GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Oslo: Three Decades Later

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ABSTRACT: Contrary to the commonly held belief that the 1993 Oslo Accord was a peace treaty, this article shows that it was an imbalanced interim agreement that unsurprisingly failed. Three decades later, the Israeli-Palestinian reality is marked by a massive expansion of Israel's settlement project, a gradual erasure of the Green Line, a symbiosis between Israeli security forces and the settlers, and an authoritarian and divided Palestinian leadership, with the Palestinian Authority acting as Israel's sub-contractor. Israel's regime of control also separates between Palestinian groups, with each group given a different set of limited rights. While the Oslo process had the potential to transform a predominantly ethnic struggle into a conflict over land and borders, the ramifications of the one single regime that has replaced the Oslo order cannot be underestimated. After describing these developments, the article introduces the contributions to the special issue, which add new perspectives to the still ongoing debate on the genesis, interpretation, and implications of Oslo.

KEYWORDS: Israel/Palestine, Oslo Process, failed peace process, borders, ethnic conflicts

When referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the term "Oslo" has two meanings in the public discourse. First, it refers to the legal documents that were signed between the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1990s. These documents comprise the accord signed on 13 September 1993 in Washington, DC, that set a gradual peace process between Israel and the Palestinians in motion (Oslo I), and the so-called Oslo II agreement of 28 September 1995 signed in Taba, Egypt. Oslo II, officially the "Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza



Strip," stipulated the gradual withdrawal of the Israeli army from designated areas in the Palestinian territories and the establishment of a Palestinian interim self-governing body, the Palestinian Authority (PA). The accord defined the structure and institutions of the PA, together with its powers and responsibilities according to the different areas that Oslo II had created. For the first time in their history, Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip elected their own political institutions (PLO institutions had never been elected); elections for the Legislative Council and the President took place in 1996. The final status negotiations that started in January 2000 and ended with the Taba talks in January 2001 did not produce any agreement. In between, the failed Camp David Summit of July 2000 took place and the second Palestinian Intifada started in September of that same year. US President George W. Bush's Roadmap for Peace of 2002–3 that was endorsed by the Middle East Quartet² and US Secretary of State John Kerry's initiative of 2013–14 sought to revive the process through a gradual resumption of Israel-Palestinian peace talks. Both failed.

The second meaning of "Oslo" relates to the diplomatic process and everything that happened between Israelis and Palestinians since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accord. This includes Israeli settlements expansion as well as acts of violence committed by both sides: Palestinian violence comprises numerous terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and the launching of rockets from the Gaza Strip on Israeli population centers; Israeli acts of violence include constant military operations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and settler violence. All these events were direct consequences of or responses to the 1993 Oslo Accords and the collapse of the Oslo process. This specific meaning of Oslo, which conceives of Oslo as a time period, is prevalent in the public discourse and is also the focus of this collection of articles.

The signing of Oslo I, officially the "Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements" (DOP), thirty years ago was a moment of great optimism. The ceremony on the lawn of the White House on 13 September 1993, during which PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands, raised hopes worldwide that a solution to the old national conflict over Palestine was within reach.

The DOP, which laid out the principles of the peace process that was about to start, is named after Oslo because Norway provided the place where Israeli and Palestinian diplomats held secret meetings. The secret Oslo talks were initiated in January 1993 by two Israeli academics who established a back channel with members of the PLO leadership. In April, the secret channel turned into an official negotiation under the direct leadership of Rabin and Arafat.

The reasons why the Oslo process came about include Israel's failure to "handle" the first Palestinian Intifada that had started in 1987 and its inability to replace the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people with Palestinian political leaders from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The PLO, on its side, realized that it had weakened its international status by supporting Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait that led to the 1991 Gulf War, a position that also had severe financial implications for the Palestinian organization.³ Moreover, the PLO was engaged in a zero-sum game with Hamas, which enjoyed growing popular support among Gaza and West Bank Palestinians ever since the movement was founded in the Gaza Strip in late 1987. And Hamas seemed to win over the PLO in the competition over who was to speak for the Palestinian people. The first Intifada and the establishment of Hamas had thus turned the territories that Israel occupied in 1967 into the Palestinian center of gravity, with the Israeli government also recognizing that it might be preferable to negotiate with a weak PLO than with an ever-stronger Hamas. Not only did the Oslo Accords enable the exiled PLO to officially enter the Palestinian territories through the main entrance that Israel opened to it, but by establishing the PA, the agreement also allowed the PLO to gain advantage over Hamas and impose its rule over the Islamist competitor.

