Difficult Dialogue: The Oslo Process in Israeli Perspective

Avraham Sela

I. Preface

The Oslo Accords seemed to represent the new post-Cold War/post-Gulf War era, which ostensibly heralded the beginning of a "new world order" under American hegemony. The weakened Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Arab radical actors, such as Syria and Iraq; the belief that the American-led capitalist, market-oriented ideology had scored its final victory—best expressed by Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis; Israel's vulnerability to Iraq's medium-range missiles and to American financial pressures; and the perceived loss of Israel's status as a reliable U.S. ally in a tumultuous Middle East all seemed to have created ripe conditions for a historical breakthrough in the long-stalemated Arab-Israeli peace process.

Indeed, the first two years following the signing of the Oslo Accords were especially marked by international optimism, together with a growing temptation to foresee a "new Middle East," characterized by joint economic ventures, development projects, and social cooperation, on both regional and Israeli-Palestinian levels. During this period, Israel and the PLO seemed determined to cement their partnership: implementing the Gaza-Jericho phase, signing the Paris Economic Protocol which defined their economic relations, and signing the Oslo II Accord by which Israel would withdraw from all Palestinian cities, thus transferring responsibility for most of the Palestinians in the West Bank, in addition to Gaza, into the hands of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

This discernible progress, however, could hardly blur the significance of formidable obstacles, first and foremost the internal opposition, with which the leaders on both sides had to cope in the process of implementation of the agreement. Despite the initial support of the majority of Israelis and Palestinians for the Oslo Accords and for a two-state solution, the factors striving to "U-Turn" the process became increasingly determined to wreck the ship before it reached a safe shore. The Taba Agreement (Oslo II) of September 1995, which signified Israel's determination to make tangible concessions toward the implementation of the Oslo Accords, and, seemingly, the realization of Palestinian statehood alarmed the zealot opponents of the Oslo process and convinced them to take decisive actions to put an end to it. The new agreement collided head-on with core nationalist beliefs of the Israeli right wing, risking not only the surrender of the West Bank—the cradle of biblical Israeli nationhood—but also the division of historic Palestine, thus burying the dream of the "Greater Land of Israel." Similarly, it threatened the Palestinian Islamic creed of historic Palestine from the "sea to the river" as an indivisible sacred unit for the Muslims until the Day of Judgment.[1]

The means that the Israeli right wing and the Islamic Jihadist groups employed to undermine the Oslo process were indeed different in nature and direction, but in effect they perfectly complemented each other's actions and jointly contributed to the escalating tensions and return to confrontation. The assassination of Prime Minister Rabin on 4 November 1995 did not prevent the implementation of the Taba Agreement,[2] and in January 1996, the first free elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council and Chairman of the PA were held in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. These events, however, triggered both local and regional Arab militant opponents to escalate their violent efforts against the process, thus deepening the doubts and fears among Israelis concerning further concessions to the Palestinians. It also led to the election of a right-wing government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, a devout opponent of the Oslo Accords, whose term in office would be perceived by Palestinian and Arab negotiators as dealing a death blow to the peace process.[3]

What began with a sense of elevated idealistic hopes and euphoria thus turned into a crisis of expectations and mistrust, resulting in a dangerous stalemate and then a major eruption of violence in October 1996. The collapse of the joint bilateral venture could not be better illustrated than by the resort of the parties to a new model

of negotiations mediated by the American administration, instead of hitherto direct ones. Growing concerns of the Israeli public over security—mainly in its individual meaning—in addition to the ideological inhibitions, became a primary consideration in shaping Israeli policy-making toward the Palestinian "other," regardless of the government's ideology. Finally, the culmination of the stalemate by the breakdown of the Camp David summit in July 2000 represented a major crisis of expectations on Israel's as well as on the Palestinians' part, leading to an unprecedented scope, span of time, and intensity of violence and counter-violence between the two communities.

Embodied by the long and costly al-Aqsa Intifada of the Palestinians against Israel, and the repeated failures to forge a sustainable cease-fire between these bleeding societies before returning to negotiations, this crisis may almost have entirely buried the possibility of a negotiated settlement between them. What these "lost years" and their cumulative political, social, and psychological residues caused seems to be even more acute: apathy, indifference, and apparent acquiescence in the continuing stalemate. Worse yet, there has been a growing despair for a two-state solution. Instead, there is a reconsideration, if not adherence—even among exemplary Palestinian advocates of the two-state solution—to the idea of a one-state solution based on equal rights between Jews and Palestinians,[4] which is an idea the vast majority of Israelis perceives as tantamount to a call for eliminating Israel as a *Jewish* state.[5]

Fifteen years after the euphoric days at the signing of the Oslo Accords, Israelis and Palestinians seem to have acquiesced in the stalemated status quo and have lost hope for an historical compromise in the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding the continued dialogue between top Israeli and Palestinian leaders; despite the American efforts—as indecisive as they were[6]—to inject new life into the Oslo process via presidential visions, such as the "Road Map" of June 2002 and the Annapolis Declaration of November 2007; and despite the efforts of the international Quartet (the U.N., Russia, the EU, and the U.S.) to see to the implementation of the Road Map, it is the cycle of violence and counter-violence, reactive rather than proactive policies, and mostly chaotic domestic politics set by ideologically divided societies and weak authorities that determined the course of events that led to this deadlock.

The collapse of the Oslo process is also represented by the need of each of the parties to justify its decisions and behavior while rolling

the blame for the failure of the once internationally cherished joint project into the other's court. The narratives developed by Israelis and Palestinians alike offered each party and group the desired explanations to the existing stalemate and continued low-intensity conflict. As such, these narratives provide a sense of validity to, and resonate with, people's lives, or are deemed a self-fulfilling prophecy. The stories of the recent past thus become another layer in the parties' accumulated historical narratives shaping the upbringing of new generations and, hence, constitute another obstacle for future conflict resolution.

Against this backdrop a balanced and studied retrospective explanation of what went wrong in the Oslo process is much needed. Rather than weighing Israeli and Palestinian relative responsibility for the deadlocked Oslo process, this essay scrutinizes the pathologies of this protracted conflict mainly through the Israeli perspective and conduct during the Oslo years.[7]

Much of the trouble undergone by the Oslo process and the crises that had befallen it can be explained in terms of two main clusters of reasons:

- The inadequate "ripeness" of the parties involved for an agreed-upon permanent settlement of their historic conflict and commitment to see to its implementation.
- The structure, rationale, and stipulations of the initial accord of 13 September 1993.

In addition—and partly interrelated with the problem of ripeness—the Israeli-Palestinian peace process suffers from serious structural barriers at both the domestic and regional levels, all of which were represented in the Oslo process. Moreover, unlike inter-state efforts for conflict resolution, and despite the fact that the state of Israel was the primary party in it, due to the geopolitics of the conflict and the distribution of Jewish and Arab populations between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, the Oslo process must be understood in the context of *ethnic* conflict resolution, which tends to be extremely complicated and thus rarely successful.[8] It is around these structural factors and the question of ripeness that this essay revolves.

This essay begins with representations of contending narratives of Israelis and Palestinians, practitioners and scholars, explaining what went wrong. The next section examines the state of ripeness as far as Israel was concerned, followed by an in-depth analysis of the structural

causes that played a spoiling role in the Oslo process. This section is divided into *endogenous* and *exogenous* factors. The endogenous factors refer mainly to the flaws built into the formal Oslo Accords, namely, the envisioned structure of the process—including phases, timetable, mutuality, clarity, binding conditions, and third-party involvement.

The exogenous factors concern the social and political environment, actors and processes, discrepancies of power between the protagonists, and the impact of state and non-state actors at both regional and international levels. This part also addresses the role of competing ideologies and collective identities in shaping the parties' behaviors and political legitimacy for implementing unpopular political compromises. Finally, the article looks into the impact of the violent conflict during the al-Aqsa Intifada on Israel's social, cognitive, and political behavior. By briefly examining the impact of the al-Aqsa Intifada on Israel's responses, I intend to further identify blockages standing in the way of current or future attempts to bring about a settlement of the conflict.

II. Who's Fault?: Contending Narratives of Failure

Though the causes for the collapse of the Oslo process, especially in view of its early hopeful stages, have since been debated by practitioners and scholars alike, they remain diverse and often represent political inclinations.[9] Indeed, Israeli and Palestinian narratives about the Oslo process, defined by an Israeli scholar as "Rashomon,"[10] represent a typical case of contentious politics waged within each of the parties concerned, as well as between them, and shared by formal and informal institutions and social movements.[11] The intuitive response of many, if not most, Israelis to the question "what went wrong?" with the Oslo process would project the blame on the "other," both external and internal players, though their relative shares of responsibility are by no means equal.

The explanations provided by the Israeli echelons directly involved in the negotiations at various levels were quite diverse in their assignment of responsibility for the final collapse of the Oslo process and in relation to the obstacles produced along the road. As far as public opinion is concerned, with the massive wave of suicide bombings in February–March 1996, the Israeli public grew mistrustful and apprehensive as to the "true" intentions of the Palestinian leadership, nurtured by a competitive media inflating the echoes of anti-civilian terrorist attacks.

