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The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process

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OVERVIEW

One of the salient strands in the International Relations of the Middle East in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War was the American-sponsored peace process between Israel and the Arabs. On the Arab side the principal participants were Syria, Jordan and the Palestinians. This chapter focuses on the two principal parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict—Israel and the Palestinians. It traces the emergence, the development and the breakdown of the peace negotiations between Israel and the PLO from 1991 to 2001. The main landmarks in this process are the conclusion of the Oslo accord, the implementation of the accord, Oslo II, the

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Camp David summit and the return to violence. The main conclusion is that the Oslo accord was not doomed to failure from the start: it failed because Israel, under the leadership of the Likud, reneged on its side of the deal.

Introduction

The Middle East is the most penetrated sub-system of the international political system. Ever since Napoleon's expeditionary force landed in Egypt in 1798, it has been an object of rivalry among the great powers. The strategic value of the Middle East was considerable as the gateway between Europe and the Far East. The discovery of oil, in the early part of the twentieth century, enhanced the region's importance for the global economy. After World War II, the Middle East became one of the major theatres of the Cold War. It was constantly caught up in super-power rivalry for political influence, power and prestige. External sources of conflict combined with internal ones to produce frequent crises, violence and wars. One of the most destabilising factors in the affairs of the region is the dispute between Israel and the Arabs.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the most bitter, protracted and intractable conflicts of modern times. It is also one of the dominant themes in the International Relations of the Middle East. There are two principal levels to this conflict: the inter-state level and the Israeli-Palestinian level. In origin and in essence this is a clash between the Jewish and Palestinian national movements over the land of Palestine. The Palestine problem therefore remains the core of the conflict. But the search for a settlement is complicated by inter-Arab relations and by the involvement of outside powers. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the peace process that got under way in the aftermath of the Gulf War and, more specifically, the quest for a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Peace Process

The United States took the lead in convening an international conference to address the Arab-Israeli dispute following the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait. The conference was held in Madrid at the end of October 1991. At the conference the US adopted an even-handed approach and pledged to promote a settlement that would provide security for Israel and justice to the Palestinians. Negotiations were to be based on UN resolution 242 of November 1967 and the principle of land for peace that it incorporated.

All the parties to the conflict were invited to Madrid but the PLO was excluded on account of its support for Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990.

The Palestinian delegation was made up of residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip who went to Madrid not as an independent delegation but as part of a joint delegation with Jordan. Jordan thus provided an umbrella for Palestinian participation in the peace talks. Although the PLO leadership in Tunis was formally banned from attending this major international gathering, the Palestinian negotiators kept in close touch with their colleagues in Tunis.

The Israeli delegation to Madrid was headed by Prime Minister Itzhak Shamir, the leader of the right-wing Likud party. Whereas Labour is a pragmatic party committed to territorial compromise, the Likud is an ideological party committed to maintaining the West Bank as part of the ancestral Land of Israel. At Madrid Shamir struck a tough and uncompromising posture. By arguing that the basic problem was not territory but the Arab denial of Israel's very right to exist, he came close to rejecting the principle of swapping land for peace.

Two tracks for negotiations were established in Madrid: an Israeli-Arab track and an Israeli Palestinian track. Stage two of the peace process consisted of bilateral negotiations between Israel and individual Arab parties. These bilateral talks were held under American auspices in Washington, starting in January 1992. Several rounds of negotiations were held in the American capital, but as long as the Likud remained in power little progress was made on either track. It was only after the Labour's victory over the Likud in June 1992 that the Israeli position began to be modified, at least on the Arab track. On the Palestinian issue the Israeli position displayed more continuity than change following the rise of the Labour government under the leadership of Itzhak Rabin. Consequently, the official talks between the Israeli and Palestinian delegations in Washington made painfully slow progress.

The Road to Oslo

Stalemate in the official talks led both Israel and the PLO to seek a back channel for communicating. The decision to hold direct talks with the PLO was a diplomatic revolution in Israel's foreign policy and paved the way to the Oslo accord of 13 September 1993. Three men were primarily responsible for this decision: Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, the foreign minister and Yossi Beilin, the youthful deputy foreign minister. Rabin held out against direct talks with the PLO for as long as he could. Peres took the view that without the PLO there could be no settlement. Expecting the PLO to enable the local Palestinian leaders to reach an agreement with Israel, he said on one occasion, was like expecting the turkey to help in preparing the Thanksgiving dinner. As long as Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the PLO, remained in Tunis, he argued, he represented the 'outsiders', the Palestinian diaspora, and he would do his best to slow down the peace talks.¹

Yossi Beilin was even more categorical in his view that talking to the PLO was a necessary condition for an agreement with the Palestinians. Beilin had always

belonged to the extreme dovish wing of the Labour Party. He was the real architect behind the Israeli recognition of the PLO. Peres backed him all the way and the two of them succeeded in carrying their hesitant and suspicious senior colleague with them.

The secret talks in Oslo got under way in late January 1993 with the active encouragement of Yossi Beilin who kept Shimon Peres fully informed. Altogether, fourteen sessions of talks were held over an eight-month period, all behind a thick veil of secrecy. Norwegian foreign affairs minister Johan Joergen Holst and social scientist Terge Rød Larsen acted as generous hosts and facilitators. The key players were two Israeli academics, Dr Yair Hirschfeld and Dr Ron Pundik, and PLO treasurer Ahmad Qurei, better known as Abu Ala. Away from the glare of publicity and political pressures, these three men worked imaginatively and indefatigably to establish the conceptual framework of the Israel-PLO accord. Their discussions ran parallel to the bilateral talks in Washington but they proceeded without the knowledge of the official Israeli and Palestinian negotiators.

