

Why did Rabin Shake Hands with Arafat?

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In 1993 secret negotiations were initiated between Israeli and PLO delegations in Oslo. They culminated in a historic handshake between Rabin and Arafat and the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP). Two interim agreements were later negotiated by Rabin and Arafat. The first, signed on May 4, 1994 in Cairo, gave jurisdiction to the PA over Gaza and Jericho. The second, signed Sept. 24, 1995 in Taba, oversaw the transfer of jurisdiction of six major Palestinian cities in the West Bank and extended full civilian authority of the PA to all Palestinians living in the West Bank. Israel maintained control of the security of all Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Both Rabin and Arafat came to the table highly motivated to reach an agreement. The 1987 Intifada was a convincing demonstration of Palestinian nationalism and the futility of trying to rule 2 million Palestinians. Furthermore, Palestinian politics were becoming increasingly radicalized by Islamic fundamentalist groups like Hamas. The Israeli delegation felt that now, with a Labour coalition in power, they had a limited window of time to broker a peace deal. The 1987 Intifada had also been a reality check for Arafat. He had been taken by surprise by the Intifada, confirming his fears that the PLO was losing its relevance in the Palestinian struggle for independence. In addition to his loss of influence in Palestinian affairs, Arafat had turned international opinion against him by openly supporting Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War. In

response the Gulf States decided to cut their funding for the PLO. The opportunity to broker a deal with Israel in Oslo looked like the only way to regain the initiative.

Both sides made historic concessions in Oslo. Arafat agreed to remove from the PNC charter the part about destroying Israel. More significantly, Arafat indicated his willingness to partner with Israeli civic and military institutions for a 5 year interim period without any firm guarantees as to how much land would eventually be transferred to the Palestinians. These were the same Israeli institutions that had humiliated Palestinians at check points for 26 years and had, sometimes brutally, suppressed the Palestinian intifada. Rabin, on the other hand, made a major policy reversal by agreeing to negotiate with the PLO. Rabin had been defense minister and then prime minister during a time when the PLO used terrorism with the stated goal of destroying Israel. In 1988, Rabin still considered them a “murderous terrorist organization.”¹ Now the PLO would become partners on security matters. What led Rabin to change his position on the PLO and ink a deal with Arafat, a man he openly despised?

Shehadeh, a Palestinian lawyer, believes that Rabin, by means of the DoP, sought “to exploit successfully the weaker position of the Palestinians in order to consolidate, without fundamentally altering the gains they achieved over the course of their prolonged occupation of the territories.”² Edward Said, a professor at Columbia University and former PLC member, echoes these sentiments and further states that Rabin used “the claim of Israeli popular and right-

¹ Efraim Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security* (Washington, DC

¹ Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press ;

¹ Johns Hopkins University, 1999), 150.

² Ardi Imseis, "Law, Reality, and the Oslo 'Peace' Process," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 20, no. 3 (2000): 474.

wing pressure on him to justify his demands.”³ Nadia Hijab views Israel’s legal obfuscation on key issues such as Jerusalem and Palestinian statehood as a ploy to gain peace without any intention of giving up sovereignty over Palestinian land. Nadia accuses Israel of negotiating the Oslo interim agreements, signed in 1994, in ‘bad faith’.⁴ All of these authors consider the Oslo Accords to be a conspiracy by crafty Israeli politicians and lawyers to continue the occupation of Palestinian land.

Critics of the Oslo Accords such as those cited above are right to be skeptical of Israeli intentions of returning to pre-1967 boundaries. That was never in the cards. However, Rabin did sincerely wish for a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and he was willing to make significant policy reversals and unprecedented territorial concessions to that end. Rabin did not negotiate with Arafat because he believed Arafat was vulnerable and could be exploited but because he was the only one who could speak for the Palestinian people. Rabin had doubts as to whether the PLO had the resources and administrative ability to successfully oppose Hamas and for this reason he might have wished that Arafat was less vulnerable. Rabin’s unwillingness to clearly articulate a vision for the future of the occupied territories was, in the words of Norwegian foreign minister Johan Holst, ‘constructive ambiguity’ intended to avoid discussing irreconcilable differences until final status talks. It was also a way of reducing domestic political opposition to future concessions and a reflection of his continued doubts about Arafat’s intentions.

³ Edward W. Said, *Peace and Its Discontents : Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 173.

⁴ Nadia Hijab, "Limitations of the Oslo Accords," *Socialism and Democracy* 16, no. 2 (2002).

The strategic balance of power in the Middle East had changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990's. For the first time, Eastern European countries began to open up diplomatic ties with Israel. Iraq had been crushed by the Americans in the 1991 Gulf War; removing one of Israel's major antagonists in the region. Israel now faced a different type of security threat. In the words of Rabin, the Mideast was "in the midst of a wave of Khomeinism."⁵ The exile of Fatah and PLO leaders to Jordan, Lebanon and later to Tunis in 1972 had left a void which had been filled by the Islamic fundamentalist group, Hamas. Hamas drew its ideology from the Moslem Brotherhood and was funded by Gulf oil states. They built new schools, mosques and clinics and generally improved the living conditions of the Palestinian people. All of this was done with the approval of the national unity government of Shamir and Peres. However, Hamas soon exposed a militant side that was spurred by fiery religious rhetoric that called for the destruction of Israel. As Hamas gained supporters, the more secular PLO began to look like an increasingly attractive negotiating partner to Israeli policy makers.

Traditionally Israel had sought to negotiate with local Palestinians or with a combined Jordanian-Palestinian delegation rather than with the PLO. In 1974, Abba Eban thought that Rabin should have signed a Jordanian-Israeli agreement in parallel with those concluded with Egypt and Syria, "even if this meant giving Jordan a foothold across the river at Jericho"⁶ Eban believed that a failure to sign an agreement with Jordan would reinforce the PLO. His fears were confirmed by Arafat's invitation to address the UN General Assembly shortly after. King Hussein of Jordan informed Reagan in 1982 that they "would not negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians"⁷ leaving

⁵ Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 151.

⁶ Abba Solomon Eban, *Personal Witness : Israel through My Eyes* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1992), 583.

⁷ Avi Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan : The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 426.

the PLO as the only viable option. The PLO was unable to capitalize on this support primarily because of their unwillingness to recognize Israel's existence. It wasn't until 1988 in Algiers that the PLO made a major strategic shift by accepting UN resolution 242 and, with some arm twisting by the US, reluctantly acknowledged Israel's right to exist. However, the Shamir government continued to refuse to negotiate with the PLO and banned any contact with them. For this reason, the Madrid Conference and the follow up talks in Washington were led by Faisal Husseini, a prominent Palestinian from East Jerusalem instead of the PLO.

Rabin came to power in 1992 with the pledge to approach negotiations with the Palestinians and Syrians differently. Rabin told the Israeli electorate that, "We must think differently, look at things in a different way. Peace requires a world of new concepts, new definitions."⁸ Once elected, Rabin put words to action. Domestically, he cut 3 billion shekels from the country's settlement budget although he still approved the construction of 10,000 houses in the West Bank that had been initially approved by Shamir.⁹ One of Rabin's first foreign policy moves was to replace Ben Aharon, Israel's contentious chief negotiator at the Madrid conference, with Professor Itamar Rabinovich with the hopes of jump starting the talks with the Palestinians. The failure of Faisal Husseini to negotiate independently of the PLO revealed the continued stranglehold of the PLO on Palestinian decision makers. Yossi Beilin, an academic from Tel Aviv University, had long argued that Israel must at some point negotiate with the PLO. He initiated the first contacts with the PLO in Norway that eventually led to the establishment of back channel talks between Abu Ala and two Israeli professors, Yair Hirshfield and Ron Pundak.

⁸ Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 136.

⁹ Robert I. Friedman, "Land for Peace - Rabin's Dilemma; Why the Talks Are Stalled. (Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin)," *The Nation* v255, no. n15 (1992).

At first, Rabin was skeptical that anything would come of the talks. However, as it became clear that the PLO was willing to make significant concessions, the Oslo track soon became the primary focus of Israeli negotiations.

The Oslo negotiations were based on a gradual and incremental approach to peace that sought to build trust between the two parties. Abu Ala, the principle negotiator in Oslo for the Palestinians described the negotiating strategy of both sides, “Our negotiating policy was intended to avoid strategies which would lead to a single deal as such a policy has the fatal drawback that the only alternative to total success is complete failure.”¹⁰ “Constructive ambiguity” as it was termed by Johan Holst, the Norwegian Foreign Minister, was a central feature of the Oslo Accords.¹¹

Uri Savir, in his opening statement to the Palestinian delegation in Oslo, insisted that two preconditions be agreed on before the Oslo back channel could be made official. The first was that the negotiations would take place directly without outside arbitration and the second was that Palestinian autonomy could not be extended to Jerusalem. Savir told the Palestinian delegation, “Jerusalem is the center of our national ethos, and if that is open to negotiation, no progress can be made.”¹² Uri Savir’s statement is a reflection of Rabin’s own feelings on the subject of Jerusalem. As late as 1995, Rabin had declared to the Knesset, “There is only one Jerusalem; from our point of view Jerusalem is not subject to compromise; Jerusalem was ours, will be ours, it is ours and so it will be forever and ever.”¹³ The Israeli public, having been

¹⁰ A. hmad Quray*, *From Oslo to Jerusalem : The Palestinian Story of the Secret Negotiations* (London ; New York

¹⁰New York: I.B. Tauris ;

¹⁰Distributed in the United States and Canada by Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 301.

¹¹ Ibid., 201.

¹² Uri Savir, *The Process : 1,100 Days That Changed the Middle East*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1998).

¹³ Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 160.

banned from the Old City for nineteen years were unwilling to see Jerusalem divided again. “In a poll of Israeli Jews conducted in 1991, about 87% felt that Israel must keep all of East Jerusalem and 10% that Israel could withdraw from at least part of East Jerusalem in the context of a final peace.”¹⁴

The Palestinians and their leaders have also demonstrated their unwillingness to compromise on Jerusalem. At the Algiers Conference in 1988 Arafat declared a Palestinian state in all of the West Bank with Jerusalem as its capital. In Arafat’s speeches to the Palestinian people upon his return to the West Bank he “invariably invokes Jerusalem as a powerful unifying and mobilizing symbol. In every case, he lists each of the towns and villages so far “liberated,” and vows to “march into Jerusalem” or to “pray in Jerusalem” at the end of the peace process.”¹⁵ This uncompromising position on the status of Jerusalem on both sides meant that there was little hope of finding common ground. For this reason no mention was made of Jerusalem in the Declaration of Principles except that future negotiations would resolve “remaining issues, including: Jerusalem...”¹⁶ According to Uri Savir, both Arafat and Abu Mazen “accepted our demand that East Jerusalem be excluded from the autonomy-though it would certainly be raised again in the talks on the final settlement.”¹⁷ The problem of Jerusalem was not solved, but rather shoved down the road.

Although the partitioning of Jerusalem was not on the table, at least initially, the Oslo Accords did require some form of territorial concessions by the Israelis. This was not the first plans were

¹⁴ Cecilia Albin, "Securing the Peace of Jerusalem: On the Politics of Unifying and Dividing," *Review of International Studies* 23, no. 2 (1997).

¹⁵ Raphael Israeli, "From Oslo to Bethlehem: Arafat's Islamic Message," *Journal of Church and State* 43, no. 3 (2001).

¹⁶ *Declaration of Principles*, 1993.

¹⁷ Savir, *The Process : 1,100 Days That Changed the Middle East*, 19.

put forward to withdraw from portions of the West Bank. The Allon Plan, proposed by Yigal Allon in 1968 and supported by Rabin, called for territorial withdrawal from about 700 of the 2100 square miles of the West Bank. Opponents of the plan, which included Moshe Dayan, argued that instead of territory, “Palestinians should be given authority over various governmental functions.”¹⁸ The DoP was something of a compromise between the two positions. It established an interim period during which the functions of government would be handed over to a Palestinian Authority. Territory would not be transferred to the PA until after final status talks were concluded. A precedent for this had already been set by the Camp David Accords signed between Israel and Egypt in 1978 which had incorporated an interim test period before the Sinai was handed back to Egypt. Rabin, commenting on the Camp David Accords, said “I cannot overemphasize the importance of testing Egypt’s intentions not merely by virtue of what the Egyptians say, but what they do for more than two years while Israel continues to hold on to such a large proportion of the Sinai.”¹⁹ Although the Oslo Accords adopted Rabin’s territorialist approach, there is no mention in the DoP of a Palestinian state.

Rabin was not opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state in principal and had openly favored the creation of a Jordanian-Palestinian state in 1979. In his memoirs published in 1979, Rabin described a state, “that would include considerable portions of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (mainly the densely populated areas).”²⁰ Peres maintained that “Israel’s declared position was that it opposed the creation of an independent Palestinian state following the interim

¹⁸ David Makovsky and Washington Institute for Near East Policy., *Making Peace with the Plo : The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 161.

¹⁹ Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, 1st English language ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 258.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

period of self-government. Certainly we were not prepared to commit ourselves *now*, at the outset of the interim period, to accepting the Palestinian's demand for eventual independence."²¹ However, it was not difficult to see that Oslo had set in motion a process that made Palestinian statehood increasingly likely. Abu Ala, the head of the Palestinian delegation in Oslo believed that the concessions made at Oslo would lead to a Palestinian state as did, apparently, the Americans. He recounts overhearing Kissinger remark to a group of Israeli delegates in Washington after signing the DoP, "How could you accept this agreement? You have created the basis for a Palestinian state. This state will be established sooner or later, perhaps in less than three years.' Then he added jokingly 'If Golda Meir were still alive, and you came back to her with such an agreement, she would have hung you up by your feet!'"²²

The ambiguity of Peres and Rabin on issues such as Palestinian statehood was a way of avoiding domestic opposition "to future concessions."²³ Although Rabin had broken 15 years of Likud dominance in Israeli politics, his victory 1992 was not overwhelming. Makovsky points out that had the right wing bloc gained only one more seat in Knesset there would have been some form of 'national unity government' as had existed from 1984-90.²⁴ The 1992 election exposed a deep divide in Israeli perceptions of Gaza and the West Bank. To some, these areas were the 'occupied territories' and needed to be unoccupied whereas to others they were the Biblical lands of 'Judea and Samaria' to which the Jewish people had strong historical ties. The late 1970's had witnessed the rise of national religious movements such as Gush Emunim that could

²¹ Shimon Peres and David Landau, *Battling for Peace : A Memoir*, 1st edition. ed. (New York: Random House, 1995).

²² Quray*, *From Oslo to Jerusalem : The Palestinian Story of the Secret Negotiations*.

²³ Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 153.

²⁴ Makovsky and Washington Institute for Near East Policy., *Making Peace with the Plo : The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord*.139

mobilize significant opposition to a withdrawal from the territories. Members of Gush Emunim were the ‘new Zionists’ who sought to recapture the ‘pioneering sacrifice’ of the early kibbutz movement. Although a fringe group, Sprinzak argues that Gush Emunim was “only the tip of an iceberg of a broader religious subculture.”²⁵ Although Gush Emunim was not a political party, they “bumped the NRP progressively to the political right”²⁶ They also had supporters within the mainstream Labour and Likud parties. This was demonstrated when Gush Emunim attempted to establish a settlement on a hill top in Samaria in 1974. As Prime Minister, Rabin had opposed them but the political support they gathered from other members of the government, especially Yisrael Galili, minister without portfolio, forced Rabin to make a compromise.²⁷ They were allowed to set up a tent for one month which eventually led to settlement of Elon Moreh under the Begin government. Begin allowed the Gush Emunim to build settlements in places where there was no political will to build them otherwise. Perhaps more important than their political influence, Gush Emunim had a profound impact on Israeli society. They changed “the priority of the three pillars of religious Zionist faith – the people of Israel, the Land of Israel, and the people of Israel – by stressing the primary importance of the Land, or Eretz Yisrael”²⁸ The public’s perceptions of the territories were changing. They were no long considered a bargaining chip for peace.

Rabin has been described as a pragmatist in contrast to his predecessor, Shamir, who prided himself on an unwavering adherence to ideology. Rabin had demonstrated an ability to make major policy reversals if new conditions warranted. In March of 1974 Rabin vehemently

²⁵ David Newman, *The Impact of Gush Emunim : Politics and Settlement in the West Bank* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 27.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Peres and Landau, *Battling for Peace : A Memoir*, 148.

²⁸ Newman, *The Impact of Gush Emunim : Politics and Settlement in the West Bank*. ??

opposed a withdrawal from the Abu Rodeis oil fields in Sinai and the Mitla and Gidi passes until Egypt abandoned its “state of war” but reversed his position several months later. This led Abba Eban to criticize Rabin for weakening Israel’s credibility²⁹ During the 1992 election campaign Rabin had promised, “We will not leave the Golan Heights, not even in exchange for a peace treaty”³⁰ but by September of the same year, Rabin announced to the Knesset his willingness to give up some territory on the Golan in exchange for peace. Rabin’s willingness to concede land for peace reflects his vision of the future - a vision that contrasts sharply with that of Gush Emunim. “The future”, he said “will not be an age symbolized by the settler and the soldier working side by side.”³¹ Rabin believed in disengagement and separation rather than further settlements in the West Bank. This separation was foreshadowed by the sealing off of Gaza and West Bank in response to knifing attacks in Israel. Although this action was viewed as a tough minded security measure, it fell in line with Rabin’s belief that Israel needed to reduce its reliance on the 50,000 day laborers who crossed the borders each day. Rabin concurrently ordered massive new public works projects in Gaza and the West Bank although the border closure still resulted in very high unemployment for the Palestinian people.

Gaza and the West Bank were in need of major outside investment and good administration. Unfortunately, after the Oslo Accords were signed, Arafat proved to be extremely slow to build governing institutions in the West Bank and Gaza. Instead, he focused his energy on establishing his own position within the party and isolating those who he felt had gained too much recognition. In a conversation with Johan Jorgen Holst in Tunis, “Arafat placed great

²⁹ Eban, *Personal Witness : Israel through My Eyes*. 582

³⁰ Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 143.

³¹ Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*.

importance on establishing himself in the territories in order to deal, so he said, with Hamas.”³²

However, having signed the DoP with Israel, Arafat was accused by his own people of abandoning the Islamic message. According to Raphael Israeli, “the polarization between Arafat and his opponents from Hamas and the Islamic jihad grew so acute, and the tensions between them escalated so rapidly, that it was seen as only a matter of time before an all-out civil war erupted.”³³ Rather than mobilize moderate forces to oppose these extremist, Arafat began to adopt their language. Although Arafat clamped down on Hamas initially, his prisons had revolving doors. The long term prisoners were often political dissidents. Arafat’s message to the Palestinians, which had been conciliatory during the negotiations leading up the signing of the Oslo Accords, became increasingly characterized by the anti-Semitic rhetoric of his earlier speeches. Shortly after signing the Taba agreement, Arafat made a visit to South Africa where he compared the peace with Israel to the Treaty of Hudabiyya. This was a temporary truce used by the Prophet Mohammed to gather strength in order to conquer the non-Muslim Qurayash at a later date. Statements like these confirmed many Israelis fears. 1994 marked the first suicide bombings inside Israel and further eroded faith in Arafat’s ability to control Hamas. Moreover, Israeli security forces no longer had the same freedom to pursue attackers inside PA controlled territory.

Arafat also had reason to question Rabin’s motives in the West Bank. Shehadai notes (in 2000) that, “although Article XXXI of the Interim Agreement provides that neither side shall initiate or take any step that will change the status of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip pending the outcome of the permanent status negotiations’ since the signing of the DOP Israel has increased

³² Savir, *The Process : 1,100 Days That Changed the Middle East*, 42.

the number of Jewish settlers in the occupied territories by over 50 per cent through the expansion of existing settlements.”³³ Rabin did not found any new settlements in the West Bank but he approved bypass roads connecting existing settlements that further carved up the countryside and expropriated land.

The guiding principal in the formulation of the Oslo Accords was ambiguity and thus it is difficult to judge the intended outcome. However, there is good reason to believe that just as Israel was willing to trade the Sinai for peace with Egypt, it was prepared to trade parts of the West Bank for peace with the Palestinians. Rabin had taken the side of territorialists in 1968 when he sided with Yigal Allon thereby suggesting that Rabin was willing trade land for peace. Rabin’s victory in the 1992 elections gave him a mandate to seek disengagement with the hopes of reconciliation or, at the very least, separation. To this end, Rabin was willing to bury the hatchet and negotiate with the only one who seemed capable of speaking on behalf of the Palestinian people. It was a major reversal that was full of political risk but with the rising popularity of Hamas, Rabin saw few other options.

³³ Imseis, "Law, Reality, and the Oslo 'Peace' Process." 475.

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