It was only after the breakup of the al-Aqsa Intifada, however, that the majority of Israelis, including segments of the left, turned to blame Arafat for the failure of the Camp David summit and the indiscriminate terrorism against Israeli civilians. In this narrative, he bore the brunt of the responsibility for the failure of the Oslo process.[12]

Indeed, Israel's main complaints in the 1990s focused on the Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens and the PA's reluctance or inability to prevent such activities, in violation of Arafat's commitments in the agreement. Yet within the Israeli political system, views differed concerning the necessary linkage between a cease of violence by the Palestinians and continuous negotiations with them. With the al-Aqsa Intifada, however, right-wing claims against the process were ostensibly vindicated, leading to a more assertive anti-Oslo discourse supported by politicians and top military officers. The new discourse aimed at interpreting the uprising as another phase in a pre-planned program of the Palestinian national movement's war against the very existence of the Jewish state. Commentators pointed to the PA's textbooks issued in 2000 as an example of instilling hostility in the young generation instead of fostering a spirit of peace with Israel. Despite disagreements among Israeli experts over the new Palestinian textbooks, these claims succeeded in framing the PA as a direct continuation of the pre-Oslo PLO rather than as a peaceful partner of Israel.[13] According to this approach, the Oslo Accords were nothing but a Trojan Horse—a major PLO deception aimed at wrecking Israel's fundamentals from within by systematic terrorism, now defined as a "strategic threat" to Israel.[14]

Consequently, those Israelis involved in the Oslo process were charged with deluding themselves as a result of ideological disorientation, loss of vision, or eagerness to "score points" in Western—especially EU—circles.[15] Politically, the continuous Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians dealt a severe blow to the Israeli left and to the Labor Party that had espoused the Oslo process. By default, the Intifada bolstered the hardliner activist approach toward the Palestinians, giving the military a free hand more than ever before to employ armed force against Palestinian citizens and armed men alike.

A similar distribution of incriminations was manifest among the Palestinians. The breakdown of the Camp David summit and the eruption of violence thereafter seemed to vindicate the critique leveled all along at Arafat and his aides by the Islamic movements and ultra-radical leftist factions for accepting the humiliating conditions of the

Oslo agreement. One of the systematic and eloquent critics of the Oslo agreement was Edward Said, who, from the outset, held on to the view that the agreement and its offshoots were disastrous and inherently flawed, placing the brunt of responsibility on the American administration, the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and the "Arafatian autocracy," with its ineptitude and subservience to the Israeli government. According to Said, Israeli leaders, including Rabin and Peres, had never intended to promote Palestinian self-determination and statehood, but to perpetuate Israel's rule over the Palestinian territories, confining their autonomy to municipal matters.[16]

A more balanced approach is offered by the studies and polemical literature that developed following the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada and the collapse of the Oslo process. Indeed, just as the surprising attainment of the Oslo Accords became a central case in peace studies, so did the collapse of the Oslo process in early 2001. The intensified violence of the al-Aqsa Intifada motivate scholars and practitioners alike to inquire as to the causes of the failure of what once seemed a historic opportunity to resolve one of the longest, most tenacious and complex conflicts on earth.[17] Many of the studies, however, focus on the gaps between the parties' positions and their current politics, with only limited historical perspective. Or they fail to examine the Oslo process through the theoretical literature on conflict resolution, which has seen immense development since the end of the Cold War.

III. Insufficient Ripeness

To what extent were the Israeli and Palestinian communities ripe for undertaking painful compromises and seeing to their implementation when their leaders signed the Oslo Accords? To what extent did Israeli and Palestinian policymakers exercise political legitimacy within their own constituencies? Moreover, to what extent have they been ready to deepen and expand the "official" peace by follow-up activities aimed at building social, economic, and psychological bases for a "culture of peace?"[18] Have they sought to bolster and perpetuate a peaceful relationship by encouraging grassroots social and economic cooperation, revising images and perceptions of self and other—"de-victimization" of self and "de-demonization" of the other—and seeking reconciliation through reformed narratives in the media and the educational curriculum? The decade and a half since the 1993 Oslo Accords clearly indicates that the parties have been insufficiently ripe for such far-reaching

commitments due to social-psychological cognitive reasons rooted in their separate yet joint histories from time immemorial.

The concept of ripeness[19] is concerned with identifying the most appropriate timing for shifting *from* conflict *to* conflict resolution, with or without the help of a third-party mediator. According to this concept, the disputants might be ripe for conflict resolution when a "mutual hurting stalemate" is being reached and when an acceptable alternative is in sight. Yet protagonists of this concept admit its weaknesses: identified "ripeness" by no means secures the success of peacemaking efforts, hence it has little explanatory use and definitely cannot be predictive. Nonetheless, the state of ripeness enables third-party actors to offer enticing opportunities, ranging from mediation to economic aid and monitoring the implementation of the settlement. Despite the inadequacies of ripeness as a theory, it offers some insights and research tools that enable us to better define the conditions that make for successful conflict resolution.

The failure of the final status negotiations and consequent resort to violence by the Islamic and Fatah movements definitely underlined the parties' unwillingness to abandon violence and resort only to peaceful means. At a deeper level, it raises doubts about the protagonists' level of ripeness for a far-reaching and comprehensive settlement as envisioned by the architects of the original accords. Indeed, an examination of the process as a whole indicates the immense gaps between the two parties, as well as political blockages, some of which were already apparent in earlier phases of the process.

The progress attained by Israel and the PLO, from signing the Declaration of Principles (DOP) in September 1993 to the Taba Accord of September 1995, indeed indicated their willingness to shift from hostility to cooperation. In retrospect, however, the Oslo II accords embodied the peak of the Oslo achievements, followed by a constant deterioration of Israeli-Palestinian relations, growing mutual mistrust, and frustration at the other's conduct. Above all, however, this deterioration was the result of varied levels of political opposition to the Oslo process, from total rejection of any deal with the PLO to a pragmatic cost-benefit approach prevalent within both Israeli and Palestinian constituencies.

Netanyahu's term as Prime Minister had an especially negative impact on the Oslo process, although he signed two agreements with the PLO (the Hebron Accord of January 1997 and the Wye Memorandum of October 1998), thus practically legitimizing the Oslo Accords,

albeit grudgingly. Yet these agreements, by which Israel ceded to the PA small chunks of land in the West Bank, were effectively redundant, resulting from Netanyahu's retreat from the original Oslo Accords by insisting on strict implementation of their own commitments, especially on security matters. Adopting a tougher line toward the PA and raising the cost for any further Israeli compromise was tantamount to a retreat from his predecessors' commitments to further redeployments and final status negotiations. It soon resulted in a state of crisis necessitating ever more American go-between inputs. Indeed, these two accords were effectively attained thanks to intensive American mediation and pressure on both Israeli and PLO leaders by the U.S. president himself, unprecedented since President Jimmy Carter's personal role in the Israel-Egypt peace process. That Netanyahu could not fulfill all his commitments to the Wye Memorandum and consequently lost his Premiership clearly attested to the limited support he could secure within his right-wing coalition, despite his tougher policies.

Examining the Oslo process along these lines and others, it seems that it was the first Intifada (begun in December 1987), the Gulf War, and the end of the Cold War that accounted for relatively ripe conditions for the resumption of the long-stalemated Middle East peace process. First, it was the Intifada that injected new energies into the veins of the marginalized PLO following its expulsion from Lebanon in 1982. It also put Israeli political and military echelons under unprecedented moral and diplomatic international pressures and revealed their inability to end the Palestinian rebellion. The Intifada also triggered the emergence of a new player in the Palestinian arena in the form of Hamas, a militant Islamic-nationalist movement, which increasingly challenged the PLO's status as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." By repudiating the PLO's acceptance of a two-state solution in the conflict with Israel, Hamas claimed legitimacy in succeeding the original combatant PLO and vowed to fight Israel to the end, thus tacitly questioning the PLO's legitimacy. The rapid development of Hamas as a popular religious movement added a dimension of urgency to those Israelis wishing to open a secret dialogue with the Palestinians, first with leading figures from Jerusalem and the West Bank and then with the PLO.[20]

It was, however, the end of the Cold War, in conjunction with the Gulf War, which framed the scope and timing of the resumed Middle East peace process. The Madrid conference opened with unprecedented international attendance in late October 1991. Indeed, had

it not been for the heavy American pressures exerted on the Israeli government, it is most doubtful that the conference could take place at all. Yet it was this diplomatic arena, coupled with the multilateral talks, which enabled a gradual rapprochement between Israel and the PLO-guided members of the Palestinian delegation, comprised of West Bank and Gaza Strip residents.

