

The Oslo Process: The Façade of Peace between Palestine and Israel

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MARIA GILANI, OCT 12 2024

The 1993 Oslo Accords, which aimed for 'comprehensive peace ... and historic reconciliation', marked a diplomatic breakthrough for Israel and Palestine for which the twentieth century was rife with tension as Zionist settlers dispossessed the Palestinians (Oslo Accords, 1993, p. 4). However, in this essay I refute the notion that Oslo was a peace process. Instead, I argue that the Oslo process further entrenched Israel's occupation of Palestine and made prospects for peace and Palestinian sovereignty increasingly elusive. To supplement this argument I will assess the outcomes of the Oslo process, revealing that behind the façade of peace these negotiations facilitated the economic, political, and territorial dispossession of Palestine for Israeli benefit (Sen, 2015, p. 170). Before undertaking this analysis, I will briefly explain what the Oslo agreements entailed and situate the process in a wider history of Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic relations. It must be noted that the Oslo process was a key historical juncture for the Israel-Palestine conflict with far-reaching implications such as the second intifada and subsequent violence in the region. Yet, this essay focuses on the direct impacts of Oslo on territorial, economic, and political development in Israel and Palestine as these categories best illuminate the unequal outcomes of the process in line with my thesis.

Overview of the Oslo Process

The Oslo process was a series of agreements signed between 1993 and 1999 intended to build trust between Israel and Palestine. Assuming that neither side was ready to engage in a full peace process, Oslo established a five-year interim period to precede final status talks where core issues such as the status of Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinian refugees would be addressed (Hassan, 2011, p. 68). The 1993 Oslo Accords were the first agreement of the process, which formalised the commitment to engage in negotiations established in the letters of mutual recognition between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat. These letters were a diplomatic breakthrough in the Israel-Palestine conflict. For the first time ever a Palestinian authority recognised Israel's right to exist and committed to a two-state solution, and Israel recognised the PLO as a legitimate political body that represented the Palestinian people.

By 1999 the Oslo process broke down, final status talks never took place, and conflict between Israel and Palestine persists today. Situating the Oslo process in the wider context of Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic negotiations sheds light on this outcome. Diplomatic efforts between these parties have always been brokered by a biased hegemonic power, ensuring that Israeli interests are pursued over Palestinian ones. This can be traced back to the 1917 Balfour Declaration where the British Monarchy pledged to help the Zionist movement establish a homeland in Palestine. Likewise, the Oslo process was brokered by Norway, which was a supporter of Zionism and shared a common bond of socialist ideology with Rabin's ruling Labour Party (Al Jazeera English, 2013). Situating Oslo within this wider history demonstrates the inherent imbalance of power that characterises Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy.

Analysing the motivations behind the negotiations for each side also sheds light on the uneven outcomes of the Oslo process. Hassan (2011) identifies the first Palestinian intifada of 1987-1993 as the key driver behind the negotiations. The popular uprising indicated to Israel that its occupation of Palestine was unsustainable, and public opinion polls saw a spike in willingness to compromise on the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) at this time (ibid., pp. 66-67). Alongside international pressure to calm the uprisings, these factors motivated Israel to engage in

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negotiations starting with the 1991 Madrid Conference, followed by bilateral talks in Washington.

Arafat, however, was excluded from the Washington Talks due to his support of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, which alienated the PLO from US political circles (Rynhold, 2008, p. 7). The intifada also indicated the declining relevance of the PLO as politics shifted away from the diaspora government to other groups within the oPt (Tripp, 2013, p. 120). Thus, Arafat approached Norway to secretly broker negotiations in an effort to retain political legitimacy (Al Jazeera English, 2013). He easily conceded to a two-state solution and recognised the State of Israel in exchange for Israeli recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Meanwhile, the Washington talks stalled due to ongoing Israeli settler activity informing distrust and rising tensions between the negotiating parties (Anziska, 2018, p. 278). Therefore, the Oslo process was brokered by a biased negotiator and was not underpinned by a genuine commitment to peace. This context helps explain why the process led to uneven outcomes as my thesis states.

