

Why Did Rabin Fall for the Oslo Process?

by Efraim Karsh

Precisely two decades after the failure by the Golda Meir government to identify a willing Arab peace partner triggered the devastating 1973 Yom Kippur war, another Labor government wrought a far worse catastrophe by substituting an unreconstructed terror organization committed to Israel's destruction for a willing peace partner. Instead of ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the "Oslo peace process" between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) created an ineradicable terror entity on Israel's doorstep that has murdered some 1,600 Israelis, rained thousands of rockets and missiles on the country's population centers, and toiled tirelessly to delegitimize the right of the Jewish state to exist.

How did this come to pass? Why did two of Israel's foremost security and foreign policy veterans—Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres—lead into Israel what a prominent PLO official candidly described as a Trojan horse designed to promote the organization's strategic goal: "Palestine from the [Jordan] river to the [Mediterranean] sea"—that is, a Palestine in place of the state of Israel?¹



(Left to right): PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres, and prime minister Yitzhak Rabin accept the 1994 Nobel Peace prize in Oslo. Instead of peace, two of Israel's foremost security and foreign policy veterans created an ineradicable terror entity on Israel's doorstep.

¹ Faisal Hussein interview, *al-Arabi* (Cairo), June 24, 2000.

Eyes Wide Shut

PLO chairman Yasser Arafat was a diehard man of war who made violence, dislocation, and mayhem the defining characteristics of his career. In 1970, he nearly brought about the destruction of Jordan. Five years later, he helped trigger the horrendous Lebanese civil war, one of the bloodiest conflicts in modern Middle Eastern history, which raged for more than a decade and claimed hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. In 1990-91, he supported the brutalization of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein, at an exorbitant cost to the Palestinians living there, thousands of whom were murdered in revenge attacks while hundreds of thousands more were expelled after Kuwait's liberation. In between these disasters, Arafat made the Palestinian national movement synonymous with violence and turned the PLO into one of the world's most murderous terror organizations with the overarching goal of bringing about Israel's demise.

How, then, did the Rabin government come to believe in the instantaneous transformation of the man and his organization into dedicated agents of peace? In Northern Ireland, the decommissioning of weapons by all paramilitary groups was a prerequisite to the peace process. In the Oslo process, the Israeli government viewed the arming of thousands of (hopefully reformed) terrorists and their entrustment with enforcing law and order throughout the West Bank and Gaza as the key to peace and security. Where did this incredible delusion originate?

From nowhere, it would seem. There were no ultimate goals set for the Oslo negotiating team, no roadmap to follow. There were no serious discussions over the direction of the process, not even awareness among the negotiators and their superiors of each other's vision of peace. "I don't remember a single serious, penetrating discussion within the Labor Party, the cabinet,

or the negotiating team about the final-status solution," Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, Peres's longtime protégé and Oslo's chief architect told an inquiring reporter.

"I cannot understand," demurred the astounded reporter. "In 1992, a government was elected. In 1993, you initiated the Oslo process. Yet at no stage you asked yourselves where all this was headed?"

"No."

"And yet, when the cabinet approved the Oslo accord in a quick and superficial session, with almost no discussion, weren't you disturbed?"

"It was amazing. Amazing. For dozens of years, I had been talking to these people, and they had been opposing, like lions, my various proposals regarding [negotiations with] the PLO ... Then all of a sudden Rabin brings an agreement with the PLO and all are in favor."²

This glaring failure to deliberate the envisaged outcome of the most ambitious peace effort vis-à-vis the Palestinians in Israel's history did not prevent Peres from applauding Oslo, not only as the end of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but also as the harbinger of a "New Middle East" that will serve as "a spiritual and cultural focal point for the entire world":

A Middle East without wars,
without enemies, without ballistic
missiles, without nuclear warheads.
A Middle East in which men,
goods, and services can move
freely without the need for customs
clearance and police licenses ... A
Middle East where living standards

² Yossi Beilin, interview with Ari Shavit, *Haaretz Weekly Magazine*, Mar. 7, 1997.

are in no way inferior to those in the world's most advanced countries ... in which no hostile borders bring death, hunger, and despair ... A Middle East that is not a killing field but a field of creativity and growth.³

Peres went out of his way to deny, dilute, and whitewash the countless Palestinian violations of the accords.