It is noteworthy that Israel's government under Rabin turned to direct contacts with the PLO as a matter of need, not of choice—in view of futile negotiations with the "inside" Palestinian delegation, a narrowed parliamentary coalition, and an unfulfilled commitment to reach an agreement on Palestinian self-rule in Judea and Samaria within nine months of coming to office. A way out of this deadlock was opened in the spring of 1993 after it had become clear that the West Bank and Gaza Strip representatives with whom Israel maintained negotiations were fully controlled by the PLO, and that an unofficial secret diplomatic channel with the latter had reached an advanced stage.[21] Indeed, the adoption of the PLO as the official partner could not be preceded by any preparation of the Israeli public for such a dramatic change in Israel's policy. Hence, the breaking news in late August about an agreement between Israel and Arafat's PLO came as a shocking surprise to most Israelis, many of whom perceived Arafat as a symbol of evil, bigotry and terrorism. Though this demonized image was somewhat mitigated in the 1990s, Arafat was never invited to visit Israel—not even to attend Rabin's funeral—and it was only a few days before the eruption of the Intifada that he attended a dinner at Prime Minister Barak's private home, not at his official residence in Jerusalem.[22]

Indeed, from the outset only a slight majority of the Israelis supported the agreement (smaller than the Palestinian one), matching the balance of right and left in the Israeli Knesset. This shaky majority proved to be extremely vulnerable and its support of the government's policy was conditional on the process's success. Under the impact of indiscriminate suicide bombings by Palestinian Islamist groups against Israeli civilians, the contradiction between political reality and promises for security and peace became difficult to settle, especially in view of the unexpected cost claimed by Palestinian violence. The latter was skillfully manipulated by the right wing's discourse, which played on sensitive chords of the Jewish historical memory of persecution and insecurity. The right wing continued to hammer their audiences with the codes of ethno-religious Jewish (as opposed to Israeli) identity and

a commitment to the Land of Israel complete (as opposed to the state of Israel). In the campaign over the Land of Israel, Jewish religious traditions and authorities were instrumental in delegitimating the government led by Rabin and Peres, paving the way to the first assassination of a Prime Minister in Israel by a Jewish zealot.[23]

The negative impact of Palestinian violence on Israeli policymaking culminated on 27 November 2000, two months into the al-Aqsa Intifada, when the Knesset passed a bill stating that it must approve any territorial concession in Jerusalem by an absolute majority of 61. Given the right-left balance of power in the Knesset, Barak would not be able to win approval for an accord involving the division of Jerusalem, forcing him to call for new elections. Under the impact of mass Palestinian violence, shared this time by Fatah, the new elections brought Ariel Sharon to the Prime Minister's office, indicating the burial of the peace process for the years to come.

Unlike the total absence of the military establishment in the negotiations leading to the Oslo Accords, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) played a major role in the negotiations on the implementation of the Accords, in addition to its role as the legal governing authority of the occupied territories. Moreover, by virtue of being in charge of the national intelligence estimate and possessing unique capabilities of military and political planning, Israeli Prime Ministers were obligated—in the case of former Chiefs of Staff Rabin and Barak, even preferred—to appoint senior military officers as chief negotiators with the Palestinians. This is not to say that the IDF necessarily played a negative role in the negotiations, but that in view of its immense influence and self-perceived duties and responsibilities, it tended to emphasize matters of policing and security, manifest mainly by the intensive employment of checkpoints, searches, closures, and the restriction of movement of people and goods. The destructive role of the military in the context of Israeli-Palestinian relations, however, reached its peak during the first months of the al-Aqsa Intifada.

IV. Endogenous Factors

A. The Inconclusive Oslo Accords

The insufficient ripeness of Israel and the PLO for a comprehensive and conclusive peace accord underpinned their approaches and conduct before and during the Oslo process. In retrospect, it seems clear that the main weakness of the Oslo Accords was its transitory (two-phase process with five-year interim phase) and inconclusive nature, leaving open core issues on which there was a huge gap between Palestinian and Israeli positions, expectations, and constraints. To circumvent this gap, the parties opted for a gradual process to establish a self-governing Palestinian Authority, first in Gaza and Jericho and later in all major towns in the West Bank. Negotiations on the core issues (final status, water resources, Jewish settlements, borders, Jerusalem, and Palestinian refugees) were delayed to the permanent status phase, which were to begin in May 1996 and finalized in May 1999. In hindsight, this envisioned order of progress failed to grasp the tremendous aggregate impact of uncontrolled Palestinian violence, repeated delays in the implementation of agreed-upon commitments, and soured relations as a result of unilateral policies on the part of Israel.

The essential uncertainty built into the Oslo process about its very ability to progress and reach the final status phase was what drew most of the fire from critics, Palestinians and Israelis alike. From a critical Palestinian viewpoint, Arafat was seen as a collaborator with Israel because he had not secured the basic Palestinian claims, primarily statehood and sovereignty, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and an end to Israeli settlements.[24] In a critical Israeli viewpoint, the Oslo process risked emptying Israel's assets without securing Palestinian consent over the permanent settlement matters.[25]

Indeed, the signatories themselves were not unaware of the inherent weaknesses built into their agreement, and would have preferred a comprehensive agreement, defining clear objectives and timetable. Reportedly, following the massacre of Muslim worshipers committed by a Jewish zealot in the Cave of the Patriarch in February 1994, Rabin and Arafat themselves discussed the possibility of abandoning the phases according to the Oslo Accords and moving straightforward to the permanent settlement. Yet even though Rabin saw the logic of such strategy, it was deemed impossible due to domestic politics and narrowly based government.[26]

Rabin's perception that the Israeli political system was unprepared for negotiations with the PLO over the core issues might have been mistaken, albeit a clear admittance of political weakness. It is not clear whether Rabin believed Israel and the PLO could reach an agreement in the final status negotiations or how he envisioned that agreement, although he apparently believed in the possibility of retreating altogether from it in case it did not work.[27] This vague approach to Israel's primary concern of national security, apparently shared by Shimon Peres, might better explain their preference for a gradual process than their sense of political insecurity. The following years demonstrated that most Israelis were indeed unprepared to accept the minimum Palestinian claims for full sovereignty and statehood, let alone their claims over the Temple Mount (*al-haramal-sharif*) and the right of return of Palestinian refugees into Israel. Indeed, the Israeli public had neither been prepared for an agreement with a hitherto sworn enemy, nor informed about the real meaning of the Oslo Accords, which had entailed relinquishment of symbolic and religiously significant places as well as established concepts of security.

In retrospect, the Israeli public possibly misinterpreted the real context and rationale for the Oslo Accords, believing that it would guarantee security and peace, due to the euphoric vocabulary vastly employed in Israeli, Palestinian, and international discourses about the Oslo process.[28] Indeed, the vision of a process leading to a two-state solution based on Security Council Resolution 242—with Palestinian sovereignty and close economic cooperation between the parties—was championed by Yossi Beilin and a few others involved in back-channel talks that eventually led to the Oslo Accords.[29] This concept, however, was not accepted by Rabin and Peres, the leading figures in the Israeli peace camp. Indeed, their policies in the years that followed their signature on the Oslo Accords represented a narrowly defined agreement on a temporary and transitional process which would preserve Israel's overall control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, keep Jerusalem unified, and deny the PA any symbol of sovereignty.[30] Hence, beyond domestic constraints, Israeli policymakers from Rabin to Barak lacked a clear vision of a final settlement or the parameters by which such a settlement should be worked out, without yet considering the minimum Palestinian claims.

Additionally, the generation-long residue of mistrust toward the PLO, and especially its leader and symbol Yasser Arafat, kept Israeli leaders uptight and cautious lest any gesture or concession to the Pal-

estinian partner—from releasing prisoners to easing restrictions on the movement of people and goods across the borders to further redeployments—would provide ammunition to their political rivals and erode their public support. This approach dictated a measurable progress conditional on the other party's "good behavior," which gradually discredited Fatah to the Palestinian public. Apart from continued unilateral measures taken by Israel in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (primarily the continued construction of Israeli settlements and security obstacles to the movement of people and goods), a symbolic example of this half-hearted policy was the reluctance to officially meet Arafat in Israel, relegating him to border-crossing offices and treating him as a high-level agent, not as a full-fledged partner, in the most crucial effort toward a settlement of the Middle East conflict. Hence, the strictly limited scope and transitory nature of the Oslo Accords attested to much deeper constraints, even on the Rabin government, concerning the minimal Palestinian claims, namely, a sovereign and independent Palestinian state along the 1967 lines of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. It was these constraints and the absence of a clear vision of a desirable and possible settlement that accounted for a hesitant and half-hearted approach to the PLO as an equal partner in jointly forging a peaceful settlement.

