

Oslo - The Conflict, the Mediators and the Breakthrough

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Introduction

The history of the Arab-Israeli conflict with the Palestine question at its core is more than 100 years old and considered one of the most complicated and complex conflicts of the century.

The positions of the main parties involved in the conflict and their relation to each other has varied throughout the different historical phases of this conflict: from advancement to retreat and sometimes to a freezing of contacts. The motives, arguments and reasoning of each party as well as their respective alliances domestically, regionally and internationally, also have developed differently.

Proposals to bring this conflict to an end dealt with and centered around the three main components of the Palestine question: the land, the people, and their rights - each separately, though sometimes jointly or overlapping each other. The role of mediators and intermediaries has always focused on these main issues, in numerous attempts to close the gap between positions, interests and needs of the parties involved, and sometimes to direct them. These mediators can be distinguished in various categories according to the circumstances surrounding their intervention, their personal attributes and qualities, and the issues they dealt with in the context of the general political environment at the given time.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict went through various interconnected and interdependent phases, which I will here divide into three major eras: the international era, the Arab era, and the Palestinian era. Although they each portray a certain period, they yet overlap in terms of dates, places, proposed solutions (politically and militarily) and respective outcomes. Therefore, the lesson to be learned from the historical evolution of the conflict throughout these eras is that each phase - regardless its specific circumstances - left its fingerprint and influenced subsequent eras, players, mediators and issues of concern. Thus, neither phase can be seen independently or separated from the others since the events of each phase accumulated over the time and led eventually to some kind of results, which again influenced the development of stages yet to come. In other words: what may be viewed as a breakthrough at any stage in any of the eras has to be seen as a product of preceding events. Thus, the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict with its main players and the role

of the mediators, their success or failure, must be read against the background of the respective circumstances but can ultimately only be understood in its overall context.

In view of the above, it is my intention to trace certain events as they occurred throughout the history of the conflict. I will thereby focus on the role of certain mediators in the each of the eras in order to comprehend the full meaning of what is widely chronicled as the "breakthrough" at Oslo in September 1993.

Today, it is legitimate to ask whether Oslo marks the beginning of the end of the conflict, or only of one of its chapters, or whether it is just another section of the very same book, this time widely witnessed by the world and exploited by the media at large. The role of the external parties involved in the Oslo phase was and is that of assisting the two main parties in conflict in taking up their new positions and in re-shaping their relationships, while, at the same time, scoring points and striking alliances on their own behalves.

Historical Background

At the beginning of this century, various motivations and arguments - of national, religious, geo-political and economic nature - were utilized by the Jews to give emphasis to their claims for Palestine. Theodore Herzl persuaded himself and many others against compelling evidence to the contrary, that Palestine was "a land without people" ideally suited to "a people without land". Yussef Diya-uddin Pasha al-Khalidi, mayor of Jerusalem in 1899, was one of the first among the Palestinian political elite who confronted this reading. Khalidi, in his letter to the Chief Rabbi of France, Sadok Kahn, reasoned that

"since Palestine was already inhabited, the Zionists should find another place for the implementation of their political goals".¹

The Chief Rabbi took on himself the duty of carrying the Palestinian message, conveyed by Khalidi, to the Zionist leader Theodore Herzl with no interpreting. Herzl replied to al-Khalidi on March 19, 1899, saying

"if the Zionists were not wanted in Palestine, we will search, and believe me, we will find elsewhere what we need."²

Herzl's concept was in the opinion of another Zionist leader, Nahum Goldmann, that of a man with no sense of history, only geography.³

¹ Walid Khalidi, *Before their Diaspora*, Institute of Palestine Studies, Washington, D.C., 1994, p. 41

² Walid Khalidi, *Before their Diaspora*, p. 41.

³ Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 19.

Zionist arguments and motives which directed the conflict for more than 100 years were admitted wrong by two Zionist leaders and military generals. The first was Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, who disclosed in 1969 - two years after the 1967 June War - before a class of Israeli students that

*"there is not one single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population."*⁴

The second was Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who, two years after the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993, and one week before his assassination by an Israeli extremist on November 4th, 1995, admitted that on this land [Palestine] there is another people and that their rights have to be recognized.

Today, after more than 100 years of the unfolding history of this conflict, dictated by wars, sacrifices and bloodshed on the one hand, and, on the other, by numerous attempts to resolve the conflict, involving many different mediators in the search for a settlement, the "enemies" of yesterday are still prisoners of their respective inherited ideologies, domestic and regional constraints, and the influence of the balance of powers. The conflicting parties are obviously not yet able or ready to pass the threshold and to enter into a new era, based on mutual recognition, equal rights and a genuine partnership.

I. The International Era (1914-1947)

The international era covered the period between the beginning of World War I and the UN Partition Plan of 1947, which recommended the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. This era was very much influenced by the rise of nationalism and the competition between four empires (the British, the French, the Russian and the Ottomans); it witnessed two world wars and the drawing and re-drawing of the globe's map.

This era also saw the rise of the Zionist movement and the re-awakening of the Arab nationalist movement. The former was seeking political support, legitimate recognition and alliances with Western powers to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Arab movement emerged after 400 years of Ottoman rule as a "renaissance" movement, aiming at the revival of Arab history, language, culture and the feeling of belonging to one Arab nation. The intention of these rekindling efforts was to attain Arab sovereignty, freedom and independence. The Arab movement was likewise invited to strike alliances with the Western powers, this time towards the establishment of

⁴ Emile Nakhleh, *Encyclopedia of the Palestine Problem*, p. 369.

United Arab States, including Palestine. While the Arab movement unfolded on its native land, leading its citizens for self-determination, the Zionist movement was scattered throughout the world, mobilizing the Jews - citizens of various countries - for the idea to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Already at this early stage, the role of third parties became evident and manifested itself as an integral part of the conflict formula between the two sides. The motives of these external players differed according to their own concerns and interests: they were either based on colonialism, or on strategic and security thoughts, or on support of one of the conflicting parties.

Between 1915-17, three major historical documents were drafted, involving the same parties and dealing with the same subject. The first of these was the Hussein-McMahon correspondence of 1915, in which the British invited the Arabs to become allies against the Turks and offered in return to help them establishing their sovereign independent Arab states. The second was the Sykes-Picot treaty of 1916, which outlined the new colonial map of the Middle East as drawn up jointly by the British and the French. The third document was the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British government declared its support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

These three historical events each laid open different phraseologies, contradicting positions, and uncertain results. However, contacts, dialogue and negotiations between the two sides were as yet indirect and did not deliver any results. In this context it is of importance to note that as early as 1913, on the occasion of the first Arab conference in Paris, Chaim Kaliverski, representing the Zionist movement, had already held talks with Arab intellectuals, namely leading members of the Arab national movement: Jamil Mardan (Syria), Riad Soulah (Lebanon), and Awni Abdel Hadi (Palestine). The actual purpose of these encounters was to explore each other's positions, whereby - according to various sources - the substance was the idea for Jewish autonomy in parts of Palestine, in return for which the world Jewry would assist the Arab states in their efforts to achieve independence and sovereignty.

During the international era, the Zionist movement saw the leaders of Arab governments as their primary address to strike partnerships and to gain legitimate recognition. The Palestinians were no main partners in this endeavor in the eyes of the Zionists but were included as *de facto* part of the Arab political elite. At the Feisal-Weizmann meeting, which took place at the doorsteps of the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, mediated by the British officer Thomas Edward Lawrence, Palestinian intellectuals were advisors to the Hashemite leadership. The same was the case when another British officer and mediator, Sir John Philby, drafted an agreement with Ben Gurion on May 18, 1937. While Lawrence was close to Feisal, Philby was close to King Ibn Saud. The Palestinian side in the first episode was

represented by Awni Abdel Hadi and in the second episode by Jamal Husseini, both of whom were members of the political intellectual elite and with certain influence. While the Feisal-Weizmann agreement covered the main issues of Arab-Jewish cooperation to achieve both sides' goals, the Philby-Ben Gurion draft agreement foresaw an "affiliation of Palestine with an Arab confederation, provided the confederation recognises and guarantees the rights of the Jewish national home as laid down by the League of nations". However, both draft agreements never materialized but were used as tools - by different circles and for different purposes - and put the two Palestinian activists involved in these episode in a dilemma: on the one hand, the "Arabization" of the conflict lessened the Palestinians' burden - though, at the same time weakening their immediate national aspirations-, while the "Palestinization" of the conflict implied the assumption of responsibilities, including direct confrontation with the Zionists and leaving the future open for the outcome of their national struggle.

The more Palestinians were in direct or indirect contacts with Jewish leaders, the more they became aware of Zionist intentions, recognizing them as the seeds of an unavoidable conflict. The Palestinian fear was well reflected in their local media (Filastin, al-Karmel, and others) and in the disputes with their counterparts. Instigated by British Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill, Musa Kazim Husseini, the head of the Palestinian delegation, held a meeting with Chaim Weizmann, head of the Zionist delegation on November 29, 1921. The meeting was exploratory in its nature and basically an introduction of each other's ideas. The Palestinian delegation used the venue to make their position clear that they would not bargain over their rights, neither directly with the British mediators nor through them. This stand was reiterated between the years 1934 and 1936, when David Ben Gurion, Moshe Shartok (ýSharett) and Chaim Arlozoroff held a series of direct talks with Palestinian leaders, among them Musa Alami, Awni Abdel Hadi, and George Antonius⁵. The Palestinians were open to meet the Jewish representatives and to listen to what they had to say but maintained their position of non-bargaining.

In 1946, Zionist leaders made attempts to re-establish their contacts with two influential Arab capitals, Cairo and Amman, hoping to find Arab recognition of their needs and a common interest for the establishment of a Jewish homeland (state) in Palestine. Eliyahu Sasson of the Jewish Agency met several Egyptian Prime Ministers (Ismail Sidqi, Mahmoud Fahmi Naqrashah, and Mustafa Nahas) as well as the Chief of the Royal Jordanian Palace, carrying messages from the Zionist leaders to King Faruk. During the same period, in the years 1945-47, Prince Abdallah (King) and his emissaries held several meetings with representatives of the Jewish Agency, mainly with Eliyahu Sasson, Moshe Shartok and Golda Meirson (Meir).

⁵ See Susan Lee Hattis, *The Bi-National Idea in Palestine During Mandatory Times*. Ben-Num Press, Tel Aviv, 1970, p. 99-102.

In view of the British military presence in the Suez canal area as well as the British-Zionist alliances, Egyptian officials were increasingly concerned about their relationship and treaty with the British Government. The Jordanian monarch shared this concern with regard to the Anglo-Jordanian treaty, in addition to the British mandate in Palestine, and its cooperation in implementing the Jewish homeland thesis. In both cases - Amman and Cairo - the Palestinians made great efforts not only to inform but warn Arab leaders of the consequences of their actions and of the danger of a possible loss of Palestine.

Summarisingly, it can be said that the international era was a first venue to explore positions, exchange views, examine balances of power and assess the position and influence of the third party, the British government. In some regards the episodes of this era laid the groundwork for the period to come, hereinafter considered as the Arab era, but it failed to reach an accepting or even understanding of each other, and certainly to build a base for the resolution of the conflict.

II. The Arab Era (1947-1967)

The Arab era covered the period between the aftermath of World War II, and the regional war which became known as the third Arab-Israeli War or June War in 1967.

During World War II, Arabs and Jews took different positions according to their respective alliances with Western powers. The real confrontation, however, erupted when the geo-political map of the Middle East was redefined as an outcome of that war.