The Oslo agreements were profoundly asymmetric and unbalanced in favor of the stronger side: Israel. In the Oslo negotiations as well as in the Camp David summit of 2000, the Israeli delegations were better prepared than their Palestinian counterparts. The international mediators did not help much to bridge this gap, with the result that Israel was able to use its advantage over an unprofessional Palestinian delegation (Agha and Malley 2001; Swisher 2011). Unlike the Palestinians in the Washington, DC, talks that were from the occupied territories, the Palestinian delegation in Oslo had never met Israelis or negotiated with them. The letters of mutual recognition exchanged between Rabin and Arafat, which were attached to the Oslo I agreement but not an integral part of it, are but one example of this structural power asymmetry: whereas Arafat recognized Israel and its right to exist in peace, Israel only acknowledged that the PLO was the representative of the Palestinian people. Israel did not recognize a Palestinian state nor was it willing to commit itself to do so in the future. Altogether, the letters and the ceremony in the White House created the impression that the Oslo agreement was a peace treaty. In reality, it was an interim agreement on the way toward a full-fledged peace accord, which, however, never materialized.

And so, with the failure of the two sides to reach a peace agreement, the Oslo Accords allowed Israel to maintain full control over more than 60 percent of the West Bank (marked in the Oslo I agreement as Area C), including over its settlements and army bases. The PA retained administrative control in Area A, a mere 18 percent of the West Bank, where the majority of West Bank Palestinians live. Since the interim agreement did not include any moratorium on settlement expansion, Israel created facts on the ground. A close examination of settlement growth shows that in 1993, the year of the first Oslo accord, 273,900 Israeli settlers lived in the occupied Palestinian territories: 116,300 in the West Bank, 4,800 in the Gaza Strip, and 152,800 in East Jerusalem. In 2000, the year of the failed Camp David summit, this number had grown to a total of around 372,000 Israeli settlers. In 2016, when the Kerry mission talks broke down, the total number of settlers in Palestinian territories had more than doubled compared to the beginning of Oslo: from 273,900 to around 613,700 settlers. Notably, in the same time span, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank had more than tripled (from 116,300 to 399,300) (Foundation for Middle East Peace 2012; Peace Now 2023a, 2023b). Today over 465,000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank and another 230,000 live in East Jerusalem. Whether the massive expansion of the settlement project was an Israeli negotiating tactic during Oslo or a response to pressures from the Israeli right, the fact remains that since the Oslo Accords, Israel has constantly expanded its settlements and their population on a massive scale—independently of whether negotiations were taking place or not.

Returning to the period of the Oslo negotiations, the opponents of Oslo soon realized that the interim agreement model provided them with the means to undermine the building of mutual trust or outright destroy it. To stop the process altogether, opponents condoned the use of violence. The massacre in the Cave of the Patriarchs in the city of Hebron by an Israeli settler in February 1994 that killed 29 Muslim Palestinian worshippers and wounded 125 is a case in point. Equally, terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians carried out by Hamas, in which Islamic Jihad would join, marked the whole period of the Oslo negotiations.

The severe Palestinian violence during the second Intifada (2000–2005), which also included dozens of suicide attacks against Israeli civilians, led to an increased presence of the Israeli army and the security services in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 2002, during "Operation Defensive Shield," the Israel army reoccupied areas marked as Areas A and B according to the Oslo II agreement (and thus fully or partially under the PA's administrative control), bringing the PA under then President Arafat to the verge of collapse. Israel permitted the reconstruction of the PA only when, after Arafat's death in 2004, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) was elected President in 2005, and only after he engaged in close security cooperation with Israel that also included unlimited Israeli operations in PA-controlled areas.

With the collapse of the Oslo process, Israel established a new regime that replaced the Oslo order. This new order witnessed the erasure of the dividing line between sovereign Israel and the occupied West Bank while the distinction between the West Bank's Areas A, B, and C became increasingly blurred, too. At the same time, the symbiosis between the Israeli security forces and the settlers grew unprecedentedly (Breaking the Silence 2021; Gazit 2020; Klein 2010: 47-88). With the extent of Israeli control over the Palestinian territories and its population reaching an unprecedented level (Gordon 2008; Khalidi 2006: 200-218), Israel effectively succeeded in imposing its overarching rule on the Palestinians while turning the Palestinian Authority into a sub-contractor. Indeed, although the PLO and the PA annulled the Oslo agreements (with the Israeli government also considering the accords no longer valid), the PA continues to cooperate with Israel on security and civil affairs. As regards the Gaza Strip, the evacuation of Israeli settlements and army bases in 2005 did not end Israeli control over that area. The so-called disengagement was not as complete as Israeli governments claimed. Rather, Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip changed in nature to one in which control was exercised no longer from within the Strip but instead from outside it with the collaboration of Egypt. While the Gaza Strip has been under a permanent blockade since Hamas gained control in 2007, Israel's regime of control is also built on the principle of separating between Palestinian groups: citizens of Israel, permanent (but usually stateless) residents in East Jerusalem, (usually stateless) residents of the West Bank, and (usually stateless) residents of the Gaza Strip. Each group is given a different set of limited rights and political status (Del Sarto 2014: 207; Erakat 2019; Klein 2010; Lustick 2019).4 Concurrently, the economic situation in the Palestinian territories has been deteriorating markedly as a result of repeated closures, restricted access to land, multiple restrictions on Palestinians' movement, and a tight permit regime imposed by Israel on West Bank Palestinians (World Bank 2008). The separation of the West Bank from the almost isolated Gaza Strip only adds to what Sara Roy (1999) has termed the economic de-development of the Palestinian territories.