Within its text, the Oslo Accords indicated that both signatories adopted a conflict resolution approach, despite the absence of any guiding principles by which the permanent status issues were to be resolved. Judged by their policies, however, it seems that under Rabin, Peres, and Netanyahu, Israel was in fact seeking *conflict management*, with a vague idea, if any, concerning the final status of the occupied territories in the permanent settlement. Only after the election of Barak for premiership in May 1999 did Israel turn to *conflict resolution*. In this context it is worth noting that the original autonomy plan, agreed upon by PM Menachem Begin at Camp David in 1979, was not perceived by Israeli governments as an obstacle to the policy of establishing further settlements in the occupied territories. Moreover, Begin clearly meant to claim sovereignty over the occupied territories at the end of the five-year interim period.[31] Even after signing the Oslo Accords, Rabin and Peres remained adamant about preventing discussion of a Palestinian state, and refrained from briefing their aides about their visions of the final status.[32]

In the Sharm al-Sheikh Memorandum, signed by PM Barak and Chairman Arafat on 4 September 1999, it was agreed that the two

sides would resume permanent status negotiations by February 2000, towards reaching a Framework Agreement on a Permanent Status (FAPS) in five months (by February 2000) and a Comprehensive Agreement on a Permanent Status (CAPS) within a year of the resumption of talks. Even then, however, Israel had not given its consent for Palestinian statehood or showed willingness to apply Resolution 242 to the Israeli-Palestinian case (a principle Barak accepted in regard to the Syrian case). The extent to which even Israeli policymakers, let alone the public, knew where they were heading was also indicated by the lack of "red lines" concerning borders. Israeli negotiators began by suggesting 65% of the West Bank, then inching up to 91% (plus a 1% swap) at the Camp David summit (July 2000), due to the firm Palestinian position claiming no less than 100% of the West Bank territory (or an equally quantitative and qualitative swap).

Jerusalem's future was effectively discussed for the first time in the formal negotiations with the Palestinian side.[33] PM Barak, who had hitherto refused to allow the Israeli delegation to deal with the subject (fearing the collapse of his coalition), agreed at Camp David to a division of sovereignties in the municipal area of Jerusalem, including the Old City, as well as a horizontal division of sovereignty in the Temple Mount (*al-haram al-sharif*), which the Palestinians rejected, insisting on full sovereignty over the whole compound. The effect of Barak's unprecedented position on Jerusalem in Israel drew harsh criticism from the right wing and, to a lesser extent, also from prominent Israeli figures at the center of the political spectrum, including Rabin's widow, Lea.[34]

The issue of refugees turned out to be another insurmountable obstacle at Camp David. Since 1993, the issue seemed to be of secondary significance for the PLO leadership. It gave Israel the impression that the historic Palestinian claim to the right of return of the refugees to their places in Israel proper had been abandoned, only to find out that the Palestinian delegation ascribed to it a crucial significance. In the final analysis, the postponement of negotiations on the core issues to the second stage, that is after establishing the PA and boosting Palestinian expectations, had little or no effect whatsoever on the parties' capability to show more flexibility in trading off assets of a symbolic nature.[35]

B. The Perils of Power Discrepancy

The built-in flaws of the Oslo Accords were particularly harmful to the envisioned process because the Israeli-PLO agreement was signed by extremely unequal actors. Israel enjoys an overall control of the territories under negotiation. Along with formal discrepancies—their different political status, experience, and institutional abilities—the immense inequality of the Palestinian and Israeli military and economic capabilities has been beyond possible rectification. Notwithstanding the internationally recognized status of the agreement and the immense interest of most nations in its successful implementation, the text of the Oslo agreement failed to mitigate the huge Israeli invincibility (e.g., by referring disputed interpretations of the agreements to a third-party's arbitration). Even when the U.S. administration became involved in the process as a single third party—often at a presidential level—in the wake of the 1996 Tunnel riots, it played the role of facilitator rather than undertaking the role of active mediator.[36]

In practice, the power discrepancy allowed Israel to conduct a security-driven policy toward the Palestinians that was shaped by the military and security echelons. Included in this policy were restrictions on the movement of people and goods (even within the Palestinian territories), curfews, closures, demolition of houses, and collective punishment, thanks to Israel's strict military control of these territories by land, sea, and air. Israel produced dictates and unilateral decisions toward the Palestinian side, such as postponement of agreed-upon target dates (especially of further redeployments and the beginning of the final status negotiations). It also avoided or prevented the implementation of mutual commitments, such as the safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank, in response to Palestinian violence. Finally, Israel created "facts"—roads and settlements—on lands that Palestinians perceived to be theirs.

Indeed, nothing soured the Oslo process more than Israel's vehement violation of the spirit of the Oslo Accords by a continued policy of settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.[37] Under Netanyahu, this policy was explained as a necessary means to keep together his shaky political coalition. Senior PA officials, however, perceived the settlement policy as disastrous to their interests, and equally as destructive as Palestinian suicide bombings to Israel.[38] The main PA response to frustrating unilateral Israeli decisions, especially the construction of settlements (including East Jerusalem), was to unilaterally

cease security coordination, or the negotiation process itself, giving a green light to the Islamist opposition groups to carry out their suicide bombings.[39]

Similarly, the Paris Protocol signed by Israel and the PLO in April 1994, which included fiscal and monetary agreements, fell prey to the huge discrepancy between the two parties' economic capacities and Israel's military control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. At the same time, Israel had agreed to informal financial arrangements with Chairman Arafat that effectively supported corruption and frustrated expectations for transparency concerning the utilization of international financial aid and institution building by the PA. Netanyahu's premiership was especially marked by unilateral decisions, the most conspicuous of which was the opening in October 1996 of the Hasmonean Tunnel along the Temple Mount's western wall, which triggered massive riots and culminated in a confrontation between the PA's security apparatus and Israeli military forces.

Barak, too, failed to respect the agreed-upon deadline of February 2000 for concluding the FAPS, mainly because he was busy trying to reach an agreement with Syria. To rush the negotiations and bridge the differences on key issues with the PLO, Barak pressed for a summit with Arafat and President Clinton. This decision proved hasty and insufficiently prepared, coupled with the loss of Barak's parliamentary majority even before going to Camp David. Yet, despite his far-reaching concessions on borders and Jerusalem, the proposals were rejected by Arafat.

From an Israeli viewpoint, the expectations for building mutual trust and cooperation were gradually frustrated by the Palestinian conduct. Indeed, despite their official recognition of the state of Israel and acceptance of the two-state solution along the 1967 lines, the PLO leaders failed to convince the Israeli public that they were trustworthy, that they meant what they signed, or the truth of their publicly stated willingness to live peacefully at Israel's side and not at its expense. Three main reasons combined to create this image of the Palestinian partner: its unwillingness to confront the Islamic opposition by force, its militant public rhetoric, and the PA's corrupt economy and political system.

Apart from short periods (March–May 1996, 1998), Arafat's willingness to coordinate security policy with Israel fell short of Israel's expectations, being either insufficient or inefficient in applying his commitment to prevent violent attacks on Israelis from territories

under the PA's full control. Indeed, Arafat's primary concern was his image and reputation among the Palestinians. This meant that during times of sour relations with the Israeli government, Arafat acquiesced in the violence perpetrated by Hamas and other Islamic opposition groups or opted to buy time and peace with them at the expense of his commitments to Israel under the Cairo agreement of May 1994 to prevent terrorist attacks from the areas put under his control.[40] Though Israeli intelligence and security officials were occasionally divided over the causes of this policy—objective inability or ill-will—it became the most effective argument employed by the critics of the Oslo Accords. As such, it was the main cause of the frustrated hopes and the loss of the PA's credibility from the Israeli perspective. It may well be the case that Arafat perceived the continued Islamist terror attacks on Israel as a necessary pressure despite its detrimental domestic implications on the PA.

Especially under the impact of the terrorist attacks and the PA's perceived acquiescence or inadequacy in fighting them, Israeli critics of the Oslo process repeatedly pointed to the incendiary nature of the PA's media and official statements as an indication that the PLO's strategic objective to eliminate Israel had remained unchanged. A case in point was the repeated Israeli demand that the PLO revoke those articles in its Charter that had tacitly or clearly denied Israel's right to exist (as stipulated in the interim agreement of September 1995). This was even after the Palestinian National Council (PNC) had approved that changes would be made to the Charter (on 24 April 1996) without specifying which of the 33 articles in the document would be changed.[41] Following Netanyahu's renewed pressures at the Wye summit, President Clinton visited Gaza in mid-December 1998 and attended the PNC session to ensure that the Charter was definitely revoked in accordance with Israel's demand.[42]

The perceived nature of a hostile Palestinian media culminated in the heyday of the al-Aqsa Intifada as a direct result of the competition with Hamas and an increasingly militant and revolutionary discourse within the PA's media, tacitly questioning the very legitimacy of the state of Israel. Already during Netanyahu's term, senior Fatah officials made repeated statements to Palestinian audiences that explicitly or implicitly indicated an intention to return to the armed struggle. Some continued to use the slogan, "Revolution until Victory," Fatah's official battle cry. The tension between *raison d'etat* and *raison de la nation*, termed by a Palestinian scholar as "national schizophrenia,"[43] was

mitigated during the al-Aqsa Intifada, underscoring that Fatah's revolutionary and combatant spirit was still alive. Indeed, Arafat himself made no clear statement to the effect that the "revolution" was over and that the time had come to focus on building the Palestinian state and silence opposing messages by Fatah's senior figures.[44]

