

# Thirty Years of Oslo - 13 September 1993 and after

Friday 22 September 2023, by [RABBANI Mouin](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2023).

**On 13 September 1993 Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization Yasir Arafat signed the Oslo Accords at a White House ceremony officiated by United States President Bill Clinton. To mark the thirtieth anniversary of this agreement, and take stock of developments during the intervening decades and their implications for the future, *Jadaliyya's* [Palestine Page](#) editors interviewed *Jadaliyya* Co-Editor Mouin Rabbani.**

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## **Jadaliyya (J): What was your response when you first learned of the 1993 Oslo Accords?**

**Mouin Rabbani (MR):** Reports that Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had successfully concluded secret talks in Oslo began to emerge in late July/early August 1993. By late August the broad contours of this agreement were clear, and it was immediately apparent that it was an unmitigated, comprehensive disaster.

The lopsided nature of these agreements is in my view best reflected in the [letters of recognition](#) exchanged between Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat (Abu Ammar) and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that accompanied the Oslo agreement.

In his letter, Arafat on behalf of the PLO “recognizes the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security”; “accepts United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338”; commits to resolving all “outstanding issues” with Israel exclusively “through negotiations”; “renounces” armed force “and will assume responsibility over all PLO elements and personnel in order to assure their compliance”; and declares that those “articles” and “provisions” of the 1968 Palestine National Covenant “inconsistent with the commitments of this letter are now inoperative and no longer valid”. For good measure Arafat addressed a second letter to Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jorgen Holst, who convened the covert Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, informing him that “the PLO encourages and calls upon the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to take part in the steps leading to the normalization of life, rejecting violence and terrorism, contributing to peace and stability”.

Rabin’s letter is much shorter. It states, in full:

*“In response to your [Arafat’s] letter of 9 September, 1993, I wish to confirm to you that, in light of the PLO commitments included in your letter, the Government of Israel has decided to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East Peace Process.”*

In contrast to Arafat's letter, Rabin's text tellingly makes no reference to Palestinian rights, nor in any way limits Israeli options in its future dealings with the Palestinians. In other words, in exchange for a slew of Palestinian strategic concessions, Israel magnanimously agreed to negotiate the PLO's terms of surrender.

The [Declaration of Principles](#) on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, as the Oslo Accord is formally called, is only a few pages long and largely free of technical jargon, and well worth reading for those who haven't done so. It contains not a single reference to "occupation", "self-determination", "statehood", or anything of the sort. Rather, Palestinians were to exercise limited autonomy, within limited areas of the occupied territories (excluding East Jerusalem), from which Israeli forces would "redeploy" rather than withdraw. Containing neither clear terms of reference for what it calls a "permanent status" agreement, nor clarity on its substance or form, nor meaningful dispute resolution mechanisms, Oslo in practice transformed the occupied territories into contested ones. Within this framework, Israeli claims and Palestinian rights were to be treated as equally valid, and subordinating the entire process to bilateral negotiations meant that Israel acquired veto power over Palestinian rights. To top it all off the process would be overseen by the United States, for decades Israel's strategic ally and geopolitical sponsor, and which officially designated the PLO as a proscribed terrorist organization.

On this basis, I viewed Oslo as an unmitigated disaster and have consistently expressed this view since 1993. At the time, the issues that had the greatest impact were the effective abandonment of the refugees, who constitute the majority of the Palestinian people, by the leadership; the political-institutional fragmentation of the Palestinian people; the indefinite suspension of the national agenda in exchange for economic reconstruction that was unlikely to materialize (as it stands the Palestinian economy is today but a shadow of what it was in 1993); and the transformation of the national movement into a local authority. Edward W. Said - who had previously supported Palestinian participation in the Madrid/Washington negotiations and at that point remained a proponent of a two-state settlement - hit the nail squarely on the head when he denounced Oslo as "[a Palestinian Versailles](#)".

Although I was never under any illusions about Oslo, and from the outset viewed it as an agreement that was designed to restructure and consolidate Israeli rule over the Palestinians rather than bring it to an end, I at the same time failed to anticipate the scope and sheer scale of the catastrophe it produced. Things have turned out very much worse than Oslo's bitterest critics could have imagined, particularly in the Gaza Strip and Jordan Valley. I suspect even Said, who passed away twenty years ago this month, would be stunned by the current reality.

