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THE OSLO ACCORD

AVI SHLAIM

Despite all its limitations and ambiguities, the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Governing Arrangements (DOP) for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and Jericho marked the mother of all breakthroughs in the century-old conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine.¹ Future generations will look back on Monday, 13 September 1993—the day the DOP was signed on the South Lawn of the White House and sealed with the historic handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasir Arafat—as one of the most momentous events in the twentieth-century history of the Middle East. In one stunning move, the two leaders redrew the geopolitical map of the entire region.

Although the DOP was signed in Washington, with President Bill Clinton acting as master of ceremonies, it had been negotiated in Oslo and initialed there in late August. The “Oslo accord” is therefore a more fitting name for the historic document than the “Washington accord.” The accord in fact has two parts, both of which were the product of secret diplomacy in the Norwegian capital. The first part was mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. It took the form of two letters, on plain paper and without letterheads, dated 9 September but signed by Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Rabin respectively on 9 and 10 September. The second part, the Declaration of Principles, set an agenda for negotiations on Palestinian self-government in the occupied territories, beginning with Gaza and Jericho. Nearly all the

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publicity focused on the signing of the DOP, but without the prior agreement on mutual recognition there could have been no meaningful agreement on Palestinian self-government.

In his letter to Rabin, Arafat observed that the signing of the DOP marked a new era in the history of the Middle East. He then confirmed the PLO's commitment to recognize Israel's right to live in peace and security, to accept United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, to renounce the use of terrorism and other acts of violence, and to change those parts of the Palestine National Charter which are inconsistent with these commitments. In his terse, one-sentence reply to Arafat, Rabin confirmed that in the light of these commitments, the government of Israel had decided to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and to commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process.²

Rabin was only slightly more expansive, but still far from effusive, in a statement he made at the signing of the letter to Arafat. He noted that this was the first agreement between the Palestinians and Israel since the creation of the State of Israel. "It's an historic moment," he said, "which hopefully will bring about an end to 100 years of bloodshed, misery, between the Palestinians and Jews, between Palestinians and Israel."³

Taken together, the two parts of the Oslo accord fully merit the overworked epithet "historic" because they reconcile the two principal parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This conflict has two dimensions: one is the interstate conflict between Israel and the neighboring Arab states, the other is the clash between Jewish and Palestinian nationalism. The latter has always been the heart and core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Both national movements, Jewish and Palestinian, denied the other the right to self-determination in Palestine. Their history is one of mutual denial and mutual rejection. Palestinian rejection of Israel's legitimacy is enshrined in the 1968 Palestine National Charter. Israel's rejection of Palestinian national rights was pithily summed up by Golda Meir's remark that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people.⁴

Now mutual denial has made way for mutual recognition. Israel not only recognized the Palestinians as a people with political rights, but formally recognized the PLO as its representative. The handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat at the signing ceremony, despite the former's awkward body language, was a powerful symbol of the historic reconciliation between the two nations. The old Israeli war-horse was deeply uneasy about the mammoth step of opening relations with the PLO, which only weeks earlier he had been calling a "terrorist organization." To his aides he confided that he had "butterflies in his stomach." Yet he managed to overcome his doubts and reservations and he took his gigantic step, knowing full well that there was no turning back.

The Oslo accord is "historic" because it reconciles the two principal parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The historic reconciliation was based on a historic compromise: acceptance of the principle of the partition of Palestine. At the same time, both sides accepted the principle of territorial compromise as the basis for the settlement of their long and bitter conflict, as the basis for peaceful coexistence between themselves. Partition is not, of course, a new idea. It was first proposed by the Peel Commission in 1937 and again by the United Nations in 1947, but it was rejected on both occasions by the Palestinians, who insisted on a unitary state over the whole of Palestine. They insisted on all or nothing and ended up with nothing. Nor were they quick to learn from their mistakes. Article 2 of the Palestine National Charter states that "Palestine, within the frontiers that existed during the British Mandate, is an indivisible territorial unit."⁵ By the time the Palestine National Council (PNC) endorsed the principle of partition and a two-state solution in 1988, Israel, under a Likud government, rejected the idea, laying claim to the whole of the biblical Land of Israel, including "Judea and Samaria" (the West Bank).