Finally, the political economy of the PA indicated a clear preference for building regime security. It employed a number of armed organizations of police, intelligence, and preventive security, the overall personnel of which totaled more than 40,000 men. Whether this was part of Arafat's centralized political economy ensuring the PA's status as the primary employer or was genuinely needed for security purposes, Israeli right-wing figures repeatedly pointed to the dangerous inflation of Palestinian military forces, suggesting that its only rationale could be to prepare for confrontation with Israel. With the Tunnel clashes between armed PA personnel and IDF soldiers still freshly in mind, the Netanyahu government insisted on a substantial reduction of these forces and the arrest of those individuals wanted by Israel.[45] This was rejected by Arafat. The debilitating impact of Israeli security and economic policies on the deteriorating Palestinian economy notwithstanding, the PA became identified with corruption, nepotism, and a lack of accountability and transparency in employing financial resources (mostly received from international donors). All this, of course, exacerbated the negative impressions concerning the PA and its institutional relevance.[46]

The Israeli grievances over the PA's lack of enforcement of security measures, the continued incitement to violence in its media, and the failure to abolish the Charter's articles denying Israel's right to exist all were brought by Israeli PM Netanyahu to the fore at the Wye summit held in October 1998. While the Palestinian agenda was topped by claims for further redeployment in the West Bank, release of Palestinian "security" prisoners, and opening the Palestinian airport in Rafah, Israel sought to reduce to a minimum its response to these demands and render its response conditional on Palestinian fulfillment of their commitments. Primary among Israel's goals were the collection and control of illegal weapons, the prevention of incitement to violence, and a change of the PLO Charter.

The Wye agreement indeed contained a detailed security chapter. The Palestinian side agreed to take all measures to prevent acts of terrorism, crime, and hostilities directed against the Israeli side. Both parties agreed to stop incitement to violence. The U.S., Israel, and the

PA agreed to establish a trilateral committee to deal with the implementation of the chapter on security and the prevention of incitement. However, although Israel did fulfill a limited military redeployment, the process soon stalled due to strong opposition within the Israeli government to the compromises made by Netanyahu at Wye, heralding the collapse of his coalition.

V. Exogenous Factors

A. The Politics of Identity

Historically, the Arab-Jewish conflict has been marked by divided identities within and across national borders and sovereignties, underpinning continued tensions concerning power and legitimacy. Both Israeli Jews and Palestinians are part of larger collective identity groups defined as the Jewish people and the pan-Arab nation. In both cases diasporic groups and larger identities tend to be involved in shaping the politics, identity, and legitimacy, thus entangling policymaking processes and consensus making. Hence, as Edward Said lamented, the signing of the Oslo Accords came without consulting the Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan who had vested interests in the agreements with Israel. Similarly, militant Jewish groups in the United States defied the Israeli government's willingness to surrender parts of the Jewish homeland and Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem at large.[47]

The conquest of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 War brought all of historic Palestine under Israeli sovereign authority, rejuvenating old and new longings for Biblical Israel, and sowing the seeds of a messianic national-religious vision. Yet, while East Jerusalem was immediately annexed by the state of Israel, demographical reasons forced Israeli policymakers to leave the future of the occupied territories open, while effectively adopting a policy of selective settlement in them and establishing new "facts on the ground." The future of the occupied territories soon became the single most important issue defining left and right and shaping Israeli politics. The impact of Israel's reign over the West Bank and Gaza Strip was especially overt in the case of the National-Religious movement—an historical ally of the Labor movement. In the late 1970s, the National Religious Party (NRP) underwent a gradual shift toward militant, messianic nationalism, as indicated primarily by the continuous effort to

settle Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza region. Together with the secular nationalist Likud Party, the NRP aimed at preventing any future territorial compromise.

These ideological differences notwithstanding, effectively the policies conducted by all Israeli governments since 1967, of both Left (Labor) and Right (Likud), on the issue of settlement were essentially supportive of the settlers, motivated by a mixture of domestic politics and traditional Zionist visions, on the one hand, and the failure to consider the Palestinians as a national collective, on the other hand. Thus, despite the image of a deep cleavage between the pragmatic Labor Party and the nationalist groups eager to settle as many Jews as possible in the West Bank, the steady increase of the scope of settlements in the occupied territories reflected cooperation and symbiosis between the state and its various civil and security agencies and the settlers.[48]

The peace process that followed the Yom Kippur War boosted these processes of polarization in the Israeli-Jewish constituency, which came to suffer from political paralysis due to the balance between left and right, thus blocking any realistic option of a settlement over these territories, including with King Hussein of Jordan.[49] The shifting reins of power between the two main blocs notwithstanding, their equal electoral power until the late 1990s turned any decision in favor of a major territorial compromise over these parts of Eretz Israel into a prescription for political suicide. Indeed, the consecutive shifts of government led by the left and right in the Oslo years have underlined the narrow room for maneuver of Israeli governments, especially under conditions of violence conducted by the Palestinians.

Despite his previous unequivocal and fierce opposition to the Oslo Accords, in view of the stable majority of support for the Oslo process among Israelis, Netanyahu had to adopt a compromise position. He suggested that his party would recognize the facts resulting from the Oslo Accords. Henceforth, the debate would revolve around the future of permanent settlements rather than on the already existing agreement. In practice, he did not conceal his loathing of the Oslo Accords as detrimental to Israel. He made continuous efforts to control Israel's losses by procrastinating on the implementation of its commitments. This approach, coupled with imposing increasingly restrictive security measures on Palestinian daily life and economic activities, eroded the political posture of Arafat and his mainstream Fatah movement within their own constituency and validated the Islamic opposition's claims against any deal with Israel.[50]

The ideological polarization in Israeli society and politics was represented by the pervasive employment by right-wing leaders of symbols and values defining Jewish collective identity in its antagonistic and secluded nature. In their campaign against the Oslo process, the right wingers showed little or no restraint, employing images of PM Rabin wearing a *coufiyya*, the traditional Arab headgear worn by Arafat; associating the peace process with the Holocaust; and turning a blind eye to extremists presenting PM Rabin's image dressed in a Nazi uniform; parallel to pointing to Arafat and his lieutenants as untrustworthy thugs. While the Rabin-Peres government emphasized its commitment to security in the context of securing the Jewish—and democratic—character of the state of Israel, the nationalist-religious groups focused on the security of the "Whole Land of Israel" and the "People of Israel" as indivisible, emanating from God's promise to his people.[51]

The discourse of the 1990s demonstrated the crucial power of values and taboos, and the debilitating effect of "non-Jewish" conduct, such as collaborating with Arafat and arming his cohorts, partitioning Jerusalem, compromising control over the Temple Mount, and freezing the construction of (or removing) settlements, even if "illegally" constructed. Indeed, since the late 1980s, the perceived threat to the Jewish majority within historic Palestine (including Israeli Arab citizens) was due to the rapid natural population growth of the Palestinians. It became crucial in shaping public opinion and policymaking alike.[52]

This factor was apparently sufficient to mobilize most Israelis to support the total disengagement, including the uprooting of the Jewish settlements—unprecedented in Israel's history since 1967—from the Gaza Strip in August 2005. Yet slashing 1.4 million Palestinians from the demographic equation affected by the disengagement from Gaza Strip has apparently reduced the acuteness of this problem and its impact on policymaking regarding the West Bank. Nonetheless, on his return from the Annapolis Conference (November 2007), Israeli PM Olmert stated that failure to negotiate a two-state solution with the Palestinians would spell the end of the state of Israel. He warned of a "South African-style struggle," which Israel would lose if a Palestinian state was not established.[53] At the same time, since the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, right-wing groups have been waging a campaign aimed at proving that the demographic balance in fact tips in favor of the Jewish side, mainly due to decreasing fertility and growing emigration among the Palestinians and, at the same time, increasing fertility of the Jewish population.[54]

B. Supra-Nationalism and Regional Linkages

A significant exogenous factor affecting Israeli policymaking concerning the Palestinians is the linkage with, and question of, prioritizing peacemaking with the Palestinians or with the neighboring Arab states. Historically, the Zionist movement and the state of Israel prioritized peace with the neighboring Arab rulers over the Arab-Palestinian leadership, primarily due to practical considerations. As the most immediately concerned party, the Palestinians were seen as an utterly intransigent opponent and, despite ongoing contacts on tactical matters and one official attempt at reaching an agreement with their leaders, the Zionist leadership preferred to approach the neighboring Arab rulers on matters of cooperation.