**J: Please identify one or two Israeli policies or practices that Oslo made possible. How have these shifted over time?**

**MR:** There are Israeli policies and practices that made Oslo possible, and those that Oslo made possible.

With respect to the former, I think Israel's policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders wherever and whenever it could do so played an important role. By 1993 Arafat's main confederates and potential counterweights in the Fatah movement, like Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) and Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), to name but two, had all been eliminated. Within the PLO other organizations, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), were much diminished or weakened by internal schisms. The Islamist current, represented chiefly by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, then as now operated independently of the PLO and had no influence over its decisions.

As a result, Arafat achieved unchallenged and unfettered control over the national movement. This enabled him to commit Fatah and the PLO to Oslo without serious internal challenge. The situation was so dire that individuals like Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazin) and Ahmad Qurai (Abu Alaa) graduated from relative obscurity and political insignificance to positions of national leadership. In 2004 Arafat was himself almost certainly assassinated by Israel as well, in my view as part of a premeditated initiative to catapult Abbas to leadership after Arafat successfully aborted the 2003 premiership of Abbas that had been imposed upon Arafat by the US and Israel, with the European Union (EU) as always in tow.

The second enabling policy was Israel's relentless campaign of mass violence throughout the occupied territories, and the Gaza Strip in particular, to crush the 1987-1993 uprising. It didn't succeed, but as [Graham Usher](#) perceptively noted at the time, it did lay the basis for widespread Palestinian acquiescence, and quite a bit of enthusiasm, in these territories for the false promises of Oslo.

In terms of what Oslo made possible, the exponential expansion of Israeli colonies since 1993 is the most obvious phenomenon. Colonization of course commenced immediately after Israel occupied and initiated the "creeping annexation" of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in June 1967, but Oslo was nevertheless a critical turning point.

Although the settlement enterprise constitutes a grave breach of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention and a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (which is the primary reason Israel refused to ratify it), the Oslo Accords as a matter of design make no reference to international law. Further, the sponsor of the Oslo process, the United States, has spared no effort to ensure that international law is not applied to Israeli conduct towards the Palestinians beyond the confines of Oslo, that it is not held accountable for its actions, and that it can continue to act with unrestricted impunity. In other words, the United States ensured that Oslo was implemented beyond the purview of the norms and rules established to govern international conduct.

The Oslo agreements do not authorize settlement expansion. But more importantly, they do not explicitly prohibit it. Anyone remotely familiar with Israeli policy immediately understood that its leaders would treat the absence of an explicit prohibition as a license to continue, and that is exactly what they have done throughout the past three decades.

Israel's response to the 1994 Hebron Ibrahimi Mosque massacre by a fanatic Israeli-American settler, which it instrumentalized to further entrench its control over Hebron and the mosque rather than confront the settlers, provided an early, definitive indication in this regard. It bears recalling that this response was led by Rabin, his fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shimon Peres, and their military commander Ehud Barak, not Binyamin Netanyahu or Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Of at least equal significance is that the Oslo process provided settlement expansion with a crucial political fig leaf. Every time Israel engaged in a new act of colonization, such as the construction of the Har Homa settlement on Jabal Abu Ghnaim in 1997, it was tolerated on the pretext of keeping the process alive - the Clinton administration resorted to this argument when it vetoed several United Nations Security Council draft resolutions that condemned the establishment of Har Homa. Indeed, virtually every Israeli action on the ground, particularly during the 1990s, was effectively ignored in the name of preserving the process. (It was around this time that Oslo acquired the sobriquet "piss process").

More broadly, an attitude took hold that settlement expansion was not particularly important because - in another development introduced during Oslo - Israel would permanently retain the

main settlement blocs in any peace agreement, while those in an eventual Palestinian entity would be either dismantled or absorbed by it. The practical consequence of this concept was of course that more Palestinian territory became eligible for permanent Israeli annexation with each passing year.