In my view, three major elements shaped this second era as an Arab one. The first was the strong belief of the Palestinians to belong to the Arab nation, not only in terms of history, language, culture but as an integral part - if not the core - of the Arab national movement and all the aspirations it stood for. The second element was the creation of a central Arab political address with the establishment of the Arab League in 1945. The third element was the UN Partition Plan for Palestine of 1947, and the subsequent first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, followed by the establishment of the Jewish state. It was this second era that witnessed the uprooting of the Palestinian people, their expulsion and seeking refuge in the neighboring Arab countries, and which, thus, made Arab leaders and their societies not only more responsible but the political address and center of decision-making for the Palestine cause. All these events and developments, however, have to be seen against the background of the Arab

governments' failure to settle Palestinian issues and grasp the weight of the Zionists' plans as already exposed during the international era.

During the Arab era, various mediators with different missions towards military and/or political solutions of the conflict appeared. Their intervention led to the cease-fire between the newly established Jewish state and the Arab countries and to the signing of several truce treaties. It can be said with some confidence that the door for political solutions and diplomatic missions - internationally, regionally and domestically - was never closed.

In shedding light on some of missions of peace brokers and mediators who played a role during this era, one should bear in mind that they had to deal with a wide range of aspects and issues of the conflict. By examining their attempts it will become evident how, again, opportunities were missed, and how the subsequent era - here the Palestinian era - evolved and reached a certain maturity which eventually allowed for a "breakthrough" in the ongoing conflict.

The proposals and ideas for resolving the conflict during the Arab era, as well as the manner in which they were brought about, were pretty similar to those of the British mandate period, though they differed according to the new balance of power in terms of intervening powers, interpretation and reasoning.

The bi-national state thesis, for example, which had previously been discussed between Jewish, British and Palestinian intellectuals, was now (July 1947) presented by King Abdallah to the UN Commission as a collective Arab position. Similarly, the partition of Palestine, originally proposed by the Peel Commission in 1937 and then further developed by the Woodhead Commission of 1938, was now presented in Resolution 181, passed by the UN General Assembly. The third topic, the proposed annexation of the Arab part of Palestine to the Jordanian state, which had most intensively been discussed between King Abdallah and Zionist leaders in August 1946, was now represented by the Swedish UN mediator Count Folk Bernadotte. Finally, the question of Jerusalem was continuously addressed as a key component of any future political settlement, with many proposals submitted, which essentially provided for a 'special status' solution. What was the real novelty in this era, was the shift in priorities given to the issues in question, with borders, refugees and direct negotiations towards mutual recognition becoming the main items on the agenda.

The British mediators of the international era, military emissaries Lawrence and Sir Philby, were "replaced" by two British diplomats: Sir George Lampson, Ambassador to Cairo, and Sir Alec Kirkbride, Ambassador to Amman. Both made their appearances with changing hats: their roles ranged from

consultants to mediators to instructors. It may have been this 'changing of hats' that encouraged other mediators to follow their steps.

The Arab era opened a new chapter with the following contents:

One)The move of the central Jewish political decision-making and, thus, center of influence, including their alliances, from London to Washington.

Two)The phenomenon of political assassination, targeting at those who were involved in seeking a resolution to the conflict: delegates of the conflicting parties itself or international personalities who accepted the responsibility of mediation.

Three)The Jewish side learning to read between the lines of the proposed ideas and rushing to create facts on the ground to close the door for future discussions.

Four)The obvious absence of a direct Palestinian involvement in the decision-making process during this era.

The principle mediator to be cited in this context and who could be studied as a typical case with regard to the above issues was Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden. He was assigned by the UN after the outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli War to:

- arrange for the operation of the common services;
- assure the protection of the Holy Places;
- promote a peaceful adjustment to the future situation of Palestine.

However, Bernadotte's ambition exceeded his terms of reference; he set himself certain objectives and priorities reaching beyond his actual mission and drafted an own proposal for a settlement based on the following points:

One)regarding his idea of extending the first truce, he opted for an imposed settlement; the parties concerned, however, rejected any such enforcement;

Two)by proposing the demilitarization of Jerusalem, he advocated international presence in the holy city, but Washington was not yet prepared for such an option;

Three)the idea of incorporating Arab Palestine into Jordan resulted from his interpretation of inter-Arab politics as manifested in their opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Four)his provisions for the return of Arab refugees were based on his humanitarian views, not realizing that it was first and foremost a national and political issue.

Bernadotte dealt with several aspects of the conflict at the same time and was unable to define clear priorities. As a consequence, he finally lost the

confidence of all the other parties involved - he had failed in his mediator role. The tragedy of his unaccomplished mission culminated in his assassination by a Jewish extremist in Jerusalem on September 17, 1948.

The phenomenon of political assassination is characteristic for this first chapter of the Arab era: in Jerusalem, Fawzi Darwish al-Husseini was murdered by a fellow Palestinian in 1946, as a warning not to accept the concept of a bi-national state; in Egypt, Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi Nukrashi was assassinated on December 28, 1948; in Amman, Lebanese Prime Minister Riad al-Souh was murdered on July 16, 1951; and only four days later, on July 20, 1951, King Abdallah the Jordan's monarch was assassinated at Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

The conclusion that the Israelis drew from the mediators' various proposals and concerns was that Bernadotte's proposal, based on a territorial compromise, best reflected the existing frontlines and military realities. Against this background, it should not have come as a surprise when Israeli forces occupied the Negev area on October 15-22, 1949, a territory allotted by Bernadotte to the Jordanian state. The same goes for the Israeli invasion of the Galilee only a few days later on October 28-31, 1949, that had been earmarked by the UN Partition plan of 1947 to become part of the Palestinian state. Israeli forces succeeded in taking full control over this area and immediately began creating facts on the ground by building Jewish settlements. Incidents like these contributed a great deal to the increase of Palestinian dependency on Arab countries in terms of refuge, support and decision-making. Thus, they were forced to become tools in the inter-Arab struggle, used by Arab leaders - mainly Faruk of Egypt and Abdallah of Jordan - to serve their own ambitions and rivalries.

Following Bernadotte's assassination, Ralph Bunch took over the mission. Bunch was probably the first international mediator to be honored with the Nobel Prize for Peace for his achievement to get Arabs and Jews signing a truce. Numerous initiatives and mediators followed; according to the Sasson-Sharett correspondence, indirect negotiations between Israeli and Arab delegations began following the Paris conference 1951. The Israelis made it clear from the very beginning that they would under no circumstances negotiate with the Palestinian delegation, nor with the Arab Higher Committee of Palestine or the Palestinian Refugee Delegation, but only with Arab governments or their representatives. In conformity with this position, the central issues of the negotiations were: current borders, security, refugees (in terms of reciprocity of observation), economic cooperation, and, finally, the Palestinian territories that were only discussed in terms of shared control.

The mediator role of the United States emerged after the July 1952 revolution in Egypt in preparation of a scenario that would allow negotiation to

commence. Miles Copland, Kermit Rosefeld and Robert Anderson were assigned this role but their mission was found to have failed on August 3, 1954. Soon after, in 1955, US Secretary of State Dallas proposed a scenario for the settlement of the refugee question, followed by the proposal of British Prime Minister Anthony Eden in October 1955, aiming at bridging the gap between the Israeli position of keeping the borders according to the 1949 truce, and the Arab position, demanding the implementation of the UN resolutions. Eden suggested to enter into direct negotiations, articulating Britain's willingness to facilitate them. Again, however, neither of these attempts met with success.

In performing their roles, these mediators had not only to consider the enormous gap between the Arab and Israeli positions, but also their own countries' interests. These circumstances were aggravated by the absence of a clear Arab position and the obvious lack of interest and seriousness regarding such negotiations on the part of the Israelis, who favored the status quo as far more likely to help strengthening their newly born state. A good example for the power game at that time is the Israeli conspiracy with London and Paris to attack Egypt in what became known as the Suez crisis in 1956 - strongly opposed by Washington. It is not difficult to see that all these determinants hampered even partial success of the missions undertaken during the Arab era.

In the early 1960s, we witnessed another two main initiatives: the Kennedy-Nasser correspondence of 1961, which was a short-lived understanding regarding certain issues. Washington's main concerns were the refugee question and the water issue, while Cairo made it clear that the Palestine question - in terms of land, people and their rights - is the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict and must be, as such, a priority within the frame of any solution.

The second initiative came from an Arab angle - which was logical but also a revolution in Arab politics of that time. President Bourguiba of Tunisia called on the Palestinians and the Arab states to accept the Partition Plan of 1947, to make way for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the basis of which the right of return for Palestinian refugees could be implemented and direct negotiations with Israel towards reconciliation and mutual recognition as the basis for peace and stability in the region could be initiated. Bourguiba's plan was rejected outright by Arab states, while Israel sounded interested to use the negotiation tool to achieve legitimization and recognition.

The June War of 1967 was the product of a number of missed opportunities and failed attempts to deal with the issues of borders, refugees, water and, mainly, to bring about recognition and legitimacy for all states in the region. This leads us to the Palestinian era.

III. The Palestinian Era (1967-)

The third era is the **Palestinian era** which began with the Israeli occupation of the rest of Palestine in the course of the 1967 June war and which reached its - so far - last stage with the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP) on September 13, 1993 (Oslo I). As previous eras, the Palestinian era witnessed many political scenarios, resolutions and proposals, submitted by committees and suggested in conferences, addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, and the Palestine question in particular.

To identify the circumstances which eventually led to the “breakthrough” in Oslo and the substance of the agreement, and to understand why it was Oslo that became a cornerstone for a future peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is important to review previous Palestinian-Israeli encounters and the numerous attempts to bring Palestinians and Israelis together to reach an understanding throughout the various phases of Israeli occupation of the heart of the Palestinian territories -Jerusalem, West Bank and the Gaza Strip - since 1967. A look at this long record of contacts, dialogue and meetings held between individuals and groups from both sides illustrates how participants, substance, political invitations, and the balance of power have changed over the time - regionally and internationally.

In my view, these events led the Palestinian national movement and its leadership “to accommodate” their political and domestic urgencies with what was possible and realistic, and to build on it towards the rebuilding of Palestine. At the same time, these events led the Israeli mainstream and its political leadership to realize that the legitimacy of the Jewish state and the normalization of its relation with the Arab countries has to go through the “lungs” of the Palestinian people and their leadership.

In order to examine the Palestinian era and the attempts to find a solution, I distinguish six phases according to the unfolding history of this era: non-cooperation, steadfastness, isolation, Intifada, negotiations, and the Oslo channel.

1. Non-Cooperation

The first phase (1967-1970) was determined by the shock of Arab defeat, the fear of the unknown future and of total military occupation. Initially, the Palestinians reacted with a policy of non-cooperation with the occupiers. This strategy and the fact that the leadership at that time consisted of “inside” notables without authority who had an unsteady relationship not only with

their constituencies, but also with the “outside” PLO leaders and vis-a-vis Jordan, opened the door for a third party’s role, be it as a substitute, a mediator or a facilitator. During this period, Cairo and Amman were the two main Arab capitals to possibly function as venues to reach an Arab-Israeli settlement. Palestinians both “outside” and “inside” put all their hope onto the implementation of UN Resolution 242, which called for Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967. There was also some confidence that the occupation would be as short-lived as in Gaza during 1955-56. Finally, the “inside” Palestinians hoped that their demand to rectify the Palestinian-Jordanian relations as laid down in their local charter (4 October 1967)⁶ - not objected by the their leadership “outside” - would be heard and considered by Jordan.

