

Arafat's Camel

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Despite all its limitations and ambiguities, the Declaration of Principles for Palestinian self-government in Gaza and Jericho marked the mother of all breakthroughs in the century-old conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. Future generations will look back on Monday, 13 September 1993, the day the Declaration was signed on the South Lawn of the White House and sealed with the historic hand-shake between Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, as one of the most momentous events in the history of the Middle East in the twentieth century. In one stunning move, the two leaders have re-drawn the geo-political map of the entire region.

The agreements recently concluded between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization constitute a major breakthrough in the century-old conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine and a revolution in the politics of the Middle East. There were two separate agreements. The first, signed by PLO chairman Yasser Arafat in Tunis and prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in Jerusalem on Friday, 10 September, provided for mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. The second, signed on the South Lawn of the White House on Monday, 13 September, with President Bill Clinton acting as master of ceremonies, was a Declaration of Principles for limited Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho. All the publicity focused on the signing of the second agreement but without the first it would not have been possible.

Taken together, the two agreements fully merit the over-worked epithet 'historic' because they reconcile the two principal parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This conflict has two dimensions: one is the inter-state conflict between Israel and the neighbouring Arab states, the other is the clash between Jewish and Palestinian nationalism. The latter has always been the heart and core of the Arab-Israeli-conflict. Both national movements, Jewish and Palestinian, have denied the other the right to self-determination in Palestine. Their history is one of mutual denial and mutual rejection which was pithily summed up by Golda Meir's remark that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people. Now mutual denial has made way for mutual recognition. Israel has not only recognized the Palestinian people but has formally recognized the PLO as its representative. The handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat at the signing ceremony was a powerful symbol of the historic reconciliation between the two nations.

The historic reconciliation was based on a historic compromise: acceptance of the principle of the partition of Palestine. Both sides, at the same time, accepted the principle of partition as the basis for the settlement of their long and bitter conflict, as the basis for peaceful co-existence between themselves. Partition is not, of course, a new idea. It was first proposed by the Peel Commission in 1937 and again by the United Nations in 1947 but it was rejected on both occasions by the Palestinians who insisted on a unitary state over the whole of Palestine. They insisted on all or nothing and they ended up with nothing. By the time the Palestinian National Council endorsed the principle of partition and a two-state solution in 1988, Israel, under a Likud government, rejected the idea, laying claim to the whole of the Biblical Land of Israel, including Judea and Samaria.

By accepting the principle of partition at the same time, the two sides have abandoned the ideological dispute as to who is the rightful owner of Palestine and turned to finding a practical solution to the problem of sharing the living space. That the idea of partition has finally been accepted by the principal antagonists would seem to support Abba Eban's observation that

people are capable of acting rationally when they have exhausted all the other alternatives.

The Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation has far-reaching implications for the other dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Originally, the Arab states got involved in the Palestine conflict out of a sense of solidarity with the Palestine Arabs against the Zionist intruders. Continuing commitment to the Palestinian cause has precluded the Arab states, with the notable exception of Egypt, from extending recognition to the Jewish state. One of the main functions of the Arab League which was established in Alexandria in 1945 was to assist the Palestinians in the struggle for Palestine. After 1948, the League became a forum for coordinating military policy and for waging political, economic and ideological warfare against the Jewish state. In 1974 the Arab League recognized the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Now that the PLO has formally recognized Israel, there is no longer any compelling reason for the Arab states to continue to reject her.

Clearly, an important taboo has been broken. PLO recognition of Israel legitimizes peace between the rest of the Arab world and Israel. It is an important landmark along the road to Arab recognition of Israel and the normalizing of relations with her. Egypt which was first to take the plunge back in the late 1970s feels vindicated and elated by the breakthrough it helped to bring about. When Mr Rabin stopped in Rabat on his way home from Washington, he was received like any other visiting head of state by King Hassan II of Morocco. Jordan allowed Israeli television its first ever live report by one of its correspondents from Amman. A number of Arab states, like Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, are seriously thinking about the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. And the Arab League is actively considering the lifting of the economic boycott which has been in force since Israel's creation. Nothing is quite the same in the Arab world as a result of the Israel-PLO accord. The rules of the game in the entire Middle East have radically changed.

