

DOES THE PEACE PROCESS MATTER AND, IF SO, WHY?

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July 1998

Since the launching of the Middle East Peace Process in 1991, the Arab-Israeli conflict has entered a new chapter and, in many regards, the region is passing through an unprecedented historical phase. However, the anticipated peace 'dividends', in most cases, have yet to be felt; the peace process has gone through many crises and appears to have failed to reach the conclusions broadly aspired to.

The internationally applauded agreements reached between the Palestinians and Israelis since 1993 have – despite their unquestionable importance – thus far failed to produce the desired stability in the region as well as rapprochement amongst its people. With the signing of Oslo I, the Palestinian people hoped this would be the turning point to decades of conflict and a long history of sacrifice and loss. The future seemed bright and there was a genuine readiness to overcome the fears of the past and begin a new era of mutual recognition and cooperation. However, the region as a whole today is at a crossroads between fear and hope, and the possible future scenarios range anywhere between achieving real peace and stability to the emergence of a new circle of violence and confrontation.

Before considering if the Middle East peace process still matters, and if so, why, one must first look at what the peace process implies in the Palestinian-Israeli context. To do this, one can refer to the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Principles, signed on 13 September 1993, which reads as follows:

“The Government of the State of Israel and the PLO team in the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation (to the Middle East Peace Conference) (“the Palestinian delegation”) representing the Palestinian people agree that it is time to put an end to the decades of confrontation and conflict, recognizing their mutual legitimate and political rights, and strive to live in peaceful coexistence and mutual dignity and security to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement and historic reconciliation through the agreed political process.”

It can be gathered from the above, that the peace process has three major aspects: mutual recognition, peaceful coexistence and a historical reconciliation through a political process that consists of contacts, dialogue and negotiation. However, the unbalanced and unequal positions of the two parties are also clearly reflected. The Israeli leadership demanded explicit conditions to be met by the Palestinian leadership before signing the Oslo Accord, that is to “recognize the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security” and that “the PLO renounce the use of terrorism and other acts of violence.” The Israeli leadership understood the accords as a truce; Prime Minister Rabin stated in Washington on 13 September 1993,

“We, the soldiers, who have returned from battles stained with blood, ...we who have fought against you, the Palestinians, we say to you today in a loud and clear voice, enough, of blood and tears, enough.”

He added, “Let us pray that a day will come when we all say farewell to arms.”

The Palestinians, on the other hand, understood the accords as the conclusion of long decades of sacrifices and losses. The PLO statement of 12 September 1993 read:

“Our people is anxious to welcome a new stage in its long struggle through the realization of the first tangible achievement on the land of its homeland. These tidings of this achievement would have not appeared without the dear sacrifices offered by the caravans of martyrs and mujaheddin for generation after generation...”

The sponsors of the Oslo Accords saw them as a “continuing process in which the parties transform the very way they see and understand each other,” as President Bill Clinton put it in his speech at the signing ceremony.

Today, approximately five years after the peace process began in Oslo, let us examine the various files of contacts, dialogue and negotiations.

Contacts are not something new or unexpected. In any relationship there are always contacts, whether in times of peace or times of war. The language or tools may differ, but they are always there. With regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, contacts have different faces and take place at different levels: between professionals, businessmen, academics, military, officials, diplomats, etc. They make telephone calls, talk to each other over lunch, attend the same seminars and conferences, etc., but do these contacts lead to a genuine dialogue? The answer would have to be no, because any dialogue that takes place does so within the respective society, in other words, between Palestinians, and between Israelis, but not with each other.

The dialogue in Israel today, after 100 years of Zionism and 50 years of Israel, is based on an ideological dilemma: Now that the Zionist dream has been achieved and a Jewish state has been established in Palestine, where do the Jews go from here? Left or Right, Labor or Likud, that is the question that all Jews are debating. The Arabs, after 100 years of struggle for independence and unity and 50 years since the Palestinian Naqbe, are asking a totally different question, namely, are we on the right

track for Arab independence and unity? The Palestinian debate, meanwhile, revolves around the question, "Are we building another Arab regime? Are we combining the major elements of democratic values, statehood and sovereignty, or are we going off in different directions?"

In spite of the fact that the dialogue is limited to the respective societies - exposing the serious divisions in each - there is no denying the fact that the dialogue in itself is an extremely positive development. Today, there is an environment of coexistence; it is still not an environment of peace, but the two sides are seeing each other, going back to their own societies and having their separate dialogues. However, having this dialogue at all is undoubtedly a step in the right direction to realizing the goals inherent in the opening paragraph of the DoP.

As to negotiations, there are taking place today inside negotiations within the Israeli government, between Israeli ministers, and not only Labor-Likud or Left-Right, but also Likud-Likud, concerning Jerusalem, settlements, and redeployment, Chairman Arafat's political system and so on and so forth. Unfortunately, in spite of the Israelis' passion for dialogue and negotiations amongst themselves, they still remain reluctant to negotiate with their recognized partner in the Middle East Peace Process, the Palestinians.

