

## **Book Review Essays on the Middle East Peace Process: “Probing the Secrets of Oslo”**

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1. David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord*, Boulder, Co.: Westview Press and The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996, viii + 239 pp.
2. Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), *Through Secret Channels*, Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1995. 252 pp
3. Yosi Beilin, *L'agaat BaShalom* (Touching Peace), Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronot Books, 1997 (Hebrew), 318 pp
4. Ziva Flamhaft, *Israel on the Road to Peace*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1996. xviii + 252 pp.

The 1993 Declaration of Principles (known as the Oslo agreement) and the accompanying exchange of letters of mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO marked a fundamental and dramatic change in the Middle East. The announced aim of the process was to end generations of conflict in a few short years, but the outcome is still far from clear. Future analysts may conclude that these agreements in fact contributed to peace and stability, or they may find that the process raised expectations unrealistically, and was ultimately counterproductive.

In the short period that has elapsed, it is difficult place the events in perspective. The research has only begun, and these four books are the first preliminary sources. Two were written by actors who were centrally involved in the process, another by one of Israel's most accomplished and insightful journalists (Makovsky), and the fourth by an academic (Flamhaft) familiar with complexities of the Middle East. All begin with an historical overview, with Beilin and Abbas adding detailed personal and family histories as prologues to the events prior to and during the Oslo talks. Abbas, Makovsky and Flamhaft include extensive appendices and documents, (over half of the Abbas volume consists of his summaries of the sessions leading to the DOP and of related meetings.) However, the absence of an index in the Makovsky volumes limits its utility for researchers.)

All four books reflect and suffer from a framework which is limited to the Middle East, and in most cases, to the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. The authors see the efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict as *sui generis*, without reference to the broader history of international conflict and experience in negotiations. Beilin and Flamhaft, in particular, begin with the assumption that there was “a solution”, and the challenge for decision makers was to identify its elements and then gain enough political support to implement it. They do not consider the broader questions related to the connection between the sources and resolution of this conflict, the conditions in which protracted ethno-national conflicts can be resolved, or

whether the Arab-Israeli conflict is fundamentally different than the other such conflicts.

Had these authors considered these broader issues, they might have thought in terms of game theory and prisoners' dilemma, or used the three-level framework developed by Kenneth Waltz. The three levels -- international, domestic, and personal -- are all important in understanding the events, but the authors of these books focus on one, or at the most, two of them.

The volumes written by Beilin and Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) represent preemptive strikes by two of the principle participants in the attempt to mold the judgments of their contemporaries and of historians. (Abbas originally published in Arabic and Beilin's book is in Hebrew). Both were supporting actors who were instrumental in getting their respective leaders to begin and continue in this process, and before the 1996 Israeli elections, they also attempted to reach a framework agreement on final status.

As can be expected, Beilin and Abbas highlight their own roles, and understate the centrality of Rabin and Peres, on the Israeli side, and of Arafat for the PLO. Abu Mazen provides a Palestinian version of events in each round of the negotiations and Beilin focuses on the internal discussions between Peres and Rabin between rounds. There is considerable consistency in the accounts, but in some respects, it seems that they are writing about entirely different events. The effort to identify and analyze systematic differences in the negotiation process will occupy graduate students for many years.

In their analyses of the factors that led to the agreements, both emphasize the second of Waltz's levels -- domestic political factors -- with a lesser impact attributed to the individuals and the relationship between them), or systemic (regional or international) variables. Both books emphasize the changes in Israeli politics that took place in the late 1980s, and, in particular, prior to the 1992 elections that brought the Labor Party and Rabin back into power.

For Beilin, this is not surprising, as his own involvement is closely linked to the changes in the fortunes of Peres and the Labor Party. However, Abu Mazen's emphasis on changes in Israeli politics is problematic, in large part because the reader is left with little information on the perspectives and the factors that influenced decision making within the PLO during this critical period. None of the other authors in this group are in a position to shed much light on changes within the Palestinian power structure or society, and here, the Palestinian who is often viewed as Arafat's most likely successor, disappoints.

In his account, Abbas also details the political ties between the Israeli Arab parties and the PLO leadership, and in particular, the efforts to coordinate support in this community for the Israeli Labor Party in the 1992 elections. Although the involvement of the PLO in Israeli domestic politics was not surprising, Abbas's revelations caused a major controversy in Israel, forcing him to dissemble and attempt to reinterpret his own words. The political controversy that erupted also demonstrates some of the limitations of Abu Mazen's understanding of Israeli political sensitivities.