The Arab strategy - as adopted at the Arab Summit in Khartoum on 29 August 1967 - was the famous Arab heads of states’ consensus on the three no’s: *no* recognition of the state of Israel, *no* direct negotiation with Israel, and *no* peace with Israel. At the same time, the Israeli government demanded direct talks with their Arab counterparts, on the basis of which it was hoped to reach bilateral peace treaties with any of the Arab neighboring states. Some Israeli experts’ interpretation was that the Khartoum summit had left the door open for such negotiation since it did not add a fourth no, that is prohibiting any Arab government from reaching an indirect agreement with Israel⁷. The Palestinian question itself however, was not an independent component in Israeli reflections but absorbed as part of a future settlement with Jordan. Notwithstanding this, Israelis often used Palestinians as “bridges” or “messengers” in order to reach the leaders of other Arab states.

Israeli-Palestinian contacts and meetings began immediately after the June war of 1967 and were initiated mainly by Israeli officials. Sometimes, however, such meetings were encouraged by foreign consulates in Jerusalem or by certain figures and delegations visiting the region. Most of these meetings were held in Israeli offices and public forums and took the form of joint debates or seminars, which later were reported in the media. The results of such meeting, much discussed in university seminars and political saloons, provided rich material for the study and analysis of the early years of Israeli occupation as well as for the evolution of Palestinian political thinking.

The meetings have differed in nature, topic, participants and objectives and did not follow a clear direction. This was mainly due to the lack of solid Arab positions and of proper follow-up plans or documentation. The meetings became more significant when Palestinian national figures became involved,

⁶ This charter, drafted by the political elite of that time, reflected the consensus of the “inside” leaders and institutions that the two banks of the Jordan River shall maintain united under Jordanian sovereignty, while both sides would jointly demand the ending of the occupation.

⁷ Yair Hirshfeld, “Jordanian-Israeli Peace negotiations after the Six Day War , 1967-1969” in *Jordan in the Middle East: 1948-1988*, London: Frank Cass, 1994, p. 233.

filling the political vacuum prevailing in the OPT. Were the meetings initially rather instruments for intellectual and political debate, they became over the time increasingly tools for exploring intentions as well as for passing political messages to decision-makers.

Some people supported the idea of these encounters, many opposed them. Yet, a third group's attitude was to maintain a certain reservation while putting a close eye at them. The most important of these meetings were usually held in the aftermath of significant political events: after the June 1967 War; following the introduction of the 1969 Rogers Plan and the Egyptian government's acceptance of it;⁸ and subsequent to the events of September 1970 in Jordan.

On the Israeli side, the meetings held during this first phase were attended by heads of the military establishment (who "enforced" such meetings), by government officials, members of political parties and peace groups (who utilized the meetings), by university professors and academics (who often sought and encouraged such meetings), and the media, who partially covered it.⁹ Palestinian participants in these early meetings were confined to the "inside" leadership: mainly heads of religious institutions and of well-known families.¹⁰

The invitations to the first round of meetings came from the Prime Minister's office, and the Israeli side was headed by Prime Minister Levy Eshkol himself. The Palestinian invitees included Walid Shaka'a and Hikmat Masri, two leaders from Nablus known, at the time, for their close association with and enthusiasm for the Egyptian leadership and policy of Gamal Abdel Nasser. According to the two Nabulsi leaders, they were to pass political messages to Cairo with the aim to initiate direct talks for an overall political settlement. Cairo was not receptive, however, but encouraged the Palestinian "inside" leadership to remain firm in their policy of non-cooperation, and to have faith in Arab strength, calling to mind the motto "what was taken by force cannot be returned but by force."¹¹

⁸ On December 9, 1969, US Secretary of State William Rogers outlined a US Proposal for an Israeli-Arab peace settlement.

⁹ Among these Israeli leaders from the military and political establishment were Haim Herzog, Benyamin Ben Elizier, Menachem Melson, Ephraim Sneh, Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres, Yigal Allon, Ezer Weizman, Ariel Sharon, Moshe Arens and Yitzhak Rabin. Other who utilized the meetings, included: Moshe Sasson, David Farhi, David Levy, Nahum Goldmann, Teddy Kollek and Gen. Dany Matt.

¹⁰ Palestinian representation in the meetings held in the first two phases, i.e. between 1967-78, included: (Jerusalem and Ramallah:) Sheikh Hilmi Muhtasib, Attorney Anwar Khatib, Attorney Anwar Nuseibeh, Attorney Sa'ad Ala al-Din, Attorney Aziz Shehadeh, Journalist Mahmoud Abu Zuluf, Sheikh Ali Taziz, Hassan Tahboub, Abd al-Aziz Suwayti, Salih Abduh, Abd al-Mu-ti Qutb Nadim Zarou; (Nablus and Tulkarem:) Walid Shaka'a, Hamdi Kana'an, Hikmat Masri, Qadri Tuqan, Haj Ma'zuz Masri, Abdel Ra'uf Faris, Hilmi Hannun; (ýHebron and Bethlehem:) Sheikh Muhammad Ali Ja'bari, Rashad Khatib, Hikmat Harmouri, Elias Freij, Izzat Atawinah; (Gaza:) Haj Rashad al-Shawwa, Dr. Hatim Abu Ghazaleh, Zuheir Rayyis; and a number of mukhtars, and heads of village and municipal councils.

¹¹ Abdel Nasser speeches since Khartoum summit.

As early as 1967, Moshe Dayan, then Israeli Defense Minister, held a series of meetings with Palestinian notables and leaders of the OPT. In the absence of a clear Israeli strategy or a government consensus on how to deal with the OPT, Dayan made use of his position as military "occupier", interrogating - rather than negotiating with - the "occupied" Palestinian leaders and, at the same time, passing through them messages to Jordan. Additionally, he tried to grasp the Palestinian and Arab thinking vis-a-vis an Israeli "agenda" for a political settlement.

One of the meetings initiated by Dayan took place on 16 April 1968 and involved the mayor of Nablus, Hamdi Kana'an, and the well-known lawyer of Ramallah, Aziz Shehadeh. According to Shehadeh's private papers¹², the meeting substantially covered the Israeli scenario for a future Arab-Israeli settlement providing for Palestinians to be associated with Jordan. Dayan addressed five questions during this "interrogation/negotiation" to the Palestinian "inside" notables and passed a sixth question to King Hussein. The five questions to the Palestinians were:

- 1.) *do you [the Palestinians] with or without Jordan want to conclude a separate peace with Israel without committing yourself to Egypt or Syria?*
- 2.) *If you wish to conclude the peace contract with or without King Hussein, do you want complete peace, as distinguished from such half solution as an armistice or a declaration of a state of non-aggression?*
- 3.) *Do you want to solve the refugee question within the frame of a political solution?*
- 4.) *An agreement between us will only take place with the blessing and support of the US.*
- 5.) *There will be no change in the status of Jerusalem. It is possible to solve the question of the holy places and religious institutions.*

The sixth question was Dayan's message to Amman:

"Regarding security: If I were to meet with King Hussein and if he asked me about the possibilities of concluding peace, my answer to him would be that the matter depended on the answers of these questions:

One)are you ready to reach a real peaceful solution with or without the approval of the other Arab states?

Two)Would you agree to basic changes to the state that existed before June 5th, 1967?

Three)Would you agree that there should be no international forces between us because the nature of the solution between us would be in the form of a federation, separate states, a Palestinian state, or a federal government consisting of Israel, Palestine, and Jordan."

¹² See Mahdi Abdul Hadi, *The Palestine Question and Political Peaceful Solutions, 1934-1974*. Beirut 1974, p. 333.

The Palestinian attorney Aziz Shehadeh reflected the Palestinian reading and the possible options towards a "settlement" by outlining his assessment regarding four possible scenarios Israel faced:

- 1.) formation of a Palestinian government
- 2.) return to Jordan
- 3.) formation of a federal union with Israel or Jordan or both
- 4.) Israeli annexation of the West Bank making it part of Israel

Soon after the Israeli occupation, Aziz Shehadeh - explaining the Palestinian fear of a possible isolation and the impossibility to "Palestinize" a solution without Arab endorsement - stated that

*"we must not extend a hand to the Israelis unless we are willing to extend another hand to the Arab states. If we become secessionists and separate from King Hussein with Arab agreement, there would be no settlement and we would not gain anything."*¹³

The Palestinian political environment in these first three years of Israeli occupation witnessed several proposals from Palestinians "inside", both individual and collective, for a political settlement with Israel. In his proposal for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital, Dr. Hamdi Taji Faruki¹⁴ suggested for the first time that the Arab states and the Palestinians recognize Israel in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Mayor Mohammed Ali Ja'bari of Hebron proposed the presence of an international authority in the OPT, i.e. a trusteeship for a period of five years, during which the implementation of self-determination would be observed. Ja'bari emphasized the need of total separation from Israel and stressed that there cannot be co-existence if there is only one state. Poet Fadwa Tuqan, Mayor Hamdi Kana'an and Qadri Tuqan of Nablus met with Dayan in Summer 1968 at Dayan's residence in Tel Aviv. Dayan emphasized that

"no Arab leader can negotiate with Israel as long as President Nasser refuses negotiations. The only people able to influence Nasser are the Palestinians."

Dayan told Fadwa Tuqan "you can go to Cairo, please go", adding that

*"I adopt Ben Gurion's thoughts: 'who cares much if the size of Israel is small, but we need secure recognized borders'".*¹⁵

Fadwa did go to Cairo, met with Sadat and Nasser and passed the Israeli message.

¹³ *New York Times*, September 9, 1967.

¹⁴ Palestinian Ba'athist living in Ramallah.

¹⁵ See Mahdi Abdul Hadi, *Palestinian Question and Peaceful Solutions*, 1934-1974. Beirut, 1974. pp. 344-349.

Meanwhile, during 1965-69, the “outside” PLO leadership issued strong statements, condemning the ideas developed by the “inside” with regard to a separate entity and the establishment of an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and accusing the “inside” to have fallen in the Israeli trap. To counteract these “inside” initiatives, the PLO tried to mobilize the Palestinian diaspora to oppose such moves. In those early years, PLO factions “outside” endorsed the thesis of establishing a Palestinian democratic state in all of Palestine, where Muslims, Christians and Jews would enjoy equal rights and duties. Some Palestinian leaders considered this a major concession which would imply the recognition of a legitimate right for Jews in Palestine; others saw it as a symptom of weakness, resulting from Arab military impotency and Palestinian incapability to unilaterally liberate their homeland.

During this phase, armed confrontations between *al-Muqawama al-Filastiniya* and Israeli forces continued, culminating in the al-Karameh battle in the Jordan Valley in March 1968. At the end of this phase, Fatah had risen to become the dominant faction within the PLO, with its head Yasser Arafat being elected chairman of the PLO Executive Committee. The new developments in the “outside” Palestinian leadership coincided with the failure of the early initiatives on the part of the “inside” leaders.

2. Steadfastness 1970-82

During the second phase, between 1970 and 1982, the strategy adopted by the Palestinians was that of steadfastness (also known as *sumud*). Steadfastness stood for keeping civil society institutions functioning and maintaining the status quo, while, at the same time, waiting for a solution to come from outside - either internationally (UN or superpowers) or regionally (Arab states and/or PLO). Nonetheless, Palestinian resistance and military confrontation with the Israeli forces continued. Remarkable events during this phase also included the bloody struggle for power in Jordan in the early 1970s, and the establishment of a strong PLO base in Lebanon in the late 1970s.