The change is no less marked in Israel's approach to her Arab opponents than in their approach to her. Zionist policy, before and after 1948, proceeded on the assumption that agreement on the partition of Palestine would be easier to achieve with the rulers of the neighbouring Arab states than with the Palestinian Arabs. Israel's courting of conservative Arab leaders, like King Hussein of Jordan and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, was an attempt to bypass the local Arabs, to avoid having to address the core issue of the conflict. Recognition by the Arab states, it was hoped, would enable Israel alleviate the conflict without conceding the right of national self-determination to the Palestinians. Now this strategy has been stood on its head. PLO recognition of Israel is expected to pave the way to wider recognition by the Arab states from North Africa to the Persian Gulf. And the agreement on Palestinian self-government, it is hoped, will be the anvil on which a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict will be forged.

The agreement ended the two-year-old deadlock in the American-sponsored Middle East peace talks which began at the Madrid conference in October 1991. The collapse of communism and the defeat of Arab radicalism in the Gulf War provided the backdrop to this renewed attempt to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute. In the bilateral talks which followed the Madrid conference, there were two tracks: an Israeli-Arab track and an Israeli-Palestinian track. The basis of the negotiations on both tracks was UN Security Council resolution 242 and the principle of swapping land for peace. But this principle was not accepted by Yitzhak Shamir, Likud leader and Israeli prime minister at the time. `Shamir', as Avishai Margalit presciently observed, `is not a bargainer. Shamir is a two-dimensional man. One dimension is the length of the Land of Israel, the second, its width. Since Shamir's historical vision is measured in inches, he won't give an inch.'¹

The Labour Party, under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, fought the August 1992

election on a programme of moving beyond peace talks to peace-making, with priority to the Palestinian track, and it won a decisive victory. But the change of government in Israel did not yield the longed-for breakthrough in the talks with the Palestinians because Rabin's initial offer of Palestinian autonomy did not differ markedly from that of his predecessor. Rabin also continued to shun the PLO and to pin his hopes on the local leaders from the occupied territories whom he considered to be more moderate and more pragmatic. He saw Arafat as the main obstacle to a deal on Palestinian autonomy in the occupied territories and did his best to marginalize him. By the spring of this year, however, the peace talks reached a dead end and Rabin concluded that the local leaders were little more than messengers of the PLO and that if he wanted a deal, he would have to cut it with his arch-enemy.

While the peace talks were going nowhere slowly, the security situation on the ground deteriorated rapidly. True to his reputation as a security hawk, Rabin resorted to draconian measures. In December 1992, following the abduction and murder of an Israeli border policeman, Rabin ordered the deportation of over 400 Hamas activists to Lebanon. Hamas is the Islamic resistance movement which is vehemently opposed to any compromise with the Jewish state. The brutal and arbitrary deportation of the Hamas activists, however, only increased popular support for the movement in the occupied territories at the expense of the PLO.

At a fairly early stage in the negotiations, Rabin was inclined to ditch the Palestinians altogether and to strike a deal with Syria. Having embarked on the peace talks with a Syria-last position, he became a convert to a Syria-first position. The bilateral talks between Syria and Israel in Washington revealed that Syria, once the standard-bearer of radical Pan-Arabism, is now ready for total peace with Israel in return for total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Rabin therefore had to choose between a deal with Syria which entailed complete withdrawal and the dismantling of Jewish settlements on the Golan Heights and a deal with the PLO on interim self-government for a period of five years which did not entail any immediate territorial compromise or the dismantling of Jewish settlements. He chose the latter.

Rabin knew that Shimon Peres, his foreign minister and political rival, had established a secret channel for informal talks with PLO officials in Norway back in January. The key players in these talks were two Israeli academics, Dr Yair Hirschfeld and Dr Ron Pundak and PLO treasurer, Ahmed Suleiman Khoury, better known as Abu Alaa. The Norwegian foreign minister and a Norwegian social scientist acted as generous hosts and gentle mediators. At first Rabin showed little interest in these secret talks. But in the course of the summer the talks made considerable progress, away from the glare of publicity and political pressures. It became clear that the PLO was bankrupt, divided and on the verge of collapse and therefore ready to settle for considerably less than the official Palestinian negotiators in Washington. Two senior officials from the Foreign Ministry were asked to accompany the capable amateurs and the negotiations began in earnest. Rabin and Peres directed the talks from Jerusalem while Arafat directed them from Tunis. Altogether 15 sessions of talks were held over an eight-month period, all behind a thick veil of secrecy. Even the official Israeli and Palestinian delegations were not informed about the secret channel which eventually produced the greatest political coup in the region's modern history.