The unofficial talks dealt initially with economic cooperation but quickly broadened into a dialogue about a joint declaration of principles. In May, Peres took a highly significant decision: he ordered Uri Savir, the director-general of the foreign ministry, and Yoel Singer, a high-flying attorney who had spent twenty years in the IDF legal department, to join Hirschfeld and Pundik on the weekend trips to Oslo. At this point Peres began to report to Rabin regularly on developments in the Norwegian back-channel. At first Rabin showed little interest in this channel but he raised no objection to continuing the explorations either. Gradually, however, he became more involved in the details and assumed an active role in directing the talks alongside Peres. Since Abu Ala reported directly to Arafat, an indirect line of communication had been established between Jerusalem and the PLO headquarters in Tunis.

Another landmark in the progress of the talks was the failure of the tenth round of the official Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Washington. To tempt the Palestinians to move forward, Peres floated the idea of 'Gaza first'. He believed that Arafat was desperate for a concrete achievement to bolster his sagging political fortunes and that Gaza would provide him with his first toehold in the occupied territories. Peres also knew that an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza would be greeted with sighs of relief among the great majority of his countrymen. Arafat, however, did not swallow the bait, suspecting an Israeli plan to confine the dream of Palestinian independence to the narrow strip of territory stretching from Gaza City to Rafah. The idea was attractive to some Palestinians, especially the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, but not to the politicians in Tunis. Rather than reject the Israeli offer out of hand, Yasser Arafat came up with a counter offer of his own: Gaza and Jericho first. His choice of the small and sleepy West Bank town seemed quirky at first sight but it served as a symbol of his claim to the whole of the West Bank.

Rabin did not balk at the counter offer. All along he had supported handing over Jericho to Jordanian rule while keeping the Jordan Valley in Israeli hands. But he had one condition: the Palestinian foothold on the West Bank would be an island inside

Israeli-controlled territory with the Allenby Bridge also remaining in Israeli hands. Jordan, too, preferred Israel to the Palestinians at the other end of the bridge. Arafat therefore had to settle for the Israeli version of the 'Gaza and Jericho first' plan.

Rabin's conversion to the idea of a deal with the PLO was clinched by four evaluations which reached him between the end of May and July. First was the advice of Itamar Rabinovich, the head of the Israeli delegation to the talks with Syria, that a settlement with Syria was attainable but only at the cost of complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Second were the reports from various quarters that the local Palestinian leadership had been finally neutralised. Third was the assessment of the IDF director of military intelligence that Arafat's dire situation, and possibly imminent collapse, made him the most convenient interlocutor for Israel at that particular juncture. Fourth were the reports of the impressive progress achieved through the Oslo channel. Other reports that reached Rabin during this period pointed to an alarming growth in the popular following of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the occupied territories. Both the army chiefs and the internal security chiefs repeatedly stressed to him the urgency of finding a political solution to the crisis in the relations between Israel and the inhabitants of the occupied territories. Rabin therefore gave the green light to the Israeli team and the secret diplomacy in Oslo moved into higher gear.

Rabin and Peres also believed that progress towards a settlement with the Palestinians would lower the price of a settlement with Syria by reducing the latter's bargaining power. Peres reduced the link between the two sets of negotiations to what he called 'the bicycle principle': when one presses on one pedal, the other pedal moves by itself. His formula was not directed at reaching a separate agreement with the Palestinians but at gradual movement towards a settlement with the Palestinians, the Syrians and the Jordanians.

On 23 August, Rabin stated publicly for the first time that 'there would be no escape from recognising the PLO.' In private, he elaborated on the price that Israel could extract in exchange for this recognition. In his estimate, the PLO was 'on the ropes' and it was therefore highly probable that the PLO would drop some of its sacred principles to secure Israeli recognition. Accordingly, while endorsing the joint declaration of principles on Palestinian self-government in Gaza and Jericho and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, he insisted on changes to the Palestinian National Charter as part of the package deal.

Peres flew to California to explain the accord to the US Secretary of State, Warren Christopher. Christopher was surprised by the scope of the accord and by the unorthodox method by which it had been achieved. He naturally assumed that America had a monopoly over the peace process. His aides in the State Department had come to be called 'the peace processors'. Now their feathers were ruffled because they had been so thoroughly upstaged by the Norwegians. All the participants in the Oslo back-channel, on the other hand, had the satisfaction of knowing that they had reached the accord on their own without any help from the State Department. Their success showed that the fate of the peace process lay in the hands of the protagonists rather than in the hands of the intermediaries.

The Oslo Accord

The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements was essentially an agenda for negotiations, governed by a tight timetable, rather than a full-blown agreement. The Declaration laid down that 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, was to be imported to maintain internal security in Gaza and Jericho, with Israel retaining overall responsibility for external security and foreign affairs. At the same time, elsewhere in the West Bank, Israel undertook to transfer power to 'authorised Palestinians' in five spheres: education, health, social welfare, direct taxation and tourism. Within nine months, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were 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 agreed to commence negotiations on the final status of the territories, and at the end of five years the permanent settlement was to come into force.² In short, the Declaration of Principles promised to set in motion a process that would end Israeli rule over the two million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

The shape of the permanent settlement was not specified in the Declaration of Principles but was left to negotiations between the two parties during the second stage. The Declaration was 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, realising that a great deal would depend on the way the experiment in Palestinian self-government worked out in practice. Rabin was strongly opposed to an independent Palestinian state but he favoured an eventual Jordanian-Palestinian confederation. Arafat was strongly committed to an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, but he did not rule out the idea of a confederation with Jordan.