The development of the “inside” leadership during this period was characterized by the demise of local notables with close ties to Jordan, the rise of a national front, and the formation of the National Guidance Committee (combining most national groups and forces). Palestinians “inside” and “outside” accepted the challenge of meeting Israelis. These contacts were meant to clarify the positions, interests and needs of both sides as a starting point to search for a political settlement. Israeli officials were engaged on two fronts: with the search for an Arab partner with whom they could reach a

“breakthrough”, and with the elaboration of numerous plans regarding the situation inside the OPT.

During the years of steadfastness, Palestinians voiced their desire for a peaceful solution based on coexistence and mutual recognition. Among the early advocates of a two-state solution were Said Hamami, PLO representative in London who was assassinated on January 4th, 1978; Izz Eddin al-Qalal, PLO representative in Paris, assassinated on August 1st, 1978; Naim Khader, PLO representative in Brussels, assassinated on June 4th, 1981; and Issam Sartawi, PLO activist assassinated on April 12, 1983 in Portugal. The message these Palestinian representatives from the “outside” leadership conveyed was to set up a dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli seekers of peace, for the sake of

“the aspiration of the reunion of the country based upon the agreement of both nations eventually (perhaps not during our lifetime) in the form of a federation or two separate states.”¹⁶

The “inside” Palestinian activists’ views of this time were expressed by two leaders. The first one spoke about the “right to meet and talk”, while the second verbalized the “right to negotiate as well as the right to govern”:

Anwar Nuseibeh¹⁷, after his meeting with Nahum Goldman in 1977, said:

“I see no reason why I should not explain the Arab viewpoint whenever conditions permit. I would be failing in my national duty if I, or any other Arab, were to miss an opportunity to express the correct Arab opinion. It is not wrong in this case for the Arabs to take the initiative.”

Qadri Tuqan’s¹⁸ version of the Palestinian position on the meetings with Israelis was as follows:

“If the PLO leaders come to us through liberation, we would go to Jericho and meet them with flowers and carrying them on our shoulders as they would be our leaders. But if they come through political negotiation, then we are the ones who have the right to lead and govern, for we are the ones who know more, if not better, than they.”¹⁹

These two statements indicate the first episode of the split in the “inside-outside” relationship and their respective understanding of political rights, freedom of speech, legitimate representation, and duties of governing, including negotiating.

¹⁶ Palestinian views as expressed by Said Hamami during a three-day seminar at the National-Liberal Club in London, March 20, 1975. See PASSIA Diary 1993, p. 252.

¹⁷ Former governor of Jerusalem and former Minister in Jordan.

¹⁸ One of the founders of An-Najah University in Nablus; former Minister in Jordan.

¹⁹ see Mahdi Abdul Hadi, *The Palestine Question and Political Peaceful Solutions, 1934-1974*. Beirut 1974.

3. Isolation 1982-87.

The third phase (1982-87) began with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the exodus of the Palestinian military resistance movement from Beirut, where the PLO mini-state had been established and had now, after almost 10 years, gone in pieces. The search for a new Arab host country which would allow the Palestinian leadership in exile to set up a new base, led the PLO to Tunis.

The position of the five major external parties during the isolation period are reflected in the following:

- One)Israel: Ariel Sharon, then Israeli Minister of Defense, commented on the newly emerged situation that “the departure of the PLO from Lebanon clears the way for Israel to a settlement with ‘moderate’ West Bank Palestinians”.
- Two)Palestinians in Jordan: Palestinian notables in Jordan sent a memo to the PLO leadership in Beirut, suggesting an immediate declaration of acceptance of UNSC 242 for this may help end the siege on the PLO in Beirut and secure its survival.
- Three)USA: Congressman Paul McClosky, during the PLO’s stage of siege in Beirut, convinced Chairman Arafat to sign a statement acknowledging all UN resolutions pertaining to Palestine (July 25, 1982). According to McClosky, the move would signal PLO recognition of Israel.
- Four)Syria: On 24th June 1982, Syria declared PLO chairman Yasser Arafat a *persona non grata* and ordered him to leave the country. Arafat flew to Tunis from where he called Syria’s move “regrettable”.
- Five)Jordan: On 11 February 1985, Chairman Arafat and King Hussein reached an agreement on common approaches towards a Middle East peace accord, calling for the exchange of ‘land for peace’ within the context of an international conference and a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation. Israeli officials discounted the proposal the next day.

Meanwhile, the OPT was exposed to three external parties and their respective interests - laid down and reflected in different plans - which influenced the events to come:

- One.The US, bearing in mind the Camp David Accords signed on 17 September 1978, promoted the theme of “improving the quality of life”.
- Two.Jordan promoted a controlled development plan for the West Bank with the intention to replace the “outside” PLO leadership with the “inside” leadership, mainly leading notables and businessmen in control of the local economy and commercial sector.

Three. Israel suggested an “autonomy plan”, based on the “Jordanian option”, viewing Palestinians as Jordanian citizens whose capital was Amman.

Israel maintained total control over the land and the people in the OPT and had the authority to govern - with no respect for international law or existing resolutions. Its message, that “occupation was irreversible”, was widely understood. At the same time, Palestinians were confused as to what their actual priorities were, a situation which was aggravated by the competition between the “outside” and “inside” leadership and their respective institutional manifestations.

Palestinian “inside” representatives to meetings and talks with Israelis in this period included businessmen, media people, individuals closely associated with municipal or village councils, and a new generation of young national activists; the traditional representation, however, was as yet maintained with directors of establishments and heads of well-known families.²⁰

Some of the invitations to such Palestinian-Israeli meetings came from the acting Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. He invited three Palestinian activists, Sari Nuseibeh, Hanna Siniora and Fayez Abu Rahmeh, who were considered close to the “outside” PLO mainstream leadership, to meet in order to crystallize each other’s positions, demands and objectives.

Other moves to establish contacts and dialogue between Israelis and the “outside” PLO leadership rooted in a new trend in Israel which was represented by liberal-minded individuals and groups, who were opposed to their government’s policies vis-a-vis the OPT but not in the position to change them. These initiators included politicians and professionals, among others Ari Elyaf, Uri Avineri, Aharon Cohen, Mattiyahu Peled and Ora Namir.

Most of these meetings were held outside the OPT, the dialogue of Walid Khalidi and Abba Eban in Washington, for example, or that of Palestinian academics with European and American Jewish academics in London, Paris, New York, Washington and at Harvard University during 1984 and 1985. Another meeting took place on 6 November 1986 in Rumania between four Israelis and PLO members - in spite of the Israeli Knesset decision banning such meetings and sanctioning the violation of this ruling²¹. The meeting in Rumania did not commit either side but called for

²⁰ Palestinian representation in the meetings held in the phase from 1978-1987, included: (Jerusalem and Ramallah:) Anwar Kahtib, Anwar Nuseibeh, Sheikh Sa’ad Ala al-Din, Aziz Shehadeh, editors Mahmoud Abu Zulf, Hanna Siniora, Othman Hallaq, Raymonda Tawil, Radwan Abu Ayyash and Ziad Abu Zayyad; Ibrahim Dakkak, Salim Tamari, Munir Fasheh, Ramzi Rihan, Albert Aghazarian, Anton Sansour; (Nablus and Tulkarem:) Walid Shaka’a, Basil and Said Kana’an, Hikmat Masri, Hafiz Tuqan, Haj Ma’zuz Masri, Wahid Masri, Ibrahim Abdul Hadi, Izzat al-Alul, Hani Arafat; (ýHebron and Bethlehem:) Fahd Qawasmeh, Mustafa Natsheh, Khaled Usaylah, Abdel Amjid Zir, Elias Freij, Edward Khamis, Hanna Nasser, Dr. Ahmad Hamze Natsheh; Nabil Ja’bari, Muhammad R. Ja’bari; (Gaza:) Haj Rashad al-Shawwa, Dr. Hatim Abu Ghazaleh, Dr. Haidar Abdel Shafi, Fayez Abu Rahmeh; and a number of leaders of professional unions.

²¹ The Knesset passed this ruling on 6 August 1986

- 1.) an end to violence
- 2.) commencement of negotiations
- 3.) a joint search for peace.

The meetings of this period were not viewed without reservations and even opposition from among Palestinian ranks. This was particularly evident in 1986 during the preparation of a Palestinian-Israeli declaration in favor of an international conference. The invitation to the preparatory meetings came from Knesset member Abba Eban and others who contacted Hanna Siniora and Fayez Abu Rahmeh, both of whom had been named by the Palestinian leadership as members of the joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation for the proposed talks in 1985.

The long preamble of that intended “declaration” spoke about the Palestinian and Jewish peoples’ destiny to live side by side, on one land. It contained a joint appeal calling for negotiations and the repudiating of violence and terrorism. Palestinians “inside” had agreed to insist that the proposed declaration included a frank provision recognizing the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the PLO as their sole, legitimate representative. However, the Israeli side dropped the definite article “the” and the provision read only “legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” The draft declaration further mentioned the national rights of the Palestinian people and recognized, beyond the right of the Jewish people to exist, the rights of the “State of Israel”.

In protest of the inclusion of such wording, the Palestinians affiliated with the “outside” PLO leadership refused to attend the joint meeting at the King David Hotel in West Jerusalem and did not approve the text of the declaration as announced by Abba Eban at a news conference.²² Other “inside” leaders affiliated with the PLO took a different stand on this. Among them, Hanna Siniora who sent personal invitations to the pro-Jordanian personalities Elias Freij of Bethlehem and the cousins Sa’id and Basil Kana’an of Nablus, asking them to attend the meetings and sign the declaration. All three accepted the invitation and attended the ceremony at the King David Hotel. The team of the four “inside” Palestinians signed - without revising, nor discussing or amending the document - the declaration as it stood. This was disapproved and regarded a negative move by many, in particular by the PLO “outside” leadership, mainly because the three newly recruited signatories had not even been involved in the drafting of the declaration at all. This incident demonstrated the gap between the different positions of the “inside” and

²² Based on the 11 February 1985 PLO-Jordan accords, the PLO named 7 personalities for the joint delegation: Khaled al-Hassan, head of the PNC Foreign Affairs Committee; Fayez Abu Rahmeh, head of the Gaza Bar Association; Dr. Hatem Husseini, University Professor in the US; Dr. Nabil Shaa/Eath, PNC member; Salah Ta/Emari, PLO Central Council member; Hanna Siniora, Editor of Al-Fajr newspaper; Mohammed Sbeih, PN²C member; and Henry Cattan, historian and lawyer, residing in Paris. Shimon Peres, however, accepted only two of the appointees on July 23, 1985: Hanna Siniora and Fayez Abu Rahmeh.

“outside” representatives of the Palestinian house, and how Palestinian dissents gave way for the Israelis to take advantage and score points on their own behalf.

On 4th July 1987, Moshe Amirav, a member of the Central Committee of the Herut Party and a close aide to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, met with two Palestinian activists, Sari Nuseibeh and Salah Zuhaiqa, at his residence to discuss rather advanced thoughts on the Arab-Israeli conflict and on the need to have the PLO participating in any future negotiation.