By simultaneously accepting the principle of partition, the two sides abandoned the ideological dispute as to who is the rightful owner of Palestine and turned to finding a practical solution to the problem of sharing the cramped living space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Each side resigned itself to parting with territory that it had previously regarded not only as its patrimony but as a vital part of its national identity. Each side was driven to this historic compromise by the recognition that it lacked the power to impose its own vision on the other side. That the idea of partition was finally accepted by the two sides would seem to support Abba Eban's observation that men and nations often behave wisely once they have exhausted all the other alternatives.⁶

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

Clearly, an important taboo has been broken. PLO recognition of Israel legitimizes the normalization of relations between the rest of the Arab world and Israel. It is an important landmark along the road to Arab recognition

PLO recognition of Israel legitimizes the normalization of relations between the rest of the Arab world and Israel.

of Israel. Egypt, which was first to take the plunge back in the late 1970s, feels vindicated and elated by the breakthrough it helped to bring about. When Rabin stopped in Rabat on his way home after attending the signing ceremony in Washington, he was received like any other visiting head of government by King Hassan II of Morocco. Jordan allowed Israeli television the first-ever live report by one of its correspondents from Amman. A number of Arab states, such as Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, started thinking seriously about the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. And the Arab League began discussions on the lifting of the economic boycott which has been in force since Israel's creation. Nothing is quite the same in the Arab world as a result of the Israel-PLO accord. The rules of the game in the entire Middle East have radically changed.

The change is no less marked in Israel's approach to her Arab opponents. Zionist policy, before and after 1948, proceeded on the assumption that agreement on the partition of Palestine would be easier to achieve with the rulers of the neighboring Arab states than with the Palestinian Arabs. Israel's courting of conservative Arab leaders, such as King Hussein of Jordan and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, was an attempt to bypass the local Arabs and avoid having to address the core issue of the conflict. Recognition by the Arab states, it was hoped, would enable Israel to alleviate the conflict without conceding the right of national self-determination to the Palestinians. Now this strategy has been stood on its head. PLO recognition of Israel is expected to pave the way to wider recognition by the Arab states from the Atlantic to the Gulf. Rabin expressed this hope when signing the letter to Arafat in which Israel recognized the PLO. "I believe," he said, "that there is a great opportunity of changing not only the relations between the Palestinians and Israel, but to extend it to the solution of the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries and other Arab peoples."⁷

The agreement ended the two-year-old deadlock in the American-sponsored Middle East peace talks which began at the Madrid conference in October 1991. The collapse of communism and the defeat of Arab radicalism in the Gulf war provided the backdrop to this renewed attempt to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute. In the bilateral talks that followed the Madrid conference, there were in essence separate tracks: Israeli-Palestinian, Israeli-Jordanian, Israeli-Syrian, and Israeli-Lebanese. The basis of all the negotiations was UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the principle of exchanging land for peace. But this principle was not accepted by Yitzhak Shamir, Likud leader and Israeli prime minister at the time. As Avishai Margalit presciently observed, "Shamir is not a bargainer. Shamir is a two-dimensional man. One dimension is the length of the Land of Israel, the second, its width. Since Shamir's historical vision is measured in inches, he won't give an inch."⁸

The Labor party, under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, fought the June 1992 general election on a program of moving beyond peace talks to peace-making, with priority to the Palestinian track, and it won a decisive victory.

During the election campaign Rabin promised that if elected he would try to reach agreement on Palestinian autonomy within six to nine months. But the change of government in Israel did not yield the longed-for breakthrough in the talks with the Palestinians. Retaining Likud's Eliakim Rubinstein as the head of the Israeli delegation to the talks with the Palestinians was a bad omen. Rubinstein's brief under the previous government had been to keep all options in the occupied territories open, including that of eventual annexation by Israel. Rabin's initial offer of Palestinian autonomy, presented at the opening of the sixth round of the official talks in Washington, did not differ markedly from that of his predecessor. Rabin also continued to shun the PLO and to pin his hopes on the local leaders from the occupied territories, whom he considered more moderate and more pragmatic. He saw Arafat as an archenemy, and did his best to marginalize him.

While the peace talks were going nowhere slowly, the security situation on the ground deteriorated rapidly. True to his reputation as a security hawk, Rabin resorted to draconian measures. In December 1992, following the abduction and murder of an Israeli border policeman, Rabin ordered the deportation to Lebanon of over 400 activists from the Islamic resistance movements, principally Hamas. Hamas, being vehemently opposed to any compromise with the Jewish state, had been campaigning against Palestinian participation in the Washington talks. By cracking down on the Islamist groups, Rabin intended to tilt the balance in favor of the moderates in the Palestinian camp. His illegal and brutal deportation of the activists, however, only increased popular support for the movement in the occupied territories at the expense of the PLO.

At a fairly early stage in the negotiations, Rabin was inclined to ditch the Palestinians altogether and to strike a deal with Syria. Having embarked on the peace talks with a "Syria-last" position, he became a convert to a "Syria-first" position. The bilateral talks between Syria and Israel in Washington revealed that Syria, once the standard-bearer of radical Pan-Arabism, was ready for total peace with Israel in return for total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Rabin therefore had to choose between a deal with Syria entailing complete withdrawal and the dismantling of Jewish settlements on the Golan Heights and a deal with the PLO on interim self-government for a period of five years entailing only limited territorial withdrawal and no dismantling of Jewish settlements. He chose the latter.