In conclusion, the Oslo agreement of 1993 had the potential to radically change the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a predominantly ethnic struggle to a conflict over land and borders. However, with one single regime replacing the Oslo order, the conflict has returned to its origins: it is now, once again, primarily an ethnic, rather than a territorial, conflict. The ramifications of this change cannot be underestimated. These include a constant shift of Israel's polity to the right (Del Sarto 2021) and permanent political instability, the Palestinian Authority's authoritarianism and complete lack of democratic legitimacy,⁵ the radicalization of public opinion on both sides, and the Palestinians' "divided house"

between the PA/Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas-rule in the Gaza Strip. Equally, within pre-1967 Israel, there has been a constant downgrading of the civil status of Israel's Palestinian citizens to second-class citizens while national-religious Jewish Israelis settle in East Jerusalem as well as in Israel's mixed cities such as Jaffa and Lydda in order to "Judaize" these areas. In the spring of 2021, a small-scale civil war broke out in these mixed cities in the context of yet another Israeli war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the demonstrations of Israel's Palestinian citizens against Israeli military operations (Klein 2023).

In the autumn of 2001 Ron Pundak, one of the two architects and negotiators of the Oslo talks, published his account of the two sides' tragic mismanagement and miscalculations (Pundak 2001). Since then and until this day, innumerous academic publications, memoirs, reports, and papers on what went wrong in the Oslo process and at the Camp David summit were published by all sides involved.⁶ In addition, documentary films and a Broadway theater drama were produced (e.g., Loushy and Sivan 2016; Rogers 2016). Assessments of Oslo remain deeply divided. For instance, there is no agreement on whether Oslo was a good plan to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but went wrong, or whether it was flawed, or even a tragic mistake, all along. There are different opinions on whether Oslo was merely an Israeli ploy to extend Israel's rule over the Palestinians, thereby signifying the continuation of a settler colonial project, whether the signing of the Oslo Accords led to Palestinian recognition of Zionism as a national movement and to a perception of the conflict as between two such movements (Sabbagh-Khoury 2022: 58), or whether Oslo's collapse demonstrated once and for all that the Palestinians do not want peace with Israel. Equally, there are diametrically opposed convictions as to which side bears most of the blame for Oslo's failure. What remains similarly open for debate is whether conflict management strategies can succeed where conflict resolution failed, and whether strategies to "shrink" the conflict (Goodman 2019) are desirable and feasible, particularly in the absence of justice. Similarly, it is far from being clear which role external actors, most notably the United States but also the European Union, are able and/or willing to play to reach a just settlement to the conflict (Del Sarto 2019; Khalidi 2006; Robinson 2022), let alone whether it makes any sense to continue upholding a two-state-solution in what has become a one-state-reality (Bashir 2016; Farsakh 2016; Klein 2010).

This special issue, which followed a call for papers of the Israel Studies *Review*, certainly does not aim to provide definitive answers to these questions. However, by looking back at Oslo thirty years after the first accord was signed, the articles in this volume undoubtedly add new perspectives to an important debate that is still ongoing.

The first set of articles focuses on the Oslo negotiations per se. David J. Wilcox analyzes the development of interpersonal trust in the Oslo back channel of 1992-1993. The article argues that the emergence and consolidation of two specific dyadic relationships of trust between the negotiators between Yair Hirschfeld and Ahmed Qurei and between Qurei and Uri Savir—are crucial in explaining the "success" of the Oslo channel, even more so if one considers that no trust developed among the negotiators at the bilateral Washington, DC, talks. Fride Lia Stensland's contribution reconsiders Norway's involvement in the secret Oslo negotiations. By applying the theoretical lens of small-state mediation in asymmetric conflicts, the article shows that Norway's relatively minor political weight was probably conducive to the opening of negotiations. But this also implied that the Norwegian facilitators, who lacked both the authority and the coercive power needed to address the power asymmetry, were unable to mediate in favor of an evenhanded compromise. Looking at the period following the signing of the DOP in 1993, Nir Levitan's article highlights the involvement in the Oslo negotiations of yet another small Scandinavian state: Denmark. The article shows that although Denmark adopted a comprehensive and sophisticated mediation strategy, the country was similarly unable to exert significant influence on the positions and decisions of the two conflicting parties.

