

Thirty Years since the Oslo Accord: You Can't Cross a Ravine in Two Jumps

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This month marks the thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the Oslo Accord – the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements – between Israel and the PLO. The agreement delineated a roadmap for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without defining what the permanent arrangement would look like. The thirty years that have passed show that the agreement failed to address the gaps between the divergent perceptions and goals of the two sides, and may be likened to an attempt to cross a ravine in two jumps. During the implementation of the agreement, after the interim jump, the signatories fell into the jaws of those on both sides who opposed the agreement and insisted “it’s all mine.”

The following are some of the milestones that have shaped the enormous complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the gulf between each side’s perceptions:

- The Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the Mandate of 1922 served as the opening shots in the conflict. These documents formalized international recognition of the right of the Jewish people, living outside its land, to a national home in its homeland, while denying this right to the country’s Arab inhabitants.
- The international recognition of the right of the country’s Arabs to self-determination in 1937–1947, culminating in Partition Resolution 181, which allocated 45% of Mandatory Palestine for a Palestinian state. The Zionist movement accepted the partition resolution as the only way to establish a democratic state with a Jewish majority. The Arabs, who represented a majority of the population and owned 90% of the land, rejected it and fought to prevent its implementation. At the end of the war they emerged as a disadvantaged minority in Israel and as refugees in the neighboring Arab countries (with the exception of Jordan, where they are citizens).
- Resolution 242 of the UN Security Council, adopted in November 1967 after the Six Day War, adopted a new formula for compromise: Israel would hold 78% of the area of Mandatory Palestine and return the territories it occupied in 1967 in return for peace agreements.
- In 1974 the Palestinians began to internalize the need for compromise and accordingly adopted the Phased Plan. In 1988, after Jordan nullified its annexation of the West Bank and the PLO was again recognized as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, the PLO recognized Partition Resolution 181 (which mentions a Jewish state) and Resolution 242, implying acceptance of a Palestinian state in 22% of the territory of “historical Palestine.”

The Oslo Accord outlined a gradual process that was intended to lead in three years and three stages (the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, the Interim Agreement, and additional arrangements) to a starting point creating the conditions for negotiations toward a permanent agreement. The entire area of the Gaza Strip and West Bank – with the exception of East Jerusalem, the settlements, and military sites (which would be discussed in the negotiations for a permanent agreement) – would be transferred to the responsibility of an elected Palestinian Authority. Yitzhak Rabin insisted on this gradual framework as part of his perception of the peace process: “I prefer interim agreements, with a test period between each stage, to an attempt to move forward in a single step to a comprehensive agreement.”

Rabin imposed this approach on the Palestinians although he was aware that the reality of the Jewish settlements in 1993 was different from that in 1978 when the Autonomy Agreement was signed at Camp David. At a government meeting on August 30, 1993, Rabin declared: “The whole idea of autonomy, the interim agreement, is a complex one. It was invented when there were virtually no Jewish settlements in the Territories, so that the whole matter was much simpler. Jewish settlement, particularly in densely-populated areas, has complicated life – that was its political goal. This was political settlement, not security settlement, without any contribution to security.”

Five factors motivated Rabin to adhere to his gradual approach. The first was the success of this approach as implemented in the peace process with Egypt: a troop separation agreement in 1974, an interim agreement in 1975, a framework agreement in 1978, and a permanent agreement in 1979. The second was the reliance on the Autonomy Agreement signed by Menachem Begin at Camp David in 1978, which was almost identical to the 1993 Declaration of Principles.

The third factor was concern regarding the ability of the PLO to adhere to the agreement, as Foreign Minister Shimon Peres noted: “The Palestinians have reached the bottom of the barrel; their position today is terrible. I must say that it is possible that the whole business of the PLO may disintegrate.”

The fourth factor was the desire to postpone the need to cope with evacuating settlements, after the Palestinians agreed that these would remain during the interim period. The fifth was the issue of Jerusalem.

Two Similar Peoples

Both Rabin and Peres ignored the insistence of each side on maintaining its own narrative. Arafat’s deputy Abu Iyad wrote: “The two peoples are similar, including in terms of the suffering they have experienced: one from Nazism and the other from colonialism; in their determination to secure their goals at any cost; and in their inherent lack of compromise, which far exceeds that of their leaders (“Without a Homeland,” 1979).