The decision to hold direct talks with the PLO constituted a revolution in Israeli foreign policy, a revolution that paved the way to the Oslo accord. Three men, all members of the Labor party, were primarily responsible for this decision: Yitzhak Rabin, who is defense minister as well as prime minister; Shimon Peres, Rabin's foreign minister and political rival; and Yossi Beilin, the youthful deputy foreign minister. Rabin, a former chief of staff, had always belonged to the hawkish wing of the Labor party. For him Israel's security takes precedence over peace with the Arab neighbors. On

being elected, he assumed personal charge of the bilateral talks and left only the much less-important multilateral talks to his foreign minister.

Peres himself had gradually moved from the hawkish wing to the dovish wing of the party. Inspired by a vision of a new Middle East based on the European Union model, he was indefatigable in his search for new and unconventional avenues of communication with Israel's opponents. Beilin had always belonged to the extreme dovish wing of the party. He had over the last twenty years consistently maintained that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict could be settled on the basis of mutual recognition. Beilin was the real architect behind the Israeli recognition of the PLO. Peres backed him all the way, and the two of them succeeded in carrying their hesitant and suspicious senior colleague with them.

Rabin had repeated on countless occasions that he would never talk to the PLO. He shared in the conventional wisdom that held that an agreement with the PLO was unattainable because it represented the Palestinian diaspora and the right of return of the 1948 refugees. He saw Yasir Arafat as the main obstacle to reaching an agreement with the local leadership on autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza. When he heard about the crash landing of Arafat's plane in the Libyan desert, he muttered "It's a pity he survived."⁹ He preferred to deal with Palestinian leaders from the occupied territories like Faisal Husseini. Yitzhak Shamir had vetoed Faisal Husseini's participation in the bilateral talks on the grounds that he is a resident of East Jerusalem and East Jerusalem is part of the State of Israel. Rabin lifted the veto and allowed Husseini to participate in the talks, hoping he would carry the Palestinian delegation toward a joint declaration of principles with Israel. When this hope was dashed, Rabin described Husseini as a mere "mailbox" for transmitting orders from Tunis to the Palestinian delegation.

Much against his will, Rabin was forced to recognize that he could not bypass the PLO and that, if he wanted a deal, a direct channel to Tunis would be necessary and that he would have to address himself to his arch-enemy, Yasir Arafat. Peres, on the other hand, believed that the conventional wisdom had been wrong and that without the PLO there could be no settlement of any kind. He even said once that expecting the PLO to enable the local leaders to reach an agreement with Israel was like expecting the turkey to help in preparing the Thanksgiving dinner.¹⁰ Beilin was even more categorical in his view that talking to the PLO was a necessary condition for an agreement with the Palestinians.

Peres and Beilin not only recognized the need to talk to the PLO but had a clear and coherent long-term strategy for directing the talks. They realized at the outset that to achieve a peace settlement with the Palestinians, Israel would have to pay a high price: a return to the pre-June 1967 borders with only minor modifications, an independent Palestinian state, the dismantling of Jewish settlements, and the granting to the Palestinians of functional control over East Jerusalem.¹¹ Rabin, on the other hand, had no clear idea of the final shape of the settlement with the Palestinians. His thinking was largely

conditioned by the Allon Plan, by the Jordanian option, and by the idea of territorial compromise over the West Bank. Nor did Rabin appear to have any coherent long-term strategy. In the past, especially during his first term as prime minister from 1974 to 1977, Rabin's only strategy in the peace talks with the Arabs was to play for time. Now, aged seventy-one, in his second and probably last term as prime minister, he seemed anxious to enter history as a peacemaker but without incurring the opprobrium involved in dismantling settlements. Hence the attraction of the idea of Palestinian self-rule for an interim period of five years during which the settlements would stay in place. It was this policy vacuum at the heart of the government that enabled Beilin to take the lead, to exert an influence that was out of all proportion to his junior position.¹²

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

The unofficial talks initially dealt with economic cooperation but quickly broadened into a dialogue about a joint declaration of principles. At the end of March, the talks were plunged into a crisis by events on the ground back home. Following a brutal wave of murders, Rabin ordered the closure of the occupied territories to protect Israeli lives. Prompted by short-term security considerations, this decision had unanticipated long-term consequences. It resurrected the "Green Line" or pre-1967 border, which previous governments had worked to obliterate in their pursuit of Greater Israel, and it started the process of economic separation between the warring communities on the two sides of this line.

