora, where the right to return to or receive compensation for homes within the green line continues to resonate. Although he recognized correctly that the priority of the Palestinians in the occupied territories was the replacement of the IDF with a Palestinian National Authority, both his reliance on loyalists from Tunis and his undemocratic style have demoralized elements of the population most inclined to support him. Camp David as a precedent for the PLO-Israeli agreement cuts both ways: "Arafat today is compared with Anwar Sadat, both by those who revere Sadat as a statesman and those who revile him as an opportunistic traitor to the Palestinian and Arab cause" (Heller 1994, 59).

Part of the popular disappointment with the peace process stems from a failure of the PLO and Israeli leadership to communicate to their people a realistic understanding of what had been accomplished. The initial announcement that an agreement had been reached sent thousands of Palestinians and tens of thousands of Israelis into the streets in jubilation. But, as Mark Heller has pointed out, there was some question as to what they were celebrating.

In Israel, the accord was often referred to as a peace agreement, rather than simply as an agreement on a process that might ultimately culminate in peace. Among Palestinians, there was a widespread perception, which

the leadership did not try very vigorously to dispel, that this was an agreement on Palestinian independence, rather than simply an agreement on a process that might fulfill that aspiration. (Heller 1994, 59).

Even more telling than the dangers of unfulfilled expectations, the situation on the ground is also subject to rapid deterioration. Continued shoot-outs between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian protesters or fugitives and the perpetuation of special privileges for Jewish settlers are sparks ready to rekindle the *Intifada*. If Netanyahu makes good on campaign pledges to expand Israeli settlements and bring thousands more Jews into the West Bank, the tinderbox will likely explode. Israel's long and economically devastating closure of the border between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza has infuriated the Palestinians, who see collective punishment where Israelis see security measures. Despite occasional media analysis highlighting the improvement of economic conditions, many Palestinians find that the Israeli border closure has left them increasingly isolated and trapped inside economically stifling pockets of Palestinian Authority.

Threats and efforts at a massive civil disobedience campaign by Israeli settlers have brought into question the ability of the Israeli government and the IDF to uproot them from the West Bank, should that scenario become part of a final territorial settlement despite Netanyahu's rejection of any such plan. At the same time, terrorist attacks and suicide bombings directed at Israelis within the green line as well as in the occupied territories reinforced traditional Israeli fears that any interim stage of Palestinian self-governance might turn out to be the first step in the classic Palestinian doctrine of the elimination of Israel by "stages." Prime Minister Rabin himself shared the uneasiness many Israelis felt at the prospect of trusting the PLO, defending his surprising policy while admitting it gave him "butterflies in the stomach" (Susser 1993, 18). Since 1993, Israelis have been reeling between the thrill of political breakthroughs and the pain of brutal terrorist attacks. Rabin's assassination at the hands of an Israeli Jew created a new agony, and new priorities, within the body politic, leading to the election of a new Prime Minister.

One veteran journalist has commented that mutual Israeli-PLO recognition "fundamentally alters both the political and psychological maps of the region. It may not bring peace tomorrow or the day after, but it will reshape the Middle East more than any other single event since the establishment of Israel in 1948" (Friedman, *New York Times*, September 10, 1993). Indeed, the old status-of-negotiator conundrum has been overcome and historic taboos broken; third-party input has been consistently supportive of an accord and unusually effective in exerting leverage on both sides; the gap separating the parties' terms of agreement, while not yet bridged, appears at least potentially bridgeable for the first time in the conflict's long history.



Some say there may be no going back from the Oslo and Cairo Accords, but neither is forward progress guaranteed. Obstacles identified in the pre-1948 patterns of Arab-Zionist negotiation may yet derail the process. Unforeseen domestic or external events may divert leaders from their stated shared purpose of working towards final status arrangements, sweeping away a newly favorable combination of motives and timing factors. After demonstrating a unique degree of civil courage, leaders may backslide into hardline reactions to challenges or disappointments from the other side, recreating a new dynamics of deadlock.

In June 1996, a twenty-one state Arab summit, convened in Cairo in the wake of Netanyahu's election, reflected the uncertainty as to how the new Israeli government would approach the faltering peace process. Will the hardline Netanyahu choose to follow in the surprising footsteps of Menachem Begin, who came from the right to make peace with Egypt? Or will he model himself instead after the Begin who declared "peace for peace," not "land for peace," and refused to grant the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza anything beyond limited personal autonomy, insisting upon Israel's right to the land?

Psychological barriers, mutual animosity and fears, and negative stereotypes continue to affect millions of ordinary Palestinians and Israelis. Both peoples peer suspiciously at one another, wondering if the leopard has indeed changed his spots. And yet, despite its fragility and the uncertainty of its outcome, the 1993–1996 Palestinian-Israeli peace process has deviated from the historical model in undeniably encouraging ways.

## **Note**

A version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Association for Israel Studies in Baltimore on June 11, 1995. It is part of a longer research-in-progress which examines six case studies of Arab-Israeli negotiations since 1978.