In Peres's view, by joining the Oslo process, Arafat and the PLO had become partners to a momentous historical odyssey; and as long as this partnership remained intact, its success was a foregone conclusion:

I think what is really important for a peace process is the creation of a partner, more than a plan [b]ecause plans don't create partners, but if you have a partner, then you negotiate a plan. ...When I was thinking about the peace process, I knew in my heart that the greatest problem is how to transform Arafat from the most hated gentleman in this country, and himself with an array of very strange ideas, into a partner that we can sit with, and make him become acceptable to our people— maybe not beloved but at least accepted.⁴

But what if the would-be partner failed to act out the role ascribed to him? What if his "array of very strange ideas" proved impermeable to change? Peres' response: "We close our eyes. We don't criticize

because, for peace, we must produce a partner."⁵

Peres fully lived up to this principle, going out of his way to deny, dilute, and whitewash the countless Palestinian violations of the accords, or indeed— anything that alluded to the PLO's continued commitment to Israel's destruction. "The right of return is in my view an Arab dream that is bound to remain a dream," he dismissed the Palestinian euphemism for Israel's destruction through demographic subversion as late as September 2001, after the issue had been instrumental in wrecking both the July 2000 Camp David summit and President Clinton's proposed peace plan several months later. "I thought then, just as I think today, that one can solve problems without giving up the dreams."⁶

Peres was similarly delusional about the PLO's failure to abolish the clauses in the Palestinian covenant calling for Israel's destruction, as required by the Oslo accords. Thus, for example, when the speaker of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the PLO's semi-parliament, conditioned the covenant's amendment on fresh Israeli concessions, Peres dismissed his demands out of hand. "We did not sign an agreement with the PNC speaker. We signed it with the PLO leadership and it is incumbent upon them to ensure its implementation," he argued, as if it were not the PNC that had adopted the covenant in the first place in 1964, revised it in 1968, and was the only body legally authorized to execute the required amendments. Small wonder that when Arafat informed him on May 4, 1996,

³ "[The Nobel Peace Prize 1994. Shimon Peres - Nobel Lecture.](#)" Nobleprize.org; Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1993).

⁴ Connie Bruck, "The Wounds of Peace," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 14, 1996.

⁵ Shimon Peres, letter to the editor, *The Jerusalem Post*, May 21, 1996.

⁶ *Maariv* (Tel Aviv), Sept. 25, 2001.

that the covenant had been amended, Peres instantaneously lauded the alleged move as “the most important event in the Middle East in a hundred years” though it quickly transpired that no such amendment had actually taken place.⁷ Indeed, the covenant, with its plethora of articles calling for Israel’s destruction, stands unrevised to this very day.

When, in May 1994, Arafat told a closed meeting of Muslim leaders in Johannesburg that the Oslo accords were a temporary arrangement designed to bring about Israel’s eventual demise, urging them to help spark a pan-Muslim jihad against Israel, Peres excused the comments as reflecting Arafat’s tortuous adjustment to the new reality while Beilin brushed the remarks off as “silly words.”

Beilin was no less dismissive of Arafat’s insistence on Jerusalem as capital of the prospective Palestinian state. “The Palestinians understand that we cannot give up [Israel’s sovereignty over the city],” he argued. “In the end, they will have to face the difficult dilemma, from their point of view, of giving up the demand for sovereignty in Jerusalem, just as they would have to give up the demand for Israel’s withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders.” He was similarly buoyant about the demilitarization of the future Palestinian state: “I learned that the civilian Palestinian leadership has no interest in a strong Palestinian army because it is keenly aware of the likely balance of forces between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and itself.”⁸

⁷ Efraim Karsh, *Arafat’s War* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2003), pp. 77-83.

⁸ Yossi Beilin, interview, *Al Hamishmar* (Tel Aviv), Sept. 29, 1993, May 19, 1994; Beilin interview, *Haaretz Weekly Magazine*, Mar. 7, 1997; see, also, *Maariv Weekly Magazine*, Sept. 15, 1995.



In May 1994, Arafat told a closed meeting of Muslim leaders that the Oslo accords were a temporary arrangement designed to bring about Israel’s eventual demise, urging them to spark a pan-Muslim jihad against Israel.

That Beilin seemed to believe these incredible assertions was evidenced by his chilling prediction that “the greatest test of the accord will not be in the intellectual sphere, but will rather be a test of blood.” Should there be no significant drop in the level of violence and terrorism “within a reasonable period of time” after the formation of the Palestinian Authority, he argued, the process would be considered a failure, and Israel would have no choice but to renege on the Oslo accords. “This will only be a means of last resort,” he said. “But if we realize that the level of violence does not subside, we will not be able to proceed, and will most certainly not implement the final-status agreement. And should there be no choice, the IDF will return to those places which it is about to vacate in the coming months.”⁹

⁹ *Maariv*, Nov. 26, 1993.



Egyptian president Anwar Sadat (right) shakes hands with Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, Jerusalem, November 20, 1977. Following the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979, Rabin believed that the greatest remaining threat to Israel's national security was Syria and that a Syrian-Israeli agreement was also likely to pave the road for peace with Lebanon and the Palestinians.

Twenty-five years and thousands of deaths later, with the Gaza Strip transformed into an entrenched terror entity and Israel experiencing horrific waves of terrorism as never before, there is no doubting the abysmal failure of this “test of blood.” Yet rather than reconsider his disastrously flawed premises in the face of their horrendous cost, let alone follow his own pledge to stop the process in such circumstances, Beilin, like other “peace camp” acolytes, continued to willfully ignore the Palestinians’ wanton violation of contractual obligations while blaming Israel for the stalled process. This, despite the public endorsement of the two-state solution by five successive Israeli prime ministers: Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Rabin’s Reversal

If Peres and Beilin’s self-delusion can be partly explained, if not condoned, on ideological grounds, Rabin’s behavior seems nothing short of the extraordinary. Unlike Beilin, he did not equate peacemaking and reconciliation with appeasement and self-flagellation; unlike Peres, he had no pipe dream of a budding “New Middle East.” Rather he was a quintessential representative of the “activist” approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict dating back to Zeev Jabotinsky and David Ben-Gurion, which upheld that peace would only follow upon Arab realization of the inability to destroy Israel by force of arms. And since the March 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty had removed the largest and most powerful Arab state from the circle of war, Rabin believed that Israel’s top strategic priority was

to neutralize the remaining greatest threat to its national security: Syria. A Syrian-Israeli agreement, he reasoned, was also likely to pave the road for peace with Lebanon, long under Damascus’s tutelage, and with the Palestinians, who would have no choice but to fall in line with their stronger Arab allies.

It was only upon realizing that President Hafez Assad would not take the plunge despite Israel’s readiness to withdraw from virtually the entire Golan Heights that Rabin turned his sights to the Palestinian track. Even then, his clear preference was to negotiate with the local West Bank and Gaza leadership (the “inside” in Palestinian parlance) rather than with the Tunis-based PLO headship, which he considered

incorrigibly extremist and corrupt. So deep was his loathing of Arafat that he planned to shun the Washington signing ceremony altogether and was talked into coming by a personal phone call from Secretary of State Warren Christopher. “We’ll take an anti-nausea pill and go,” he told his press secretary. Shortly before the signing ceremony, as Israelis, Palestinians, and other guests mingled in the White House, Christopher watched Rabin circle the Blue Room to avoid shaking hands with Arafat. “Of all the hands in the world, it was not the hand that I wanted or even dreamt of touching,” the prime minister told a group of Jewish leaders after the ceremony.¹⁰ (Ironically, Peres was so distraught by Rabin’s decision to attend the signing ceremony, lest this would rob him of the credit for the agreement, that he considered resigning his post.)¹¹

Rabin’s preference for the “inside” leadership made eminent sense. Unlike the PLO’s diaspora constituents (the “outside”), who upheld the extremist dream of returning to their 1948 dwellings at the cost of Israel’s destruction, West Bankers and Gazans were amenable to peaceful coexistence that would allow them to get on with their lives and sustain the astounding economic boom begun under Israel’s control. During the 1970s, for example, the West Bank and Gaza were the

Unlike the PLO’s diaspora, West Bankers and Gazans were amenable to peaceful coexistence that would allow them to get on with their lives.

fourth fastest-growing economy in the world— ahead of such “wonders” as Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea, making socioeconomic conditions there far bet-

ter than in most neighboring Arab states. And while the outside diaspora had no direct interaction with Israelis (and for that matter with any other democratic system), Israel’s prolonged rule had given the “inside” Palestinians a far more realistic and less extreme perspective: hence their perception of Israel as more democratic than the major Western nations;¹² hence their overwhelming support for the abolition of those clauses in the Palestinian covenant that called for Israel’s destruction and their rejection of terror attacks;¹³ and hence their indifference to the thorniest issue of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, and the one central to the PLO’s persistent effort to destroy Israel, namely, the “right of return.” As late as March 1999, two months before the lapse of the official deadline for the completion of the Oslo final-status negotiations, more than 85 percent of respondents in the territories did not consider the refugee question the most important problem facing the Palestinian people.¹⁴

¹⁰ Warren Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 2001), pp. 202, 204; *The Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 21, 1993; Arutz 7 (Beit El and Petah Tikva), [Sept. 18, 2013](#).

¹¹ Avi Gil, *Nushat Peres: Meyomano shel Shutaf Sod* (Modiin: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2018), pp. 146-8.

¹² “Results of Public Opinion Poll No. 25,” Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, Washington, D.C., Dec. 26-28, 1996, p. 14.

¹³ “Palestinian Public Opinion about the Peace Process, 1993-1999,” Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, Washington, D.C., 1999; “New Beginning,” *U.S. News & World Report*, Sept. 13, 1993.

¹⁴ “Public Opinion Poll No. 31 - Part I: On Palestinian Attitudes towards Politics,” Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, Mar. 1999, p. 3.



Yossi Beilin (right) with Mahmoud Abbas, then the PLO signatory for the Oslo accords. Rabin's lack of faith in Oslo was a corollary of his distrust of Shimon Peres and Beilin, whom he labelled "Peres's poodle."

Rabin's lack of faith in Oslo was also a corollary of his distrust of Peres, for whom he had harbored a deep personal animosity since the mid-1970s, and Beilin, whom he pejoratively labelled "Peres's poodle." According to Jacques Neria, Rabin's foreign policy advisor at the time, the prime minister authorized the Oslo talks as a ploy to keep Peres occupied with what Rabin believed to be a stillborn project while he was negotiating with Assad.¹⁵ If this was indeed the case, then Rabin had disastrously underestimated his nemesis' political skills. By the time he turned his sights to the Palestinian issue, Peres and Beilin had transformed Oslo into the foremost negotiating channel, having reportedly collaborated with

¹⁵ Jacques Neria, lecture, BESA Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Apr. 2017; see, also, Yossi Beilin: *Lagaat Bashalom* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 1997), p. 153.

the PLO in obstructing the Washington peace talks and preventing the "inside" delegation there from establishing direct contact with Rabin and his people.¹⁶

Interestingly, this was not the last time that Peres collaborated with the PLO against his own government. Two decades later, as Israel's president, he strove to persuade the Obama administration, among others, that "it is unfair to demand that the Palestinians give up one inch from the total territory of the 1967 lines"—in contravention

of Security Council Resolution 242, which envisaged territorial adjustments to these lines, and his own longtime held position.¹⁷

In a last ditch attempt to rein in his foreign minister, on June 7, 1993, Rabin instructed Peres to stop the Oslo talks until further notice, secretly sending his confidant Efraim Sneh to London to try to reach a better deal with the PLO. "In the current situation, the so-called 'Oslo contacts' pose a danger to the continuation of the peace negotiations," he wrote to Peres:

They provide the Tunis people with an opportunity to bypass the

¹⁶ Mamduh Nawfal, *Qisat Ittifaq Uslu: ar-Riwaya al-Haqiqiya al-Kamila* (Amman: al-Ahliya, 1995), pp. 61-7.

¹⁷ Gil, *Nushat Peres*, p. 297.

Washington talks and weaken the moderate element there: the West Bank and Gaza members of the Palestinian del-

egation. The Tunis people are the extreme element of those Palestinians interested in the peace process, preventing the more moderate elements from making progress in their negotiations with us ... the Tunis people seek to torpedo any chance for real negotiations in Washington and to force us to negotiate only with them, something that will endanger the peace moves and negotiations with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.¹⁸

As late as August 2, 1993, Rabin told Peres that he would rather pursue the Syrian than the Palestinian track. “We made many concessions to the Palestinians, to no avail,” he argued. “Arafat’s coming to Gaza is hugely problematic.”¹⁹ It was only when he learned from Christopher of Assad’s prohibitive demands, and when Sneh’s attempt to improve Israel’s negotiating position and reduce its security risks (e.g., by conditioning recognition of the PLO on a six-month suspension of terror attacks) came to naught, that the Oslo talks were swiftly resumed, culminating in the White House signing ceremony on September 13. Sneh wrote in his memoirs,

Thus the Palestinians managed to reach the Israeli government through a channel that was more

**As late as August 1993,
Rabin told Peres that he would
rather pursue the Syrian track
than the Palestinian.**

trusting, less cautious, more eager to reach an agreement, and better disposed to concessions.²⁰

Why Rabin decided to abandon his astute approach to the Palestinian problem in favor of an agreement he deemed “a national disaster,”²¹ brokered by colleagues he distrusted, and inextricably binding him to a partner he profoundly loathed, remains somewhat of a mystery. He might have reckoned that, in the circumstances, Oslo offered the only way to portray him as fulfilling his 1992 election pledge to reach an agreement with the Palestinians within nine months of taking office. He might have also recognized his inability to rally the Labor party behind his preference for the “inside” given the strong support there for negotiations with the Tunis leadership, on the one hand, and Peres’s tight grip over most party organs, on the other. It has even been argued that Rabin was likely to face an internal rebellion, probably ending in his dethronement as party leader and prime minister, had he chosen to confront Peres and his supporters over the issue of Palestinian representation.²² As Beilin put it, the “Oslo story is the story of a man who was dragged into it against his will. He did not want the entire thing; he wasn’t interested. He

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 129-30.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 134-5.

²⁰ Efraim Sneh, *Nivut Beshetah Mesukan* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2002), pp. 22-3.

²¹ “[Jacques Neria: Rabin was a hawk](#) - there would have been no agreement had he known Arafat’s true intentions,” YouTube, Jan. 8, 2017.

²² Adam Raz, “[Hazitot Mitnagshot: Haanatomia ‘Hamuzara’ shel Hakhreat Oslo shel Rabin.](#)” *Israelim*, Autumn 2012, pp. 126-8.

grudgingly gave his repeated consent so as not to destroy his relations with Peres.”²³

Above all, Rabin’s readiness to embrace Oslo was grounded in his conviction in the reversibility of the process. As he told a high-ranking consultation shortly before departing for the Washington signing ceremony,

An agreement with the Palestinians is reversible. An agreement with Syria is irreversible. Should the Palestinians cause trouble, we will reenter [their territory]. This is our backyard. But if we give the Golan Heights to Syria, we will have to launch a full-fledged war [should Damascus violate the agreement].²⁴

As with his initial decision to authorize the Oslo talks, this premise proved disastrously misconceived. Rather than navigate Israel’s foreign policy in his own vision, as he famously pronounced in his victory speech on election night, he found himself skidding down a slippery slope into a process he would have rather avoided. He made his displeasure repeatedly known yet failed to take the necessary measures to stop the slide. Instead, he developed the oddest excuses to justify his behavior, including the oxymoronic thesis of ensuring Palestinian compliance through noncompliance: Rather than demand the PLO’s strict adherence to

Rabin’s readiness to embrace Oslo was grounded in his conviction in the reversibility of the process.

the accords, let alone publicly fault Arafat for noncompliance, Israel should seek to boost Arafat’s position through accommodation (e.g., re-

leasing larger numbers of imprisoned terrorists; allowing the return of West Bankers who had fled during the June 1967 war). When, in late October and early November 1993, three Israelis were murdered in terror attacks, one of them by Arafat’s Fatah group, Rabin stated that he did not consider the PLO leader responsible for preventing terror attacks by “dissenting” Palestinian groups. The following month, Rabin announced that the IDF would preempt terror attacks from the Gaza Strip and Jericho after the evacuation of these territories, only to back down in the face of Palestinian protest and to assert that “there will be no thwarting of terrorist actions.” A few months later, he took this concession a big step forward by telling the Knesset that terrorism was a natural outcome of the Oslo accords. He similarly excused the PLO’s open pleading with the Arab states to sustain their economic boycott of Israel as an understandable negotiating ploy.²⁵

This is not to ignore Rabin’s occasional berating of Arafat, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) and PLO more generally, for failing to fight terrorism and/or meet other contractual obligations, notably the

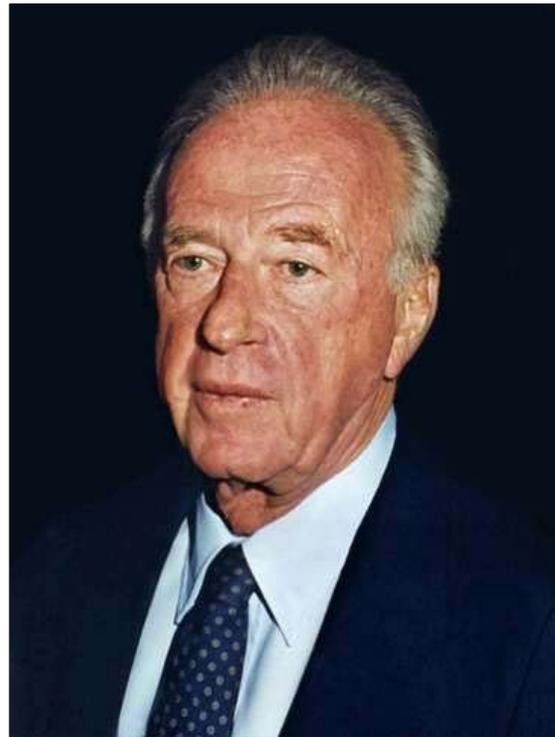
²³ Gil, *Nushat Peres*, pp. 115-6.