In the wake of the closure, a public debate reopened in Israel on the proposal for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Many Israelis supported the proposal, viewing Gaza as a millstone around their necks. In May, amid gloom and doom on all sides, Peres took a highly significant decision: he ordered Uri Savir, the director-general of the Foreign Ministry, and Joel Singer, his legal adviser, to join Hirschfeld and Pundak on the weekend trips to Oslo. It was apparently at this point that Peres first informed Rabin of the Norwegian back channel. At first Rabin showed little interest in this channel but raised no objection to continuing the explorations either. Gradually, however, he became more involved in the details and assumed an active role in directing the talks alongside Peres.

At the PLO end, the main architect of the accord was one of Arafat's most senior advisers, Mahmud 'Abbas (Abu Mazen). The role played by 'Abbas in overcoming difficulties and steering the talks toward a successful conclusion was strikingly similar to that played by Shimon Peres. Since Abu Ala' reported directly to Arafat and 'Abbas, an indirect line of communication had been established between Jerusalem and the PLO headquarters in Tunis.

Another landmark in the progress of the talks was the failure of the tenth round of the official Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Washington. Peres read the reports of Eliakim Rubinstein, and his frustration and anger steadily mounted. He did not like the Israeli approach which strove to establish Palestinian autonomy in a way that would leave all options open for the permanent settlement. He was tired of tactical maneuvers and wanted to change the course of the region's history by tackling once and for all the root cause of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.¹³

To tempt the Palestinians to move forward, Peres floated the idea of "Gaza first." He believed that Arafat was desperate for a concrete achievement to bolster his sagging political fortunes and that Gaza would provide him with his first toehold in the occupied territories. Peres also knew that an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza would be greeted with sighs of relief among the great majority of his countrymen. Arafat, however, did not swallow the bait, suspecting an Israeli plan to confine the dream of Palestinian independence to the narrow strip of territory stretching from Gaza City to Rafah.¹⁴ The idea was attractive to some Palestinians, especially the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, but not to the politicians in Tunis. Rather than reject the Israeli offer out of hand, Yasir Arafat came up with a counteroffer of his own: Gaza and Jericho first. His choice of the small and sleepy West Bank town seemed quirky at first sight but it served as a symbol of his claim to the whole of the West Bank.¹⁵

Rabin did not balk at the counteroffer. All along he had supported the Allon Plan, which envisaged handing over Jericho to Jordanian rule while keeping the Jordan Valley in Israeli hands. But he had one condition: the Palestinian foothold on the West Bank would be an island inside Israeli-controlled territory with the Allenby Bridge also remaining in Israeli hands. It seemed that Jordan, too, preferred Israel to the Palestinians at the other end of the bridge. Arafat therefore had to settle for the Israeli version of the "Gaza and Jericho first" plan.¹⁶

Rabin's conversion to the idea of a deal with the PLO was clinched by four evaluations that reached him between the end of May and July. First was the advice of Itamar Rabinovich, the head of the Israeli delegation to the talks with Syria, that a settlement with Syria was attainable, but only at the cost of complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Second were the reports from various quarters that the local Palestinian leadership had been finally neutralized. Third was the assessment of the Israeli Defense Forces' chief of military intelligence that Arafat's dire situation, and possibly imminent collapse, made him the most convenient interlocutor for Israel at that

particular juncture. Fourth were the reports of the impressive progress achieved through the Oslo channel. Other reports that reached Rabin during this period pointed to an alarming growth in the popular following of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the occupied territories. Both the army chiefs and the internal security chiefs repeatedly stressed to him the urgency of finding a political solution to the crisis in the relations between Israel and the inhabitants of the occupied territories.¹⁷ Rabin therefore gave the green light to the Israeli team, and the secret diplomacy in Oslo moved into higher gear.

Rabin and Peres also believed that progress toward a settlement with the Palestinians would lower the price of a settlement with Syria by reducing the latter's bargaining power. Peres reduced the link between the two sets of

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negotiations to what he called "the bicycle principle": when one presses on one pedal, the other pedal moves by itself. His formula was not directed at reaching a separate agreement with the Palestinians but at gradual movement toward a settlement with the Palestinians, the Syrians, and the Jordanians.¹⁸

Rabin carefully scrutinized every word in the DOP, which Joel Singer took the lead in drafting. Singer's approach was eclectic. He incorporated in the draft declaration elements from different sources. He adopted some articles from the paper submitted by the Americans in June, a paper rejected by the Palestinians because it had Israeli fingerprints all over it. Other articles he derived from the "Framework for Peace in the Middle East" agreed between Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat at Camp David in September 1978. The idea of an early transfer of authority was taken out of proposals presented by Eliakim Rubinstein in Washington. The model of "Gaza and Jericho first," however, was entirely new. If Menachem Begin had been guilty of "constructive ambiguity" at Camp David, Yitzhak Rabin was guilty of what two Israeli journalists termed "creative recalcitrance," examining every word with a magnifying glass and refusing any proposal from which there was no turning back. Yet, despite his caution, Rabin moved a very long way in a very short time. In June he did not take the Oslo channel at all seriously; in August he wanted to go all the way. In the end, both he and Peres put all their weight behind the Oslo negotiations.¹⁹