The establishment of the PLO in 1964 and the consequent systematic guerrilla war against Israel by Palestinian armed organizations—in the name of liberating Palestine as a whole and eliminating the state of Israel—defined the PLO as Israel's sworn enemy. The conquest of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967 provided Israel with direct access to Palestinian notables in these territories, but this leadership lacked the necessary legitimacy to enter into independent negotiations with Israel, especially under the PLO's prohibition and threat of violent punishment against violating its exclusive authority. It was only in May 1989 that the national coalition government, with Y. Shamir as Prime Minister and S. Peres and Y. Rabin as Foreign and Defense Ministers, respectively, defined the Palestinians—albeit confined to the West Bank and Gaza Strip—as Israel's main partner for a peaceful settlement over these territories.[55]

Nonetheless, the built-in difficulties of reaching a settlement with the Palestinians (let alone its implementation) have repeatedly tempted Israeli leaders since the International Madrid Conference (1991) to seek a quick breakthrough with an Arab state (Jordan, Syria, or Lebanon). Such attempts raised concerns among Palestinian policymakers lest Israel was seeking to prolong negotiations with them or shore up its bargaining position with them through securing its interests toward a third party. A salient example is PM Ehud Barak's efforts to reach an agreement with Syria over the Golan Heights and Lebanon (May 1999–March 2000) while holding back the fulfillment of Israel's commitment to cede another territory to the full responsibility of the Palestinian Authority.[56]

Regardless of Israel's priorities, promoting Israeli-Arab peace relations has been, in theory and practice, dependent on progress in the Israeli-Palestinian track. Indeed, the Oslo process revealed the crucial role of the Palestine cause in Arab-Muslim states and societies. That breakthrough encouraged many Arab states to establish diplomatic relations with Israel or at least abandon their traditional policy of diplomatic boycott against the Jewish state. Similarly, however, the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada forced all Arab states to cease normalization of their relations with Israel or cut off diplomatic relations with it. In the absence of institutional legitimacy, continued economic depression, and dysfunctional bureaucracies, Arab regimes must reckon with public opinion, which in the recent two decades has been primarily shaped by the Islamist movements. The impact of growing Islamist activism was especially apparent in defying the Arab-Israeli peace process through systematic public campaigns against normalization, thus emptying the peace treaties signed with Israel of their contents.[57]

Despite the PLO's impressive diplomatic achievements since its establishment in 1964, the competitions among Arab states offered the rival Palestinian factions myriad opportunities for asylum, financial, military, and political support in their struggle against Israel. In the long run, these networks of patronage turned into a permanent phenomenon in the regional Arab-Israeli conflict, serving Palestinian opposition groups and their Arab patrons. Thanks to Libyan, Iraqi, Syrian and—as of the early 1990s—Iranian patronage, Palestinian terrorist and "rejectionist" groups could play the role of spoilers of the peace effort by strategies ranging from exacerbating terrorist attacks against Israel to intra-Palestinian terrorism.

The main result of these processes in the Palestinian sphere was the emergence of the Islamic faction Hamas as the main opposition to the PLO and, since 1994, the Palestinian Authority. Without ignoring the significance of Hamas as a social movement and its practical role in this respect, it is largely thanks to Iran's generous financial aid and Syria's political and military offices that this movement has been able to flourish and build a broad popular base. It defeated Fatah both politically, winning the elections to the PA Legislative Council in January 2006, and militarily in June 2007, assuming a ruling position in the Gaza Strip and threatening Fatah's primacy in the West Bank.

In summary, both Israeli and Palestinian communities are stifled by contradictory systems of beliefs—and identities defined primarily along a religious-secular dichotomy—but also by competing struc-

tures and actors, both within and outside their immediate territorial boundaries. The impact of this web of identities and parallel regional networks of state and non-state actors on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is hard to exaggerate, especially given the Iranian and Syrian motivations and the interactions with U.S. policies in the region, especially its war on Iraq. No less important, given Iran's overt call for the destruction of Israel and uncertainty about its nuclear project, Israeli perceptions of, and responses to, Islamic Palestinian violence tend to assume a broader regional context of security.[58]

V. Israel and the al-Aqsa Intifada

The failure of the Camp David summit was by no means the end of Israeli-PLO negotiations, which continued until the termination of Clinton's administration in January 2001. Further international attempts to continue negotiations were made, primarily Clinton's final proposals.[59] However, with the escalation of violence beginning on 29 September 2000, the prospects for finalizing a full-blown agreement faded quickly despite the narrowed gaps between Israel and the PLO. Due to Arafat's reservations, disagreements remained unresolved, especially concerning Israel's claims to the Western Wall in Jerusalem as part of the Temple Mount compound, and the Palestinian refugees—the two most contentious issues. Similarly to PM Barak, Ambassador Ross, the senior American mediator in the Oslo process, maintains that, "Arafat was not up to peacemaking."[60]

The scope of violence adopted by Palestinians and Israelis in 2001–2004 was unprecedented in the history of their conflict, primarily in terms of human losses. During this period, the Palestinians carried out more than 20,000 attacks of various types, in which more than 1,000 Israelis were killed (70% of whom were civilians), and more than 5,600 were wounded. More than 500 Israelis were killed in suicide bombings, most of them civilians within the Green Line. The year 2002 was a record high, with 60 suicide bombings.[61] From the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada in late September 2000 to the end of March 2002, 556 Israeli civilians were killed.

The terrorist attacks had a far-reaching direct impact on civilians, as well as indirectly, defined in terms of high levels of post-traumatic anxiety and depression. The terrorist attacks were experienced by some as an existential anxiety.[62] The main implication of these attacks was represented by growing militant perceptions and support of decisive

responses against the Palestinians.[63] More specifically, and in view of the inefficacy of the diplomatic means, the Israeli public demonstrated a growing support for a military solution represented by the popular slogan, "Let the IDF Win!"

In the heyday of the al-Aqsa Intifada (October 2000–August 2003) most Israeli Jews experienced fear and anxiety, along with a sense of abandonment and hostility from the international community. In addition, despite the asymmetry of power relations with the Palestinians, many shared the view that while the prevailing perception is that "we are the Goliath and they are the David," in actuality, the opposite was the case.[64] Hence, while most Israelis perceived Operation Defense Shield (April 2002) as an inevitable act of defense against an unprecedented brutal wave of terror, world opinion by and large perceived Israel as an invader into sovereign Palestinian territory and as a vehement reverse of the Oslo process.[65]

Given the weakness of Israel's political echelons, it was the military forces that dictated the parameters of the actual confrontation. The eruption of riots in late September 2000 was met by an unprecedented magnitude of fire power for which the IDF had been well prepared.[66] Indeed, during the first few weeks of the al-Aqsa Intifada, the toll of Israeli-to-Palestinian casualties was 1:20. Thus, despite statements by the military establishment to the contrary, it would seem that the IDF responded with excessive force, aiming to "decide the confrontation," which escalated the violence by triggering a strong sense of vengeance among the Palestinians in an effort to straighten up this "blood balance."[67]

Furthermore, while Mofaz, the IDF Chief of Staff during the first two years of the al-Aqsa Intifada, strove to dismantle the PA and expel Arafat from the territories, his successor, Ya'alon, preferred a strategy of accumulating pressure on the Palestinians that would exhaust their will to fight. In both cases, the government tended to follow the strategic outlines and operational recommendations of the Chief of Staff.[68] The military's freedom of action was further promoted by the Israeli government's decision shortly after the eruption of the riots, defining the violent events as an "armed conflict," unlike policing activity. This meant a radical liberalization of the rules concerning opening fire, and a decreasing commitment of the legal system to see to the implementation of the rules.[69]

Despite the long bleeding conflict in the years of the al-Aqsa Intifada, the parties were, by and large, left alone, even when Israel recap-

tured the territories under PA jurisdiction. Underpinning this state of international paralysis was the Bush administration's unprecedented support of Israel, perceiving it as part of the post-9/11 U.S. war on terrorism. Hence, despite consequent visits of senior American officials and envoys in an effort to stop the violence, a resumption of negotiations failed. When the idea of deploying international military forces in the Palestinian territories emerged in the course of Israel's Defensive Shield as a means of stabilizing the conflict, Israel responded with all-out rejection, perceiving it as detrimental to its freedom of action.[70]

The media played a destructive role in the implementation of the Oslo Accords. The impact of the media was discernible already during the first Intifada. By inflating and exaggerating the significance of the events, it exacerbated violence that otherwise may not have taken place.[71] A comparative study of the peace process of Oslo, Northern Ireland, and Israel-Jordan concluded that the media played a destructive role by its tendency to operate with competitive considerations and report immediately and dramatically, which ignored the vulnerable, slow, and transitory nature of peacemaking processes.[72]

The vicious terrorist attacks by Palestinians in the al-Aqsa Intifada played into the hands of those Israelis who had loathed the Oslo Accords or felt ambivalence toward the Palestinian leadership. It enabled the Israeli political and military echelons not only to place the responsibility for the collapse of the Oslo process on the Palestinian side, but also to explain the Palestinian violence as proof of Arafat's unwillingness to accept the historical compromise offered by Israel. This line of argument, publicly propagated by PM Barak in the wake of the Camp David summit, meant to rally the Israeli public around the government and justify an anticipated long and costly confrontation with the Palestinians. Asserting Israel's moral correctness in fighting the al-Aqsa Intifada, Chief of Staff Ya'alon typically defined the confrontation as an existential one: "[I]n terms of our righteousness [of policy], today I feel much more comfortable fighting what the Palestinians create…[A]fter what we have been through in the last nine years, I have less question marks and more exclamation marks. For me, a moral clarity has been emerged."[73]

VI. Conclusion

The Oslo process demonstrated the rocky course to a historic Israeli-Palestinian settlement as well as the immense cost of the frustrated expectations of the Palestinian people for statehood and sovereignty. It also underlined the resilience and blocking effect of symbolic assets and sacred values, even after agreeing on key principles and implementing substantive military, political, and economic steps. The Oslo process shows that in spite of broad and intensive international diplomatic and financial efforts, local and regional factors played a primary role in shaping the conduct of policymakers and the pace, direction, and results of the process.