²⁴ Jacques Neria as cited in Israel Rosenblatt, “[Moreshet Rabin - Zo Shelo Rotsim Shetakiru](#),” *News1*, Dec. 10, 2016; see also Neria, *Bein Rabin Le’Arafat: Yoman Medini 1993-1994* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2016), pp. 29, 88.

²⁵ *Haolam Ha’ze* (Tel Aviv), Oct. 13, 1993; *Al Hamishmar*, Nov. 16, 1993; *The Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 18, 19, May 27, 1994; Zeev Binyamin Begin, “Yasser Arafat’s Lackey,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 28, 1993; Zeev Binyamin Begin, “Revealing Mistakes,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 26, 1993; Zeev Binyamin Begin, *Sipur Atsuv* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2000), p. 77.

amendment of the Palestinian covenant.²⁶ Yet these warnings made no perceptible impact on the Palestinian leadership, not least since they were not followed by any meaningful sanctions. Thus, for example, not only did Arafat ignore Rabin's demand to retract his infamous Johannesburg incitement, but he publicly reiterated the same themes shortly after the original speech.²⁷ When, in August 1994, Arafat failed to condemn the call for Israel's destruction by Farouq Qaddoumi, the PLO's perpetual "foreign minister," Rabin threatened not to sign the early empowerment agreement, stipulating the transfer of some forms of civilian authority in the West Bank and Gaza, only to back down and sign it on the designated date later that month. The interim agreement of September 1995 giving the PA control over 95 percent of the West Bank's Palestinian population (control of the Gaza populace had been transferred in spring 1994) was similarly signed despite the PLO's failure to amend the covenant or to stem terrorism.

On October 20, 1994, a week after delivering his toughest reprimand of Arafat following the murder of twenty-one people in a suicide bombing on a Tel Aviv bus, Rabin stated that it would be a mistake to blame the PA for the rampaging terrorism. At a press conference with Arafat on January 19, 1995, he went further by claiming that Israel did not expect watertight guarantees on the halt of all attacks from PA-controlled territories.²⁸ When three days later nineteen Israelis were murdered in a suicide bombing at the Beit Lid junction in central Israel—with Arafat



At a press conference with Yasser Arafat, January 19, 1995, Rabin claimed that Israel did not expect watertight guarantees on the halt of all attacks from PA-controlled territories.

publicly applauding the atrocity—Rabin temporarily banned Palestinian movement from the territories to Israel and threatened that "we will not be able to move forward unless we are confident that the personal security [of Israelis] is assured."²⁹ Yet for all his exasperation, he could not bring himself to break with Arafat. When Israeli president Ezer Weizmann, himself a leading proponent of Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, called for a response to the Beit Lid massacre by halting the Oslo process, Rabin was reportedly "livid," though some of his ministers backed the suggestion and even Uri

²⁶ See, for example, *Al Hamishmar*, Aug. 11, 16, Sept. 1, 1994; *The Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 14, 1994.

²⁷ *The Jerusalem Post*, June 1, 1994.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Oct. 20, 1994; *Haaretz*, Jan. 20, 1995.

²⁹ *Haaretz*, Jan. 24, 29, 1995; *Maariv*, Jan. 24, 27, 1995; *The Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 5, 1995.

Savir, Oslo's chief negotiator, warned, "We need a profound change of direction to make the next stage a success."³⁰

This was not the first time that Rabin rejected the idea of constraining Arafat's power. In 1994, he had declined a request by the two most prominent "inside" politicians, Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi, to assist with the creation of a democratic regime in the territories that would replace the corrupt and oppressive rule established by Arafat and his Tunis cronies. The idea was to hold proportional elections for a legislative council, after which the winning party or parties would form a government. This was naturally anathema to Arafat, who insisted on presidential elections where his victory was a foregone conclusion. Rabin dutifully complied, turning down the proposal.³¹

Having ruled out the possibility of a more democratic and less militant Palestinian regime likely headed by the local leadership he had preferred in the first place, Rabin stuck with Arafat, whom he considered, in a curious twist of logic, both a tacit supporter of terrorism and a peacemaker. Acknowledging that Arafat had made no serious effort to fight terrorism or to enforce law and order in Gaza, he nevertheless insisted that "there is no other partner ready to make peace ... [or] negotiating with a partner who is ready to make peace ... We must abide by our commitments provided Arafat will contain the terrorism emanating from the territories under his control."³²

Although Arafat made no serious effort to fight terrorism, Rabin insisted "there is no other partner ready to make peace."