Outcomes of Oslo

Territory

The issue of borders and Israeli occupation of Palestinian land underpins tensions in the region. Since the imposed 1947 United Nations (UN) Partition Plan for Palestine, Israel has persistently encroached into Palestinian territory, capturing land through war and expanding illegal settlements (Haddad, 2020). The 1993 Oslo Accords attempted to address the issue by committing to UN Resolution 242 (Oslo Accords, 1993, p. 4). Issued after the Six Day War when Israel came to occupy all of historic Palestine, Resolution 242 (1967) established a land for peace deal stipulating Israeli withdrawal from the oPt in exchange for the right to exist 'in peace within secure and recognised boundaries'. However, the resolution failed to clearly define the oPt essentially allowing Israel autonomy over drawing its borders. Decades later, the Oslo Accords (1993) only outlined Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho (one city in the West Bank), further postponing the implementation of Resolution 242 until final status talks (Oslo Accords, 1993, p. 5). As Said (1993) explains, by deferring the question of Palestinian sovereignty and failing to demand full Israeli withdrawal, Oslo undermined Palestinian territorial claims and redefined the oPt as 'disputed land'.

Oslo rulings on territory enabled Israeli forces to continue displacing Palestinians. Between 1993 and 2000 Israeli settlements increased by 77% (Hassan, 2011, p. 71). During the Oslo years, the settler population in the West Bank alone increased by over eighty thousand (Gordon, 2008, p. 193). By 1995 the Oslo-created Palestinian Authority (PA) was responsible for all Palestinian citizens in the oPt while disproportionately controlling only 3% of land in the West Bank (ibid., p. 178). Moreover, Israeli withdrawal from Gaza demanded by the Oslo Accords wasn't complete until 2005, and this loss of land simply encouraged illegal settlement activity in the West Bank (Mansour, 2022, p. 69). Thus, in terms of Oslo's outcome for territory, the accords clearly facilitated Israeli settler colonialism.

The Oslo process also allowed for the restructure of Palestinian land. The 1995 Oslo II agreement divided the West Bank into three areas, the largest being Area C (60% of the territory) which was under full Israeli control (Anziska, 2018, p. 285). Only Area A (18% of the territory) was placed under full Palestinian authority (Haddad, 2020). Moreover, Mansour (2022) argues that Israel worked to separate Gaza and the West Bank from each other during Oslo. Palestinian territories were isolated into clusters characterised by checkpoints, fences, and borders (Gordon, 2008, p. 178). According to 2020 data, there are 700 road obstacles across the West Bank including checkpoints (Haddad, 2020). Moreover, a 54 km closed fence was erected around Gaza, and today the territory is the world's largest open-air prison (Gordon, 2008, p. 179). Alternately in Israel, strategic corridors were created between controlled areas with 400 km of paved roads established in the West Bank to connect settlements with one another and with Israel proper (ibid., pp. 178, 193).

Overall, the outcome of Oslo on territory allowed for status quo settlement expansion by Israel and subsequent dispossession of Palestinians. Even where territory was conceded to Palestine, there were no mechanisms to control the pace or extent of Israeli withdrawal nor any impediments on its separationist tactics to isolate Palestinian territories. Overall, these implications on disputed territory demonstrated Oslo's commitment to Israeli sovereignty

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and subsequent denial of Palestinian statehood.

Economic Development

The 1994 Paris Protocol was part of the Oslo negotiations intended to integrate Israel and Palestine's economies to generate common interests and aid peacebuilding (Rynhold, 2008, p. 2). However, as Roy (1999, p. 65) explains, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and resources actively hindered Palestinian development prospects. By failing to address Israel's control over Palestinian means of production and creating a single economic zone between the parties, the Paris Protocol informed economic prosperity for Israel and dependency for Palestine (ibid., p. 18; Rynhold, p. 17).

For example, the Paris Protocol established a custom union based solely on Israeli trade regulations (Gordon, 2008, p. 174). Not only did this deny Palestinians economic autonomy but also enabled new forms of control for Israel. The setup allowed Israel to collect the taxes on products destined for the oPt, which was meant to pass on to the PA (ibid., p. 186). These taxes accounted for two thirds of Palestinian revenue which gave Israel immense political leverage (ibid.). For example, in retaliation for a series of Hamas suicide bombings in 1997, Israeli authorities illegally withheld tax revenue from the PA (ibid.).