On 23 August, Rabin stated publicly for the first time that "there would be no escape from recognizing the PLO." In private, he elaborated on the price that Israel could extract in exchange for this recognition. In his estimate, the PLO was "on the ropes" and it was therefore highly probable that the PLO would drop some of its sacred principles to secure Israeli recognition. Accordingly, while endorsing the joint DOP on Palestinian self-government in Gaza and Jericho and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, he insisted on changes to the Palestine National Charter as part of the package deal.²⁰

Peres, in the course of an ostensibly ordinary tour of Scandinavia, met secretly with Abu Ala' in Oslo airport on 24 August and put his seal on the accord. Since the drafting of the joint DOP had already been completed, the face-to-face discussion between the Israeli foreign minister and the PLO official focused on the other vital element of the accord—mutual recognition. As numerous rumors began to circulate about his secret meeting, Peres flew to California to explain the accord to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Christopher was surprised by the scope of the accord and by the unorthodox method by which it had been achieved. He naturally assumed that America had a monopoly over the peace process. His aides in the State Department had come to be called “the peace processors.” Now their feathers were ruffled because they had been so thoroughly upstaged by the Norwegians. The participants in the Oslo back channel, on the other hand, had the satisfaction of knowing that they had reached the accord on their own without any help from the State Department.

The participation of Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak was critical to the success of the Oslo channel. As Uri Savir acknowledged: “They are, in a sense, so removed from the customary manner in which international diplomacy is shaped, that this is what enabled them to be so successful. The very unorthodox nature of their mission was a basic element of our success.”²¹

Hirschfeld himself, when asked what eventually broke the ice between the two sides, replied that one could never tell. Yet he went on to identify four factors which in his opinion contributed to the success of the negotiations: the preservation of absolute secrecy, the excellent working conditions provided by the Norwegian hosts, the personal chemistry between the individuals involved, and the sense of realism that pervaded the talks. The last point was also the most important. Hirschfeld and Pundak had been more intent on putting across their point of view to the Palestinians than on seeking a solution. Above all they wanted to convey to the Palestinians a sense of the limits of what was possible and not to give rise to any illusions. They made it clear, for example, that Jerusalem would not be included in the interim settlement and that the Palestinians would not be given control of all the occupied territories. Everything had to be organized around the principle of gradualism.²²

The DOP was essentially an agenda for negotiations, governed by a tight timetable, rather than a full-blown agreement. The document laid down that within two months of the signing ceremony agreement on Israel's military withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho should be reached, and within four months the withdrawal should be completed. A Palestinian police force, made up mostly of pro-Arafat Palestinian fighters, was to be imported to maintain internal security in Gaza and Jericho, with Israel retaining overall responsibility for external security and foreign affairs. At the same time, elsewhere in the West Bank, Israel undertook to transfer power to “authorized Palestinians” in five spheres: education and culture, health, social welfare, direct taxation, and tourism. Within nine months, the Palestinians in the

West Bank and Gaza were to hold elections for a Palestinian Council to take office and assume responsibility for most government functions except defense and foreign affairs. Israel and the Palestinians agreed to commence negotiations on the final status of the territories within two years, and at the end of five years the permanent settlement is to come into force.

The DOP is completely silent on vital issues such as the right of return, borders, settlements, and Jerusalem.

The shape of the permanent settlement is not specified in the DOP but is left to negotiations between the two parties during the second stage. The DOP is completely silent on vital issues such as the right of return of the 1948 refugees, the borders of the Palestinian entity, the future of the Jewish settlements in

the West Bank and Gaza, and the status of Jerusalem. The reason for this silence is not hard to understand: if these issues had been addressed, there would have been no accord. Both sides took a calculated risk, realizing that a great deal would depend on the way the experiment in Palestinian self-government worked out in practice. Rabin was strongly opposed to an independent Palestinian state but he favored an eventual Jordanian-Palestinian confederation. Arafat was even more strongly committed to an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, but he did not rule out the idea of a confederation with Jordan.

On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, the Rabin-Arafat deal provoked strong and vociferous opposition on the part of the hard-liners. Both leaders were accused of a betrayal and a sell-out. Leaders of the Likud and of the nationalistic parties further to the right attacked Rabin for his abrupt departure from the bipartisan policy of refusing to negotiate with the PLO, and charged him with abandoning the 120,000 settlers in the occupied territories to the tender mercies of terrorists. The Gaza-Jericho plan they denounced as a bridgehead to a Palestinian state and the beginning of the end of Greater Israel. A Gallup poll, however, indicated considerable popular support for the prime minister. Of the 1,000 Israelis polled, 65 percent said they approved of the peace accord, with only 13 percent describing themselves as "very much against."²³

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

Within the Palestinian camp, the accord also encountered loud but, at least initially, ineffective opposition. The PLO itself was split, with the radical nationalists accusing Arafat of abandoning principles to grab power.

These included the Damascus-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) led by George Habash, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) led by Nayif Nawatmah. Arafat succeeded in mustering the necessary majority in favor of the deal on the PLO's eighteen-member Executive Committee, but only after a bruising battle and the resignation of four of his colleagues. Outside the PLO, the deal aroused the implacable wrath of the militant resistance movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which regard any compromise with the Jewish state as anathema.

Opposition to the deal from rejectionist quarters, whether secular or religious, was only to be expected. More disturbing was the opposition of mainstream figures like Faruq Qaddumi, the PLO "foreign minister," and prominent intellectuals like Professor Edward Said and the poet Mahmud Darwish. Some of the criticisms related to Arafat's autocratic, idiosyncratic, and secretive style of management. Others related to the substance of the deal. The most basic criticism was that the deal negotiated by Arafat did not carry the promise, let alone a guarantee, of an independent Palestinian state.

This criticism took various forms. Faruq Qaddumi argued that the deal compromised the basic national rights of the Palestinian people as well as the individual rights of the 1948 refugees. Edward Said lambasted Arafat for unilaterally canceling the intifada, for failing to coordinate his moves with the Arab states, and for provoking appalling disarray within the ranks of the PLO. "The PLO," wrote Said, "has transformed itself from a national liberation movement into a kind of small-town government, with the same handful of people still in command." For the deal itself, Said had nothing but scorn. "All secret deals between a very strong and a very weak partner necessarily involve concessions hidden in embarrassment by the latter," he wrote. "The deal before us," he continued, "smacks of the PLO leadership's exhaustion and isolation, and of Israel's shrewdness."²⁴ "Gaza and Jericho first . . . and last" was Mahmud Darwish's damning verdict on the deal.²⁵

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

Jordan is the country most directly affected by the Israel-PLO accord. A day after the accord was presented to the world, in a much-more-modest ceremony at the State Department, the representatives of Jordan and Israel signed a common agenda for detailed negotiations aimed at a comprehensive peace treaty. This document bore the personal stamp of King Hussein, a noted realist who has steered his country through numerous regional crises since ascending the throne forty years ago. In 1988 the king turned over to the PLO the territorial claim to the West Bank, which Jordan had lost to Israel in the June 1967 war. In 1991, when the Madrid conference convened, he took the Palestinian negotiators into the peace talks as part of a joint delegation. The Jordanian-Israeli agenda was ready for signature in October 1992, but the king preferred to wait until progress had been made between Israel and the Palestinians. Great, therefore, was his anger when he found out that the PLO chairman had kept him in the dark about his secret negotiations with Israel.

Even after the king had studied the Israel-PLO accord and given it his public endorsement, his attitude remained somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, he felt vindicated, having argued all along that the Arabs would have to come to terms with Israel. On the other hand, the new unholy alliance between the PLO and Israel could threaten Jordan's traditional position as "the best of enemies" with Israel. If Israel and the Palestinian entity became close economic partners, the result could be inflation and unemployment on the East Bank, leading to political instability. More than half of Jordan's 3.9 million people are Palestinian. If, for whatever reason, there is an influx of Palestinians from the West Bank to the East Bank, the pressure will grow to transform the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan into the Republic of Palestine. In short, Jordan's very survival in its present form could be called into question.

The Israel-PLO accord also had implications for Jordan's progress toward democracy. This process got under way with the elections of November 1989 and provides the most effective answer to the challenge of the Islamic fundamentalists. Another election was scheduled for 8 November 1993. Arafat's deal, however, meant that some Palestinians could end up voting for two legislatures, one in Amman and one in Jericho. As constitutional expert Mustafa Hamarnah explained to a foreign journalist: "These are extremely challenging times for Jordan. Yasser Arafat did not pull a rabbit out of his hat, but a damned camel."²⁶ Arafat's camel, it might be added, is not a dromedary, a one-humped camel bred for riding and racing, but a Bactrian camel with two humps—Gaza and Jericho. This split in the area of Palestinian self-government into two centers involves an additional complication inasmuch as Jordan has close political, economic, and administrative links with the West Bank, but only tenuous links with Gaza.