If, for the sake of argument, we take claims that Oslo was supposed to conclude with Palestinian statehood seriously, ignoring reality on the ground on the pretext of preserving the diplomatic process helped ensure its failure.

More to the point, the limitless indulgence of Israel's insatiable appetite for Palestinian land defined Washington's role, no small matter given its sole proprietorship of the Oslo process. Aaron David Miller, the US State Department's Deputy Middle East Coordinator for Arab-Israeli Negotiations during the 1990s, put the US role as an honest broker on a par with British devotion to fair play:

*"[M]any [American officials](#) involved in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, myself included, have acted as Israel's attorney, catering and coordinating with the Israelis at the expense of successful peace negotiations ... The "no surprises" policy, under which we had to run everything by Israel first, stripped our policy of the independence and flexibility required for serious peacemaking ... [O]ur departure point was not what was needed to reach an agreement acceptable to both sides but what would pass with only one - Israel."*

A second key Israeli policy enabled by Oslo is Palestinian fragmentation. Although this began to take shape during the early 1990s, it was institutionalized by the Oslo regime. The West Bank and Gaza Strip were isolated from each other, East Jerusalem was severed from the remainder of the West Bank, and thereafter the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were fragmented into encircled cantons that could and often were sealed off from each other. Travel out of the Gaza Strip, into East Jerusalem, and often within the West Bank and (until 2005) within the Gaza Strip as well, became virtually impossible. And of course Palestinians within the Green Line, in the occupied territories, and in the diaspora were also isolated from each other. This was all in place before the construction of the West Bank Wall which imposed further restrictions, before the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the Gaza Strip which is approaching its third decade, and before the Fatah-Hamas schism which has a clear territorial dimension. There's a reason South Africans who have visited Palestine observed that Israel's restrictions far exceed the measures imposed by the former white minority regime in their country.

More generally, Israel succeeded in making Oslo's transitional phase a [permanent arrangement](#), in the process transforming the Palestinian Authority (PA) into a local subsidiary of the Israeli state. Oslo's sponsors and supporters took as much notice of the interim period's expiration in 1999 as they did of the formal conclusion of Abbas's presidential term in 2009.

The PA's operating costs - the funds required to keep its institutions afloat and properly staffed so that its security forces can keep the Palestinians powerless to resist Israel and its settler auxiliaries, and its civil agencies can prevent societal collapse - are funded by Palestinian taxpayers and Western governments, at no cost to Israel. And a substantial proportion of PA purchases are of course made in Israel, in no small part on account of import and other restrictions. By way of the 1994 Israel-PLO Protocol on Economic Relations, or [Paris Protocol](#), and 1995 Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, better known as [Oslo II](#), the enforced common market Israel had imposed since 1967 was perpetuated.

Oslo II also contains what I consider the most telling clause of this entire series of agreements. Pursuant to [Article XX](#) of this document, the PA agreed to assume full financial liability for successful claims by West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians against Israel, or any Israeli agency or corporation, before an Israeli court "with regard to acts or omissions which occurred prior to" Oslo

II (XX.1.a.). Specifically, “In the event that an award is made against Israel by any [Israeli] court or tribunal in respect of such a claim, the Council [i.e. PA] shall immediately reimburse Israel the full amount of the award” (XX.1.e.). The agreement additionally obliged the PA to promulgate “legislation, in order to ensure that such claims by Palestinians ... are brought only before Palestinian courts and tribunals ... and are not brought before or heard by Israeli courts or tribunals” (XX.2.a). Israel’s contribution is to permit the PA to “participate” in defending Israel against Palestinian claims that arise before Israeli courts (XX.1.d), and to assist the PA in defending Israel against Palestinian claims that come before Palestinian courts (XX.2.c).

In other words, if a Palestinian from the West Bank or Gaza Strip seeks to pursue a claim against Israel for an act committed between 1967 and 1995, let’s say against the Israeli military for unlawful use of force in 1976 or during the 1987-1993 uprising that rendered the claimant quadriplegic, the PA is under an obligation to ensure that the claimant brings the case before a Palestinian rather than Israeli court, and that any financial judgement by that court in the claimant’s favor is paid out by the PA rather than Israel. If the claimant despite the above brings the case before an Israeli court, and an Israeli judge rules in the claimant’s favor, on account of unlawful actions by the Israeli military years before the PA even existed, the PA is required to immediately reimburse Israel the full amount of compensation awarded to the Palestinian by the Israeli court. Article XX perfectly encapsulates the thoroughly lopsided nature of Oslo, the imbalance of power it codified, Israel’s insistence upon achieving retroactive impunity, and its determination to hold its victims responsible for its crimes against them. In my view nothing better demonstrates that this is a conflict between occupier and occupied and nothing else.

With respect to economic benefits, an additional development that is often overlooked but needs to be taken into account is the enormous economic windfall Israel derived from the Oslo Accords and its integration into the global economy. Most importantly it led the Arab League to renounce its boycott of Israel and – crucially – of companies that do business with Israel. For all its shortcomings this boycott was exponentially more effective than the current Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and for example kept major Japanese and South Korean firms out of Israel and quite a few Western ones out of the Arab world. It is often forgotten that during the 1970s and 1980s Israel was something of an international pariah, but in the wake of the 1991 Madrid Middle East diplomatic conference and thereafter Oslo was able to normalize relations with much of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The only exception is South America, where Israel enjoyed strong relations since its establishment, particularly with its terror regimes, but which diminished as a combination of leftist and democratic governments more critical of Israel took power in recent decades.

Within the region, Israel has of course had formal relations with Egypt since the late 1970s and covert ties with a number of Arab states for decades, but in the wake of Oslo and largely on account of it these informal links grew very substantially. In addition, formal diplomatic relations were established with Jordan in 1994 and more recently with Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Palestinian leadership had hoped to leverage Arab-Israeli normalization to achieve Palestinian national objectives, but in practice Oslo enabled normalization, and it has become an instrument to marginalize the Palestinians and legitimize Greater Israel.

While Oslo promised Palestinian economic development in exchange for political paralysis, growth materialized only temporarily from the desultory baseline where it stood in 1993 at the conclusion of a prolonged uprising. A sharp reversal in fact commenced in the years leading up to the 2000 eruption of the Al-Aqsa Intifada on account of Israeli policy, and this deterioration has continued at an accelerated pace ever since. What Oslo did achieve was to catapult Israel into the ranks of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), of which it has since 2010 been a full member. It is virtually inconceivable Israel would have acquired this status without Oslo.

## **J: How have Palestinians organized, resisted, and held ground in the Oslo era?**

**MR:** The national movement as it existed in the decades prior to Oslo is today in an advanced state of disintegration. The PLO has for all intents and purposes been reduced to an ancillary bureau within the PA, even though the latter was in 1994 established as a subsidiary administrative agency of the former. As personified by Abbas, the PA leadership is for its part entirely disconnected from its people, viewed as illegitimate by virtually every Palestinian who is not a part of it, and more beholden to the agendas of Israel and the United States than Palestinian national interests.

Against this background, movements established and operating outside this framework have gained prominence. Hamas and Islamic Jihad most obviously, but also a growing number of smaller groups, often local in nature, that are either unaffiliated, or incorporate members from a variety of organizations, or - like the remnants of the Fatah Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades - seek to revive agendas that have been renounced and disavowed by their leaders.

It's a very different reality than that of the PLO as it existed prior to Oslo, in which different and rival movements operated under a common umbrella with at least nominal unity of purpose and collective participation in unified institutions and decision-making organs. Looking beyond the PLO, Fatah and Hamas may have been fierce rivals during the 1987-1993 uprising, but neither was committed to the eradication of the other nor formed a partnership with Israel to this end. If the 1987-1993 uprising was characterized by a popular movement organized over many years by the various Palestinian factions, and the 2000-2004 uprising by a leadership that provided at least tacit endorsement and made only performative efforts to end it, today's reality is one in which the PA is fully committed to eradicating resistance to Israel and its settlements, and additionally believes - correctly in my view - that doing so is essential to its own survival.

These factors make conditions challenging, complicated, and difficult for unaffiliated activists working at the popular level, where in sharp contrast to previous eras a growing majority of Palestinians are either independent or only loosely affiliated with a specific organization.

