
Column

Oslo: Twenty Years After

Uri Savir

Introduction

“Meet enemy number one” is how Norwegian peace facilitator Terje Larsen introduced me to the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) number three official, Abu Ala (Ahmed Qurie), when we met during the first-ever official meeting between Israel and the PLO in Oslo on May 20, 1993. I was involved in this process as Israel’s chief negotiator from that first meeting until the “anti-Oslo” Benjamin Netanyahu became Israeli prime minister in May 1996.

Over those three years, the formal Oslo negotiations that followed that meeting led to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, with full authority handed over in the Gaza Strip, and security and civilian authority in 40 percent of the West Bank, including all of its cities and populated areas. It became a much-debated historical breakthrough, which profoundly changed the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, despite many disappointments.

The intense years of negotiations — during which I spent three thousand five hundred hours with Abu Ala, my principle counterpart — gave me many insights about our next-door neighbors and about peace negotiations between archenemies. We can learn much, I believe, by examining both the impact of the agreements and the key characteristics of the negotiation process.

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The Impact of the Oslo Agreements

Oslo has been much criticized, as it did not meet the expectations of its architects and constituencies. It was nevertheless a major turning point in modern Middle Eastern history, primarily for the following five reasons:

The End of “Greater Israel” and “Greater Palestine”

The Oslo agreements brought an end to two dangerous and incompatible visions: the revisionist Israeli goal of a greater Israel that would extend from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, and the nationalistic Palestinian goal of a greater Palestine that would extend from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. A compromise became necessary, leading to the ultimate sharing of the land — the two-state solution was born. It was supposed to be the beginning of the end of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, which is politically and morally wrong.

Mutual Dependency

The need to “share the land” led to the beginning of mutual dependency. Israel and its security ceased to be self-reliant and became dependent on cooperation with the PLO. This contradicted the very ethos of the birth of the State of Israel, the idea that “we must depend only on ourselves.” Simultaneously, the Tunis-based PLO turned into a Gaza/Ramallah-based PLO, which consequently became dependent on cooperation with Israel.

Mutual dependence between bitter enemies proved to be difficult — carried out only half-heartedly and with great mutual suspicion. But from Oslo on, the notion of common interests was not only part of the agreement, but was also filtering into the minds of the leaders and commanders.

The Creation of a Palestinian National Entity

Never before in history had the Palestinians been recognized as a sovereign nation, even dating back to the times when the West Bank and Gaza were under full Arab control. Oslo, from this point of view, was a historical watershed, even if the deal did not ultimately meet Palestinian expectations. It put the Palestinian people on an irreversible track toward statehood. The Palestinian Authority began to create state-like institutions, including government ministries, a parliament, a national bank, police, and internal security forces. For the first time in history, Palestinians received their own passports.

Mutual Recognition

Israel and the PLO negotiated mutual recognition in Paris in September 1993 just before the signing of the Document of Principles in Washington. These proved to be the most arduous and intense forty-eight hours of the

whole process because they concerned the most central of issues: mutual legitimacy.

With Israeli leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres and PLO leader Yasser Arafat communicating with us on the telephone, Abu Ala and I spent half the time negotiating just one word regarding Palestinian recognition of Israel. The Palestinians wanted to state that the PLO recognizes Israel's existence. We insisted that they recognize Israel's *right to exist*, as this relates to Israel's very legitimacy. Arafat eventually agreed, after spending the night consulting with his inner cabinet.

We had the sense that this process was like *giving birth* — until that moment the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was of an existential nature — neither side had recognized the legitimacy of the other. The Palestinians wanted Israel off the map, and likewise Israel never recognized the Palestinians as a national entity — it was “us or them.” Mutual recognition of “Israel's right to exist,” and of the PLO as “the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” meant the beginning of coexistence between the two national movements. An existential conflict, thus, became a political conflict, to be resolved through negotiations. Oslo moved us from mutual rejection to mutual recognition.

Religious Opposition

New sources of opposition arose on the new Israeli-Palestinian landscape. The agreement challenged basic myths and ethos on both sides of the conflict. Israel, which was created in the aftermath of the Holocaust with the belief that it must depend solely on itself, was suddenly forced to deal with its next-door neighbor in order to ensure its daily security needs.