Neither the Israeli nor the Palestinian leadership has been equipped with sufficient legitimacy or political power to handle the core issues due to their "sacred" nature. Hence, the ambivalent and half-hearted approaches by policymakers are revealed, especially under conditions of uncertainty and delayed implementation of agreed-upon commitments. Nothing attests more clearly to the Israeli and Palestinian constrained decision-making than the continued violence against Israelis on the part of the Palestinian opposition groups (with limited efforts by the Palestinian Authority to curb it) or the continued Israeli settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem throughout the years of the Oslo process. At the grassroots level, there has been no serious discourse on the core issues of the conflict and no effective attempts to educate the public about the painful concessions they would have to make in order to reach a settlement.

Under these circumstances, and aggravated by the huge gap in material capabilities between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as insufficient ripeness, a more determined international effort was necessary to cut the Gordian Knot.

The story of the Oslo process is an account of Israel's escalating resistance to conceding authority and control over the occupied territories and East Jerusalem to an autonomous Palestinian Authority, on the one hand, and the Palestinians' frustrated hopes for improved social and economic conditions, let alone a rapid development toward statehood and sovereignty, on the other. In retrospect, it seems that Israeli policymakers sought first and foremost to absolve themselves of the burden of directly governing the Palestinian population in the occupied territories and, with the PA's help, substantially to reduce if not fully quell Palestinian violence originating from these areas.

Clinton and his aides were originally content with facilitation, rather than playing an assertive role and presenting their own proposals to the parties, forgoing the use of the clout of the single world power. When a proactive model was finally applied by Clinton, it turned out to be too little, too late. As to the Bush administration, despite its diplomatic efforts to resume the Oslo process, the "Road Map," and its declared vision of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, it demonstrated distance and passivity. Both administrations were overly supportive of Israel and lacked sufficient commitment to see to a successful process. ◉

Notes

1. See the Charter of Hamas (Article 11). Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas, Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 181–82.

2. The traumatic assassination of Rabin convinced the Religious National Party to adopt the Oslo II Accord, to the chagrin of the settlers' movement, in *Ha'aretz* (28 November 1995).

3. Yossi Beilin, *Manual for a Wounded Dove* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2001), pp. 28, 35, and 44 (Heb.). See also, Sa'ib 'Ariqat's description of this period as "a nightmare," in "Shattered Dreams," *Frontline*, 2002 [Video].

4. Most recent among those expressing such views is Sari Nusseiba, in an interview to Akiva Eldar, *Ha'aretz* (16 August 2008); and Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "Into the Lion's Den," *The New York Review of Books* 55, no. 7 (1 May 2008). See also, Ali Abunimah, *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse* (New York: Metropolitan, 2006); and Jamil Hilal, ed., *Where Now for Palestine?: The Demise of the Two-State Solution* (London: Zed Books, 2007). The idea was first brought up as a way out of the Oslo deadlock in 1998. See Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pp. 282–286.

5. This is best indicated by the strong Israeli responses to the documents of a "Future Vision," published by Israeli Arab institutions (December 2006–May 2007), suggesting that Israel should give away its Jewish identity as a precondition for the full incorporation of its Arab minority. Avraham Tal, "This is a Declaration of War," *Ha'aretz* (7 December 2006); and Meron Benvenisti, "One Out of Five," Ibid. (16 March 2007). See also 'Uzi Benziman, "Israeli Arabs Cross a Line," Ibid. (20 September 2006).

6. See, for example, Pierre Tristam, "Bush's Road Map for Peace: Five Years Later," online on 9 July 2007 at http://middleeast.about.com/od/israelandpalestine/p/me070911.htm.

7. In addition to memoirs and studies, I also draw on the findings of a research project conducted by the Davis Institute of the Hebrew University in 2002–2004 by a group of scholars, including myself. The project included interviews with more than twenty senior Israeli officials, including former PM Ehud Barak and leading negotiators of the Oslo process. The main attitudes and approaches to the Oslo process are summarized in Arie M. Kacowicz, "Rashomon in the Middle East: Clashing Narratives, Images and Frames in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Cooperation and Conflict* 40, no. 3 (2005).

8. This is especially emphasized by Barak, "The Failure of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process." On the slim prospects of success in resolving ethnic conflicts, see Stephen J. Stedman, "International Implementation of Peace Agreements in Civil Wars: Findings from a Study of Sixteen Cases," in *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, edited by Chester A. Crocker, Fen O. Hampson, and Pamela Aall (Washington D.C.: USIP, 2001), pp. 737–752.

9. For a summary of the contending explanations for the failure of the Camp David summit and its aftermath by practitioners and commentators, see Itamar Rabinovich, *Waging Peace: Israel and the Arabs 1948–2003* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 160–176.

10. Arie M. Kacowicz, "Rashomon in the Middle East: Clashing Narratives, Images and Frames in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Cooperation and Conflict* 40, no. 3 (2005): 343–360.

11. Sidney Tarrow, "Social Movements in Contentious Politics: A Review Article," *The American Political Science Review* 90, no. 4 (December 1996): 884–893.

12. This approach was officially propagated by PM Barak—and approved by President Clinton—in the wake of their failed summit at Camp David in July 2000. See Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), pp. 712–15. See also, Charles Enderlin, *Shattered Dreams: The Failure of the Peace Process in the Middle East 1995–2002* (New York: Other Press, 2002), pp. 321–322.

13. For a critique of these attitudes, see Nathan Brown, *Democracy, History, and the Contest over the Palestinian Curriculum* (Adam Institute, 2001), pp. 1–27; and Matti Steinberg, *Facing Their Fate: Palestinian National Consciousness 1967–2007* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2008), pp. 404–407 (Heb.).

14. See, for example, 'Akiva Eldar, "Popular Misconceptions," *Ha'aretz* (11 June 2004), online at http://www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/spages/437895.html. For similar and other claims, see also Beilin 2001, pp. 13–15 (Heb.).

15. The most conspicuous expression of that are the car bumper stickers as well as graffiti that became prevalent after the eruption of the Intifada, calling for "posh'ei Oslo, laddin" (Criminals of Oslo, go on trial).

16. Said 2001, pp. 20–37, 69–73, and 113–118.

17. Ron Pundak, "From Oslo to Taba: What Went Wrong?," *Survival* 43, no. 3 (2001): 31–45; Jerome Slater, "What Went Wrong? The Collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," *Political Science Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2001): 171–199; Jeremy Pressman, "Visions in Collision: What Happened at Camp David and Taba?," *International Security* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 5–43; and Oren Barak, "The Failure of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process, 1993–2000," *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 6 (2005): 719–736. For the practitioners' debate conducted in *The New York Review of Books*, see Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors," Vol. 48, no. 13 (9 August 2001); Dennis Ross; Gidi Grinstein (Reply by Hussein Agha, Robert Malley), "Camp David: An Exchange," Vol. 48, no. 14 (20 September 2001); Benny Morris, "Camp David and After: An Exchange" (1. "An Interview with Ehud Barak"), Vol. 49, no. 10 (13 June 2002); Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, (2. "A Reply to Ehud Barak"), Ibid.; Benny Morris, Ehud Barak, "Camp David and After—Continued" (Reply by Hussein Agha, Robert Malley), Vol. 49, no. 11 (27 June 2002).

18. D. Bar-Tal and G. H. Bennink, "The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process," in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, edited by Y. Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 11–38.

19. Richard N. Haas, "Ripeness and the Settlement of International Disputes," *Survival* 30, no. 3 (June 1988): 232–251; Marieke Kleiboer, "Ripeness of Conflict: A Fruitful Notion?," *Journal of Peace Research* 31, no. 1 (1994): 109–116; and William I. Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, edited by Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000), pp. 225–250.

20. Yair P. Hirschfeld, *Oslo: A Formula for Peace: From Negotiations to Implementation* (Tel Aviv: Rabin Center and 'Am 'Oved), pp. 69–71 (Heb.).

21. Rabinovich 2004, pp. 51–53.

22. The visit to Barak's home is documented in "Shattered Dreams," *Frontline*, 2002 (Video).

23. For the campaign of incitement against Rabin and Peres, see Michael Karpin and Ina Friedman, *Murder in the Name of God: The Plot to Kill Yitzhak Rabin* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); and Enderlin 2002, pp. 15–19.

24. Said 2001, pp. 5–6 and 163–64.

25. *Gerald M. Steinberg*, "Unripeness and Conflict Management: Re-Examining the Oslo Process and its Lessons," Bar-Ilan University, Occasional Papers, No. 4 (June 2002): 1–15; and Steinberg 2008.