Despite all its limitations and ambiguities, the Declaration of Principles for Palestinian self-government in Gaza and Jericho marked a major breakthrough in the century-old conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. On Monday, 13 September 1993, the Declaration was signed on the South Lawn of the White House and sealed with the historic hand-shake between Prime Minister Rabin and Chairman Arafat.

The Oslo accord consisted of two parts, both of which were the product of secret diplomacy in the Norwegian capital. The first part consisted of mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. It took the form of two letters, on plain paper and without letterheads, signed by chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Rabin respectively on 9 and 10 September. Nearly all the publicity focused on the signing of the

Declaration of Principles, but without the mutual recognition there could have been no meaningful agreement on Palestinian self-government.

In his letter to Rabin, Arafat observed that the signing of the Declaration of Principles marked a new era in the history of the Middle East. He then confirmed the PLO's commitment to recognise Israel's right to live in peace and security, to accept United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, to renounce the use of terrorism and other acts of violence and to change those parts of the Palestinian National Charter which were inconsistent with these commitments. In his terse, one-sentence reply to Arafat, Rabin confirmed that in the light of these commitments, the Government of Israel decided to recognise the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and to commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process.

Taken together, the two parts of the Oslo accord seemed at the time to merit the over-worked epithet 'historic' because they reconciled the two principal parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The clash between Jewish and Palestinian nationalism had always been the heart and core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Both national movements, Jewish and Palestinian, denied the other the right to self-determination in Palestine. Their history was one of mutual denial and mutual rejection. Now mutual denial made way for mutual recognition. Israel not only recognised the Palestinians as a people with political rights but formally recognised the PLO as its representative. The handshake between Rabin and Arafat at the signing ceremony, despite the former's awkward body language, 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 accepted territorial compromise as the basis for the settlement of their long and bitter conflict. By accepting the principle of partition, the two sides suspended 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 cramped living space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean sea. Each side resigned itself to parting with territory that it had previously regarded not only as its patrimony but as a vital part of its national identity. Each side was driven to this historic compromise by the recognition that it lacked the power to impose its own vision on the other side. That the idea of partition was finally accepted by the two sides seemed to support Abba Eban's observation that men and nations often behave wisely once they have exhausted all the other alternatives.³

The breakthrough at Oslo was achieved by separating the interim settlement from the final settlement. In the past the Palestinians had always refused to consider any interim agreement unless the principles of the permanent settlement were agreed in advance. Israel on the other hand, had insisted that a five-year transition period should begin without a prior agreement about the nature of the permanent settlement. At Oslo the PLO accepted the Israeli formula. In contrast to the official Palestinian position in Washington, the PLO agreed to a five-year transition period without clear commitments by Israel as to the nature of the permanent settlement.⁴

Reactions to Oslo

The Israeli-PLO accord had far-reaching implications for the inter-state 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 had 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 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 recognised the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Now that the PLO had formally recognised Israel, there was no longer any compelling reason for the Arab states to continue to reject her.

Clearly, an important taboo had been broken. PLO recognition of Israel was an important landmark along the road to Arab recognition of Israel and the normalising of relations with her. Egypt, which was first to take the plunge back in the late 1970s, felt vindicated and elated by the breakthrough. When Rabin stopped in Rabat on his way home after attending the signing ceremony in Washington, he was received like any other visiting head of state by King Hassan II of Morocco. Jordan allowed Israeli television the first ever live report by one of its correspondents from Amman. A number of Arab states, like Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, started thinking seriously about the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. And the Arab League began discussions on the lifting of the economic boycott which had been in force since Israel's creation. Nothing was 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 had changed radically.

The change was 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 Palestine 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, and avoid having to address the core issue of the conflict. Recognition by the Arab states, it was hoped, would help to alleviate the conflict without conceding the right of national self-determination to the Palestinians. Now this strategy was reversed. PLO recognition of Israel was expected to pave the way for wider recognition by the Arab states from North Africa to the Persian Gulf. Rabin expressed this hope when signing the letter to Arafat in which Israel recognised the PLO. 'I believe', he said, 'that there is a great opportunity of changing not only the relations between the Palestinians and Israel, but to expand it to the solution of the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries and other Arab peoples'.⁵

On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, the Rabin-Arafat deal provoked strong and vociferous opposition on the part of the hard-liners. Both leaders were accused of a betrayal and a sell-out. Leaders of the Likud, and of the nationalistic parties further to the right, attacked 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 was denounced as a bridgehead to a Palestinian state and the beginning of the end of Greater Israel. A Gallup poll, however, indicated considerable popular 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'.⁶

Within the Palestinian camp the accord also encountered loud but ineffective opposition. The PLO itself was split, with the radical nationalists accusing Arafat of abandoning principles to grab power. They included 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 eighteen-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 regarded 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 was 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 related to Arafat's autocratic, idiosyncratic and secretive style of management. Others related to the substance of the deal. The most basic criticism was that the deal negotiated by Arafat did not carry the promise, let alone a guarantee, of an independent Palestinian state.