The gradual approach gave the opponents of compromise on both sides – Hamas and the messianic-nationalist stream in Israel – time to recover from the blow of the agreement, which was only made public when it was signed. They were able to thwart the main changes to which each side had committed itself, and by so doing to undermine the trust needed in order to implement a long process toward compromise. Ehud Barak – chief of staff at the time – and Rabin were aware of this risk. At the same meeting, Barak commented: “I would just note that there will be extremist elements in Palestinian society that will have an active interest in trying to torpedo this agreement and its maturation.” Rabin interrupted him: “The same in Israeli society.” Rabin attempted to shape the reality on the ground ahead of the negotiations toward a permanent agreement through numerous steps, including Government Decision 360 (1992), which froze the construction of new settlements, the reallocation of budgets from Judea and Samaria to Israel proper, and a prohibition against the construction of infrastructures strengthening the connection between the settlements in the various “blocks.”

Rabin’s assassination and the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister reversed these trends and sparked processes that eroded the territorial commitment to the Palestinians. After transferring Hebron and implementing a minor step toward the Palestinians, Netanyahu froze the ongoing transfer of land to the Palestinian Authority, and proudly boasted of this. The messianic nationalists, under a series of leaders – from Yitzhak Levy and Effi Eitam through Naftali Bennett and on to Betzalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir – received budgets and security support from all the governments headed by Netanyahu enabling them to sabotage the process. They managed to increase the number of Israelis living in Judea and Samaria fourfold, including the founding of 170 illegal outposts and farms (40 of which have already received retroactive approval), the construction of a network of bypass roads serving isolated settlements, the expulsion of Palestinians from their land, attacks on Palestinians, and the demolition of their homes. These actions seriously eroded trust in Israel among the Palestinians.

On the other side, Hamas, seeing its dream of an Islamic Palestine from the Jordan to the Mediterranean vanishing in front of its eyes, continued to use terror against Israel and the PA, impairing the main benefit the Israelis had anticipated – security. Arafat failed to meet his commitment to pursue an uncompromising struggle against terror, thereby fueling Israeli fears and eroding the level of mutual trust to a level that even Mahmud Abbas, a loyal exponent of the peace process, has to date failed to repair. Numerous opinion polls show a dramatic fall in support for the two-state solution among Israeli Jews, from 60% to around one-third, although the majority still support separation, including unilaterally. The Palestinian public shares the despair at any possibility of a solution; many Palestinians, particularly the younger generation, prefer a solution of a single state with equality for all.

The negotiations toward a permanent agreement eventually began after a delay of two years. Only 38% of the territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip was transferred to the Palestinians; on the other side, Israel was badly shaken by terror attacks. The challenge was how to bridge the gaps between the perceptions of the two sides regarding the permanent agreement and the question of which conflict the process sought to address – that of 1917, 1948 or 1967. The enormous gulf was already evident in the mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. The PLO granted Israel full territorial payment (recognition of Israel in the 1967 borders), thereby leaving Israel with 78% of the area of Mandatory Palestine. In return, the PLO sought solutions to the problems created by a century of conflict: the Palestinian right to self-determination in Mandatory Palestine, a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem, the borders, and the refugees.

Israel presented 1967 as the starting point for the conflict and the territories occupied in that year as the content of the conflict. It did not offer the PLO reciprocal payment, confining itself to recognizing the organization as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This position, based on Israel's strength, was reflected in Rabin's refusal to utter the words "Palestinian state," referring instead to "an entity that is less than a state."

In his speech to the Knesset on October 4, 1995, in the session that ratified the Interim Agreement, Rabin offered a portrait of the permanent agreement (more or less along the lines of the Allon Plan); from the Palestinian perspective this was ridiculous. Barak followed suit in 1999, defining the goal of the negotiations as "a just division of the territories of Judea and Samaria." In other words, a compromise would be reached beginning from the 1967 War, rather than from the true starting point: the Balfour Declaration.

Barak's Failure

From the PLO's perspective, its recognition of the Partition Resolution and of UN Resolutions 242 and 338 gave the Palestinian people a legitimate place in the international community, from which it had excluded itself since 1917 by its refusal to accept international decisions. This recognition implied the implementation of the UN resolutions: an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders in return for peace agreements. Accordingly, when it accepted the gradual process imposed on it, the PLO assumed that the process would end in the establishment of a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders (with land swaps).

In the negotiations that began in the second half of 1999, Barak chose not to continue to pay the price for a gradual process. He argued that the two sides should not deal with "installments" but should proceed to a permanent agreement in two stages: A framework agreement outlining the ultimate reality, followed by a detailed agreement; this was agreed in the protocol signed at Sharm a-Sheikh in May 1999. However, Barak failed to

recognize that for the messianic nationalists in Israel, the smallest success is one guided by divine intervention. He adopted a lenient approach toward the facts they created on the ground, which as noted eroded Palestinian trust in the process.

Under Barak the number of apartment constructed in the settlements soared. In 1999, he even agreed to the “whitewashing” of illegal outposts that had flourished under Netanyahu’s first government. Barak’s failure to understand the Palestinian position and the limits of their flexibility reached its peak at Camp David in 2000. His most generous offer was supposed to send Arafat back to the Palestinian people with a proposal that would secure just 84% of the area of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, demilitarized and without heavy weapons, as well as a further 7% in the Jordan Valley to be held by Israel under a temporary lease – without access to the border with Jordan, without a capital in Al-Quds (East Jerusalem), with Israeli sovereignty on the Temple Mount, and without any possibility for the return of Palestinian refugees. In other words, Barak’s offer was detached from the international resolutions and from the Palestinian narrative and their perception of compromise. The offer created the conditions for the outbreak of the Second Intifada, following Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount, and entrenched the mantra that “there is no partner.”

It was only 15 years after the signing of the Oslo Accord that Israel, under Ehud Olmert, fell into line with the international resolutions. During the Annapolis process in 2007–2008, Olmert and Abbas reached agreement on the parameters for negotiations. Both leaders made significant process, but were unable to close all the gaps before Olmert resigned after he was indicted.

The opponent of compromise on both sides had taken advantage of the preceding 15 years to erode trust between the two sides and resume the mutual bloodshed. In 2005 Israel withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip and in 2007 Hamas seized control of the area by force, creating the division between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Netanyahu’s return to the prime minister’s office in 2009 dealt a death blow to the peace process and the two-state solution. President Trump’s “Vision for Peace” (2020), which was conceived and dictated by Netanyahu, presented a cynical and absurd reworking of the two-state concept.

With strong backing from the US Administrations, Israel missed the opportunity to convert the Oslo Accord into the final chord of its conflict with the Palestinians from a position of strength, and in the best possible conditions it could achieve. Rabin was wrong to impose the principle of a gradual solution on the peace process: the most complicated and intricate issues in the century-long conflict required a solution in a single, sharp cut. This was the spirit of the 1947 Partition Plan, whose initiators recognized that it offered the “most practical” solution given the unbridgeable gulf between the narratives of the two sides. As then-Minister of Police Moshe Shahal warned at the above-mentioned

government meeting: “It would be better to head for a permanent solution and implement it in stages... Autonomy in itself creates an impossible reality for implementation.”

The Palestinians have paid a heavy price for their mistakes over the years – the First Intifada and the failure to fight Hamas terror. Today, the absence of a peace process and Israel’s refusal to compromise may force the PLO, whose political approach has failed, to make way for Hamas or to adopt its policy of resistance.

Nevertheless, the Oslo Process secured unprecedented achievements for both sides. From the Israeli side, the formation of the Palestinian Authority relieved it of responsibility for direct management of the daily lives of millions of Palestinians. Jordan’s relinquishing of its role as the representative of the Palestinians paved the way for the peace treaty with the Kingdom. The establishment of diplomatic relations with Arab states later permitted the signing of the Abraham Accords. The process encouraged dramatic economic growth in Israel. For the Palestinians, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in democratic elections created the foundation for a “state in the making” and led to the recognition by the UN of Palestine with observe status; it also led to the recognition by Israel of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

In the long term, the missed opportunities of the Oslo process may come to be seen as a disaster for Israel comparable to the Palestinian Nakba of 1948. Israel has behaved and continues to behave from a position of power, seeking to gain more than it is entitled to in accordance with the international resolutions. It has ignored and continues to ignore the risk that it may fail in this approach and pay a very heavy price. Right now the price has reached a peak with the judicial coup – the sacrificing of the State of Israel as a democratic state on the altar of the West Bank and the entrenchment of Apartheid.

In the first stage, the Apartheid regime is pushing Israel into the role of a global pariah. Ultimately, it will transform Israel into an Arab state with a Haredi and messianic Jewish minority. Israel currently faces a diplomatic opportunity in the form of a possible agreement with Saudi Arabia. Including significant steps in this agreement, particularly in the territorial dimension, that can restore the path to separation between two states may save Israel from the abyss it is hurtling toward.

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