In parallel, the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), part of the biblical Promised Land, was gradually handed over to its Arab inhabitants. Some Israelis saw in Oslo a betrayal in favor of “the Arab enemy.” To those constituents who perceived Israel as an institutionalized ghetto, mainly among the religious right, Oslo was a dangerous break with conservative Jewish and nationalistic values. They rebelled with vehemence, and the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin was the violent and tragic climax of their resistance.

In the Palestinian territories, Islamist forces, especially those in Gaza, viewed the Oslo Accords as surrender to the greatest of infidels: the Jews and America. They rebelled with violence and terror, thereby undermining the agreement. The religious forces on both sides became the forefront of fundamentalist resistance.

The process challenged both Israeli and Palestinian identity — two states living side by side, with openness and cooperation, part of a family of nations — or two separated closed ghettos in permanent hostility and conflict, in isolation from the world and distanced from universal values.

Negotiation Lessons

The Ability of Leaders to Make Difficult Decisions

In peace negotiations, negotiators often become overimpressed by their own capacities, forgetting that progress happens when leaders make policy decisions — the role of negotiators is to present realistic choices to their leaders. In the case of Oslo, Rabin, Peres, and Arafat were indeed capable of making the difficult decisions — at every crossroad, they made decisions that met much popular resistance. Suspicion and hostility were the overriding popular sentiments, often expressed through demonstrations and violence. At the outset of the process, my mentor, Shimon Peres, who was Israel's foreign minister at the time and the *real* architect of Oslo, told me what he and Rabin told each other that day: "We are over 70, let's make now the difficult historical decisions to spare the younger generation from making them one day." To a large degree they did.

Ensuring Secrecy

In Oslo, secrecy was key from the outset. Had the initial negotiations been made public, an agreement would have been unreachable because of the mutual public suspicions. To negotiate effectively, the negotiator must be able to test positions of compromise with his or her counterparts that his or her constituencies might initially find unacceptable.

At the very outset of the negotiations, Rabin instructed me to warn the PLO that any leaks about the talks would lead to their immediate breakdown. Knowing Israelis and Palestinians, I worried that this would prove impossible, but Rabin insisted: "If they are able to keep these talks a secret, it means that they are serious about this process." Indeed, secrecy was maintained.

Creating Chemistry between Negotiators

Given my experience in negotiations with the PLO, Jordan, and Syria, I firmly believe in the value of developing personal chemistry between negotiators. It can lead to personal trust despite the manipulations, and sometimes deceit, inherent within negotiations. I was fortunate to have Abu Ala as a counterpart — we understood each other from day one, not only as negotiators, but also as two human beings, each representing a different cause. Our mutual trust helped us transcend suspicion. Building personal relationships can reveal the most elusive secret of conflict: the other side is human, just as you are.

Understanding Your Opponent

The process of understanding of one's opponent undergoes a fundamental transition throughout the negotiation, evolving from "know your enemy" to know your opponent's needs, interests, values, and ability to compromise. Conflict breeds dehumanization, with its focus only on the opponent's

hostility, not on understanding the other party's culture, and because the intelligence services are the primary source of information about the other side, these misunderstandings are only compounded.

In negotiation, it is less important to know the preferences of leaders, their policy positions, or even their negotiation tactics because these are constantly in transition. It is more important to understand what moves the other side, what are the basic myths and ethos of the nation and society, what are their fears and aspirations, and even what daily life resembles. My sense was that we knew much more about the Palestinians than we actually *understood*. In this respect, it is often more valuable to read an opponent's daily newspapers, rather than intelligence reports written about them.

Taking a Sequential Approach

Oslo was characterized by a clear gradualism on the disputed issues. The conflict is so deeply rooted in conflicting historical narratives that it was impossible to tackle all issues simultaneously. The two constituencies were unable to immediately accept compromises on fundamental issues connected to their identities, such as Palestinian statehood, Jerusalem, and refugees.

Both sides needed time to adapt to new realities and to each other, but the changes we agreed upon created psychological earthquakes on both sides. We lived in a constant political "jet lag" between past, present, and future. Therefore, we agreed to start the redeployment of the Israeli army first by withdrawing from the Gaza Strip and the city of Jericho, and in the second stage from the populated parts of the West Bank. Only three years after the Gaza-Jericho Agreement implementation would the five-year permanent status negotiations begin in order to deal with the core issues of borders, security, settlements, Jerusalem, and refugees. It was simply impossible to immediately attempt full conflict resolution. Too much emotional burden stood in our way, and the constituencies were not ready for the necessary decisions, given their total mutual mistrust.