This criticism took various forms. Farouk Kaddoumi argued that the deal compromised the basic national rights of the Palestinian people as well as the individual rights of the 1948 refugees. Edward Said lambasted Arafat for unilaterally cancelling the *intifada*, for failing to coordinate his moves with the Arab states, and for introducing appalling disarray within the ranks of the PLO. 'The PLO', wrote Said, 'has transformed itself from a national liberation movement into a kind of small-town government, with the same handful of people still in command'. For the deal itself, Said had nothing but scorn. 'All secret deals between a very strong and a very weak partner necessarily involve concessions hidden in embarrassment by the latter', he wrote. 'The deal before us', he continued, 'smacks of the PLO leadership's exhaustion and isolation, and of Israel's shrewdness'.⁷ 'Gaza and Jericho first . . . and last' was Mahmoud Darwish's damning verdict on the deal.

Arab reactions to the Israeli-Palestinian accord were rather mixed. Arafat got a polite but cool reception from the nineteen 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 chairman's solo diplomacy which violated Arab pledges to coordinate their negotiating strategy. 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, was 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 justified his resort to a secret channel by arguing that the almost two years of public negotiations under US sponsorship had reached a dead end. Some of the Arab foreign ministers agreed with the PLO chairman that the accord was an important first step, even if they were not all agreed on the next step or the final destination.

Implementing the Declaration of Principles

Two committees were set up in early October 1993 to negotiate the implementation of the lofty-sounding declaration signed in Washington. The first committee was chaired by Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas, the leader who signed the declaration on behalf of the PLO. This ministerial-level committee was supposed to meet in Cairo every two or three weeks. The other committee, the nuts and bolts committee, consisted of experts who were supposed to meet for two or three days each week in the Egyptian resort of Taba on the Red Sea. The heads of the delegations to these talks were Nabil Sha'ath and Major-General Amnon Lipkin-Shahak the number-two man in the IDF and head of its military intelligence. The two sides managed to hammer out an agenda and formed two groups of experts, one to deal with military affairs, the other with the transfer of authority.

The IDF officers took a generally tough line in the negotiations. These officers had been excluded from the secret talks in the Norwegian capital and they felt bitter at having not been consulted about the security implications of the accord. Chief of staff Ehud Barak believed that in their haste to secure their place in history, the politicians had conceded too much to the PLO and that when the time came to implement the agreement, it would be the responsibility of the army to tackle the security problems.

Underlying the labyrinthine negotiations at Taba, there was a basic conceptual divide. The Israeli representatives wanted a gradual and strictly limited transfer of powers while maintaining overall responsibility for security in the occupied territories in their own hands. They wanted to repackage rather than end Israel's military occupation. The Palestinians wanted an early and extensive transfer of power to enable them to start laying the foundations for an independent state. They were anxious to get rid of the Israeli occupation and they struggled to gain every possible symbol of sovereignty. As a result of this basic conceptual divide the Taba negotiations plunged repeatedly into crisis and took considerably longer to complete than the two months allowed for in the original timetable.

After four months of wrangling, an agreement was reached in the form of two documents, one on general principles, and the other on border crossings. The two documents were initialled by Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat in Cairo on 9 February 1994. Although the Cairo agreement was tactfully presented as a compromise solution, it was a compromise that tilted very heavily towards the Israeli position. The IDF had managed to impose its own conception of the interim period: specific steps to transfer limited powers to the Palestinians without giving up Israel's overall responsibility for security. The IDF undertook to redeploy rather than withdraw its forces in the Gaza Strip and Jericho. The Cairo agreement gave the IDF full authority over Gaza's three settlement blocs, the four lateral roads joining them to the Green Line and 'the relevant territory overlooking them'. The outstanding feature of the agreement was thus to allow the IDF to maintain a military presence in and around the area earmarked for Palestinian self-government and to retain full responsibility for external security and control of the land crossings to Egypt and Jordan. Despite these serious limitations, the Cairo agreement formed a first step in regulating the withdrawal of the Israeli Civil Administration and secret services from Gaza and Jericho.

Another round of negotiations resulted in an agreement which was signed by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in Cairo on 4 May. The Cairo agreement wrapped up the Gaza-Jericho negotiations and set the terms for expanding Palestinian self-government to the rest of the West Bank. Expansion was to take place in three stages. First, responsibility for tourism, education and culture, health, social welfare and direct taxation was to be transferred from Israel's Civil Administration to the Palestinian National Authority. Second, Israel was to redeploy its armed forces away from 'Palestinian population centres'. Third, elections were due to take place throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a new authority.

The Cairo document was billed by both sides as an agreement to divorce after twenty-seven years of unhappy coexistence in which the stronger partner forced the weaker to live under its yoke. This was true in the sense that Israel secured a separate legal system and separate water, electricity and roads for the Jewish settlements. It was not true in the sense that the document gave the stronger party firm control over the new relationship.

The Cairo document stressed repeatedly the need for cooperation, coordination and harmonisation in the new relationship. A large number of liaison committees, most of which were to have an equal number of representatives from the two sides, gave a superficial appearance of parity. But this parity was undermined in favour of the stronger partner by the fact that Israeli occupation laws and military orders were to remain in force unless amended or abrogated by mutual agreement. What this meant in practice was that any issue that could not be resolved by negotiation would be subject to the provisions of Israeli law rather than that of international law. This was a retreat from the Palestinian demand that international law, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention, should be the source of legislation and jurisdiction during the transition period.

