

# Oslo Revisited

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September 7, 2013

**I**SRAEL LOVES ANNIVERSARIES. The media fill up with revelations and memories of the event commemorated, eye-witnesses recite their stories for the umpteenth time, old photos flood the pages and the TV screens.

In the coming days, two main memorial dates will play this role. True, the Yom Kippur war broke out only in October (1973), but already the newspapers and TV programs are full of it.

The Oslo agreement was signed on September 13 (1993). Hardly any mention. It has been almost expunged from the national memory.

Oslo? Oslo in Norway? Anything happened there? Tell me about it.

ACTUALLY, FOR me the historic date is September 10. On that day, Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat exchanged letters of mutual recognition.

The State of Israel recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the representative of the Palestinian people, and the PLO recognized the State of Israel.

It is one of the historic achievements of Oslo that today nobody can possibly grasp the immensity of this recognition.

The Zionist movement aimed officially at the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine. Unofficially, it wanted to turn Palestine—all of it—into a Jewish State. Since Palestine was already inhabited by another people, the existence of this people—as a people—had to be denied. Since the Zionist movement was, in its own eyes, a moral and idealistic endeavor, this denial was a basic tenet of the Zionist creed. A land without a people for a people without a land. Golda Meir famously declared that there was “*no such thing as a Palestinian people.*” I myself have spent hundreds, perhaps thousands of hours of my life trying to convince Israeli audiences that there really exists a Palestinian nation.

And here was the Prime Minister of Israel signing a document that recognized the existence of the Palestinian People, demolishing a central pillar of Zionism after almost a hundred years.

Yasser Arafat's declaration was no less revolutionary. For every Palestinian, it was a fundamental truth that the Zionist state was the illegitimate child of Western impe-

rialism. Palestine was an Arab land, inhabited by Arabs for many centuries, until a bunch of foreign settlers took it over by force and guile, expelled half its population and terrorized the rest.

And here was the founder and leader of the Palestinian liberation movement accepting Israel as a legitimate state!

Recognition of this kind cannot be taken back. It is a fact in the minds of millions of Israelis and Palestinians, and of the world at large. This is the basic change forged in Oslo.

FOR THE vast majority of Israelis, Oslo is dead. Their story is quite simple: we signed a generous agreement. And “the Arabs” broke it, as they always do. We did everything possible for peace, we let the devious Arafat come back into the country, we even gave arms to his security forces—and what did we get? Not peace. Just terrorist attacks. Suicide bombers.

The lesson? The Arabs don't want peace. They want to throw us into the sea. As Yitzhak Shamir put it so succinctly: “*The Arabs are still the same Arabs, and the sea is still the same sea.*” For many Palestinians, of course, the lesson is the very reverse. The Oslo agreement was a cunning Zionist trick to continue the occupation in another form. Indeed, the situation of the Palestinians under occupation became much worse. Before Oslo, Palestinians could move freely throughout the country from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, from Nablus to Gaza, from Haifa to Jericho, from everywhere to Jerusalem. After Oslo, this became impossible.

SO WHAT is the truth? Is Oslo dead?

Of course not.

The most important creation of the Oslo agreement, the Palestinian Authority, is very much alive, though not kicking.

One may think about the Authority what one wants, good or bad, but it certainly is there. It is recognized by the international community as a state in the making, attracting donations and capital. It is the visible embodiment of the Palestinian national presence.

In spite of the all-pervading oppression by the military occupation regime, there is a dynamic, vital, self-governing Palestinian society in both the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, enjoying wide international support.

On the other hand, peace seems far, far away.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER the signing of the agreement (called the “Declaration of Principles”) on the White House lawn, we convened a large meeting in Tel Aviv for the peace forces to discuss its merits.

None of us had any illusions. It was a bad agreement. As Arafat put it: “*the best possible agreement in the worst possible situation.*” Not an agreement between equals, but between a strong military power and a small, almost helpless, occupied people.

Some of us proposed condemning the agreement outright. Others, including myself, proposed accepting it conditionally. “*The actual paragraphs are less important,*” I said, “*The main thing is the peace dynamic set in motion.*” Today I am not certain that I was right, but neither am I sure that I was wrong. The jury is still out.

THE MAIN fault in the agreement was that its ultimate aim was not stated. While it seemed obvious to the Palestinians (and to many Israelis) that the aim was to pave the way to peace between the State of Israel and the soon-to-be-established State of Palestine, this was not clear at all to the Israeli leadership.

It was an interim agreement—but interim to what? If you want to go from Berlin to Paris, the interim stations are quite different from those you pass on the way from Berlin to Moscow.

Without agreement on the final destination, a quarrel was bound to break out about every single station on the way. The mood of reconciliation quickly changed into distrust on both sides. It went sour almost right from the beginning.

One can compare Rabin to a general who has succeeded in breaking through the lines of his opponent. A general in such a situation should not stop to think things over. He should rush forward and throw everything he has got into the breach. But Rabin did stop, allowing all the forces of opposition in Israel to gather, regroup and start a fatal counterattack.

By nature, Rabin was no revolutionary. On the contrary, he was a rather conservative type, a military man with not much imagination. By exercising sheer logic, he had arrived at the conclusion that it was in the best interest of Israel to make peace with the Palestinians (a conclusion I had arrived at 44 years earlier, treading the same path). At the age of 70, he changed his whole outlook. For this he deserves much respect.

But once there, he hesitated. As the Germans say, he had Angst at his own courage. Instead of rushing forward, he haggled at length over every detail even while an intense

fascist-type propaganda campaign was let loose against him. For this he paid with his life.

SO WHO broke the agreement first? I would blame my own side.

It was Rabin who proclaimed that “*there are no sacred dates!*” (To which I responded “*I wish he would convince my bank manager of that.*”) Breaking dates set down in a contract means breaking the contract. The timetable for starting the serious negotiations for final peace was ignored, and so of course was the date set for the conclusion: 1999. By that time, nobody was even thinking about Oslo any longer.

Another fateful violation was the failure to set up the “four safe passages” between the West Bank and the Gaza strip. In the beginning, road signs saying “To Gaza” were indeed set up on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, but no passage was ever opened.

The result of this became apparent only much later, when Hamas assumed power in the isolated Gaza Strip, while Fatah clung to in the West Bank. It was “divide et impera” at its best (or worst).

In the agreements following Oslo, the occupied West Bank was divided into temporary zones, A, B and C. Area C was to remain for the time being under complete Israeli control. Soon enough it became clear that Israeli military planners had devised the map carefully: Area C included all the main roads and the sites earmarked for Israeli settlements.

The people who devised all these things did not have peace on their mind.

The picture is not altogether one-sided. During the Oslo period Palestinian armed attacks on Israelis did not cease. Arafat did not initiate them, but neither did he go out of his way to prevent them. He probably thought that they would needle the Israelis into going ahead with implementing the agreement. They had the opposite effect.

THE ASSASSINATIONS of Rabin and Arafat put an end to Oslo for all practical purposes. But reality has not changed.

The considerations which led Arafat by the end of 1973 to conclude that he must negotiate with Israel, and which led Rabin in 1993 to talk with the Palestinians, have not changed.

There are two nations in this country, and they must choose: to live together or to die together. I hope they choose life.

Some day, public squares in Tel Aviv and Ramallah will be named for this agreement. And in Oslo, too, of course.