The mediator, who initiated this meeting was David Ish’Shalom, author of *Fear and Hope* in which he suggested the establishment of a Palestinian unarmed entity in the OPT under the ruling of the PLO. In Amirav’s opinion it was in the interest of both the Likud and the Palestinians to establish Palestinian autonomy for a yet to define transitional phase. He believed that such an arrangement would be acceptable for both parties but realized that it cannot be implemented but with the approval of the PLO, since otherwise, no Palestinian would ever accept to become a member in any administrative council. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir did neither agree nor reject the idea but expressed his fear that the Palestinians would exploit such provisions according to their interests. In a second meeting which took place at Nuseibeh’s residence in Jerusalem on 13 July 1987, Faisal Husseini participated; he and Amirav agreed that neither the Israeli dream of both banks of the Jordan river becoming part of their state nor the dream of the Palestinians to rule in Haifa and the Galilee were realistic to come true.

According to Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) the two parties agreed on a draft document, including the following²³:

- One) There would be two negotiation phases between the PLO and the Israeli government, whereby the preparatory stage would lead to a transitional agreement and the subsequent second phase to a permanent peaceful settlement.
- Two) The preparatory negotiation period may commence in a third country yet to be agreed upon. The second negotiation phase would commence after one year following the implementation of the transitional agreement. It was understood that the transitional agreement would last 3-5 years.
- Three) The understanding for the transitional period was based on the establishment of a Palestinian entity in the territories which fell under Israeli control in June 1967, with the Arab sector of Jerusalem as its administrative capital. The Palestinian inhabitants of these territories would be entitled to self-administer their affairs in a manner to be agreed upon during the first negotiation phase.

²³ Mahmoud Abbas, *The Road to Oslo*, Beirut 1994, pp. 62-65.

Four) It was understood that this entity would have the right to national symbols such as the flag, a special currency, its national anthem, a communication network including radio, independent TV, and issuing ID cards and travel documents.

Five) A comprehensive agreement would be reached to establish this entity as well as to settle the issues of Israeli settlements and settlers, the return and resettling of Palestinians, sharing economic resources and cooperate commercially.

As for the first phase of negotiations between the PLO and Israel - in order to meet the need to create a proper atmosphere for negotiation - it was agreed on the following:

1. Israel would declare its recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the PLO, at the same time, would recognize the State of Israel.
2. The two parties would declare their willingness to hold direct negotiations to reach a settlement.
3. Israel would officially declare the freeze of all settlement activities in the OPT and would halt all violent activities against Palestinians and their property, while, at the same time, the PLO would declare an end to all violent activities against Israeli targets.
4. It was understood that the final phase of negotiation would lead to the establishment of a Palestinian independent state.

Mahmoud Abbas explained the importance of these meetings by saying that, although they did not achieve political infiltration or immediate results, they

“prepared a suitable base for dialogue and contact and compiled ideas on which we could build and which assisted us to reach what we achieved on September 13, 1993.”²⁴

It is important to note here that these meetings had a direct impact on the people involved, illustrating the dissent among the people on both sides: Yitzhak Shamir dismissed Moshe Amirav from the Likud; Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin ordered the arrest of Faisal Hussein; and Bir Zeit University students from the mainstream attacked their professor Sari Nuseibeh.

During this period, when the “outside” PLO leadership together with its loyalists from within the territories, tried to achieve a political breakthrough with the Likud through the Nuseibeh-Amirav negotiations, also other attempts for a similar political breakthrough were made. Prime Minister Shamir (Likud) and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (Labour) competed in this endeavor. Shamir held meetings with Palestinian personalities from the “inside” who

²⁴ Mahmoud Abbas, *The Road to Oslo*, Beirut, 1994, p. 62

were considered pro-Jordanian, e.g. Othman Hallaq, editor of An-Nahar newspaper; and the Jerusalem businessman Khaled al-Qutb. During June-August 1987, Mr. Shamir held also meetings with King Hussein in London. "But King Hussein felt that with Mr. Shamir in power, the situation was hopeless."²⁵

Meanwhile, Peres held meetings with "inside" Palestinian personalities who were affiliated with and/or loyal to the PLO (e.g. Hanna Siniora, Fayez Abu Rahmeh and Sari Nuseibeh, see above). He also conducted negotiations with King Hussein in London to draft guidelines for a political settlement with Jordan. The outcome, a document concluded between Peres and King Hussein on April 11, 1987, was basically a three-part understanding on:

One)an invitation sent by UN Secretary General to negotiate an agreement based on UN resolutions 242 and 338;

Two)the decision to hold an international conference; and

Three)the nature of the agreement on the provisions that:

1. the conference will not impose a solution
2. negotiations will be held in bilateral committees in a direct manner
3. the Palestinian issue will be discussed in a joint meeting of the Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli delegations
4. the representatives of the Palestinians will be included in a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.
5. participation in the conference will be based on acceptance of UN resolutions 242 and 338 by all sides and the renunciation of violence and terror.²⁶

The proposed agreement failed for more than one reason: the US was reluctant to adopt it as an American invitation (George Shultz); second, the Israeli Labour party's (Peres) was reluctant to put a vote on it in the inner coalition cabinet and thus, to challenge the Likud; third, King Hussein's was reluctant to present the plan publicly as Jordanian-Israeli initiative. And finally, the head of the Likud-run government undermined the proposed agreement by vetoing it.

According to Asher Susser

"despite the long debate in Israel over the advantages of the Palestinian and the Jordanian options, the question was not whether to reach a settlement with one or the other, but rather what form of Jordanian-

²⁵ Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 382.

²⁶ The London Document was published by the Hebrew daily Ma'ariv on January 1, 1988.

*Palestinian combination would be the counterpart for an eventual final settlement.*²⁷

4. Intifada 1987-90

After two decades of Israeli occupation of Palestine, the international arena witnessed the beginning of the consolidation between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, with a meeting that took place between Ronald Reagan and Mikhael Gorbachev. It was this rapprochement that made the Palestinians realize that the Arab-Israeli conflict and their particular cause had vanished from the superpowers' agenda.

In the regional arena, the Arab summit of November 1987 marked the beginning of Arab consolidation. The summit was held in Amman, only 60 km or an hour drive from Jerusalem; the Palestinian question, however, although it formed the core of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict, was not a priority of that summit. It rather dealt with Egypt, which was, for the first time since Camp David, officially invited; also on the top of the agenda were the reconciliation between Syria and Iraq (Saddam-Assad meeting), and thirdly, the issue of economic cooperation.

With these two main arenas (international and regional) being occupied with their own interests, relations and reconciliation processes, not many options were left for the Palestinians in the domestic arena (OPT) either. The deterioration of their situation then was best mirrored by the conditions prevailing in the slums of Gaza. The Israeli arrogance and brutal occupation practices had never ended, and the ongoing confiscation of land, expansion of settlements and violation of human rights led to one conclusion: "occupation is irreversible".

According to the Israeli intellectual and expert on the OPT, Meron Benvenisti, "under the most optimistic conditions, the Palestinians can aspire to hold their ground in the territories".²⁸ Palestinians in the OPT reached a stage of hopelessness, desperation and anger which made them feel that they had nothing to lose. Palestinians outside the OPT were marginalised if not ignored, their leadership was isolated and they were full of bitterness, too. Benvenisti contemplated that "a local Arab leader [inside leader] must be able to challenge the status quo, recognizing the objective constraints which cannot realistically be changed in a radical fashion."²⁹

²⁷ Asher Susser, "Jordan, the PLO and the Palestine Question", in *Jordan in the Middle East 1948-1988*. London: Frank Cass, 1994, p. 227.

²⁸ Meron Benvenisti, "The Peace Process and the Intercommunal Strive", in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XVII, No. 1 (Autumn 1987), p.10 .

²⁹ Meron Benvenisti, "The Peace Process and the Intercommunal Strive", in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XVII, No. 1 (Autumn 1987), p.10 .

The spark which moved people's frustration and anger was the famous incident in Gaza on December 9th, 1987, when an Israeli taxi driver ran into a group of Palestinians, killing four and injuring several others. The small stone that was thrown at the Israeli driver became the symbol and tool of challenging the occupiers.

The Palestinians decided not to wait any longer for a solution from outside to "rescue" them and to end the policies and practices of the occupation. They took, for the first time since the beginning of the occupation, the struggle into their own hands, initiating untraditional methods to resist the occupation, which became known as the Intifada.

The philosophy of the Intifada was (a) to change the status quo, i.e. to end Israeli occupation, and (b) to build a new society in the OPT, based on self-reliance, and to lead it towards freedom, independence and statehood.

In the first year of the Intifada, the Palestinian strategy based mainly on two cornerstones: (1) the fall of fear in people's hearts and minds (over 55% of the Palestinian population was under the age of 25); (2) the strong national pride to be a Palestinian.

The Intifada covered three basic dimensions:

1. Direct confrontation with the military occupiers whereby the tools used were stones, burned tires, commercial strikes, demonstrations, graffiti on the walls, political leaflets containing weekly confrontation programs;
2. The Palestinization of the society through renaming places and changes, unilateral changing of summer and winter times, boycotting of Israeli goods, refusing to pay taxes to the Israeli authorities, rejecting the obedience of Israeli orders, instructions or laws.
3. The elaboration of a political program, declared as the "Fourteen Demands" on January 14, 1988 in Jerusalem.

The Intifada came as a surprise to both the Israeli leadership as well as the Palestinian leadership "outside". Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin described the sudden uprising as "ordinary disturbances which will come to an end within days" and did not cancel his visit to the US. The Palestinian leadership prayed that it would last³⁰ and suggested with Khalid al-Wazir's (Abu Jihad) famous "Jerusalem Document" of 8 February 1988 a plan towards civil disobedience. The "inside" Palestinian leadership organized itself as the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). The society accepted and legitimized the UNLU and followed its directives to form public

³⁰ See Mahmoud Nofal, *The Story of the Oslo Agreement*. Amman, 1995, p. 15.

committees to run Palestinian affairs, including education, health, social welfare, economy and infrastructure.

Several mediators rushed to the scene with suggestions and ideas on how to settle the escalation of the conflict between the occupier and the occupied. The first initiative came from Cairo in January 1988, calling for “a truce” in the West Bank and Gaza for six months during which there would be a freeze on settlement activities. Meanwhile, there would be preparations for an international peace conference.

The second mediator was US Secretary of State George Shultz who proposed in March 1988 that Israel would suspend its settlement activities and the Palestinians their Intifada, both on the grounds that negotiations would begin immediately (March 1988). The negotiations were to be conducted on the provisions laid down in the Camp David Accords, with the exception that Palestinian self-rule be achieved by February 1989, i.e. after one year instead of the five-year interim period foreseen in the Camp David Accords³¹. Israeli Prime Minister Shamir opposed the US plan, as did the Palestinian “inside” delegation which boycotted Shultz’s invitation to meet at the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem.

There were other mediators trying to bring Israel and the PLO “outside” leadership to start a dialogue, though Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin was quoted saying “as long as Shamir is the Prime Minister this is out of question”³².

Israeli General Abraham Tamir sought a meeting with Bassam Abu Sharif (an close aide to Arafat) but the encounter did not materialize.³³

The Soviet Union’s mediation role entered the arena with Mikhael Gorbachev in April 1988. He openly encouraged PLO chairman Yasser Arafat to recognize Israel’s right to exist.³⁴

After the assassination of Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) on April 16, 1988 by Israeli agents at his residence in Tunis, the Intifada was at a crossroads facing three options: (1) to be “Arabized”, similar to the Arab revolt of 1936 when Arab leaders took over the decision-making; (2) to be “militarized” by allowing the radicals to escalate the daily confrontation with the occupiers and thus, to take the lead of the uprising; and (3) to maintain its political endeavor to remain an unarmed national struggle as a “white” Intifada.

³¹ Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p.384.

³² Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 388.

³³ Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 388.

³⁴ *Washington Post*, April 11, 1988.

The “inside” Palestinian leadership discussed ways and means to maintain the “Palestinization” of the struggle, favoring two initiatives: a) issuing a declaration of independence and b) forming a provisional government-in-exile.³⁵

Meanwhile, the “outside” PLO leadership began to publicly talk about political solutions. These included:

One) “establishing two states between the river and the sea, which signifies acceptance, in principle, of the state of Israel alongside a Palestinian state.”³⁶

Two) the PLO’s openness to negotiate with any Israeli official, even with Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin;³⁷

Three) the underlying condition that the right political environment for negotiations be created: “the PLO is ready to sit down with Israel if it was to withdraw from the OPT.”³⁸

By late August 1988, chairman Arafat had received nine drafts from the “inside” leadership calling for Palestinian national independence. On this politicized track of the conflict the “inside” and “outside” leadership worked parallel, if not overlapping each other, to emphasize their respective concepts of a political solution. This became evident with the “Bassam Abu Sharif Document” in June 1988, which was studied, discussed and eventually endorsed by the “inside” leadership.³⁹ At the same time, a second paper, the “Faisal Husseini Document”, called for a two-state solution and for the declaration of Palestinian independence, based on UN Partition Resolution 181.⁴⁰

The “inside” leadership considered the formation of a provisional government in the third year of the Intifada as an “advancement towards establishing national authority to replace the occupiers”, as a new challenge which added a new dimension to the independence process. The formation of a provisional government, it was argued, may help legitimizing and normalizing the idea of independence. Both superpowers strongly objected the idea; the “outside” PLO leadership tended to agree with their objections as they saw that it would

³⁵ The deliberations among the “inside” Palestinian leadership were about the declaration of independence with the options to either encourage the leading figures among the Palestinian political detainees to declare from Israeli prisons, or to chose a group of leading personalities to travel to Geneva declaring independence and announcing a provisional government in a press conference, or, finally, to call for a public gathering at al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on the occasion of declaring the independence by a masked youth leader of the Intifada.

³⁶ Statement of Khaled al-Hassan, head of the PNC Foreign Committee, on April 22, 1988.

³⁷ Bassam Abu Sharif, Interview with ABC TV on April 26, 1988.

³⁸ Bassam Abu Sharif, Interview with ABC TV on April 26, 1988.

³⁹ PASSIA Meeting in Jerusalem, June 1988.

⁴⁰ *Jerusalem Post*, August 12, 1988.

transform the PLO from a liberation movement to a semi-government for which they were neither prepared nor ready yet.

Meanwhile, the “inside” leaders compared this historical phase with the experience of the Jewish Agency in 1948, when it was transformed to become the provisional government of Israel. The “inside” called for the reformation of the PNC through elections based on proportional representation.

Already since the second year of the Intifada, the Palestinian “inside” leadership had advocated a policy of establishing contacts and dialogue with the Israelis in order to influence Israeli public opinion and to build an understanding of the Palestinian cry for freedom and independence. For example, Palestinians began publishing articles in Israeli newspapers and magazines, accepted to appear on Israeli TV, and addressed Israeli audiences in public forums and universities. On August 2, 1990, delegations from the Palestinian and Israeli mainstream⁴¹ met at the Notre Dame Hotel in Jerusalem to sign a joint statement which included mutual recognition and the call for direct negotiation towards a settlement of the conflict. However, on that day Iraq invaded Kuwait, marking the beginning of the Gulf crisis. Hence, despite the ongoing dialogue and the relative harmony in which the meetings had taken place, the Israeli delegation “declared divorce” from their Palestinian counterparts and refrained from signing the document.

5. Peace Negotiations / Madrid-Washington-Moscow 1990-1993

The Gulf War, a divided Arab world, the fall of the Soviet Union and Eastern European bloc, a US agenda promoting ‘land for peace’ and UN Resolutions 242 and 338, and the Palestinians and their leadership in a stage of siege in the Occupied Territories as well as in the diaspora - against this background the peace negotiations commenced in Madrid.

The state of siege the Palestinians found themselves at that time was due to many interwoven elements ranging from Israel, to the Arab world, to international positions. These elements of siege can be read as follows:

One) Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens’ policy of dividing the West Bank and Gaza into tiny islands, isolating Jerusalem, suppressing Palestinian leadership and imposing a media black-out;

Two) the daily strangulation of Palestinians through land confiscation, settlement building which achieved some of its goals in shaking Palestinian society and uprooting its entity;

⁴¹ The Palestinian delegation included: Sari Nuseibeh, Faisal Hussein, Hanan Ashrawi, Ziad Abu Zayyad, Mamdouh Aker; and the Israeli delegation included Yossi Beilin, Dedi Zucker, Yael Dayan, Yossi Sarid, Chaim Ramon, Naomi Chazan.

Three)raising the status of settlers to become a third authority that imposes its will on Palestinians in addition to the authority of the Israeli government and its judicial branch, so that the extreme right-wing can impose the law of the jungle in the OPT;

Four)the accumulated social and economic suffering throughout the four years of Intifada;

Five)the decrease of financial support, the decline in the standard of living, the regression of Palestinian organizations' functions.

The state of siege the Palestinians outside the OPT is reflected in the following:

One)the absence of a military option;

Two)the decline of Arab government support;

Three)the fast and serious changes in Eastern European states, including their recognition of Israel;

Four)the end of financial support for Palestinian organizations in the OPT and the PLO in the diaspora;

Five) the end of Palestinian presence and influence in the Gulf countries;

Six)attempts to by-pass the role of the PLO leadership.

On the other side, the Jewish state was the biggest beneficiary from the Gulf war for the following reasons: a) it remains the strongest military arsenal in the region; b) it continued to receive astronomical financial assistance from world capitals; c) it continued to receive US financial support for its projects, including settlement expansion in the OPT.

The options for the Palestinians were limited. "They were called upon to accept a reality which was not yet legally in force"⁴². This reality was the negotiation tunnel, introduced by US President George Bush in his speech to the Congress on March 6, 1991. The US formula to the Madrid conference was based on the implementation of a) UNSC Resolution 242 and 338; b) the principle of 'land for peace'; c) the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people; d) security and peace for the state of Israel.

In summer 1985, a leading Palestinian academic, Walid al-Khalidi, an authority on the Palestinian problem and the Arab-Israeli conflict suggested the magic formula for the Madrid conference called by the Americans.

"There is no substitute for a general, political, regional, integrated, conceptual framework, and a multi-track, multi-issue approach. By a multi-track, multi-issue approach is meant quiet, patient, intelligent, inventive, politically purposeful dialogue with all the key protagonists: local, regional and global; simultaneously addressing at different levels of publicity and

⁴² J. Kirsten Urban, *Conflict Resolution - Assumptions behind the Approach*. Jerusalem: PASSIA, 1992.

*salience the issues of Palestinian self-determination, Lebanon and the Golan. If the horrendous mess in Lebanon points to anything, it points to the absence of such a complicated framework and such an approach.*⁴³

Israeli acceptance to go to Madrid was subject to the enforcement of the following conditions regarding the composition of the Palestinian delegation: no for Jerusalemites, no for PLO members, no for an independent Palestinian delegation, no for the Palestinian flag and no for a Palestinian state.

Palestinians realized that they cannot deter those who were invited to go through, nor change or amend the terms of references, nor can they afford to stay outside the tunnel. They accepted the challenge to enter it in order to protect their position as an essential party of the conflict in the region. They were confident that they would be able to change the conditions and effect other conference participants based on the theme of their Intifada “changing the status quo and building a new society”. Palestinians were interested in bringing back the minimum level of Arab coordination with the Palestinian cause and to keep an close understanding with European countries as well as sitting with the Israeli official delegation face to face and on an equal footing before the world.

In Madrid, Palestinians were acknowledged as an independent delegation and, perhaps for the first ever time, people showed concern for what they had to say. “Look at Hanan Ashrawi, the moment they saw this messenger, they began to listen to the message.”⁴⁴

The Palestinian delegation to Madrid were not elected but nominated by the PLO “outside” leadership in Tunis. Some saw their role as the representative of regional interests, be it a village, a tribe, a faction or a profession. Others put it that they represent a process of recognition for their years of suffering under occupation and in a sense for the years of their people’s suffering. It was their first real experience of freedom.

In Washington, the talks were of the nature of a diplomatic game which in itself creates special categories of concerns for a “people” acting in the role of a “nation-state”. After long talks in the corridors of the US State Department, Palestinians eventually accepted the formula of 9 [Palestinians] plus 2 [Jordanians] for their delegation’s composition. They suggested a transitional phase to end the military occupation and to form a national authority. The Israeli side, however, was not interested in such scenario; their intention was rather to use these talks to reach out for other Arab participants, i.e. Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The Israeli policy was to use the Madrid negotiations to

⁴³ Walid al-Khalidi, “A Palestinian Perspective on the Arab-Israeli Conflict”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer 1985, p.46.

⁴⁴ J. Kirsten Urban, *Conflict Resolution - Assumptions behind the Approach*. Jerusalem: PASSIA, 1992.

normalize its relations with the Arab world while maintaining the status quo in the OPT.

In Moscow, Palestinians formed their delegation from among prominent activists from Jerusalem and the rest of the OPT with the inclusion of the diaspora. Through dialogue in this long, dark tunnel, they affirmed the interconnection between the bilateral and multilateral tracks. Their position was unanimously approved by all delegates who participated in the Moscow talks, despite the denial of their right to enter the meeting hall.

After 22 months of Washington negotiations, the Israelis presented their vision for a transitional phase: the old autonomy plan, starting with gradual transfer of twelve technical civil departments from Israeli to Palestinian hands, but without any mention of transferring the authority, withdrawing the military, or recognizing Palestinian rights on the land, water, Jerusalem, and nothing on the question sovereignty. In addition, the Israeli plan was limiting Palestinian rule to only one-third of the OPT whereby all authorities would remain in Israeli hands, including borders, continued settlement activity, and introducing the settlers as a party in issues relating to the OPT. The Israeli proposal was narrow, limited and reflected in its format and content clearly the Israeli intention not to leave the OPT, nor to recognize Palestinian rights; further, it reflected a retreat from positions Israelis had agreed on in the Camp David Accords.

The Palestinians presented a “political document” later known as PISyGA (Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority) based on Palestinian positions expressed in PNC decisions and the Fourteen Demands of the Intifada, and confirming that Palestinian needs ought to be met, including a freeze on settlements, guaranteeing the geographic integrity of the OPT, democratic elections, and freedom - all what is needed to provide for a political and social environment able to handle the changes. The Palestinians outlined the framework and the responsibilities of the interim Palestinian self-government, but Israel did not change its position nor accommodated it according to Palestinian needs and the negotiations faced a dead end. There were only these two documents - the Israeli autonomy plan and the Palestinian PISGA plan - with no influential mediator to close the gap between them.

6. The Oslo Channel

After nine months of negotiations in Madrid, five rounds of talks at the US State Department and the exchange of numerous documents outlining the positions of both the Palestinian and Israeli side with no common ground, and after it became obvious that neither the mediators nor the host US could

successfully influence the talks in one way or another, the negotiation had seemingly reached a deadlock. Throughout this period, both the Israeli government and the PLO, though for different reasons, were very much concerned with the role, performance and future of the Palestinian delegation.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was extremely worried that the PLO would infiltrate its members into the Palestinian delegation, as he had constantly opposed any attempt of the PLO to become part of that delegation and had even outlawed any contacts between members of the Palestinian delegation with the outside PLO. The gravity of this attitude became clear when Shamir dismissed Minister of Science Ezer Weizmann from his cabinet after the latter had established contacts with the PLO representative to Switzerland, Mr. Nabil Rimlawi.⁴⁵ Shamir was interested in maintaining the umbrella of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation. He sent verbal messages to Amman suggesting joint economic and tourist projects in the Red Sea area (Aqaba-Eilat) and anticipating the old Likud plan for a Jordanian role on the West Bank that leaves room for the interpretation of what the “Jordanian option” may be. Amman listened but did take neither the emissaries nor their messages serious.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, PLO chairman Arafat tried to balance the Likud’s plans by opening various back-channels with the Labour Party. Among these attempts was his encouraging Faisal Husseini’s to meet with Peres, Ephraim Sneh and others.

After the fall of Shamir, newly-elected Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin took office, formed a new government, and resumed negotiations with the Palestinian delegation in Washington. Throughout nine rounds of talks in Washington, the Palestinian delegation was too loyal to Arafat and the PLO leadership and refused to bypass them. Arafat saw the delegation as a “Trojan Horse” and encouraged Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi to convince Washington of the need for the PLO to hold direct talks. Washington’s advice was, however, not to rush things, not to jump to later phases, but to wait, saying that the PLO’s role is yet to come. From day one of the Washington negotiations, Arafat had sent two emissaries to be in direct contact with the Palestinian delegation (Akram Haniyyeh and Nabil Sha’ath) since it was his nightmare that the Palestinian delegation (al-Wafd) would turn into a substitute leadership. His famous quotation “they want Yasser Arafat to be a male bee, i.e. deliver once and die” speaks for itself. Arafat’s ongoing fear was that the negotiation process may not be governed by desires but by

⁴⁵ PM Shamir reportedly was furious about this move of Weizmann as well as his writing a letter to Chairman Arafat, conveyed by Dr. Ahmad Tibi. Both acts were seen by Shamir as the reason which contributed to Chairman Arafat’s decision to accept the Baker Plan. See *Ha’aretz*, Dec. 31, 1989.

⁴⁶ At the suggestion of Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem, Shamir received several Palestinian businessmen in his office, encouraging them to pass his verbal messages to officials in Jordan.

results and, despite all loyalty of the delegates to the PLO and to his leadership, he realized that those who will deliver are likely to become the future leaders. There were enough indicators for such an unwelcome development; for example, when it was the Jerusalemite leader Faisal Hussein, who, in his capacity as the head of the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks, exchanged official correspondence with US Secretary of State James Baker, who was officially received at the US State Department, and who, before the end of the 8th round of talks, was received by President George Bush in the White House.⁴⁷

The situation Arafat faced at this time resembles the episode of Chaim Weizmann, leader of the world Zionist movement, and Ben Gurion, then leader of the Jewish Agency “inside” Palestine, in 1948: following Israel’s declaration of independence and the establishment of the Jewish state, the “outside” leader Weizmann became the symbol of the state and its head, but it was Ben Gurion who formed the government and ruled as the Prime Minister.

With this background in mind, chairman Arafat and the PLO leadership in Tunis saw that the official negotiations taking place between 20 people in Washington would lead to nowhere. Recalling the experience of Vietnam, Algiers and Camp David, Arafat and his inner cabinet were convinced that other channels must be opened. The PLO needed a progress in the peace talks badly in order to maintain its legitimacy as the official representative and leadership of the Palestinian people, especially in view of an increasing opposition steered by the radicals in Damascus and the Islamic trends of Hamas and Jihad Islami, and to face King Hussein whose popularity was rapidly growing⁴⁸. To reach any further step in the peace process was furthermore crucial in order to contain the already recognized “inside” Palestinian leaders, and to grab the possibility of establishing direct secret contacts with Israel. The opening of new channels besides the official talks in Washington was encouraged by the Israeli Knesset decision to lift the ban on contacts with the PLO, although Arafat was wondering why the lifting at the ban coincided with the deportation of 400 Islamic leaders from the OPT.⁴⁹

On the other hand, Rabin and his inner cabinet thought along similar lines and came gradually to realize that the Palestinian delegation itself was not capable of signing an agreement with Israel nor of governing any interim regime, and that it lacked legitimization as it was not elected by the community but chosen by Israel in back-door coordination with the US and

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that Faisal Hussein’s audience with President George Bush was preceded by Teddy Kollek’s meeting with the President at the White House, only a few days before.

⁴⁸ Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 434

⁴⁹ Mamdouh Nofal, *The Story of the Oslo Agreement*. Amman, 1995, p.46.

the PLO. Furthermore, the Israeli side comprehended two other crucial aspects: that any agreement would require a strong and highly legitimate Palestinian authority in order to gain acceptance and be able to security and police forces to control the OPT; and the Israel's only alternative to dealing with the PLO as a political legitimate representative was the Islamic movement and its leadership. This however, would imply the transformation of the political conflict into a religious one - something the Rabin-Peres government could not afford.

Thus, at this stage, numerous other channels of contacts between the Palestinians and the Israelis were opened besides the official talks in Washington. Indeed, at least two of them contributed major elements to the final text of the accords, as did the ten rounds of formal negotiations at the State Department in Washington held between November 1991 and June 1993.⁵⁰ One of these channels was, again, the "inside", i.e. Faisal Husseini's and Hanan Ashrawi's contacts with and through Washington, instructed by and directly reported to Arafat but without the knowledge of any other member of the delegation nor of any other PLO leader in Tunis. Another channel was indirect contacts with and through Cairo of Arafat himself and members of his inner cabinet.⁵¹ A third channel was proposed by PLO Executive Committee member and head of the Palestinian negotiation committee, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), who suggested to open a back-channel contact with and through the Russians in Moscow in order to balance the Washington track. The Russians made a lot of efforts to convince the Israelis, but Foreign Minister Shimon Peres' answer was "what is already available is enough."⁵²

At a time when the talks had seemingly come to a deadlock and the two parties were in the urgent need to break out of their domestic constraints and to deliver some kind of an interim arrangement, an intermediary appeared who introduced an issue that addressed a major concern of both sides, though out of different motivations: Terje Larsen, founder of the Norwegian Institute for Applied Sciences, who at the time worked on a project to alleviate Gaza's chronic social problems, suggested to focus on "Gaza first" and an initial step towards a comprehensive agreement. Gaza was of particular interest for Israelis and Palestinians. Peres' thinking had centered for years on the notion of Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip⁵³, and also Rabin had repeatedly expressed in public speeches the wish that Gaza may disappeared from the map and 'sink in the sea'. On the other hand, chairman Arafat and most PLO leaders were very much aware of and seriously concerned with Gaza's daily cry for freedom and getting rid of Israeli

⁵⁰ See Rashid Khalidi. "A Palestinian View of the Accord with Israel", *Current History*, February 1994, pp. 62-66.

⁵¹ Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 434.

⁵² Mahmoud Abbas, *The Road to Oslo*. Beirut, 1994, p. 151.

⁵³ Jane Corbin. *Gaza First - The Secret Norway Channel to Peace Between Israel and the PLO*, 1994, p. 55.

occupation. Already back in 1974, at the Rabat Arab Summit in Morocco where the PLO was recognized by the Arab leaders as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, Egypt's President Anwar Sadat and Arafat had mentioned Jericho as a possible base for PLO authority and talked about the need to have a strong PLO presence in Gaza as well.⁵⁴

Terje Larsen, the Norwegian intermediary, suggested to Yossi Beilin, an Israeli Labour politician, who saw in Gaza one of Israel's biggest political and military problems which to solve was an priority⁵⁵, to meet Faisal Husseini and discuss the issue. The meeting between the two took place shortly before the Israeli June 1992 elections, but a second meeting did not materialized after Beilin became Peres' Deputy Minister in the Rabin government and Faisal Husseini was too much exposed to the media and public. It was very clear to the Israelis that Arafat would not welcome such a contact with the "inside leaders". Israeli officials were aware of the conflict and mutual fear defining the Palestinian inside-outside leadership relations at that time.

Yossi Beilin took the initiative to overcome this situation by giving green light to one of his academic colleagues, Yair Hirschfeld of Haifa University, to get in touch with Ahmad Qrei'a (Abu Ala'), the PLO's financial expert, at the multilateral meetings on December 3-4, 1992, in London. Palestinian delegation members Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi, together with the PLO representative in London, Afif Safieh, encouraged Qrei'a and arranged the first encounter. Meanwhile, Terje Larsen encouraged and convinced Hirschfeld to go to the meeting. PLO leaders in Tunis saw in this meeting a watershed, marking the beginning of direct and secret negotiations between the PLO and Israel. The "outside" leadership was very much concerned that the Palestinian "inside" delegation, i.e. Faisal Husseini, Hanan Ashrawi, Haidar Abdel Shafi and others would not learn more about the development of this channel. Abu Ala' later revealed that whenever Hirschfeld during the various stages of talks made attempts to approach Husseini, Ashrawi or any other Palestinian activist from inside the territories to pass a message or to comment on an issue, the PLO threatened the Israeli team to freeze the contacts or halt the talks. The PLO inner cabinet that supervised this back-channel consisted of chairman Arafat, Abu Mazen and Abu Ala', while Peres, with his close advisors⁵⁶, and Beilin, with his academic team⁵⁷, negotiated on the Israeli side. Both parties were keen to maintain the high level of secrecy of this channel and the Norwegian mediator committed himself to take full responsibility for facilitating the meetings with no intervention in the substance of the talks.

⁵⁴ Discussion with Jordan Prime Minister Zeid Refa'i in Amman during a seminar in Kronberg, Germany, March 1996.

⁵⁵ Mohammed Hassanen Haikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 435

⁵⁶ Uri Savir, Peres' Press spokesman and later Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and Avi Gill, Peres' Policy Advisor

⁵⁷ Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundik.

The leaderships on both sides faced domestic constraints and feared a political storm that would shake their bases. In this regard, the Palestinians faced two crises. First, when the Palestinian delegation's leading figures, namely Faisal Husseini, Hanan Ashrawi and Sa'eb Erekat, resigned due to differences with Arafat in terms of tactics and strategies and because of the absence of a centralized body to coordinate and govern the negotiation process. Additionally, they had suspicions that there may be another negotiation channel behind their backs, undermining their own efforts. The second crisis emerged when three PLO leaders (Abu Mazen, Yasser Abed Rabbo and Mahmoud Darwish) resigned due to differences with chairman Arafat regarding the handling of the PLO's financial affairs and the possible bankruptcy of its institutions. Chairman Arafat contained the first storm by accepting the establishment of a higher coordinating body to supervise the negotiations, and allowing the participation of leaders from the inside. The second storm he managed to abort by disclosing the news of the successful developments on the Oslo track to the resigning PLO leaders. They withdrew their resignation with the exception of Mahmoud Darwish whose move was followed by others such as PLO Executive Committee member Shafiq al-Hout, PLO representative in Beirut.⁵⁸

On the Israeli side, there was the case of Mr. Dore'i of the Shas Party who was - following his conviction of bribery by the Israeli High Court - asked to resign, or otherwise be dismissed from office by the Prime Minister. This episode resulted in the Shas Party's withdrawal from the government, which in turn shakened and weakened the coalition government, leaving it depending on the Arab votes in the Knesset. At the same time, rumors of alleged secret negotiations taking place between Israel and Jordan, stirred more dissension within Israeli ranks. At the same time, these rumors were "an invitation" to Hamas, Jihad Islami and other Islamic organizations on both banks of the Jordan River to coordinate positions and prepare strategies to face any outcome of the alleged Jordanian-Israeli talks.