A week after the Cairo document was signed, a token force of thirty Palestinian policemen entered the Gaza Strip from Egypt to assume control for internal security from the retreating Israelis. This was the first tangible evidence that Israeli occupation was winding down. Until this point all the movement had been unilateral as the Israeli army redeployed its forces so as to provide continuing protection for the tiny community of Jewish settlers in the strip. Now a new Palestinian police force was to take charge of the nearby Palestinian population centres in accordance with a pre-arranged division of labour. The Israeli withdrawal was greeted with a sigh of relief at home and great joy and jubilation among the Gazans. As the last Israeli soldiers pulled out of their military camps in Rafah and Nusairat to a final barrage of stones, the Israeli flag was replaced by the flag of Palestine. A twenty-seven year old experiment in imposing Israeli rule over two million recalcitrant Arabs was symbolically and visibly nearing the end of its life.

The government's policy of controlled withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho enjoyed broad popular support. Hard as they tried, the leaders of the opposition failed to arouse the nation against the decisions of the government. As far as the government was concerned, the real paradox was that it needed a strong PLO to implement the Gaza-Jericho settlement, but a strong PLO could only reinforce the determination of the Palestinians to fight for a state of their own.

The government maintained its commitment to peace with the Palestinians despite the protests from the right and despite the terrorist attacks launched by Hamas and Islamic Jihad with the aim of derailing the peace talks. On 29 August 1994, the Agreement on Preparatory Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities was signed by Israel and the Palestinians. This agreement transferred powers to the Palestinian Authority in five specified spheres: education and culture, health, social welfare, direct taxation and tourism.

Oslo II

Negotiations on the Syrian track proceeded in parallel to those on the Palestinian track. Rabin's strategy was to decouple the Syrian track from the Palestinian, Jordanian and Lebanese tracks. He controlled the pace of the negotiations with Syria according to what was happening on the other tracks. The Americans offered their good offices in trying to broker a settlement with Syria. For Syria the key issue was full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights by which they meant a return to the armistice lines of 4 June 1967. The Israelis preferred withdrawal to the 1923 international border which was more favourable to them. In the second half of 1993 Rabin came close to accepting the Syrian condition if Syria met his demands, the four legs of the table as he used to call them. Besides withdrawal, the other three legs of the table were normalisation, security arrangements and a timetable for implementation. The Syrian response on these other points did not satisfy Rabin. Consequently,

although considerable progress was achieved by the two sides in narrowing down the differences, it was not sufficient to secure a breakthrough on the Syrian track.

Jordan was more directly affected by the Israel-PLO accord than any other Arab country because of its close association with the West Bank and because over half of its population is of Palestinian origin. A day after the 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 negotiations aimed at a comprehensive peace treaty. Its main components were borders and territorial matters, Jerusalem, water, security and refugees. The document bore the personal stamp of King Hussein who had been deeply involved in the quest for peace in the Middle East for the preceding quarter of a century. A year of intensive negotiations culminated in the signature of a peace treaty in the Arava desert on 26 October 1994. This was the second peace treaty concluded between Israel and an Arab country in fifteen years and the first to be signed in the region. The treaty between Israel and Egypt had been signed in 1979. But whereas Egypt had offered a cold peace, King Hussein offered Israel a warm peace.

On 28 September 1995, the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was signed in Washington by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in the presence of Bill Clinton, Hosni Mubarak and King Hussein of Jordan. It became popularly known as Oslo II. This agreement, which marked the conclusion of the first stage in the negotiations between Israel and the PLO, incorporated and superseded the Gaza-Jericho and the early empowerment agreements. The Interim Agreement was comprehensive in its scope and, with its various annexes, stretched to over 300 pages. From the point of view of changes on the ground, it was highly significant. It provided for elections to a Palestinian Council, the transfer of legislative authority to this Council, the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Palestinian centres of population, and the division of territories into three areas—A, B and C. Area A was under exclusive Palestinian control, area C under exclusive Israeli control and in area B the Palestinians exercised civilian authority while Israel continued to be in charge of security. Under the terms of this agreement, Israel yielded to the Palestinians control over nearly a third of the West Bank. Four per cent of the West Bank (including the towns of Jenin, Nablus, Kalkilya, Tulkarem, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron) were turned over to exclusive Palestinian control and another 25 per cent to administrative-civilian control. Oslo II marked the point of no return in the process of ending Israel's coercive control over the Palestinian people.

On 5 October, Yitzhak Rabin gave the Knesset a comprehensive survey of Oslo II and of the thinking behind it. His speech was repeatedly interrupted by catcalls from the benches of the opposition. Two Likud MKs opened black umbrellas, the symbols of Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Adolf Hitler at Munich. In the course of his speech, Rabin outlined his thinking for the permanent settlement: military presence but no annexation of the Jordan Valley; retention of the large blocks of settlements near the 1967 border; preservation of a united Jerusalem with respect for the rights of the other religions; and a Palestinian entity which would be less than a state and

whose territory would be demilitarised. The fact that Rabin sketched out the principles of the permanent settlement in a session devoted to the interim settlement suggested a strong interest in proceeding to the next stage.

The day that Knesset endorsed Oslo II by a majority of one, thousands of demonstrators gathered in Zion Square in Jerusalem. Binjamin Netanyahu, the leader of the Likud, was on the grandstand while the demonstrators displayed an effigy of Rabin in SS uniform. Netanyahu set the tone with an inflammatory speech. He called Oslo II a surrender agreement and accused Rabin of 'causing national humiliation by accepting the dictates of the terrorist Arafat'. A month later, on 4 November 1995, Rabin was assassinated by a religious-nationalist Jewish fanatic with the explicit aim of derailing the peace process. Rabin's demise, as the murderer expected, dealt a serious body blow to the entire peace process. Shimon Peres followed Rabin down the pot-holed road to peace with the Palestinians but his efforts were cut short by his electoral defeat in May 1996.

Declaration of War on the Peace Process

The return of power of the Likud under the leadership of Binyamin Netanyahu dealt another body blow to the Oslo peace process. From the very beginning the Likud had been bitterly opposed to the Labour government's land-for-peace deal with the PLO. Netanyahu himself repeatedly denounced the accord as a violation of the historic right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and as a mortal danger to their security. The foreign policy guidelines of his government expressed firm opposition to a Palestinian state, to the Palestinian right of return and to the dismantling of Jewish settlements. They also asserted Israel's sovereignty over the whole of Jerusalem and ruled out withdrawal from the Golan Heights. In the Arab world this programme was widely seen as a declaration of war on the peace process.

Netanyahu spent his two and a half years in power in a relentless attempt to arrest, freeze and subvert the Oslo accords. He kept preaching reciprocity while acting unilaterally in demolishing Arab houses, imposing curfews, confiscating Arab land, building new Jewish settlements and opening an archaeological tunnel near the Muslim holy places in the Old City of Jerusalem. Whereas the Oslo accord left Jerusalem to the final stage of the negotiations, Netanyahu made it the centrepiece of his programme in order to block progress on any other issue. His government waged an economic and political war of attrition against the Palestinians in order to lower their expectations.

Intense American pressure compelled Netanyahu to concede territory to the Palestinian Authority on two occasions. The Hebron Protocol was signed on 15 January 1997, dividing the city into a Palestinian zone and a Jewish zone. This was a milestone in the Middle East peace process, the first agreement signed by the Likud government and the Palestinians. The second agreement was brokered by President Bill Clinton at Wye Plantation in Maryland on 23 October 1998. By signing the Wye

River Memorandum, Netanyahu undertook to withdraw from a further 13 per cent of the West Bank in three stages over a period of three months. But a revolt of his ultra-nationalist and religious partners brought down the government after only one pullback. The fall of the government was inevitable because of the basic contradiction between its declared policy of striving for peace with the Arab world and its ideological makeup, which militated against trading land for peace.

Under the leadership of Ehud Barak the Labour Party won a landslide victory in the May 1999. Labour's return to power was widely expected to revive the moribund peace process. During the election campaign Barak presented himself as Rabin's disciple, as a soldier who turned from fighting the Arabs to peace-making. He was given a clear mandate to resume the quest for peace with all of Israel's neighbours. Within a short time, however, Barak dashed the hopes that had been pinned on him. He lacked the vision, the political courage and the personal qualities that were necessary to follow through on the peace partnership with the Palestinians. During his army days Barak used to be called Little Napoleon. In politics, too, his style was arrogant and authoritarian and he approached diplomacy as the extension of war by other means.

The greatest barrier on the road to peace with the Palestinians raised by Barak was the expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. Settlement activity is not contrary to the letter of the Oslo accord, but it is contrary to its spirit. True, settlement activity had gone on under all previous prime ministers, Labour as well as Likud. But under Barak settlement activity gathered pace: more houses were constructed, more Arab land was confiscated, and more access roads were built to isolated Jewish settlements. For the Palestinian population these settlements are not just a symbol of the hated occupation but a source of daily friction and a constant reminder of the danger to the territorial contiguity of their future state.

Another reason for the slowdown on the Palestinian track was the clear preference articulated by Barak for a deal with Syria first on the grounds that Syria was a serious military power whereas the Palestinians were not. During his first six months in power Barak concentrated almost exclusively on the Syrian track, leaving the Palestinians to twist in the wind. When the late Syrian President, Hafez al-Asad, rejected his final offer, Barak turned, belatedly and reluctantly, to the Palestinian track. His reservations about the Oslo accord were well known. He argued that the step-by-step approach of trading land for peace does not serve Israel's interests because the Palestinians will always come back for more. This made him wary of further interim agreements and prompted him to insist that the Palestinian Authority commit itself to an absolutely final end to the conflict.

Camp David

One more interim agreement was necessary, however, before taking the plunge to the final settlement. It took ten months to break the deadlock created by the Likud government's failure to implement the Wye River Memorandum. Once again, Barak

proved to be a tough negotiator, applying intense pressure on the Palestinians. His method was described as 'peace by ultimatum'. The accord that he and Yasser Arafat signed at Sharm el-Sheikh, on 4 September 1999, reflected the underlying balance of power between the two parties. It put in place a new timetable for the final status talks, aiming at a 'framework agreement' by February and a fully fledged peace treaty by 13 September 2000.

The February deadline fell by the wayside, fuelling frustration on the Palestinian side and prompting Arafat to threaten to issue a unilateral declaration of independence if no agreement could be reached. To forestall this eventuality, Barak persuaded President Clinton to convene a trilateral summit in the United States. With the announcement of the summit, Barak's chaotic coalition fell apart. Three parties quit the government, robbing him of his parliamentary majority on the eve of his departure for the summit. In a defiant speech, Barak told the Knesset that although he no longer commanded a majority, as the directly elected prime minister he still had a mandate to make peace. But Barak's domestic political weakness inevitably reduced the diplomatic room for manoeuvre that he enjoyed. Once again, as so often in the past, the peace process was held hostage to the vagaries of the Israeli political system.