Playing the End Game

Until the end of negotiations, both parties keep their red lines and difficult concessions secret. Thus, the end is the only stage in which the face-to-face intervention of leaders becomes indispensable. At the Taba Summit in 2001, toward the end of the negotiations on the interim agreement for Gaza and the West Bank, Peres and Arafat actively joined in.

The main issues of contention were the future of the city of Hebron and the elections to the autonomous Palestinian Council by Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. In both cases, concepts of holiness conflicted with the need for political compromise. Arafat insisted that residents of East Jerusalem had the right to vote for the Palestinian Council, but Israel objected, fearing this would entrench certain rights that could become problematic for future negotiations over the control of Jerusalem. A creative

compromise was worked out with the assistance of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak: the residents of East Jerusalem would vote in an East Jerusalem post office, which afforded them same voting rights as the West Bank Palestinians, but for Israel constituted an absentee ballot.

Neglecting Public Diplomacy

The biggest flaw of the Oslo process was our failure to build public support. We were all convinced that the drama of the agreement would convince our societies to move toward reconciliation, but Oslo was seen by many as peace by the leaders for the leaders, and became in many ways an elitist process.

Designing the Architecture of the Future

Conflict resolution processes, such as the Oslo process, sometimes focus too much on the problems of the past, rather than on how to create a better future. Once territory, security, and authority issues are resolved, we will still be left with the critical daily needs of the two peoples. In Oslo, we did not place enough emphasis on our economic futures, and both economies suffered from our stringent and sometimes excessive security arrangements. Peace negotiations must create architecture for the future, answering the practical needs of the societies whose conflicts they seek to resolve.

Future Negotiations and Peacemaking

What does a look back at the Oslo Accords reveal for the future of Middle East peace negotiations, particularly in light of the turmoil of recent years, such as the Arab Spring revolts in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and the civil war in Syria? I suggest several issues that must be addressed.

Permanent Status, Not Interim Solutions

As agreed upon in Oslo, future negotiations must deal with *permanent status* and not with interim solutions. Interim in the Middle East has a tendency to become permanent. I officially began permanent status negotiations with the Palestinians, represented by Mahmoud Abbas, in April of 1996. I proposed that we begin with the end in mind: what relationship between Israel and Palestine are we aspiring for and how can our relationship foster our security and economic interests? After agreeing upon that goal together, we hoped to create a bridge between past and future in order to tackle the thorny core issues. Abbas agreed. Unfortunately, Benjamin Netanyahu soon came to power, which meant the end of realistic permanent status negotiations.

Future permanent status negotiations will deal with state-to-state issues (security, borders, and settlements), identity issues (Jerusalem and refugees), and issues affecting future relations between the two states (economic and people-to-people). The lesson of Oslo is to not postpone the difficult identity issues because without addressing them the conflict will never be resolved.

Active Mediation by the U.S.

Today, there is a need for active American mediation of the Israel–Palestine conflict. The strength of Oslo lay in the political will of its leaders, but today that will does not exist — at best, leaders perceive it necessary to uphold stability. The two existing Israeli–Arab peace treaties began with direct negotiations between the parties and concluded with active American intervention: the Israeli–Egyptian treaty (negotiated by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and U.S. President Jimmy Carter) and the Israeli–Jordanian treaty (Rabin, Peres, King Hussein of Jordan, and U.S. President Bill Clinton).

This must be true for the Israeli–Palestinian case also — Oslo was a breakthrough of direct negotiations, and now active intervention by the administration of President Barack Obama is necessary. President Obama and American Secretary of State John Kerry understand this and have publicly stated the critical importance of diplomacy in conflict resolution. This diplomacy should occur at various levels, including the creation of:

- clear guidelines emphasizing Israel’s security needs and defining the 1967 lines as the basis for negotiations (with mutually agreed land swaps) and the peace plan proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002 (the Arab Peace Initiative);
- a time line for negotiations (not more than three years);
- an American guarantee of Israel’s security and technological edge; and
- American economic assistance to the new Palestinian state (together with international assistance for the creation of modern state institutions).

Many advise Obama that direct American involvement in the Middle East is too risky, but the alternative is to leave the field open for extremists — possibly spearheaded by Iran — to assert their own power, which is itself a risky proposition.