The Palestinians, as a direct result of this Israeli reluctance, are obliged to put all their effort into consulting and negotiating with the neighboring Arab countries, with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc.; they are negotiating the Palestinian national agenda with their so-called strategic allies in the region, because they need the Arab states' political, moral and financial support as the Israelis continue their attempts to avoid fulfilling their commitments and implement what was signed and agreed upon.

Does the peace process matter? The answer is yes, for the following reasons. The peace process, with all its flaws and setbacks, was successful in delivering the first cornerstone of this new environment of coexistence, namely recognition. The importance of this recognition is that it changed the base on which the two parties were standing.

Political Zionism has been based on two beliefs; the first was promoted amongst the Jews by the Anglo-Jewish author, Israel Zangwill, who wrote in 1901 that

"Palestine is a country without a people, the Jews are a people without a country. The regeneration of the soil would bring the regeneration of the people."

This concept represented the demand of the Jews for Jewish exclusivity in Palestine, thus denying the existence of another people.

The peace process has brought about Jewish recognition of the Palestinians, their leadership and their legitimate rights, and acceptance of not only their existence, but also the fact that the two peoples, the Palestinians and Israelis, are destined to live in the land of Palestine/Israel together. As Rabin stated in his speech at the signing ceremony:

“to live together on the same soil in the same land ... live side by side with you in dignity, in affinity, as human beings, as free men.”

The cornerstone inherent in Zangwill's writings has therefore been shaken, the foundation on which its argumentation was based lost.

The second element of political Zionism derives from beliefs similar to those of Jabotinski, who frequently voiced the opinion that the Arabs do not understand anything but the language of force and that the only way for the Jews to realize their aspirations in Palestine was to fight the Palestinians. He was by no means alone in his belief. The philosophy, the education and the establishment of the Israeli army has been based on this notion.

In theory, this concept lost its validity when the Labor Party government accepted the negotiation process and the Madrid Conference 'land-for-peace' formula as a basis to reach an understanding with the Arabs and a settlement with the Palestinians. With this move, the concept of force or war suddenly lost much of its support and was eventually replaced by the conclusion that it is possible for the Israelis and Palestinians to achieve peace through negotiations as opposed to war. "We wish to open a new chapter in the sad book of our lives together – a chapter of mutual recognition, of good neighborliness, of mutual respect, of understanding." (Prime Minister Rabin at the signing ceremony.)

The same is true when it comes to the Palestinians and the Arabs. The Pan-Arab movement never, in the past, considered the idea of accepting the State of Israel or negotiating with the Jews, and it totally rejected any Jewish claim to any part of Palestine. The mutual recognition through the peace process has done away with the 'unthinkable' of the past. PLO Chairman Arafat, in his speech at the White House, put it this way: "Our people do not consider that exercising the right to self-determination could violate the rights of their neighbors or infringe on their security."

Of course, Palestinians are frustrated and angry that not all the dividends of peace are yet within their reach, but it would be wrong to say that the peace process has not opened the opportunity to one day enjoy them. The peace process has undoubtedly resulted in a new way of thinking, new perspectives, new approaches, etc., and has started a normalization process, but what use the Palestinian can make of such developments is an entirely different story.

The Current Situation

For most Palestinians, life has worsened since the Oslo Accords and only a few talk about the ongoing negotiations in positive terms. Today, five years after Oslo the hopes for a two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and bring about a better life for the generations to come has been replaced by great disillusionment and frustration among Palestinians.

There are some positive aspects that arose following the signing of the Oslo accords and the event of the PNA. New buildings have sprung up everywhere, beautification projects have given most cities a new outlook, and the streets are filled with people who are no longer threatened by curfews. Previously illegal symbols of the Palestinian identity, such as the flag, can now be seen everywhere and there are Palestinian stamps, Palestinian license plates, and Palestinian passports and IDs, in addition to uniformed Palestinian security personnel. However, beyond the symbolic level and the political system in the making - with the establishment of ministries and other governmental institutions, governorates, the Legislative Council, Bureau of Statistics, etc., the PNA has become the largest employer with some 100,000 employees - national sovereignty is still far from being achieved. Although the small changes in individual freedom should not be underestimated, they stand in stark contrast to the fact that it is still Israeli interests and goodwill that govern the life of the Palestinians in every aspect. The free movement within Gaza is diminished by the fact that hardly anyone can leave the Strip except, in some cases, to go to work in Israel, but not to visit relatives or friends in the West Bank or even Jerusalem, which also remains completely closed off for Palestinians from the West Bank.

With regard to the actual dividends a look at the current situation pertaining to the land, the economy, and security, shows that the developments and changes have clearly occurred at the expense of the Palestinians.

The continued land confiscation and expansion of Israeli settlements remains central to the struggle for real peace and a viable Palestinian state. Although the Rabin government promised a freeze on settlement construction and the Oslo Accords postponed the issue to the upcoming final status talks, the existing settlements continue to expand at an alarming rate, especially around Jerusalem. Besides involving more confiscation of Palestinian land, the settlements are a strategic threat to any further Palestinian development as they prevent the towns' and villages' natural growth and destroy the territorial integrity of the Palestinian territory.

The peace process was based on the implementation of UN resolutions 242 and 338 of 1967, which called for an Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in the course of the June War. It was in the spirit of this understanding, that the Palestinian side signed the Oslo Accords. However, since then Israel has confiscated hundreds of thousands of additional dunums of Palestinian land and the number of Jewish settlers in the Palestinian Territories has increased considerably. That the Israeli side had read the accords in a totally different manner with regard to the land and settlement issue, becomes clear in the following statement by Israeli scholar Yossi Alpher, quoted in the *Jerusalem Post* (28 January 1994):

“The Rabin government accepts the principle of a territorial solution but it has locked into the [Oslo] Agreement the key manifestation of its predecessor’s determination to prevent such a territorial solution – the settlements.”

Similarly, former Israeli key negotiator Yossi Beilin explained that

“the [Oslo II] Agreement was delayed for months in order to guarantee that all the settlements would remain intact and that the settlers would have maximum security. This entailed an immense financial investment. The situation in the settlements has never been better than in the situation created following the Oslo II agreement.” (Quoted in *Ma’ariv*, 27 September, 1994.)

As for the economic situation, World Bank and other statistics clearly indicate that the Palestinians are significantly worse off than they were before the Oslo Accords. Unemployment and poverty have reached unprecedented levels and the Israeli imposed restrictions as well as the prevailing instability have undermined business and trade opportunities in the Palestinians Territories.

Within the West Bank, the Israeli isolation policies have led to particularly bad repercussions. Despite the fact that the territorial integrity of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank was explicitly recognized in the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians are today divided into three separated entities: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The freedom of entry and exit between these three areas has become a mission impossible because of the ongoing Israeli-imposed closure. Due to the closure of Jerusalem, people who do not have a Jerusalem residency card cannot enter the city without prior permission, nor can cars with West Bank plates. The closure means a policy of siege, no freedom of movement, economic control and preventing access to sources of income. The closure has had devastating effects on the Palestinian economy and created losses that exceed by far the disbursements of the donor countries.

Security has been “sold” as an absolute value to the Israelis; the fact that Palestinians long for security too is ignored. In the past two decades, thousands Palestinians were killed at the hands of Israelis and tens of thousands more were injured. Moreover, they have been subject to arbitrary Israeli practices in terms of arrests, detention, house demolition, deportation, etc., and their lives have been ‘guided’ by Israeli military orders and restrictive measures as well as by the many violations perpetrated by Israeli settlers and ignored by the army. In the absence of a legal system there is no protection for individuals, their communities, or their towns and villages. Palestinian resistance and reaction to all of these practices has constantly been interpreted as “terror acts” and violence. Today, in spite of the signed agreements, whose security-related terms and conditions were dictated by Israel, the security situation of the Palestinian people has hardly improved and they remain to a great extent exposed to arbitrary Israeli measures.

Outlook

It is clear to all parties involved that the collapse of the peace process would prove perilous, as it would give rise to the extremists on both sides. To avoid this, the peace accords must be implemented as scheduled in order to restore the hopes of a disheartened Palestinian people and all those Israelis who opted for peace.

What are the options at hand? First, to maintain the *status quo*, meaning a continuation of Israeli policies and practices, including settlement expansion and the Judaization of Jerusalem. This would provoke and anger the Palestinians, thereby creating a powder keg in the Palestinian Territories that could explode at any time. If such confrontations were to erupt, it is doubtful whether the PNA and its forces would be in the position to contain the anger of the street or challenge other forces, such as the Islamic movement, that are on a rise within Palestinian society.

Another question is that of how Israel would react? There are three possible scenarios: the Netanyahu government might order the army to re-occupy the Palestinian Territories, which would initiate a new vicious circle of violence; Israel might tighten the closure, including moving tanks around Zones A, B and C.; or it might recognize a partial Palestinian state. This would be most likely limited to Gaza, while the West Bank would either be annexed, occupied or given some sort of autonomy. All three scenarios would lead to a deterioration in Palestinian-Israeli relations and the eventual collapse of the PNA, which will ultimately open the doors for the Islamic movement to take the lead in the subsequent confrontations.

How can we avoid bloodshed? The only answer to this question is that the accords have to be implemented now and with no new conditions imposed by the Israelis. If this is not achievable, the Palestinians will consider themselves freed from the Oslo stipulations by the end of May 1999, when the interim phase officially comes to an end. Palestinians will under no circumstances give up their rights to freedom and an independent state and will fulfill their aspiration by declaring their state. This is not a dream but an inevitable fact: the Palestinians have the land (i.e., the 1967 borders as recognized by International Law and various resolutions), the people, their legitimate elected government, and the recognition.

“Oslo is dead” is the most common sentiment heard in Palestine these days and even those who are still committed to peace and operating within the spirit and framework of the signed accords have lost faith that negotiations will live up to the Palestinians’ expectations. If the peace process is to have any further meaning for Palestinians it must deliver self-determination and a state as well as a tangible improvement in their daily lives.