The Declaration of Principles for Palestinian self-government is essentially an agenda for negotiations, governed by a tight timetable, rather than a full-blown agreement. Within two months of the signing ceremony, agreement on Israel's military withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho should be reached and within four months the withdrawal should be completed. A Palestinian police force, made up mostly of pro-Arafat Palestinian fighters, will be imported to maintain internal order in Gaza and Jericho, with Israel retaining overall responsibility for defence and foreign affairs. At the same time, elsewhere in the West Bank, Israel will transfer

power to 'authorized Palestinians' in five spheres: education, health, social welfare, direct taxation and tourism. Within nine months, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are to hold elections to a Palestinian Council to take office and assume responsibility for most government functions except defence and foreign affairs. Within two years Israel and the Palestinians commence negotiations on the final status of the territories and at the end of five years the permanent settlement comes into force.

The shape of the permanent settlement is not specified in the Declaration of Principles but is left to negotiations between the two parties during the second stage. The Declaration is completely silent on vital issues such as the right of return of the 1948 refugees, the borders of the Palestinian entity, the future of the Jewish settlements on the West Bank and Gaza and the status of Jerusalem. The reason for this silence is not hard to understand: if these issues had been addressed, there would have been no accord. Both sides took a calculated risk, realizing that a great deal will depend on the way the experiment in Palestinian self-government works out in practice. Mr Rabin is strongly opposed to an independent Palestinian state but he favours an eventual Jordanian-Palestinian confederation. Mr Arafat is even more strongly committed to an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, but he has not ruled out the idea of a confederation with Jordan.

On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, the Rabin-Arafat deal has provoked strong and vociferous opposition on the part of the hard-liners. Both leaders have been accused of a betrayal and a sell-out. Leaders of the Likud and of the nationalistic parties further to the right have attacked Mr Rabin for his abrupt departure from the bipartisan policy of refusing to negotiate with the PLO and charged him with abandoning the 120,000 settlers in the occupied territories to the tender mercies of terrorists. The Gaza-Jericho plan they denounced as a bridgehead to a Palestinian state and the beginning of the end of Greater Israel. A Gallup poll, however, confirmed growing support for the prime minister. Of the 1,000 Israelis polled, 65 per cent said they approved of the peace accord, with only 13 per cent describing themselves as 'very much against'.

The Knesset approved the accord, at the end of a debate which stretched over three days, by 61 votes for, 50 against and nine abstentions. During the debate, the right appeared more seriously divided on the peace issue than the centre-left coalition which was backed by five Arab members of the Knesset. The margin of victory, much greater than expected, was a boost to Mr Rabin and his peace policy. Given the importance he attaches to having a 'Jewish majority' for his policy, he was greatly reassured by the fact that more Jewish members voted for than against. The vote gave him a clear mandate to proceed with the implementation of the Gaza-Jericho plan.

Within the Palestinian camp the accord has also encountered loud but so far ineffective opposition. The PLO itself was split, with the radical nationalists accusing Arafat of abandoning principles to grab power. They include the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, led by George Habash, and the Damascus-based Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, led by Nayef Hawatmeh. Arafat succeeded in mustering the necessary majority in favour of the deal on the PLO's 18-member Executive Committee but only after a bruising battle and the resignation of four of his colleagues. Outside the PLO, the deal aroused the implacable wrath of the militant resistance movements, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who regard any compromise with the Jewish state as anathema.

Opposition to the deal from rejectionist quarters, whether secular or religious, was only to be expected. More disturbing is the opposition of mainstream figures like Farouk Kaddoumi, the PLO 'foreign minister' and prominent intellectuals like Professor Edward Said and the poet Mahmoud Darwish. Some of the criticisms relate to Arafat's autocratic and secretive style of

management. Others relate to the substance of the deal. The most basic criticism is that the deal negotiated by Arafat does not carry the promise, let alone a guarantee, of an independent Palestinian state.

