

# THE TROUBLED LEGACY OF THE OSLO AGREEMENT

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Yosi Beilin, *L'agaat BaShalom* (Touching Peace), Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronot Books, 1997 (Hebrew), 318 pp

Four years have passed since the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (the "Oslo" agreement) and the mutual recognition agreement. In Israel, this anniversary was marked by intense debate. Critics argued that Arafat's continued embrace of Hamas leaders and the green light for terrorism proved that the process was a naive experiment, in which Israel gave up vital security assets and received nothing in return. Supporters of the agreements blamed the Netanyahu government for failing to continue in the "spirit of Oslo", thereby destroying the opportunity for peace.

Yosi Beilin is a major figure in this debate, and his book, *Touching Peace*, is an effort to claim credit on the Israeli end, while also making the case in favor of the Oslo process. (His Palestinian counterpart, Abu Mazen, published his version in 1995.) The book was written after May 1996, when the Israeli electorate narrowly voted Shimon Peres, Beilin's former patron, out of office following a devastating series of Palestinian suicide bombings. From 1992 until the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in November 1995, Beilin served as Deputy Foreign Minister under Peres. He presents a detailed first-person account of the negotiations with the Palestinians, and, more importantly, of the negotiations and debates within the Israeli government.

From the beginning of his tenure, Beilin's primary goal (beyond aspirations to become Prime Minister) was to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Washington talks that began after the Madrid Conference seemed to be stalled, with little hope for change. At the urging of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, Beilin, along with two academics (Hirschfeld and Pundak) who were also part of Beilin's group in the Labor Party, initiated a "track two" channel with representatives of the PLO to discuss ways of breaking the deadlock. At first, Peres and Rabin had very limited expectations from this informal channel (one of many), but by early 1993, the coalition government was close to a split, and a breakthrough in the negotiations was seen as a means of holding power. At this point, Peres immersed himself in these meetings, while Rabin remained skeptical.

The Palestinians took Oslo very seriously from the beginning, sending Abu Ala, who was close to Arafat, to lead the delegation. They pressed for an agreement, the quicker the better. Beilin directed traffic by fax and telephone from Tel Aviv, and Hirschfeld and Pundak negotiated a first draft. The framework was based on an interim agreement for five years, to be followed by a final status agreement. During the interim agreement, Israel would withdraw in stages (beginning with Gaza and a small enclave around Jericho), and these areas would become the responsibility of a "trusteeship" modeled on the old UN system.

At this point, Rabin became engaged, and Yoel Singer, a lawyer working under contract for the Foreign Ministry, and closely linked to Rabin, began redrafting the documents. He replaced the trusteeship model with the idea of a Palestinian Authority, and introduced the concept of mutual recognition.

In August, in the middle of the "end game", Rabin demanded an explicit Palestinian pledge to end terror was included in the agreement. Beilin told him that in the preamble, both sides state their commitment to peace. This ambiguous formulation did not satisfy the security-oriented Rabin who told Beilin "for me, the central issue is terror.... It is inconceivable that we will sign an agreement with the Palestinians and without a PLO pledge to end terrorism." Negotiations then began on the nature of this pledge, but Rabin was never fully satisfied with the results.

Singer and Rabin also did not change what proved to be the basic flaws in the process -- the absence of an agreed endpoint, and the lack of specificity regarding Palestinian obligations to end terrorism. Under Oslo, Israel agreed to turn responsibility for territory to the Palestinian Authority without assurance that an acceptable agreement would be reached on core issues such as borders, security, Jerusalem, or refugees. Beilin believed that if the process was successful, these differences would somehow be resolved.

Writing after the series of terrorist attacks and the Labor Party's defeat in the 1996 elections, Beilin admits to fundamental errors in judgment. Based on the enthusiastic support the agreement received in 1993, "We thought that everything was ripe for an ideological revolution, but the real response was shock. ... We thought that we were exempt from [developing national] agreement. We erred because we did not show the public our objectives for the end of the process." He argues that the process should have been accelerated, with a framework on permanent status linked to the interim withdrawals and transfer of security responsibility. But at the same time, as he admits, there was no Israeli consensus on the key issues, and Rabin and Peres, in contrast to Beilin, did not believe that Israel and the Palestinians would make the necessary compromises without a significant period of confidence building and peaceful coexistence. The interim agreements were designed to provide this.

Overall, this analysis reflects Beilin's optimistic and idealistic approach. He viewed the Oslo process as the path to ending the Arab-Israeli conflict, in a positive-sum framework. There is no evidence that he or Peres considered or discussed whether the PLO and Arafat might be operating in terms of a zero-sum game. Disagreements were seen as resulting from misunderstandings or attempts to make marginal gains, and Beilin does not consider the possibility that Palestinian positions were designed to weaken Israel for the "next round" of the conflict. In contrast, Rabin and Singer had a realist perspective, making measured concessions and taking risks with the hope that these would be beneficial, but also aware that other outcomes were possible.

Beilin has probably not convinced anyone who was skeptical or opposed to the Oslo process to change their position. When the book was published, it was largely dismissed as self-promotion during the Labor Party primaries, in which Beilin was a candidate for the leadership. Indeed, in the first and last chapters, Beilin attempts to place himself in the center of the Israeli spectrum, dealing with issues such as the future of the Jewish people, and the role of religion in Israeli politics. These brief sections divert attention from the core issues regarding Oslo and the peace process.

Since then, as the debate about the wisdom of Oslo intensifies, Beilin's detailed account and analysis is getting a second and more serious look. The Netanyahu government has also reached the conclusion that before more interim steps are taken, a national consensus on the outlines of permanent status must be reached. But in contrast to Beilin's optimistic efforts to end the conflict, Netanyahu is a realist, and his goals are conflict management. If Netanyahu fails, Beilin hopes to get another chance.

Note: This text is the original manuscript before editing at Foreign Policy, and the published version contains some stylistic changes