26. Steinberg 2008, pp. 390–91.

27. Testimony of Eitan Haber, Rabin's bureau chief, "What Went Wrong," Davis Institute, Hebrew University, 24 March 2002.

28. A post-Rabin assassination popular song among the youth, representing the shattered hopes placed on the Oslo process, stated: "but you've promised peace…promises must be implemented." See also Said 2001, pp. 161–64 and 312–14.

29. See the Beilin-Abu Mazin Document (31 October 1995), Beilin 2001, pp. 267–280; Uri Savir, *The Process* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 1998), pp. 46–83 (Heb.); and Yair P. Hirschfeld, *Oslo: A Formula for Peace*, pp. 106–109.

30. Hirschfeld, *Oslo: A Formula for Peace*, pp. 152–155.

31. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 307; Ibrahim M. Kamel, *The Camp David Accord: A Testimony* (London: KPI, 1986), pp. 53–61; and Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981), pp. 93–100.

32. Hirschfeld, *Oslo: Formula for Peace*, pp. 152–53. The author himself heard Uri Savir, Director General of the Foreign Ministry, stating to a forum of advisers, in March 1996, that he had no clue as to the government's vision on the future relations with the Palestinians.

33. Testimonies of some of the participants in the discussion, including former ministers Dan Meridor (8 August 2002) and Amnon Lipkin-Shahak (20 August 2002), Davis Institute, WWW–Oslo Project.

34. Ross 2004, p. 715.

35. The gap between the parties' positions is most apparent in view of the Israeli insistence on sealing the permanent settlement by a joint official declaration of "end of the conflict," as stated by Barak before leaving for the Camp David summit.

36. On the differences between these roles, see Fen O. Hampson, "Parent, Midwife or Accidental Executioner?: The Role of Third Parties in Ending Violent Conflict," in *Turbulent Peace*, edited by Crocker et al., pp. 387–406.

37. In 1993–2000, the settler population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip grew by nearly 9% a year—three times more than the annual population growth in Israel proper. See *Foundation for Middle East Peace*, accessed online at http://www.fmep.org/settlement€info/states€data/settler€population€growth/sources (2 May 2008).

38. Enderlin 2002, pp. 67–68; and Ross 2004, pp. 328–338.

39. As in the case of Israel's decision to establish a new neighborhood in Har Homa (*jabal ghneim*) in 1997, Beilin 2001, pp. 30–31; and Ross 2004, p. 338.

40. Mishal and Sela 2000, ch. 3; and Ross 2004, p. 338.

41. Press Release. "Legal Opinion," *Peace Watch* (25 April 25 1996), accessed online on 10 October 2008 at http://www.iris.org.il/pncvote/htm.

42. Ross 2004, pp. 478–79, 486. Even after a public vote (in Clinton's presence) by a vast majority of the PNC members on December 13, 1998, senior Israeli figures still claimed that the PLO Charter had never been changed. See, for example, former Chief of Staff, Lt. General (res.) Moshe Yaalon, "Israel and the Palestinians: A New Strategy," *Azure*, No. 34 (November 2008).

43. Ali Jarbawi, "Evaluation of the Palestinian General Elections," *Palestine-Israel Journal* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 87.

44. Michael Milshtein, *Between Revolution and Statehood: Fatah and the Palestinian Authority* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University, 2004), pp. 61–70 (Heb.).

45. Enderlin 2002, pp. 90–93.

46. Arafat's authoritarianism and corrupt economic system were repeatedly criticized by Said. See, for example, his *End of the Oslo Process*, pp. 160–64. The structures and procedures of the PA's economic policies are best described in *A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank and Gaza*, edited by Rex Brynen (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000).

47. Said 2001, pp. 325–26; Beilin 2001, pp. 30, 42, 60.

48. Idit Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The Settlers and the State of Israel, 1967–2004* (Or Yehudah: Kineret, Zemora-Bitan, Dvir, 2004). (Heb.).

49. Moshe Zak, "Israeli-Jordanian Negotiations," *Washington Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1985): 167–176.

50. Steinberg 2008, pp. 188–199, 365–375; Enderlin, 2002, pp. 42–46; and Beilin 2001, pp. 20–22, 69.

51. Arie Naor, "The Security Argument in the Territorial Debate in Israel: Rhetoric and Policy," *Israel Studies* 4, no. 2 (1999): 150–177; David Newman, "Conflicting Israeli Peace Discourses," *Peace Review* 9, no. 3 (1997): 417–424; Shaul Shenhav, "Once upon a Time there was a Nation: Narrative Conceptualization Analysis. The Concept of 'Nation' in the Discourse of Israeli Likud Party Leaders," *Discourse & Society* 15, no. 1 (2004): 81–104;

and Baruch Kimmerling, "Religion, Nationalism, and Democracy in Israel," *Constellations* 6, no. 3 (1999): 339–363.

52. Guy Ben-Porath, "We are Here, They are There: Between Peace and Exclusion in Israel/Palestine," *Citizenship Studies* 7, no. 3 (2008): 307–320; Sergio Della Pergola, "Demography in Israel/Palestine: Trends, Prospects, Policy Implications," The A. Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Paper presented at the IUSSP XXIV General Population Conference, Salvador de Bahia, August 2001). Online at http://www.iussp.org/brazil2001/s60-s64€02/dellapergola.pdf.

53. BBC News (29 November 2007), accessed online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle€east/7118937.stm.

54. For the right-wing arguments, see Bennett Zimmerman, Roberta Seid, and Michael L. Wise, *The Million Person Gap: The Arab Population in the West Bank and Gaza* (Ramat Gan: The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, 2005); and a series of statistical articles by Yoram Ettinger, online at http://yoramettinger.newsnet.co.il. For different conclusions, see Sergio Della Pergola, "A Question of Numbers," *Haaretz* (25 January, 2006), online at http://yoramettinger.newsnet.co.il.

55. Elyakim Rubinstein, *Yozmat Hashalom Shel Memshele Israel Mahi?* State of Israel, Information Center, Jerusalem, 1989: *WAKH* (20 May 1990), *FBIS, Daily Report* (22 May 1990) (Heb.).

56. Enderlin 2002, pp. 135–140; and Rabinovich 2004, p. 52.

57. Avraham Sela, "Politics, Identity and Peacemaking: The Arab Discourse on Peace with Israel in the 1990s," *Israel Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 15–71; and Paul L. Scham and Russell E. Lucas, "'Normalization' and 'Anti-Normalization' in Jordan: The Public Debate," *Israel Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2003): 141–164.

58. Avraham Sela, *Non-State Peace Spoilers and the Middle East Peace Efforts* (Jerusalem: The Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies, June 2005).

59. Enderlin 2002, pp. 334–39.

60. Ross 2004, p. 756; Morris, "An Interview with Ehud Barak, *The New York Review of Books* 49, no. 10 (13 June 2002); and Barak's testimony, "What Went Wrong," Davis Institute, Hebrew University (30 June 2002).

61. Maj. Gen. (res.) D. Almog, in a conference on Israel in Protracted Wars, Bar-Ilan University, December 1, 2004. See also the website www.IDF.il. For comparison, from mid-1996 to September 2000, the Israeli toll was 45.

62. Avi Bleich, "The Israeli Society in the Pincer of Terror," *About the Emotion: Journal of NTL Association*, No. 5 (The Center for Help in States of Stress and Trauma on National Background, May 2003) (Heb.).

63. Meir Elran, *National Strength in Israel: The Impacts of the Second Intifada on the Israeli Society* (Tel Aviv: Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, January 2006), p. 6 (Heb.).

64. As stated by Israeli Chief of Staff, Lt. General Moshe Yaalon, interview with Ari Shavit, *Ha'aretz* (30 August 2002).

65. "Behind Defense Shield—Israeli Communication under Fire" (Keshev, The Israeli Center for Defense of Democracy in Israel, May 2002), online at www.keshev.org.il (Heb.). Daniel Dor, *Behind a Defense Shield* (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2003) (Heb.).

66. Akiva Eldar, "The Crucial Disagreement in the Intelligence Division—The Full Story," *Ha'aretz* (13 June 2004); and Enderlin 2002, p. 318.

67. Ben Kaspit, "New 5763 Year—Two Years of the Intifada," *Ma'ariv* (5 September 2002).

68. Aluf Ben, "The Military Dictates, the Political Echelon Accepts," *Ha'aretz* (8 August 2002).

69. Ronen Schneiderman, "Taking no Prisoners—Killing Palestinians by Shooting at the Hands of the Security Forces During 'Arrest Operations,'" *Be'tzelem Report* (May 2005) (Heb.). See also, Avi Yisakharov and Amos Har'el, *The Seventh War: How We Won and Why We Lost the War with the Palestinians* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2004), p. 333 (Heb.)

70. *YNET* (16 April 2002).

71. Don Peretz, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1990), p. 125.

72. Gadi Wolsfeld, *Media and the Path to Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

73. Interview with Ari Shavit, *Ha'aretz* (30 August 2002).