The Israeli agenda for the breakthrough was made up of three components as Foreign Minister Peres put it: a) a partial staged Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories, beginning with Gaza as an opening gambit; b) postponing the rather difficult and complicated issues to the future, i.e. a later round of talks, when the final status of the OPT would be decided upon - thus, leaving the future of the West Bank and Gaza Strip for the time being enveloped in fog; and c) building a strong foundation of economic cooperation.⁵⁹ This concept allowed it to make the future of Palestinian autonomy with "Gaza-Jericho first" depending on the future balance of power and on Palestinian capabilities to develop towards an independent Palestinian

⁵⁸ Mamdouh Nofal, *The Story of the Oslo Agreement*. Amman, 1995, pp. 111-114.

⁵⁹ Jane Corbin, *Gaza First - The Secret Norway Channel to Peace between Israel and the PLO*. 1994, p. 57

state - or otherwise to face transformation into a scattered “bantustan” with Israeli *de facto* - if not *de jure* - sovereignty⁶⁰. The postponement of the most difficult issues to the final status talks, including Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, security, relations and cooperation with other neighbors made further clear that the Israeli side considered Oslo as a test, i.e. an interim phase, during each stage of which they would insist on the fulfillment of certain guarantees before moving any further.

The Palestinian agenda, on the other hand, was determined by a) the notion that reaching an agreement would mean a historical breakthrough in terms of mutual recognition. This recognition could take the form of a declaration of principles or of a framework agreement similar to the Camp David accords; b) the importance of the “Gaza-Jericho First” formula as an incentive to market the proposed declaration of principles by establishing an official, recognized PLO authority on Palestinian soil; c) the realization that separating the difficult issues from those that can be agreed upon rather easily would make way for needed compromises; d) the comprehension that a Palestinian-Israeli agreement would open the door for other agreements with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. For the Palestinians, Oslo was thus a step needed in order to establish an official and recognized PLO authority on part of their homeland. Another incentive for the acceptance of a historical reconciliation with the Israelis was the recognition of the OPT “as a single territorial unit whose integrity will be preserved during the interim period”⁶¹.

The Norwegian intermediaries contributed a great deal to what the world witnessed as the first ever historical handshake between Israeli and Palestinian top leaders at the lawn of the White House on 13 September 1993. The substance of the DOP was the exchange of “land for peace” and limited Palestinian self-rule during a transitional phase until the final status talks on the remaining major issues would provide for a permanent settlement. In fact, this understanding did not at all differ from the principles underlying the initial Madrid peace conference, the invitation to which - dated October 18, 1991 -read:

“the aim of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations within the current Middle East peace process is, among other things, to establish a Palestinian interim self-government authority, to elect a Council for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, for the transitional period not exceeding five years, leading to a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. It is understood that the interim arrangements are an integral part of the whole peace process and that the negotiations

⁶⁰ Michel Warschawsky, “How the Intifada Led to the Oslo Agreement”, *News From Within*, January 1994, p. 6.

⁶¹ Declaration of Principles, Article 4 “Jurisdiction”.

*on the permanent status will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 and 338.*⁶²

Conclusion

The Oslo “breakthrough” was one of many opportunities to build on for a just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but it seems that still too many people are prisoners of past ideologies, principles and positions and do not realize the importance of looking forward to the future. They rather tend to underestimate the power and options of the respective other side. The major lesson to be learnt from the Oslo experience is that it needs more than the will and the courage and than pressure and constraints to force legitimate leaders to reach political agreements putting an end to deep-rooted historical conflicts.

The Oslo accords were signed between the PLO, the embodiment of Palestinian aspirations and their legitimate, historic and sole leadership, and the elected Israeli government, headed by the Labour Party. The Oslo blueprint delivered mutual recognition and conformed to the common interest in minimizing the role of Islamic and extremist bodies at either end. However, the agreement to build a relationship on the principle of “land for peace”, reiterated in the subsequent Gaza-Jericho Autonomy Agreement signed on May 4th, 1994 in Cairo, was designed according to Rabin’s and Peres’ vision to leave the OPT in stages or through testing periods.

Today, three years after Oslo, there is a Palestinian authority with an elected Legislative Council governing the autonomous areas of the Zone A-category, coordinating with Israeli security forces on the territory falling in the zone B-category, while the most of the OPT - Zone C - remains under Israel’s full control. The Palestinian, after accepting the transitional phase as an opportunity to establish their civil society and institutions and to build bridges of trust, understanding and cooperation with the other side, are now facing a new dilemma. It took them two decades of steadfastness under occupation, five years of Intifada challenging the occupiers, and three years of long and painful negotiations in Madrid, Washington and Moscow to bring about the DoP as a historical reconciliation document signed with the Israeli Labour Party representing half of the Israeli society.

After the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin on 4th November 1995 by a Jewish extremist, and, six months later, with the defeat of the Labour Party, the rise of the right-wing Likud Party and the direct election of Benjamin Netanyahu as the new Prime Minister, Palestinians realize that not even half of the Israeli

⁶² *Journal of Palestine Studies*, No. 2 (Winter 1992).

society accepts a political settlement on the basis of the land-for-peace formula. It took Mr. Netanyahu 100 days in office to evoke a storm in both societies as well as to the region. The Palestinian angry outburst on 24/25th September 1996 - in response to the Likud government's policies and practices - brought the Palestinian-Israeli conflict once again to a crossroads with no clear indication of what lies ahead.

Against the background of the - for Palestinians unacceptable - formula of Mr. Netanyahu to contain the problems in the Gaza Strip through economic scenarios while sharing, not leaving, the West Bank, it was again the Norwegians who mediated. On the recommendation of his advisor Dore Gold, Netanyahu had invited Terje Larson, UN Special Coordinator for the Occupied Territories on August 14th, 1996 to his office and asked him and his wife Muna Juul to host a series of quiet top-level Palestinian-Israeli meetings in a bid to reach an agreement with Arafat. Arafat welcomed the idea as he would have his personal direct channel for a new chapter of PLO-Likud relations.⁶³

The Norwegian mediation led to the first official public meeting between chairman Arafat and the Likud Party's leader and Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu, in Beit Hanoun/Gaza, where we witnessed the second historical handshake on September 4th, 1996 - almost three years after Oslo. The goal of the meeting at Beit Hanoun was substantially to resume the halted bilateral talks and to arrange for the implementation of the provisions of the transitional phase signed with the previous government.

The confidential note for the records of the Palestinian-Israeli meeting of September 4th, put together by the Norwegian intermediaries' at their residency in Tel Aviv, states the following:

*"In meetings held today, Israel and the PLO are reactivating the negotiations at all levels. To this end, the two parties agreed that the Steering and Monitoring Committee will monitor and steer the implementation of the interim agreement and will deal with all outstanding commitments and issues, while giving immediate priority to the following: closure, Hebron, special security issues, including Gaza Airport. The Steering Committee will convene on Thursday, 5th September 1996. As work on these issues are going on, the parties will also start working on all other outstanding issues. This will facilitate the negotiations on permanent status, as well, at the earliest possible date. Both Israel and the PLO are interested in reaching tangible results on the ground. Neither has any interest in the process of negotiation for its own sake. (Possible differences between both sides will be discussed between Mr. Arafat and Mr. Netanyahu)."*⁶⁴

⁶³ *Jerusalem Post*, September 2, 1996.

⁶⁴ Private paper of a Palestinian negotiator.

The role of the external parties involved in the Oslo phase has been that of assisting the two main parties in conflict in taking up their new positions and in reshaping their relationship, while, at the same time scoring points and striking alliances on their own behalves.

And it is true that the role of leaders is to lead, to bring about agreements, build public opinion and the consent of their people, but historical leaders with the strong commitment and vision are not always available; and if they are, they may not have enough time to fulfill their dreams.

The positive results of the meetings since 1967 until 1990 can be summed up as follows: they helped exploring opinions and ideas in the search for short and long-term solutions and illustrated the various reactions of the local communities to the respective outcomes of these meetings. They also helped shaping the Palestinian leadership and coordinating among various figures and schools of thought. Finally, they contributed a great deal to the promotion of a national leadership. On the other hand, they divided people into moderates, neutrals and extremists or loyalists, mainstreamers and opposition, thus preventing a real national alliance to emerge, and exposed positions, contacts and relations.

The theme of this phase was “negotiation, recognition, reconciliation”. The PLO leadership, in a divided Arab house, accepted the challenges and went under a joint umbrella with Jordan to Madrid in October 1991 and in separate teams to subsequent talks in Washington. No changes in Israeli policies and practices in the OPT occurred and all they wanted was to return to the old autonomy plan. After 22 months of fruitless negotiations, the Palestinians inside delivered the PISGA plan. That initiative made the PLO outside to open five different channels of negotiations, one of which led to the Oslo Agreement / DOP.

After three years of the breakthrough in Oslo and the signing of the DoP between the Israeli government and the PLO, the political environment in the Middle East of today is characterized by feelings of bitterness, depression, anger, and fears of possible scenarios to go back to hostility. Believing that the strong image of the historical hand-shake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the 13th of September 1993 at the White House does not necessarily mean that the conflict is over. If we look closely at the three countries Israel Palestine and Jordan today, it is easy to come to the conclusion that the peace process is not delivering the people's expectations of stability and economic development as well as partnership. Israel is today a divided country, the assassination of Mr. Rabin on 4th November 1995 reflected the serious division within Israeli society. The rise of the right-wing government led by the Likud party and the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister showed that the Israeli society is not in favor of becoming a member of the Arab Middle East through the avenues of the two-track talks of the peace process. The new Israeli government is not endorsing the 'land for peace' formula but is, on the contrary, confiscating land, expanding settlements and freezing the implementation of the agreements. In Israel itself, there are series of strikes among physicians, professionals, trade unionists and workers, as well as possible political storms within the Likud party as well as struggles for power in the Labour party. Mr. Netanyahu's

strategy has been to maintain the status quo, limit contacts and not delivering anything to the Palestinians, hoping to change the political agenda towards a new Israeli-Jordanian scenario.

Conclusion

Nature and scope of meetings during preliminary phases which lead to the entering of negotiations and the role of the intermediaries involved in them.

Preconditions and procedures of conflict resolutions in general and why meetings held previous to Oslo did not succeed.

* Why did Oslo lead to what is considered a “breakthrough” while Madrid and other venues failed?

- was it due to changed conditions?
- was it simply the ripe period for it?
- was the Oslo channel more appropriate to the conflict than others?

Why?

* What was the role, and the importance of the role, of mediators and other third party intervention?

* How did the overall situation influence the outcome? (Setting, participants, their relation and previous contacts to each other, the way of interaction)

* Which was the key process(es) that led to the breakthrough? What kind of setbacks did occur and how were they overcome?

* Which practical/theoretical lessons can be learned from the Oslo case? Especially in terms of resolution of seemingly intractable conflicts.

* Are existing theories appropriate to explain Oslo?