The problem with this assertion was, of course, that Arafat was not trying to make peace or curb terrorism. In April 1995, Maj. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, commanding officer of Southern Command, described Gaza as a hotbed of terrorism and questioned the PA's ability to fight terrorism in the West Bank once it took control of the area at the end of the year. In the same vein, the head of the military intelligence research department estimated that once the IDF withdrew from the West Bank's populated areas, the PA would lose all remaining incentives to fight terrorism. This stark prognosis was corroborated by a senior Gaza police officer who revealed that mass arrests carried out by the PA after major terror attacks were "a big show" for Israeli and American consumption, with most detainees released shortly after their arrest having promised not to engage in future acts of terrorism.³³

Even Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak, the IDF's chief-of-staff and Rabin's protégé, who had carried out delicate political and diplomatic missions on the prime minister's behalf, warned the Knesset's foreign affairs and defense committee on August 23, 1995: "If the PA will not act decisively against Palestinian terrorism, everything we are doing now will fail." Two weeks later, as the Interim Agreement was about to be signed in Washington, the head of the military intelligence research department argued that the PA intensified its anti-terrorist measures only when it feared Israeli retribution. "For

³⁰ *Maariv*, Jan. 19, 23, Mar. 14, 1995; "Can Peace Survive?" *Time*, Feb. 6, 1995.

³¹ *Haaretz*, May 10, 2002.

³² *Ibid.*, Apr. 17, 1995.

³³ *Maariv Weekly Magazine*, Apr. 13, 1995; *Maariv*, Apr. 16, June 7, 1995; *The Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 14, 1995.

Arafat,” he added undiplomatically, “peace is shit.”³⁴

Ignoring the considered opinions of his most senior military advisers, Rabin signed the Interim Agreement on September 28, 1995. When questioned about the prudence of this move by American Jewish leaders, he exploded and told the Israeli press, “One should not waste any time on them. They are pariah Jews. They will be judged by Jewish history.”³⁵ This outburst, however, seemed to reflect Rabin’s inner doubts about his latest move rather than an unwavering conviction in it. Shortly afterwards he confided to Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Weisel, “Initially, I thought that Arafat was the solution. Now I am convinced that he is the problem.”³⁶

Rabin’s Real “Peace Legacy”

In the decades attending Rabin’s assassination on November 4, 1995, an extensive “peace legacy” associated with his name has been created, transforming him from “Mr. Security,” as he had been widely known prior to Oslo, into an indefatigable “peacenik,” who would leave no stone unturned in the tireless quest for reconciliation. Had it not been for his assassination, ran a common argument, the peace process would have made



Shimon Peres (standing) shakes hands with Jordan’s King Hussein during Yitzhak Rabin’s funeral, November 6, 1995. Rabin did not embrace Oslo out of a burning desire for peace but was maneuvered into it by Peres, hoping that it would help consolidate Israel’s security.

substantial progress if not been brought to fruition.³⁷

Reality, of course, was quite different. Rabin had never been a member of the “flower generation,” to use Henry Kissinger’s handy quip,³⁸ but a hardened security man who viewed peace through this prism rather than the other way around. He did not embrace Oslo out of a burning desire for peace but was maneuvered into it by his lifetime nemesis, hoping that it would help consolidate Israel’s security yet lacking a clear idea where the process was headed or, indeed, should be headed. As his widow put

³⁴ *Maariv*, Aug. 23, Sept. 13, 1995.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Oct. 1, 1995; *The Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 6, 1995.

³⁶ *Haaretz*, Aug. 2, 2002.

³⁷ See, for example, [Eitan Haber interview, Channel 7 News \(Isr.\)](#), Jan. 13, 2009; “[Derech Rabin - Pinat Hashalom \(interview with Itamar Rabinovich\)](#),” *Yediot Ahronot Weekly Magazine*, Oct. 1, 2015.