Collective Diplomacy and Security

Israeli and Palestinian leaders must accept the fundamental change in diplomacy and security that has occurred over the last decade. Today, international crises are tackled by collective diplomacy, and likewise security is collective. This is a difficult lesson for Israel, with its tradition of self-reliance. But today, because of terrorism and the proliferation of nonconventional weapon systems, seemingly weaker countries and terrorist groups are often too lethal to be fought by one country alone. A strong army and deterrence capacity, which Israel has, will not necessarily suffice.

Like its Arab neighbors, Israel must think in terms of international and regional security and develop alliances for the security of its future. This demands strong and full cooperation with the U.S. and eventually its allies

in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and with Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and the future Palestinian state. New security relationships based on common interests must be developed, which will include the future monitoring of border areas.

Creative Solutions

To resolve the most difficult issues, negotiators must develop creative solutions that will prevent either side from being seen as sacrificing too many of its fundamental values. This holds true for the most difficult issue, which is the future of the city of Jerusalem. The “city of peace” has historically been a city of war and conquests. It is the heart of the Jewish people, and of great religious importance to Muslims and Christians. Cutting it in half with a scalpel risks the death of the patient.

One creative solution, which I have previously advocated, would be to maintain Jerusalem as a united city, with three sections: Yerushalayim, the Israeli and Jewish neighborhoods and holy sites, as Israel’s capital; Al-Quds, the Palestinian Muslim and Christian neighborhoods and holy sites, as Palestine’s capital; and an international section in a small area outside the existing city, as a capital for international peace, to which one quarter of the U.N. would be moved. I proposed this configuration to former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and Yasser Arafat. Their enthusiasm was rather restrained; however, it is this *type* of creative proposal that could make a difference.

Economic Development and Cooperation

Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign catch phrase “it’s the economy stupid” holds true for the Middle East. The Oslo process failed to make provisions for distributing the socioeconomic fruits of peace — too many wealthy people became wealthier, while many poor became more frustrated and rebelled. Permanent status peace dividends must be spread more evenly in both societies.

Economic development is the most important outcome of peace — when people have something to lose, they tend not to reinitiate war. The land that will be shared is rich in history and stirs passions, but it is small in territory. Infrastructure such as water, energy, and transportation must be linked and shared. The movement of people and goods should be free. Joint ventures should be created and international private investment must be attracted. Tourism, which is the most important peace industry, could turn the Holy Land into a major international attraction. In the Oslo process, the economic annexes were “step children” to the final agreement — in the future, they must be central.

Normalization of Relations with the Arab World

Israeli-Palestinian peace can help stabilize the region. It is not the only conflict in the region, but religiously and psychologically, it is the one that,

I believe, poisons hearts and minds the most. The basic “territory for peace” deal must bring an end both to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and to the Arab rejection of Israel’s legitimacy. In return for making the necessary territorial concessions (based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed and parallel land swaps) and a sharing of Jerusalem as two capitals, Israel must demand the end of mutual claims — including the right of return — and full normal relations with all Arab countries. Within this context, regional economic cooperation should be developed gradually, following the European model of collaboration on infrastructure, tourism, trade, communications, and youth mobility; as Shimon Peres has envisioned, in a “new Middle East.”

Peace of the People

Future Israeli-Palestinian peace, unlike the Oslo agreements, must be a peace of the people. I propose that a sixth item be added to the five permanent status issues: people-to-people relations. Both sides have suffered much pain and loss, resulting sometimes even in the loss of our own humanity. A real peace must be a peace of reconciliation, of equality, of mutual respect for human rights and dignity, and even of forgiveness. It has been possible in other regions; it is possible in our region. I learned this firsthand in Oslo, not least from my former enemy, Abu Ala.

Importantly, the youth of the two societies must be included in the peace process, physically and virtually through the Internet, especially young women, who can become important agents of change in a conservative Middle East. The young perceive the future in pragmatic terms. They yearn for a normal life, good education, good jobs, and to be part of the world. All this is impossible without peace and some degree of regional cooperation. The young, therefore, must play critical roles in an inclusive peace process, turning a culture of hostility into a culture of cooperation.

The last and most important lesson that I learned from Oslo: it taught me to remain a believer, not to surrender to prejudice and skepticism. Twenty years later I am still an incorrigible optimist.