This criticism takes various forms. Farouk Kaddoumi argued that the deal compromised the basic national rights of the Palestinian people. Edward Said wrote in The Guardian on 9 September: 'All secret deals between a very strong and a very weak partner necessarily involve concessions hidden in embarrassment by the latter.' 'Gaza and Jericho first ... and last' was Mahmoud Darwish's damning verdict on the deal.

There is no denying that the Palestinians have made painful concessions and that the road ahead is fraught with pitfalls, obstacles and dangers. But it is the only road that might eventually lead them to statehood. State-building is a slow and arduous process and the most difficult part is the beginning. When the Peel Commission proposed a tiny Jewish state in 1937, Chaim Weizmann, the veteran Zionist leader, thought 'the Jews would be fools not to accept it even if it is the size of a table-cloth.' The Palestinians too would be fools not to accept the offer of a patch of territory they can call their own, even though it is the size of Mr Arafat's keffiyeh. Mr Arafat and his colleagues have pulled off a major diplomatic coup. They now face the much greater challenge of building the institutions of a state from the ground up in the occupied territories. Success in carrying out this task may generate the momentum that would eventually carry them forward to full statehood after the five-year interim period of self-government. There are no short-cuts.

Arab reactions to the Israeli-Palestinian accord have been rather mixed. Mr Arafat got a polite but cool reception from the 19 foreign ministers of the Arab League who met in Cairo a week after the signing ceremony in Washington. Some member states of the League, especially Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, were dismayed by the PLO's solo diplomacy which violated Arab pledges to coordinate their negotiating strategy. Mr Arafat defended his decision to sign the accord by presenting it as the first step towards a more comprehensive peace in the Middle East. The interim agreement, he said, is only the first step towards a final settlement of the Palestinian problem and of the Arab-Israeli conflict which would involve Israeli withdrawal from all the occupied territories, including 'Holy Jerusalem.' He sought to justify his resort to a secret channel by arguing that the almost two years of public negotiations under US sponsorship had reached a dead end. The Arab foreign ministers agreed with Mr Arafat that the accord was an important first step, even if they were not all agreed on the next step or the final destination.

Jordan is the country most directly affected by the Israel-PLO accord. A day after this accord was presented to the world, in a much more modest ceremony in the State Department, the representatives of Jordan and Israel signed a common agenda for detailed negotiations aimed at a comprehensive peace treaty. This document bears the personal stamp of King Hussein, the king of realism who has steered his country through numerous regional crises since he ascended the throne forty years ago. In 1988 the king turned over to the PLO the territorial claim to the West Bank which Jordan had lost to Israel in the June 1967 war. In 1991, when the Madrid conference convened, he took the Palestinian negotiators into the peace talks as part of a joint delegation. The Jordanian-Israeli agenda was ready for signature last October, but the king preferred to wait until progress had been made between Israel and the Palestinians. Great therefore was his anger when he found out that the PLO chairman had kept him in the dark about his secret negotiations with Israel.

Even after the king had studied the Israel-PLO accord and given it his public endorsement, his attitude remained somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he felt vindicated, having argued all along that the Arabs would have to come to terms with Israel. On the other hand, the new unholy alliance between the PLO and Israel threatens Jordan's traditional position

as 'the best of enemies' with Israel. If Israel and the Palestinian entity become close economic partners, the result could be inflation and unemployment on the East Bank, leading to political instability. More than half of Jordan's 3.9 million people are Palestinian. If, for whatever reason, there is an influx of Palestinians from the West Bank to the East Bank, the pressure will grow to transform the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan into the republic of Palestine. In short, Jordan's very survival as a separate state could be called into question.

The Israel-PLO accord also affects Jordan's progress towards democracy. This process got under way with the elections of November 1989 and it provides the most effective answer to the challenge of the Muslim Brotherhood. Another election was scheduled for 8 November. Now, thanks to Mr Arafat's deal, some Palestinians could end up voting for two legislatures, one in Amman and one in Jericho. As constitutional expert Mustapha Hamarneh explained to a foreign journalist: 'These are extremely challenging times for Jordan. Yasser Arafat did not pull a rabbit out of his hat, but a damned camel.'²

Under the initial shock of the Israel-PLO accord, King Hussein gave a clear signal of his intention to postpone November's national elections. Israeli assurances given at a secret meeting appear to lie behind the subsequent decision to go ahead as planned. Personal diplomacy had always played a crucial part in the conduct of relations between Jordan and Israel. Countless meetings had taken place across the battle lines between the 'plucky little king', as Hussein used to be called, and Israel's Labour leaders after 1967. One source estimates that the king had clocked up over a hundred man-hours in conversations with Labour leaders. This figure presumably includes the time he spent with Mrs Golda Meir who had gained fame by her trip to Amman in May 1948, disguised as an Arab woman, in a vain attempt to persuade King Abdullah, Hussein's grandfather, not to join in the Arab invasion of the soon to be born Jewish state.