As a major player, Beilin is in a good position to provide insights into the Labor's party's positions and internal divisions, particularly on the impact of relations between Rabin and Peres. In the first section of his volume, Beilin focuses on meetings between Israelis and Palestinians prior to 1993, and on the difficulties posed by the Israeli law that, at the time, prohibited meetings with PLO officials. He hammers home the absurdity of this law, but fails to discuss the background of terrorism, and the consistent failure of the Labor Party to understand

its impact, including prior to the 1996 elections). The influence of terrorism on the Israeli political system is consistently underestimated, and Beilin also underplays the importance of Rabin's decision to expel 400 Hamas activists following a series of terrorist acts in late 1992. These events and the international criticism they generated, along with the growing threat of revolt by the religious parties in the coalition, led Rabin to search for a dramatic step that would bind the government. (Rabin's first stint as Prime Minister in 1976 ended when the religious parties decided to seek new elections.)

Although Beilin's book is a highly personal account (many sentences begin with "I"), he provides some interesting insights regarding Israeli decision making. Following his appointment after the 1992 elections, Beilin claims that his primary goal was no less than the complete resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Washington talks that began after the Madrid Conference were stalled, and 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.

In contrast to the clear Palestinian goals, articulated by Abu Ala in his opening presentation during the first round in Sarpsborg (and summarized in Abu Mazen's book), the Israeli delegation never agreed on the objectives to be sought in the final status negotiations. Beilin favored a Palestinian state incorporating Gaza and most of the West Bank areas of Judea and Samaria, with a capital in Abu Dies, which is considered to be part of Jerusalem by the Palestinians, but not by Israel. Peres favored a loose (and probably unworkable) functionalist cooperation involving Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians. Rabin appeared to favor partition, but the details of his views of the final settlement are unknown, and he may not have formulated them very clearly.

As a result, Beilin and the Israeli team in Oslo was told to focus on the interim steps, based on the old Camp David framework of a five year transition period. In the initial conception, during this time, 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.

Later, after Rabin became engaged, Yoel Singer, a lawyer working under contract for the Foreign Ministry began redrafting the documents. Singer decided that the trusteeship model was unworkable, and instead, proposed the creation of a Palestinian Authority. In August, as the draft was being completed, Rabin demanded an explicit Palestinian pledge to end terror. Beilin told him that in the preamble, both sides state their commitment to peace, but Rabin responded "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 the problem continued through the signing ceremony at the White House and long after.

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, there was no Israeli consensus on the key issues, and Rabin and Peres 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 time.

Flamhaft, like Beilin, focuses on the evolution of Israeli domestic political factors and their impact on the process. Although an academic, she displays a clear ideological and even emotional bias that weakens her analysis. A Labor Party supporter living in New York, she credits Shimon Peres as the first to envision “a peaceful and integrated Middle East”, going on to say that this concept “is actually coming to life”. Until Peres was able to make policy, Israel was “the stubborn partner”. In the preface, the author states her beliefs that “peace remains the only option for both Israel and the Palestinians”, that the assassination of Rabin “will draw many indecisive Israelis toward the Labor government” and that “the peace process will be enhanced in spite of the setback by the Hamas reign of terror.” The veracity of these predictions speak for themselves.

Substantively, this is a very broad analysis, couched largely within the framework of the Cold War, aimed at undergraduates and newcomers to conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East. The chapters on the Reagan and Schultz Initiatives and on the negotiations preceding the Madrid conference are prologues to Oslo, which itself is treated very briefly. The analysis focuses on links between changes in the international system and the evolution of views in the Israeli domestic political environment. She concludes that without the changes in Israeli domestic politics, American mediation efforts were doomed to failure. However, she provides little that is not available in other analyses, and there is no consideration of the impact of the conflict between the Shamir government and the Bush/Baker team on the 1992 Israeli elections.

Of these four publications, Makovsky’s description and analysis are the most insightful and useful for further research. Based on extensive interviews and documents, this volume gives a more complete picture than emerges from the other publications. From his analysis, it is apparent that the combination of intense activity at each of three levels of analysis created the framework for these historic events. However, it appears that the changes in the systemic environment (the end of the Cold War and the coalition that defeated Iraq), as well as the related changes in the domestic political environments in Israel and among the Palestinians were necessary, but not sufficient conditions for the beginning of the Oslo process. Personal factors and interests of major actors were also critical to these events.