Under the initial shock of the Israel-PLO accord, King Hussein gave a clear signal of his intention to postpone November's national elections. Israeli assurances given at a secret meeting appear to lie behind the subsequent

decision to go ahead as planned. Personal diplomacy had always played a crucial part in the conduct of relations between Jordan and Israel. Countless meetings had taken place across the battle lines between the "plucky little king," as Hussein used to be called, and Israel's Labor leaders after 1967. One source estimates that the king had clocked up over a hundred man-hours in conversations with Labor leaders. This figure presumably includes the time he spent with Golda Meir, who had gained fame by her trip to Amman in May 1948 disguised as an Arab woman in a vain attempt to persuade King Abdullah, Hussein's grandfather, not to join in the Arab invasion of the soon-to-be-born Jewish state.

This time, too, the political overture for a high-level meeting probably came from the Israeli side. The Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* quoted intelligence reports saying that the king felt "cheated and neglected" over the accord. "King Hussein's political world has collapsed around him and the most direct means are required to calm him down," the Israeli prime minister was reportedly advised. A long-time advocate of cooperation with Jordan, Rabin heeded this advice. He spent several hours aboard the royal yacht in the Red Sea resort of Aqaba on Sunday, 26 September, conferring with the king and his advisers. Rabin was said to have assured the king that Israel remained firmly committed to upholding his regime, that Jordanian interests would be protected in dealing with the Palestinian issue, and that future peace strategy would be closely coordinated with Jordan.²⁷

The general election held on 8 November 1993, the first multiparty election since 1957, yielded what King Hussein clearly hoped for: a strengthening of the conservative, tribal, and independent blocs, and a resounding rebuff to the Islamic Action Front, whose principal platform was opposition to the peace talks with Israel. This result gave Hussein a popular mandate for proceeding with the task of Arab-Israeli peacemaking. It also gave rise to speculation that the signing of a Jordanian-Israeli peace accord was imminent. Hussein, however, was unwilling to run the risk of consummating a separate agreement with Israel, preferring to wait for progress in the stalled Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

The other key "front-line" leader, President Hafiz al-Asad of Syria, greeted the Israel-PLO accord with a coolness verging on hostility, and gave free rein to the dissident Palestinian groups based in Damascus to attack it. President Asad is a cold and calculating realist, the Bismarck of the Middle East. His political career has been dominated by the desire to regain the Golan Heights, which Syria lost to Israel when he was minister of defense in 1967, and by the wider geopolitical contest with Israel for mastery in the region. Asad agreed to participate in the peace process started at Madrid but insisted all along on a unified Arab front leading to related peace treaties. For most of 1993 it looked as if Syria would lead the way. Suddenly, Syria was upstaged by the PLO.

Asad felt that Arafat, by going off secretly on his own and striking a separate deal, had played into the hands of Rabin, who prefers to deal with the

Arab partners individually and not as a bloc. Asad even compared Arafat's actions to those of Anwar Sadat, whose separate deal with Israel led to Egypt's isolation and vilification in the Arab world for nearly a decade. Israel alone stood to benefit from the new deal, claimed Asad. He suspected that Israel made this deal with a weak PLO in order to draw Jordan next into its orbit, to isolate Syria, and to consolidate its own regional hegemony.²⁸ He reacted to the Israel-PLO deal by suspending Syria's participation in the Washington forum.

While the Washington forum remained in limbo, Israel and the PLO entered into intensive negotiations on the implementation of the Oslo accord in the Red Sea resort of Taba, in Cairo, and in other locations. These negotiations were billed as the first official, full-scale, face-to-face Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in history. But they were really back-to-back talks, because both sides spent most of their time with their backs to each other, their eyes looking homeward, taking great care not to say anything that could get them into trouble with their domestic constituencies.

Apart from the domestic constraints on the two sides, there were the inherent defects of the Oslo accord itself. The accord contains so many ambiguities and contradictions that it is open to widely differing interpretations. For the Israeli government the accord makes provision for an interim arrangement which carries only the most general implications for the permanent transfer of territory or power. For the PLO, the accord is the first step toward full statehood. The two sides could not march forward together because they were intent on marching in different directions.

Deadlock in the negotiations over the implementation of the Oslo accord reopened the question of the relationship between the various tracks of the Middle East peace process. The question for Israel was whether to concentrate on all simultaneously or only on one track at a time, and if the latter, which one? Israel's leaders were divided on this question. Rabin was an advocate of one peace at a time, whereas Peres was an advocate of waging peace on all fronts. Upon his return home from the historic meeting in Washington, Rabin was inclined to slow down on the Syrian front in order to give his countrymen a chance to digest the sudden turnabout in their relations with the Palestinians. Peres was inclined to move swiftly along the Syrian and Jordanian tracks in order to widen the accord with the PLO into a comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

Israel poses the same questions to Syria that it refuses to answer when asked by the Palestinians.

The real problem with Rabin's idea of peace by installments is that it generates mutual suspicions that undermine the peace process. Israel, for example, poses the same questions to Syria that Israel itself refuses to answer when asked by the Palestinians. Israel refuses to say how much land it would

be willing to relinquish on the Golan Heights until the regime in Damascus spells out precisely what it means by full peace. In other words, Israel de-

mands to know the end result of the peace process before it will enter into detailed negotiations with Syria. What the Palestinians demand of Israel is strikingly similar. They want to know what the permanent settlement will look like before entering into interim arrangements, but Israel refuses to answer them.

Consequently, Israelis and Palestinians harbor similar suspicions. Israelis suspect a Syrian trap. They worry that Asad plans to recover the entire Golan in return for a mere nonbelligerency agreement that would leave the conflict unresolved. The Palestinians fear an Israeli trap. They worry that Israel plans to leave them in the lurch with only a partial transfer of power and a redeployment rather than withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories. Rabin plays his cards very close to his chest in order to minimize the risk of leaks. The Israeli government has not discussed, let alone defined, its aims in the talks with either the Palestinians or the Syrians. And in the absence of clearly defined goals, it is difficult for the Israeli negotiators to engage in purposeful negotiations on any track of the Middle East peace process.²⁹

A broad view of the peace policy of the Labor government since it came to power in 1992 thus reveals an odd combination of strategy and tactics—Peres's strategy and Rabin's tactics. Peres's strategy aimed at a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, while Rabin's tactics aimed at playing the Arabs off one against another in order to reduce the pressure on Israel to make concessions. When these tactics ended in deadlock on all fronts, Rabin was forced to go along with the Beilin-Peres strategy of direct negotiations with the PLO. The result was the Oslo accord. After the Oslo accord was signed, Rabin reverted to his customary tactics of divide and rule. This tactic is sensible enough when waging war against several enemies; it is much more problematic when waging peace. To attain comprehensive peace in the Middle East, the Arab world needs to be united rather than divided. Peres's strategy is calculated to promote comprehensive peace whereas Rabin's tactics are liable to frustrate it. Rabin is bound to discover sooner or later that he cannot implement only half of his foreign minister's strategy. The choice for Israel is between going forward at full speed on every front at the same time, and losing momentum on every front at the same time. The choice is between forging a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the anvil of the Oslo accord, and allowing inter-Arab rivalries to nullify this historic breakthrough. And the choice for the seventy-one-year-old Rabin is between going down in Israel's history merely as a great soldier or also as a great statesman and peacemaker.

NOTES

1. "Israeli-PLO Declaration of Principles, Washington, D.C., 13 September 1993," *JPS* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1993), pp. 115–21.
2. "PLO and Israeli Letters of Mutual Recognition, Tunis and Jerusalem, 9 September 1993," *JPS* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1993), pp. 114–15.
3. Israeli prime minister's statement, *International Herald Tribune*, 11–12 September 1993.
4. Meir's famous statement was "It was not as though there was a Palestinian people and in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist." *Sunday Times* (London), 15 June 1969, as quoted in David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 264.
5. Text of the charter is in Zuhair Diab (ed.), *International Documents on Palestine, 1968* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1971), pp. 393–95.
6. Abba Eban, "Building Bridges, Not Walls," *The Guardian*, 10 September 1993.
7. Israeli prime minister's statement, *International Herald Tribune*, 11–12 September 1993.
8. Avishai Margalit, "The Violent Life of Yitzhak Shamir," *The New York Review of Books*, 14 May 1992, p. 24.
9. Yoel Marcus, "The Revolution and the Grave Pit," *Ha'Aretz*, 15 September 1993.
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12. Yoel Marcus, "Three Comments on the Situation," *Ha'Aretz*, 19 September 1993.
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17. Marcus, *Ha'Aretz*, 15 September 1993.
18. Barnea and Schiffer, *Yediot Aharonot*, 3 September 1993.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Jerrold Kessel, "Professors Clinch Deal," *The Guardian*, 18 September 1993.
22. Interview with Yosef Algazi, *Ha'Aretz*, 3 September 1993.
23. *The Guardian*, 16 September 1993.
24. Edward Said, "The Lost Liberation," *The Guardian*, 9 September 1993.
25. *The Economist*, 4 September 1993.
26. Nora Boustany, "King Hussein Fears Prospects for Peace Could Raise Premature Hope in Jordan," *International Herald Tribune*, 18–19 September 1993.
27. Jerrold Kessel, "Rabin Soothes King at Secret Meeting," *The Guardian*, 29 September 1993.
28. Patrick Seale, "Israel's Vision Fades on the Road to Damascus," *The Independent on Sunday*, 19 September 1993.
29. Ze'ev Schiff, "Mutual Suspicions," *Ha'Aretz*, 11 June 1993.