Negotiations at Camp David started on 11 July 2000 and lasted fourteen days. Barak approached the summit meeting in the manner of a soldier rather than that of a diplomat. He dismissed Arafat's plea for more time to prepare the groundwork, believing that with the help of the American 'peace processors' he would be able to impose his terms for the final settlement on the opponent. In fairness to Barak it must be said that he crossed his own 'red lines' and put on the table a package which addressed all the issues at the heart of the conflict: land, settlements, refugee rights and Jerusalem.

Basically, Barak envisaged an independent Palestinian state over the whole of the Gaza Strip and most of the West Bank, but with the large settlement blocs next to the 1967 border being annexed to Israel. The Jordan Valley, long cherished as Israel's security border, would eventually be turned over to exclusive Palestinian sovereignty. Altogether 20.5 per cent of the West Bank was to remain in Israel's hands: 10.5 per cent to be annexed outright and 10 per cent to be under Israeli military occupation for twenty years. Barak agreed to the return of Palestinian refugees but only in the context of family reunification involving 500 people a year. On Jerusalem he went further than any previous Israeli prime minister, and indeed broke a taboo by agreeing to the partition of the city. But his offer fell well short of the Palestinian demand for exclusive sovereignty over all of the city's Arab suburbs and over Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.⁸ The problem with this package was that it was presented pretty much on a 'take it or leave it' basis. Moreover, Barak insisted that an agreement would mark the final end of the conflict, with the Palestinians formally renouncing any further claim against the State of Israel.

The Palestinian delegation was divided in its response to the package. Some saw in it a historic opportunity for putting the conflict behind them, others felt that it would

compromise their basic national rights, and in particular the right of return of the 1948 refugees. In addition, the Palestinian delegation came under pressure from Egypt and Saudi Arabia not to compromise Muslim rights over the Muslim holy places in the Old City of Jerusalem. At this critical juncture in his people's history, Yasser Arafat displayed neither courage nor statesmanship. His greatest mistake lay in rejecting many of the proposals put to him without putting forward any counter-proposals of his own. Consequently, when the summit ended in failure, Barak and Clinton were able to put all the blame on Arafat. Arafat returned home to a hero's welcome, but he returned empty-handed.

The question of responsibility for the failure of the summit became the subject of heated controversy, not surprisingly given the serious consequences of failure. Both sides of the argument were forcefully presented over the pages of the *New York Review of Books* in articles and letters to the editor. Robert Malley and Hussein Agha launched the debate with a long revisionist article based on first-hand knowledge. They believe that Bill Clinton consistently sided with Ehud Barak leading Yasser Arafat to suspect that there was a conspiracy afoot against him and causing him to dig his heels in.⁹ Ehud Barak repeatedly asserted that at Camp David he made a most generous offer and that Arafat made a deliberate choice to abort the negotiations and to resort to violence in order to extract further concessions from Israel.¹⁰ Dennis Ross, Clinton's special envoy to the Middle East, also laid all the blame at Arafat's door, arguing that at no point during Camp David or in the six months after it did the Chairman demonstrate any capability to conclude a permanent status deal.¹¹ Jeremy Pressman, an academic with no axe to grind, examined in depth both the Israeli and the Palestinian versions of the Camp David summit and concluded that the latter is significantly more accurate than the former.¹²

The Al-Aqsa Intifada

With the collapse of the Camp David summit, the countdown to the outbreak of the next round of violence began. On the Palestinian side there was mounting frustration and deepening doubt that Israel would ever voluntarily accept a settlement that involved even a modicum of justice. Israel's apparent intransigence fed the belief that it only understands the language of force. On the Israeli side, there was growing disenchantment with the Palestinians and disillusion with the results of the Oslo accord. Ehud Barak succeeded in persuading virtually all his compatriots that there is no Palestinian peace partner.

It was against this background that Ariel Sharon, the leader of the Likud, chose to stage his much-publicised visit to al-Haram al-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary which the Jews call Temple Mount. On 28 September 2000, flanked by a thousand security men and in deliberate disregard for the sensitivity of the Muslim worshippers, Sharon walked into the sanctuary. By embarking on this deliberately provocative walk-about,

Sharon in effect put a match to the barrel of gun-powder. His visit sparked off riots on the Haram al-Sharif that spread to other Arab areas of East Jerusalem and to other cities. Within a very short time, the riots snow-balled into a full-scale uprising—the Al-Aqsa *intifada*.

Although the uprising happened spontaneously, the Palestinian security services became involved and played their part in the escalation of violence. The move from rocks to rifles on the Palestinian side and the resort to rockets, tanks and attack helicopters by the Israelis drove the death toll inexorably upwards. As so often in the past, the sound of gunfire drowned the dialogue of the diplomats. Violence is, of course, no stranger to the region. Even after the signing of the Oslo accord, diplomacy was sometimes interspersed with bursts of violence. Now fierce fighting was interspersed with small doses of ineffectual diplomacy. Positions hardened on both sides and the tit-for-tat gathered its own momentum.