This time, too, the political overture for a high-level meeting came from the Israeli side. The Israeli daily newspaper, *Ma'ariv*, quoted intelligence reports which said that the king felt 'cheated and neglected' over the accord. 'King Hussein's political world has collapsed around him and the most direct means are required to calm him down', Mr Rabin was reportedly advised. Mr Rabin spent several hours aboard the royal yacht in the Red Sea resort of Aqaba on Sunday, 26 September, conferring with the king and his advisers. Mr Rabin is said to have assured the king that Israel remains firmly committed to upholding his regime, that Jordanian interests will be protected in dealing with the Palestinian issue, and that future peace strategy would be closely coordinated with Jordan.

The other key 'front-line' leader, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria, greeted the Israel-PLO accord with coolness verging on hostility and gave free rein to the dissident Palestinian groups based in Damascus to attack it. President Assad is a cold and calculating realist, the Bismarck of the Middle East. His political career has been dominated by the desire to regain the Golan heights which Syria lost to Israel when he was minister of defence in 1967 and by the wider geopolitical contest with Israel for mastery in the region. Assad agreed to participate in the peace process started at Madrid but insisted all along on a unified Arab front leading to related peace treaties. For most of the last year, it looked as if Syria would lead the way. Now Syria has been upstaged by the PLO.

Assad feels that by going off secretly on his own and striking a separate deal, Mr Arafat has played into the hands of Mr Rabin who prefers to deal with the Arab partners individually and not as a bloc. Assad even compared Arafat's actions to those of Anwar Sadat whose separate deal with Israel led to Egypt's isolation and vilification in the Arab world for nearly a decade. Israel alone benefits from the new deal, according to Assad. He suspects that Israel made this deal with a weak PLO in order to draw Jordan next into its orbit, isolate Syria, and

consolidate its own regional hegemony.

As the spoiler of plans which are not to his liking, President Assad is greatly to be feared. But he has also made it clear that he is ready for full peace with Israel in return for full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. He also holds the key to a peace settlement between Israel and Lebanon by virtue of his position as the supreme arbiter of Lebanese politics. Both he and Mr Rabin are playing for very big stakes. The next move is up to Mr Rabin.

Upon his return home from the historic meeting in Washington, Mr Rabin indicated that he wanted to go slow on the Syrian front to give Israelis a chance to digest the sudden turn-about in their relations with the Palestinians. This would suggest a static policy of consolidating the new status quo which he knows to be unacceptable to Syria. But there is an alternative policy which Mr Peres is known to favour: that of moving at full speed on the Syrian track in order to widen the accord with the PLO into a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Such a policy could help start a new political dynamic in the Middle East. If Syria and Lebanon make peace with Israel, most of the remaining Arab states will sooner or later follow suit. Militant Islamic movements which thrive on the conflict between Israel and the Arabs would lose much of their appeal. The renegade regimes of Iraq and Libya would be encircled and Iran's capacity for causing mischief would be largely neutralized. Above all, an important foundation of Arab authoritarianism will disappear. For nearly half a century, the conflict with Israel has been used by Arab soldiers and strongmen to capture and retain power. Israel, on the other hand, likes to present itself as 'a light unto the nations', as a shining example of democracy amidst a sea of authoritarianism. Now that it has reached an accord with the Palestinians, Israel is better placed to contribute to peace, stability and democracy throughout the region. And Mr Rabin has his big chance to go down in history not only as a great soldier, but also as a great statesman and peace-maker.

¹ Avishai Margalit, 'The Violent Life of Yitzhak Shamir', New York Review of Books, 14 May 1992.

² International Herald Tribune, 18-19 September 1993.