Moreover, the aforementioned enclavization and isolation of Palestinian space also impeded economic development for Palestine (Roy, 1999). Israel's control over Palestinian borders informed a detrimental closure policy, which impeded the mobility of Palestinian goods and labour (ibid., p. 68). Between 1993 to 1996 Palestinians lost out on \$28 billion in revenue due to being economically closed off from Israel, their biggest market (ibid., p. 69). The separation of the West Bank and Gaza from each other also had detrimental impacts. Before the Oslo period, 50% of Gazan goods were marketed in the West Bank. Yet after a year of the Paris Protocol this figure fell to 8% (Gordon, 2008, p. 186). This enclavization of the oPt reoriented Palestinian production towards domestic markets and subsistence (Roy, 1999, p. 75). Consequently, rising unemployment and loss of income were key outcomes of Oslo for the Palestinians. Between 1992 and 1997 Palestinian GNP per capita fell by 37% (Gordon, 2008, p. 183). At the imposition of full closure, the Palestinian unemployment rate was over 60% (Roy, 1999, p. 70). The mass creation of jobs by the PA to absorb labour also meant that a large portion of its budget was redirected towards paying salaries rather than essential infrastructural costs, hindering the physical development of the Palestinian space (ibid., pp. 70-71).

In contrast, the economic outcomes of Oslo for Israel were prosperity and development. A key factor that aided this was the reduction of the cost of occupation for Israel, as the Oslo Accords required the PA to take over responsibility for security, health, education, and welfare of Palestinian citizens (Gordon, 2008, p. 183). This allowed Israel to save on the cost of deploying troops and redistribute income to boost development. In 2000 Israeli per capita health expenditure was \$1600 compared to just \$121 for Palestinians (ibid., p. 191). By controlling trade policies, Israel was also able to open up to new markets, which prompted external investments, and the tourism industry was revitalised (ibid., p. 183). Between 1994 and 2000 Israeli GDP rose by \$2000 (ibid.).

Thus, the Oslo process entrenched Israel's occupation of Palestine by allowing it to retain control of Palestinian productive capacities and the economic policies of the entire region as per the Paris Protocol. This informed economic autonomy for Israel which saw a boom, and dependency for Palestinians whose economy shrank. The 1998 Wye River Memorandum attempted to revitalise Oslo commitments to promoting economic development in the West Bank and Gaza through the establishment of new seaports and passages linking the oPt to each other (Roy, 1999, p. 78). Yet it failed to address Israel's closure policy, demonstrating that the Oslo process consistently failed to meet Palestinian needs and allowed Israel's status quo occupation to endure (ibid.).

Governance

The 1993 Oslo Accords detailed the transfer of power and responsibility over Palestinian civilians to the newly created PA (Oslo Accords, 1993, p. 5). However, rather than establish political autonomy, the creation of the PA 'effectively bureaucratized a guerrilla movement' (Sen, 2015, p. 170). As Gordon (2008) explains, the Oslo Accords

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outsourced the occupation of the oPt to the PA by making them responsible for combating terror and resistance groups, effectively protecting Israeli security interests (Sen, 2015, p. 167). As aforementioned, Arafat was principally concerned with maintaining political legitimacy; thus the interests of the PA and Israeli occupation converged to put down resistance groups, such as Hamas and the left-wing secular groups, which had united to form a rejectionist front (Baconi, 2015, p. 506). The PA had to create a police force to ensure public order as per the Oslo Accords, which Israel provided arms to, and this security apparatus was so vast that the West Bank and Gaza police-to-citizen ratio was amongst the highest in the world (Gordon, 2008, p. 176).

Thus, the Oslo process fragmented Palestinian politics. Whereas the Israeli occupation had previously united Palestinians in the fight for independence, the co-option of Arafat's Fatah party severely weakened the liberation movement (Doumani and Stork, 1994). The rise of Hamas was a key outcome of the Oslo process in this regard. Hamas was opposed to the Oslo process, viewing it as a Western plot, and remained committed to armed struggle as a legitimate means of liberation (Baconi, 2015, p. 506). The political legitimacy of Hamas grew exponentially when they took up a socio-economic role providing education and welfare in Gaza when the PA could not, and a key role in mobilising the second intifada in 2000 (Sen, 2015, pp. 165-6; Gordon, 2008, p. 192). Collusion between the PA and Israel informed their rejection of Hamas's offer to form a national unity government and the breakdown of the 2007 Mecca Agreement for Hamas-Fatah power sharing (Sen, 2015, p. 169).