A second set of articles focuses on the interpretation, representation, and memory of Oslo. Marcella Simoni's contribution analyzes several documentaries and films on the Oslo process by Amos Gitai, produced between 1994 and 2015. Utilizing these films as a primary source of a history of Oslo from below, her article discusses the different Israeli and Palestinian voices on key political, social, and cultural issues related to Oslo, showing that Oslo itself and its violent end left a trail of consequences that retroactively impacted the representation of this period. The narratives of Oslo, this time among Israel's Palestinian-Arab community, is the topic of the subsequent contribution. Arik Rudnitzky analyzes the evolution of the narratives of Oslo among different ideological currents within Israel's Palestinian-Arab community. This analysis shows that for the political and intellectual elites (and unlike for the wider Palestinian-Israeli public that considers Oslo to be no longer relevant), the legacy of Oslo continues to influence the political reality between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

Following the evolution of positions and practices since the advent of the Oslo process, a third group of articles focuses on societal developments since, and prompted by, the collapse of Oslo. Leonie Fleischmann discusses the reasons for the shifting paradigms of the Israeli and Palestinian human rights community in their attempts to protect the human rights

of Palestinians living under prolonged Israeli occupation. New approaches include a focus on the occupation's underlying structures, the cessation of working with Israel's law enforcement to avoid the legitimization of an unjust system, and the reframing of Israel's rule over the Palestinians as one of apartheid. Stacey Gutkowski's contribution shifts the focus of attention to the attitudes toward Oslo and Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking of Jewish-Israeli millennials, born between 1980 and 1995. Drawing on a wider study of self-described hiloni (secular) post-Oslo millennials across the political spectrum, this contribution argues that a "hope-as-waiting" behavior marks the legacy of Oslo among this demographic group, a behavior that is skeptical, anti-perfectionist and non-utopian but may also help sustain Israel's continuous rule over the Palestinians.

The final contribution of this volume discusses the development of Israel's relations to various African states during the Oslo process and after its collapse. Yaron Salman's article highlights Oslo's important contribution to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and many African countries, but also shows that current relations are dictated by realpolitik in which the Palestinian issue plays only a marginal role. Discussing more recent developments in Israel-African relations, Salman's contribution questions the quality and consequences of Israel's security cooperation with several authoritarian regimes on the African continent, which still tend to shy away from open political cooperation with Israel.

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NOTES

- 1. The Oslo II Accord gave the Palestinian Authority self-governing powers in Area A and shared responsibilities with Israel in Area B of the West Bank, with the prospect of negotiations on a final settlement based on UN Security Council Resolution 242 and 338. Area A corresponds to all major Palestinian population centers and Area B encompasses most rural centers. Area C constitutes the territory outside of the enclaves of Areas A and B (about 60 percent of the West Bank) that was to remain under full Israeli control but that was to be gradually transferred to PA jurisdiction under the terms of Oslo II.
- 2. The Quartet comprised the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia.
- 3. The Gulf monarchies in particular cut their financial support for the PLO while also expelling Palestinian migrant workers, thereby strongly reducing migrant remittances.
- 4. Since 1994, West Bank and Gaza Palestinians may obtain PA passports, the issuing of which depends on Israel, which compiles the Palestinian population registry. Moreover, these passports do not express a proper Palestinian citizenship (since de facto there is no independent Palestinian state). Many East Jerusalem Palestinians and a minority of West Bank Palestinians were allowed to keep their Jordanian citizenship after the establishment of the PA. However, those passports are often temporary, and they are not proof of Jordanian citizenship but rather facilitation for travel (Del Sarto 2014: 207).
- 5. There have not been any elections either for president or for the legislature since 2005 and 2006 respectively.
- 6. We cannot cite this vast body of literature here, of course, but see for example Agha and Malley 2001; Pundak 2001; Morris 2002; Pressman 2003; Shamir and Maddy-Weitzman 2005; Ben-Ami 2006; Swisher 2011; Elman, Haklai and Spruyt 2014; Golan 2014; Farsakh 2016; Aharoni 2018.

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