³⁸ “[Derech Rabin - Pinat Hashalom](#).”

it shortly after his assassination: “He was very pragmatic, hated to deal with something that would happen years down the road. He only thought of what would happen now, in the very near future. As far as I know, he did not have a very clear picture of what the final-status agreement would look like.”³⁹

Had it been up to Rabin, he would have avoided Oslo altogether in favor of an Israeli-Syrian agreement, and in its absence, a deal with the West Bank and Gaza leadership. As it were, not only did he not view the process in anything remotely reminiscent of the posthumous idealism misattributed to him, but the farther he walked down that path, the greater his disdain for his “peace” partner became—and the lesser his inclination for concessions. He repeatedly lamented that had he known in advance Arafat’s real intentions, he would have never signed the Oslo accords, telling confidants and subordinates (including Henry Kissinger, Tel Aviv mayor and former comrade in arms, Shlomo Lahat, and head of military intelligence Moshe Yaalon) of his intention to revisit, if not abandon, the process after the 1996 elections.⁴⁰

It is doubtful whether Rabin would have indeed disengaged from Oslo in the rather unlikely event of his reelection (at the time of his assassination, he was trailing Netanyahu in most polls, in some by as many as thirteen

Rabin lamented that had he known Arafat’s real intentions, he would have never signed the Oslo accords.

points)⁴¹—something that even Netanyahu found impossible to do. It is clear, however, that his perception of the broad contours of the final-status arrangement, as presented

in his October 5, 1995 Knesset defense of the Interim Agreement he had signed the previous week, was far more restrictive than that of any of his successors, Netanyahu included.

Rejecting the two-state solution altogether, Rabin foresaw “an entity short of a state that will independently run the lives of the Palestinians under its control” within narrower boundaries than the pre-June 1967 lines. The Jordan Valley area, “in the broadest sense of the word,” was to constitute Israel’s security border, and a united Jerusalem “comprising Maale Adumim and Givat Zeev” was to remain under Israel’s sovereignty.⁴²

Conclusion

It is a historical irony that it was Benjamin Netanyahu, who had vehemently opposed the Oslo process from the outset, who publicly announced Israel’s support for the creation of a Palestinian state, both in his June 2009 Bar-Ilan speech and May 2011 address to a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress.⁴³ In doing so, he went further not

³⁹ Beilin interview, *Haaretz Weekly Magazine*, Mar. 7, 1997; see, also, Beilin interview with Ofer Aderet, *Haaretz*, Oct. 23, 2016.

⁴⁰ “[Dalia Rabin: My Father Might Have Stopped Oslo](#),” *Independent Media Review Analysis* (IMRA), Oct. 13, 2010; Raz, “[Hazitot Mitnagshot](#).”

⁴¹ See, for example, Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), Mar. 25, 1995; Anshel Pfeffer, “Would It All Be Different If Yitzhak Rabin Had Lived?” *Haaretz*, Oct. 27, 2015.

⁴² The 376th session of the 13th Knesset’s, Oct. 5, 1995.

⁴³ “[Address by PM Netanyahu at Bar-Ilan University](#),” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, June 14, 2009; “[Speech by PM Netanyahu to a Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress](#),” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 24, 2011.

only from Rabin's "Palestinian entity short of a state" but also from Peres's preferred vision of peace. For, contrary to the conventional wisdom, Peres did not consider the creation of a Palestinian state an automatic, or even desirable, consequence of the Oslo process. Rather he subscribed to Labor's old formula of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, which he sought to sell to Rabin, Arafat, King Hussein, presidents Bill Clinton and Egypt's Husni Mubarak, and Morocco's King Hassan II, among others.⁴⁴

It was thus Beilin who shrewdly steered his two superiors towards a path they had not planned to take despite his keen awareness of the untrustworthiness of the "peace" partner. As he put it on one occasion:

I never had any illusions regarding Arafat. I never considered him an important world leader. I think he has committed numerous follies. He could have achieved a lot for his people many years ago, and his personal record includes almost every possible mistake ... But since I have only Arafat, despite all the stupidities he utters, I must negotiate with him.⁴⁵

This approach probably makes the Oslo process the only case in diplomatic history where a party to a peace accord was a priori amenable to its wholesale violation by its cosignatory. There have, of course, been numerous agreements where one or both parties acted in bad faith. The September 1938 Munich agreement, to give a prime example, was conceived by Hitler as a "Trojan Horse" for the destruction of Czechoslovakia, a strategy emulated by Arafat fifty-five years later with the Oslo process. But while there was little Czechoslovakia could do given its marked military inferiority and betrayal by the international community, in Oslo, it was the stronger party that allowed its far weaker counterpart to flaunt the agreement with impunity—with devastating consequences that would haunt both sides for decades to come.

Efraim Karsh, editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, is director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University and emeritus professor of Middle East and Mediterranean studies at King's College London.



⁴⁴ Gil, *Nushat Peres*, pp. 186-94.

⁴⁵ *Maariv Weekly Magazine*, Sept. 15, 1995; see, also, Beilin interview, *Al Hamishmar*, May 19, 1994.