At the end of the interim period the Oslo peace process had collapsed, which, paired with the death of Arafat in 2004 and Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, left a political vacuum in Gaza that Hamas filled (Baconi, 2015, p. 513). In 2006 Hamas won an electoral victory, capturing 76 out of 132 seats in the PLC elections, forming a unilateral government and replacing the PA in Gaza (ibid., p. 503). Despite its autonomy in Gaza, Hamas is constrained as they must consider the civilian costs of any conflict as Israel retains control over Gazan borders and resources (Mansour, 2022, p. 71). This dynamic is best demonstrated in the October 7th 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, which caused approximately 1200 deaths (Al Jazeera, 2023). In response, Israel cut off food, electricity, and fuel supplies to the entirety of Gaza as collective punishment and is pursuing a genocidal campaign, with a death toll of at least 41,909 as of October 2024, predicted to exceed 186,000 by a July 2024 Lancet study (ibid.; Al Jazeera, 2024; Chughtai and Okur, 2024). Thus, the Oslo process led to the political fragmentation of Palestine and the consequent rise of Hamas which continues to represent Gaza and resist Israeli occupational forces today.

More directly, the transfer of power outlined in Oslo gave Israel sole veto power and full authority to enact legislation (Gordon, 2008, p. 175). Additionally, the PA was recognised as representing the Palestinian people solely within the oPt, meaning that the Palestinian diaspora (half the Palestinian population in 1993) that had brought Arafat to power in the first place was disenfranchised (Said, 1993). Thus, the accords also inhibited democracy by asserting rule from above and militarising the PA against its own citizens. Likewise, even though Hamas was elected democratically, the UN, EU, US, and Russia refuse to engage with it unless it renounces violence and recognises Israel (Baconi, 2015, p. 515). This illustrates how Oslo has framed international diplomacy and adversely impacted the way Palestinians are represented (ibid., p. 516).

In contrast, for Israel the Oslo process led to the rise of the right wing, which has been dedicated to expanding settlements and dispossessing Palestinians (Hassan, 2011, p. 66). Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing American settler who, like most right-wing Zionists, was appalled by his willingness to negotiate with Palestine. Rabin was succeeded by Shimon Peres who had a heavy hand in negotiating the Oslo Accords, from whom Netanyahu's Likud Party took over in 1995. Netanyahu campaigned against the Oslo Accords and consistently opposed a Palestinian state (IMEU, 2015). He either delayed or outright refused to implement agreements under the accords and overall moved to strengthen Israeli dominance (ibid.).

Israeli right-wing discourse also redefined public opinion over the Oslo process, turning it into a debate of Palestinian trustworthiness rather than portraying it as the binding agreement it is (Lustick, 1997, p. 64). This led to the emergence of organisations such as Peace Watch, which claim to foster prospects for genuine peace (ibid., p. 65). However, they are actually led by the right wing and publicise Palestinian violations of the peace process in order to delegitimise the PA and relieve Israeli responsibility to withdraw from the oPt (ibid.). Though the Oslo process did not directly alter Israeli power structures, the historical juncture acted as a rallying point for right-wing groups to rise to

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power, inciting an era of radical nationalism that endures today with Netanyahu's reign.

Therefore, the Oslo process had profound impacts on the politics of Israel and Palestine. For Palestinians the Oslo process fragmented the liberation movement. For Israel, it led to the rise of the right wing, which continues to aggressively pursue the occupation of Palestine.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Oslo process was heralded as a diplomatic breakthrough; yet, rather than facilitate reconciliation, the process solidified Israel's occupational regime and hindered Palestinian sovereignty. Given the outcomes of Oslo, it is evident that the Oslo process resulted in territorial dispossession, economic dependency, and political fragmentation for Palestine while bolstering Israel's occupational regime. The negotiations outlined a vague Israeli withdrawal plan and deferred questions of Palestinian sovereignty, allowing Israel to continue expanding settlements and to perpetuate a cycle of dispossession. Moreover, the economic ramifications of the Oslo process further entrenched Palestinian dependency on Israel as the Paris Protocol failed to address the structural inequalities in Israeli-Palestinian economic relations. Politically, the Oslo process fragmented Palestinian governance by creating PA-Hamas tensions and indirectly ushering a new era of violence in the region, starting with the second intifada in 2000. Conversely, the Oslo process bolstered right-wing factions in Israel, which capitalised on the failures of the accords to entrench their agenda of expanding settlements and sustaining their occupation. In conclusion, the Oslo process failed to deliver reconciliation because it was intentionally set up to strengthen Israel's regime. The ramifications of the rise of the Israeli right wing and Hamas are still unfolding, most recently with the genocide that started on October 7th 2023. Thus, the outcome of Oslo has made peace even more elusive for the region.

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