Neither side wanted to be seen as willing to back down. Yasser Arafat saw no contradiction between the *intifada* and negotiations. On the contrary, he hoped that the *intifada* would give him more leverage in dealing with the Israelis. Ehud Barak insisted that the incitement and the violence had to end before he would return to the negotiating table. His announcement of ‘time out’ signaled the abandonment of the political track until further notice. In the absence of talks, the security situation steadily deteriorated, clashes became more frequent and lethal and the death toll increased at an alarming rate. Trust between the two sides broke down completely. The two societies became locked in a dance of death. The Oslo accords were in tatters.

Conclusion

Why did the Oslo peace process break down? One possible answer is that the Oslo accord was doomed to failure from the start because of its inherent shortcomings, and in particular because it did not address any of the core issues in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The foregoing account of the rise and fall of the Oslo accord, however, suggests a different answer. It suggests that the basic reason for the failure of Oslo to resolve the conflict is that Israel, under the leadership of the Likud, reneged on its side of the deal. By resorting to violence, the Palestinians contributed to the breakdown of trust without which no political progress is possible. But the more fundamental cause behind the loss of trust and the loss of momentum was the Israeli policy of expanding settlements on the West Bank which carried on under Labour as well as Likud. This policy precluded the emergence of a viable Palestinian state without which there can be no end to the conflict.

The breakdown of the Oslo peace process suggests one general conclusion about the International Relations of the Middle East, namely, the importance of external intervention for the resolution of regional conflicts. According to a no doubt apocryphal story, Pope John Paul believes that there are two possible solutions to the

Arab-Israeli conflict—the realistic and the miraculous. The realistic would involve divine intervention, the miraculous a voluntary agreement between the parties. For the reasons explained in this chapter, the PLO and Israel were able to negotiate the Oslo accord without the help of a third party. But the imbalance in power between them made it exceedingly difficult to carry this agreement to a successful conclusion. America's role as the manager of the peace process was therefore essential to the success of the whole enterprise. In the final analysis, only America could push Israel into a settlement. And in the event, America's failure to exert sufficient pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories was one of the factors that contributed to the breakdown of the Oslo peace process.

Further Reading

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- SHLAIM, A., *War and Peace in the Middle East: A Concise History* (London: Penguin Books, 1995). A brief and basic introduction to the international politics of the Middle East since World War I.
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OSLO CHRONOLOGY

2 Aug. 1990	Iraq invades Kuwait.
16 Jan.–28 Feb. 1991	The Gulf War.
30–31 Oct. 1991	Middle East peace conference convenes in Madrid.
10 Dec. 1991	Bilateral Arab-Israeli peace talks begin in Washington.
23 June 1992	Labour defeats Likud in Israeli elections.
19 Jan. 1993	Knesset repeals ban on contacts with the PLO.
10 Sept. 1993	Israel and PLO exchange letters formally recognising each other.
13 Sept. 1993	Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles on Palestinian self-government is signed in the White House.
4 May 1994	Israel and PLO reach agreement in Cairo on the application of the Declaration of Principles.
25 July 1994	Washington Declaration ends state of war between Israel and Jordan.
26 Oct. 1994	Israel and Jordan sign a peace treaty.
28 Sept. 1995	Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II) is signed.
4 Nov. 1995	Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated and Shimon Peres succeeds him as prime minister.
21 Jan. 1996	First Palestinian elections.
24 April 1996	The Palestinian National Council amends the Palestinian National Charter.
29 May 1996	Binyamin Netanyahu defeats Shimon Peres in Israeli elections.
15 Jan. 1997	The Hebron Protocol is signed.
23 Oct. 1998	Binyamin Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat sign the Wye River Memorandum
17 May 1999	Ehud Barak defeats Binyamin Netanyahu in Israeli elections.
4 Sept. 1999	Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat sign the Sharm el-Sheikh accord.
11–25 July 2000	Camp David summit.
28 Sept. 2000	Ariel Sharon visits Temple Mount. Outbreak of the Al-Aqsa <i>intifada</i> .
23 Dec. 2000	President Clinton presents his 'parameters'.
18–28 Jan. 2001	Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Taba in Egypt.
6 Feb. 2001	Ariel Sharon defeats Ehud Barak in Israeli elections.

Notes

1. Shimon Peres, *Battling for Peace: Memoirs* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 323–4.

2. Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government, Washington, 13 September 1993,

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3. Abba Eban, 'Building Bridges, Not Walls', *The Guardian*, 10 September 1993.

4. Yossi Beilin, *Touching Peace* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 1997), 152.
5. Israeli Prime Minister's Statement, *International Herald Tribune*, 11–12 September 1993.
6. *The Guardian*, 16 September 1993.
7. Edward Said, *Peace and its Discontents: Gaza-Jericho, 1993–1995* (London: Vintage, 1995), 2.
8. Charles Enderlin, *Shattered Dreams: The Failure of the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1995–2002* (New York: Other Press, 2003) 213, 270, and 324.
9. Robert Malley and Hussein Agha, 'Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors', *New York Review of Books*, 9 August 2001.
10. Benny Morris, 'Camp David and After: An Interview with Ehud Barak', *New York Review of Books*, 13 June 2002; and Benny Morris and Ehud Barak, 'Camp David and After—Continued', *New York Review of Books*, 27 June 2002.
11. Dennis Ross, 'Camp David—An Exchange', *New York Review of Books*, 20 September 2001.
12. Jeremy Pressman, 'Visions in Collision: What Happened at Camp David and Taba?' *International Security*, vol. 28, no. 2, Fall 2003.