Rather than being nurtured by a national movement and leadership they are, as argued by Jamil Hilal, viewed with suspicion by rival leaders in Ramallah and Gaza who fear their activism may be either directed or utilized against them. Abbas's embrace of "popular resistance" is a case in point; he did so only in order to delegitimize armed resistance, did nothing to support and quite a bit to undermine the forms of resistance he claimed to be championing, and simply stopped referencing it once he felt he had gained control over the armed formations.

Similarly, in the Gaza Strip Hamas has curbed mass demonstrations at the boundary with Israel in order to preserve its tacit understandings with Israel and maintain its rule over that territory. As noted by George Giacaman, Hamas has been unable to resolve the fundamental contradiction between being a governing authority within the Oslo paradigm and a resistance movement against it.

The above notwithstanding, Palestinians, whether within the West Bank and Gaza Strip, within Israel, in its prison system, or in the diaspora, have been organizing and resisting in myriad ways. Most importantly, they have despite massive and systematic state violence and repression, and betrayal by their own leaders and Arab governments, refused to surrender - putting into practice "the power of refusal" advocated by Said. In doing so the Palestinians have retained the overwhelming support of the international community, and even in the West public opinion increasingly recognizes that Israel is a structurally racist, colonial state. Nevertheless, the stark reality that needs to be recognized and understood is that the Palestinians are not holding ground, but losing it.

## **J: What does the future look like to you?**

**MR:** It's exceedingly difficult to predict what the situation will look like in five, or ten, or fifteen years. Since the end of the second intifada Israel has been engaged in a determined campaign to liquidate the Question of Palestine once and for all, seeking to reduce the Palestinians to a politically inconsequential, fragmented demographic reality rather than a unified people capable of promoting their national rights in an organized manner. This is particularly evident with the policies of the current Israeli government.

Will this result in a second Nakba and international recognition of Greater Israel, or a new uprising or armed conflict that will weaken Israel? Will the triumphalism of the Israeli establishment weaken the state from within? How will the regional and global political map evolve in the coming years?

The one lesson we can draw from the past century is that the Palestinians will not surrender, and will continue to find ways to assert and promote their collective and individual rights irrespective of the intensity of the continuing Israeli onslaught. How effective they will be in doing so is an entirely different question that is at this point in time difficult to determine, because Palestinian politics are also in a period of transition. One positive development is that Palestinians appear to be engaged, with some success, in an effort to overcome their fragmentation as a people, and to pursue national as opposed to local agendas. The balance of evidence suggests that the 2021 Unity Intifada was a portent rather than anomaly.

Once Abbas departs the scene, which in my view can't be soon enough, and given that Israel no longer sees the need for a Palestinian counterpart to sign an instrument of surrender, and given that most Palestinians view the PA as an extension of the occupation rather than legitimate representative of their interests, it seems unlikely the PA can survive in recognizable form despite the best efforts of the US and EU to preserve it for reasons of their own.

I've argued for a number of years that when the succession commences Israel is likely to promote a model where different Palestinian population concentrations - Hebron-Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus-Salfit-Jenin, Qalqilya-Tulkarm - are administered by a series of local chieftains, people like Muhammad Dahlan, who can be relied upon to do its bidding yet have the ability to build local support. In the absence of viable alternatives and with fragmentation a priority, Gaza would remain under Hamas rule. Yet even this model, a regional version of the failed Village Leagues of the 1980s, may prove unpalatable to the lunatics currently running the Israeli asylum. These are forces agitating for wholesale, formal annexation and then some, and which thanks to the inexorable rightward shift of Israeli society, and international and regional support and acquiescence (not unrelated phenomena) are only gaining in strength and power.

But Israel is only one, admittedly very powerful and central, factor in the equation, Its agenda will needless to say be strenuously opposed, not only by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and not only by Palestinians.

This opens new possibilities and opportunities, but also presents new dangers. That we have come to this point is the legacy of three decades of Oslo.

**Mouin Rabbani**

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**P.S.**

- Thirty Years of Oslo. Jadaliyya. Sep 12, 2023:

<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45313/Quick-Thoughts-Mouin-Rabbani-on-Thirty-Years-of-Oslo>