While the Palestinians sent relatively high level officials led by Abu Ala (Ahmed Qurei), on the Israeli side, the negotiations began with two academics close to Beilin and the Labor Party. Hirschfeld and Pundak, like dozens of other academics, were deeply involved in unofficial “track two” meetings, but, as Abu Mazen understood, their links to the political leadership provided the basis for more substantive talks. However, as Makovsky notes, they were also amateurs, mixing their own ideologies and personal views (Pundak more than Hirschfeld) with the policy guidelines that they were expected to fulfill. Thus, in the early drafts

of the Declaration of Principles, they agreed to terms that had not been approved by Rabin, and later, at a high cost, these had to be revised. Makovsky concludes that “As invaluable as the academics were in establishing the Oslo channel, in retrospect, it appears that they should have taken a backseat once the drafting process had begun.”

In contrast to Beilin, Makovsky also explores the reasons for Norway’s intense (and somewhat naive) devotion to reaching an agreement between Israel and the PLO. He notes that “The Norwegians believed that precisely because they did *not* have major interests in the region .. yet were on good terms with both Israel and the Palestinians, they were uniquely suited to prod the talks along.” The late Foreign Minister Holst was inspired by the example of post-war Europe, in which Monet succeeded in “transforming the mutual hatred of France and Germany into a web of interdependent economic relationships.” It was a vision that also captivated Peres, and which proved, at least so far, to be irrelevant to the Middle East.

Makovsky, in contrast to the other authors, rightfully places the major emphasis on the two key actors, Rabin and Arafat. Without access to Arafat, he explores Rabin’s personality at length, using various sources, including his own extensive interviews with the late Israeli Prime Minister. In the Oslo process, as in the rest of his political career, Rabin was largely reactive, rather than active, and a tactician rather than strategist. After the 1992 elections, Rabin had no grand design for dealing with the Palestinians, but rather, as was consistent with his behavior in other situations for decades, he adopted a pragmatic approach, taking “one step at a time”. It was only after this approach appeared to have reached a dead-end, and Rabin was pressed to find an alternative, that he agreed to consider the potential in the Oslo talks. Rabin never underwent a fundamental transformation, but rather was slowly edged by a combination of pressures from inside and out, and by the lack of alternatives, into adopting and then adapting the draft prepared in Norway.

As was the case throughout his political career, Rabin’s distrust of experts and politicians, and the Rabin-Peres rivalry, played key roles. After the elections, Rabin marginalized Peres, stripping the Foreign Ministry of control over the bilateral talks, and Makovsky asserts that the Prime Minister believed that he could use his instinct to single-handedly manage the peace process. Peres and Beilin were left with some of the multilateral working groups, and they also opened up a number of unofficial channels (Track 2 talks) to the Palestinians. There were numerous such contacts, all over the world, including meetings sponsored by groups such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and also the Oslo channel.

Makovsky, like Beilin, recalls that at first, Rabin was uninterested in reports of these meetings, but by the Spring of 1993, following the first round in Oslo, he agreed to a briefing from Peres, on the grounds that the meetings provided information about PLO objectives. In contrast to Beilin, Makovsky highlights the combined impact of the domestic pressure (Rabin was under pressure from the Left, who reminded him of his pledge of a breakthrough within a year, and from the religious parties) and the external pressure following the deportation of the Hamas activists to Lebanon. Rabin also found the idea of giving the PLO responsibility for Gaza attractive. Once he had opened the door, Peres and Beilin steadily pressed Rabin to go further, including Jericho in the first-stage autonomy plan, agreeing to a five year time-table for permanent status, arbitration procedures that were contrary to Israeli policy, the exchange of letters on Jerusalem, and the elevation of Arafat and the PLO to the status of equal partners. Yet, according to Makovsky, Rabin was never comfortable with Oslo, and as his body language

clearly demonstrated, he did not put any faith in Arafat's interest in or ability to keep his end of the agreement.

In contrast to his distrust of Peres and other politicians, Rabin often turned to the IDF for advice and analysis, and as Defense Minister, he chaired the weekly meetings of the General Staff. The military was his source of advice on Oslo as well, and as Makovsky demonstrates, contrary to published reports and Beilin's version, Rabin consulted IDF Chief of Staff Ehud Barak frequently along the way. When Barak later raised serious objections to the final draft of the DOP before the cabinet, he may have been acting as Rabin's alter-ego, expressing the misgivings that Rabin felt but could not state while leading the effort for approval.

These volumes provide a beginning in the effort to understand the process, substance, and impact of the what has come to be known as the Oslo agreements, but many questions remain. Perhaps a less ambitious framework, negotiated in formal channels, with a longer time frame and more checks and balances, would have been more successful. These analyses also show that the failure of the Rabin government to articulate or reach agreement on the overall objectives of the process, in sharp contrast to the Palestinians, was a major mistake.

These books provide a first layer of source material and analysis, to be supplemented as archives become available and more memoirs from other players are published. In the meantime, these volumes provide valuable resources for anyone involved in conflict resolution, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere.