‘Peacemaking Is a Risky Business’
Norway’s Role in the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1993–96

Hilde Henriksen Waage
‘Peacemaking Is a Risky Business’

Norway’s Role in the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1993–96

HILDE HENRIKSEN WAAGE

PRIO Report 1/2004
CONTENTS

PREFACE ........................................................................................................................................ V

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1
  Mediation or Facilitation? ............................................................................................................ 4
  The Pieces in the Puzzle ........................................................................................................... 8

CHAPTER 1: THE ROAD TO OSLO ......................................................................................... 13
  Unsuccessful Attempts in the Past ............................................................................................ 13
  The Changing World .................................................................................................................. 22
  The Madrid Conference ........................................................................................................... 27

CHAPTER 2: NORWAY’S POLITICAL PAST IN THE MIDDLE EAST ........................................ 31
  Establishing a Very Special Relationship .............................................................................. 31
  Small Beginnings ..................................................................................................................... 37
  The Crucial Role of the Norwegian Labour Party ................................................................. 38
  Official Activities and the Link to Terje Rød Larsen .............................................................. 43
  Towards the Oslo Back Channel .............................................................................................. 46

CHAPTER 3: THE MODEST FACILITATOR .............................................................................. 51
  Reasons for Leaving Washington – and Choosing Oslo ........................................................... 51
  The Sarpsborg Setting .............................................................................................................. 58
  The First Meeting ..................................................................................................................... 63
  Gaza First .................................................................................................................................. 66
  The Birth of the Sarpsborg DoP .............................................................................................. 69
  Norway and the USA: Two Close Allies ................................................................................. 76
  The Modest Facilitator ............................................................................................................ 80

CHAPTER 4: THE ACTIVE MEDIATOR .................................................................................. 85
  Upgrading the Talks ................................................................................................................... 85
  Jericho .................................................................................................................................... 90
  Israeli Governmental Negotiators Replace Academics ............................................................ 91
  The Grefshiem DoP and the First Halvorsbøle Crisis ............................................................... 101
  The Norwegians – Helping on Israel’s Premises? ................................................................. 106
  Israel’s Trump Card ................................................................................................................. 120
  The Final Game ...................................................................................................................... 128
  The Declaration of Principles ................................................................................................. 135
  Informing the United States .................................................................................................... 141
  Mutual Recognition .................................................................................................................. 145
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 5: IMPLEMENTING PEACE</th>
<th>151</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Reactions</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Palestinian Legacy</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Long and Winding Road</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing an Economic Framework</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Only One</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Helpful Fixer</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twisting Arafat’s Arm</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securing Norway’s Role</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The End of the Oslo Era</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCLUSION</th>
<th>221</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Political Past</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Facilitator</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mediator</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Relationship with the United States</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Implementer</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Room for Manoeuvre</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF SOURCES</th>
<th>247</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

IN JANUARY 2001, it was agreed that I would carry out a study for the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs, examining Norway’s role in the peace process in the Middle East in 1993–96. According to the agreement made with the ministry, the study was to focus on the nature of the role played by Norway in the peace negotiations that took place during those crucial years. However, it was neither to analyse nor to evaluate Norway’s development aid to the Palestinian Self-Rule Areas, a theme beyond the scope of the present study. The project was to begin on 15 March 2001 and, according to the terms of a later contract, to be completed by 30 June 2003. These goals were met.

The present report – the final report from the study – is based on recently declassified and still-classified documents (to which I was granted access) at the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs, the verbatim records of the Norwegian Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, records of government proceedings, records of the Norwegian parliament, Labour Party archives and documents from the US State Department and the Socialist International – to mention the most important. In addition, Norwegian newspapers from the period under study were examined, and a large number of interviews were conducted with leading actors in Norway, the USA and the Middle East. Additional relevant literature, particularly material on the peace process in the Middle East, has also been reviewed. I would like to thank all of the interviewees for their forthcoming attitudes and for having generously given me so much of their valuable time. I would additionally like to thank the planning and evaluation section of the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs for seeing the importance of collecting together all of this information and for providing a generous economic basis for doing so.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Martin Halvorsen, who proved an invaluable research assistant during this project. Bringing with him both a valuable knowledge of history and a positive attitude, Martin worked hard and systematically to provide me with necessary literature and documentation for carrying out my research. Throughout the entire process, he made useful comments and helped me to maintain an overview of what turned out at times to be a rather complex stream of information. I would also like to thank John Carville for his exceptional language-editing of the finished work. In addition, I would like to thank Professor Helge Pharo, Professor Rolf Tannes and Associate Professor Nils Butenschon, who all read through and commented on the final manuscript. Drawing on their extensive and broad knowledge of Norwegian postwar foreign policy – and, in the case of the latter, the Middle East –
their comments have been most useful and highly appreciated. However, responsibility for the end result of the project – this final report – lies solely with its undersigned author.

HILDE HENRIKSEN WAAGE

Oslo, 30 June 2003
‘MEET YOUR ENEMY NUMBER ONE’, said Norwegian academic Terje Rød Larsen nervously as he introduced Israeli diplomat Uri Savir to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) representative Abu Ala.¹ The two astonished enemies looked at each other for the first time. This meeting, which took place in Norway in May 1993, was to kick off a series of rapid developments in the secret Norwegian back channel that had been established just a few months earlier, aiming at nothing less than peace in the Middle East. Only nine months after the inconspicuous start of the process, a world taken by surprise would witness the results that had been promoted by Norway. Indeed, on 13 September 1993, Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst would be among the prominent international actors strolling in the sun on the White House lawn in Washington, DC, as the world witnessed an extraordinary breakthrough in the apparently insoluble Middle East conflict. Through a series of secret talks held in and around Oslo, representatives of the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships had managed to agree on a declaration of principles that paved the way for the establishment of the Palestinian Self-Government Authority and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. A major turning point seemed to have been reached in Israeli–Palestinian relations.

Norway had made a decisive contribution to this, one of the most serious attempts at making peace in the strife-torn Middle East region since May 1948, when the state of Israel had been established. Rarely had the region witnessed such a moment of hope as on that bright September day in 1993. The Oslo Agreement was to be signed. Two arch-enemies – Israel’s Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Leader of the PLO Yasser Arafat – were soon to speak and shake hands. US President Bill Clinton was present as a witness – along with engrossed audiences throughout the world who followed the momentous events on their television sets.

Few adversaries have ever been enmeshed in a more vicious spiral of violence than the Israelis and their Palestinian neighbours. Countless previous efforts by individuals, organizations, and large and small states to open up direct contacts between Israel and the PLO had all failed.² And then, through secret diplomacy and by playing a role far out of proportion to the country’s size, Norway had succeeded where all others had failed, managing to get the old enemies to agree both to a gradual Israeli withdrawal

---

¹ Savir 1998, p. 11.
² Bercovitch 1997, pp. 220–221.
from some of the Occupied Territories and to local Palestinian self-determination. What had made Norway, of all countries, suitable for such an extraordinary task?

By the beginning of the 1990s, the Middle East conflict seemed ripe for mediation. New international, regional and national configurations had made this the case. In addition, the Israelis and Palestinians had willingly and voluntarily entered into negotiations. However, this readiness, this willingness to negotiate, does not explain why it was Norway, and not some other, perhaps more powerful, actor that succeeded in bringing the enemies together. Nor does it explain why the USA failed, having invested huge amounts of dollars, hard work and political prestige in the peace process that was being pursued in Washington at the same time. These factors alone cannot explain why it was Norway that succeeded, nor why Norway – a country geographically and culturally at a distance from the Middle East, on the periphery of Europe and situated on the northern shores of NATO – could play an important role in world politics. How did this small Scandinavian country come to be involved in one of the deadliest and most intractable conflicts of the 20th century?

The Oslo Back Channel did not emerge from a vacuum, either on the Israeli–Palestinian or on the Norwegian side. On the one hand, the Palestinians and the Israelis had a long and complex history of secret talks and channels. On the other hand, previous Norwegian policies constituted the basis for the role played by the Norwegians in the 1990s. Seen from this perspective, the achievements of the Oslo Back Channel appear less sensational than they might have seemed at first glance. Indeed, over 40 years of contact and friendship between influential circles in Norway and the Middle East culminated in the Back Channel. The Norwegians did not stumble by accident into the peace process in the Middle East. Rather, the engagement came about as a consequence of contacts made over the course of many years; it was the outcome of patience and hard work, and it was the result of policy choices that gave priority to the Middle East conflict and aimed at giving it a new and active Norwegian content.

Thus, Norway did not fly in out of the blue. The importance of Norway’s political past in the Middle East and, more to the point, Norway’s special relationship with Israel, together with several years of conscious mediation and confidence-building efforts, constitute the decisive explanatory factors underlying the establishment of the Oslo Back Channel. It was because of – and not in spite of – Norway’s traditional position as Israel’s best friend that PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat already in 1979 considered the remote country suitable and attractive as a possible mediating partner. Arafat pursued the Norwegian track from then on, although with varying degrees of intensity. For the diplomatic purpose he had in mind, he did not need friends of the PLO. What he needed was a friend of Israel. He needed someone who could talk to and be trusted by the enemy. And Israel did not have many friends left by the beginning of the 1990s.

Does this Norway-as-Israel’s-best-friend perspective also explain the role of Norway in the Oslo process? Was Norway a biased mediator? Did the Norwegians negotiate peace in the Middle East on Israel’s premises? Or is this a far-fetched assumption that places too much emphasis on past politics and is therefore useless as an approach to understanding Norway’s contribution at the beginning of the 1990s?
Regardless of Norway’s political past in the Middle East, its role in the Oslo peace process must be examined and established. What kind of role did Norway play? Why did Israelis as well as Palestinians find Norway of all countries acceptable as a mediating partner? And, not least, how can the outcome of the process be explained? In order to provide a meaningful analysis of Norway’s role, a major focus must be on the development of the peace process itself. The Oslo peace process reflected the fundamentally asymmetrical power situation that existed between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Israel was the stronger party, possessing a clear national security agenda and unwilling to concede much. The PLO, being the weaker party, while it had a strong vision of a future Palestinian state, was willing to make significant concessions in order to avoid further marginalization of itself and the Palestinian cause. What room for manoeuvre did such a basic asymmetry of power provide for the Norwegians?

Norway’s involvement in the peace process in the Middle East by no means ended with the signing ceremony on the White House lawn. On the contrary, the Norwegian government decided to make a role in the peace process a continued foreign policy priority. For decades, Norway had been working hard to play a mediating role in one way or another in the Middle East. Why was Norway so eager to play such a role in international politics in general and in the Middle East conflict in particular? Why did Norway take upon itself a mediating role? What was in this for Norway?

A powerless international actor has many reasons for seeking a peaceful international order. In many ways, a small state is dependent on the existence of such a peaceful international community. As a result, it was not simply Norway’s humanitarian and mediatorial inheritance that encouraged it to play an international role in the Middle East. The engagement policy, as the new Norwegian activist policy in the 1990s was called, also served and protected Norway’s interests in other areas. This Norwegian engagement policy was aimed at a better and more organized international community, cooperation and increased international justice. A well-organized international community can be seen both as a counter to the exercise of raw military power and as a protector of small states in general. Norway’s support of the United Nations and its involvement in peacekeeping and peacemaking operations should also be viewed against this background. In addition came a need to be actively involved in international affairs, which was built on a strong humanitarian tradition, a bulging wallet and a self-image that cried ‘Norway saves the world, therefore Norway exists’. Consequently, Norway was extremely well suited to preaching the gospel of peace, wealth and democracy. At least so the Norwegians thought, and they set out to put this into practice in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East.

Mediation in most forms might be seen as a foreign policy instrument. States resort to mediation of other people’s conflicts, not only for humanitarian reasons, but also in pursuit of their own foreign policy and domestic interests. Consequently, mediation might improve a mediator’s position by expanding its power and influence. Small and

medium-sized powers have fewer foreign policy instruments at their disposal than great powers. Mediation might increase their usefulness and independence in relation to their stronger allies.5

The Norwegian ‘crusader diplomacy’ in the Middle East created and reinforced positive attention. It created an image of having a mission in the world, of having something special to offer in terms of political morality and conflict mediation. Internationally, Norway’s role in the peace process involved fame and prestige. It involved influence on the international peace scene. Peacemaking became one of Norway’s best export articles.6 This involvement made the small and remote country and its capital visible on the map of actors in international politics. It reinforced and contributed to the Norway’s ‘peace’ image. Norway already had the Nobel Peace Prize. After the diplomatic breakthrough in the Middle East, it also had Oslo as the Capital of Peace – at least for a while.7

Mediation or Facilitation?

The purpose of mediation is to resolve a conflict by finding a solution that is acceptable to the adversaries. It should neither be based on the use of force nor aimed at helping one of the participants to win. In such a process, parties are not committed in advance to accepting ideas presented to them by a mediator: ‘Mediation is best thought of as a mode of negotiation in which a third party helps the parties to find a solution which they cannot find themselves.’8

Mediation plays an important role in contemporary international affairs, and events associated with it at times garner widespread public attention. In international politics, the use of mediation as a tool has a long history. However, the precise nature of mediation is often hard to pin down: ‘Mediation has always been something of a mysterious art.’ Hence, this field of research has developed ‘as many theories of practice as there are practitioners’.9

During the last three decades, many theories on third-party intervention, mediation, facilitation and the role of intermediaries have been developed. Given the importance of these subjects, it is hardly surprising that this is a topic of great interest to both scholars and practitioners. Theories have been developed within the fields of international relations, political science, sociology, communication, and political and social psychology. The approaches provide different perspectives and levels of analysis.

8 Zartman 1996, p. 446; see also p. 445.
However, many of the theories are empirically underdeveloped, and there is a striking neglect of history within this literature.\textsuperscript{10}

Mediators are often thought to be more effective if they are unbiased, impartial and have no preferences of their own as to how the disputed issue should be resolved. Broadly speaking, mediators may be divided into four categories: the weak and unbiased, the strong and biased, the strong and unbiased, and the weak and biased.\textsuperscript{11}

The weak but unbiased mediator is the classic concept of a mediator, someone unable to influence the bargaining directly by offering carrots and sticks, but who facilitates agreements in other ways. The first systematic study of international mediation focused on just such an actor, the United Nations.\textsuperscript{12}

This classical concept of the weak unbiased mediator was soon challenged by scholars who felt that the importance of the third party’s impartiality had been overemphasized as a mediatory virtue. Well-known mediation theorists pointed out that many successful mediators were strong and had policy interests of their own, and were therefore in some sense biased. They emphasized the superiority of ‘mediation with muscle’ over mediation by less weighty third parties.\textsuperscript{13} They argued that ‘impartiality is neither an indispensable condition of their acceptability, nor a necessary condition for the successful performance of intermediaries’ functions’.\textsuperscript{14} ‘Mediators are accepted by the adversaries not because of their impartiality, but because of their ability to influence, protect, or extend the interests of each party in conflict.’\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{11} This division into four categories and the account below is based on Kydd 2000.

\textsuperscript{12} Kydd 2000; see also Young 1967.


\textsuperscript{14} Touval 1975, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{15} Bercovitch 1996, p. 26; see also Dobinson 2000, pp. 102, 105.
the USA in the Middle East was used as an illustrative example. The USA was powerful compared to the other states of the region. The Americans also had a clear interest in how the disputes in the Middle East were settled. The Camp David Accords of 1978 were mainly achieved because the USA offered substantial rewards to both parties. This view of mediation placed the ‘emphasis on powerful, interested mediators, who affect the negotiations in easily understood ways, by offering carrots and sticks to the participants to get them to agree’.  

The strong and unbiased mediator would perhaps be an ideal mediator, being capable of anything a weak mediator was but also able to come up with side-payments or encouragements to settle the dispute. But which disinterested strong third party would play such a role? A dominant power with limited interest in a dispute could be interested in the overall values of protecting peace, preventing a humanitarian disaster or defending trade links. Such values could be threatened by civil war or international conflicts. The US mediation in Bosnia in the middle of the 1990s might be interpreted in this way.

Finally, the last category, the biased yet powerless mediator, might seem a little odd. Parties do not automatically reject mediators who are biased against them. Mediators will improve the welfare of both parties. Biased mediators may succeed in getting ‘the side towards which they are biased to make concessions, or not make large demands’. Consequently, an effective mediator could be described as ‘one who is biased towards one side, but has information to contribute about the other side’. In order to be credible, a biased mediator needs to share the preferences of one of the parties in the negotiations. ‘Such a mediator could be trusted to send the correct signal truthfully regardless of whether it increases the likelihood of war or not. This provides support for the idea that mediators do not need to be unbiased to have beneficial effects.

Do these theories and attempts at generalizing bring us any further when it comes to explaining the role of Norway? Are they useful tools? Norway had the rare combination of being traditionally close to Israel while having more recently established a rela-

17 Kydd 2000, pp. 7–8.
20 Kydd 2000, p. 29.
21 Kydd 2000, p. 32.
22 Kydd 2000, p. 33, see also pp. 2–5, 8, 26, 29–33.
tionship with the Palestinians and the PLO. Did this place Norway, with its traditional close friendship to Israel and its asymmetrical relationship to the parties, in the powerless and biased mediator category? Again, in order to answer such a question, the kind of intermediary role played by Norway must be analysed, as well as its room for manoeuvre within this setting. Furthermore, did Norway play only one role, or can we distinguish between different actors, various roles and shifting phases during the Oslo process? Did Norway pursue a variety of activities and roles? And finally, and not least, did Norway have a mediating role at all?

The Norwegian actors basically saw themselves as playing only a facilitating role in the process. There seems to be little doubt that the Norwegian role in 1993, at least initially, was based on the facilitative model of third-party intervention. The Norwegian contribution to the process consisted of getting the parties together, booking flights and hotels, paying bills, arranging meetings and, not least, keeping the negotiations going and secret. The Norwegians achieved virtually total secrecy for the talks, which were mainly held in isolated locations, where the participants were forced to spend most of their time with each other. A warm, friendly, humorous atmosphere developed. There was also solidarity of purpose, with each side ready to engage in the kind of give and take necessary to reach a negotiated agreement, convinced that the other side shared this outlook. The Norwegian actors emphasized the friendships that were created between the main players, the small-group setting and, above all, the secrecy and intimacy of the facilitative approach. The emphasis was on breaking down stereotypes, smoothing over existential obstacles, removing misunderstandings and overcoming a lack of willingness to talk.23

Originally, the Oslo Back Channel was initiated as a supplement to the official negotiations in Washington. The intention was to break out of the deadlocked Washington process and develop new concepts and formulations that could later be transferred back into the main track. In contrast to the intense media scrutiny in the US capital, playing the gallery was absent in the secret Oslo negotiations. But gradually the negotiations in Norway replaced the process in Washington. How could a small, cosy and secret setting in Norway in any way compete with and replace the huge and prestigious one in Washington?

One of the advantages of facilitation is that it uses an incremental approach. At the outset, only minor issues are put on the negotiating table. Once some sort of compromise has been reached on these, the parties move on to the more difficult problems. This idea underlay the Oslo process. The status of Gaza was to predate the status of Jerusalem. All difficult questions – such as the Palestinian refugee problem and issues of borders, statehood or settlements – were deferred to future negotiations, with no guarantees. During the interim period, the Israelis and the Palestinians were going to learn to trust each other and to overcome mutual suspicion. ‘Thus, the facilitator, like the psychoanalyst, does not attempt to impose a solution on the disputants. Like a magician, the facilitator only invokes the spectre of communicative power. The facilitator

will create the conditions and parameters of debate and then will employ all the known facilitative techniques designed to protect the state of communication.’ These are the principles on which the facilitative model is based.24

However, this is exactly what causes trouble. Many of the problems associated with the Oslo Accords might be seen to have occurred simply because a powerless facilitation process carried the entire burden of a conflict resolution designed to solve one of the 20th century’s most intractable international conflicts. Norway, the small-state facilitator, shouldered what was previously seen to be an international responsibility. Was the Norwegian facilitative model, based on the ‘radical intimacy of the hearth’, the appropriate channel in which to institutionalize a relationship between Israel and the PLO? Did the Norwegian facilitation help to constitute a state of affairs in which Palestinian claims to national self-determination were marginalized?25

Another serious problem with the facilitative approach is that it fails to deal adequately with problems related to power asymmetry between the two parties. By no standards could the Israelis and the Palestinians be claimed to be on an equal footing. A facilitation exercise can create an illusion of genuine communication. It can create a sense of equality between the adversaries. Indeed, the Norwegians did everything they could to ensure a symmetrical process. They strove to make all logistical arrangements just perfect. The Israelis and the Palestinians had the same cars, the same hotel rooms, the same amount of time for presentations, and often even the same food. This process symmetry enabled the Palestinian delegates to feel empowered and thus equal to their Israeli counterparts. But was this creation of process symmetry helpful in achieving a peaceful settlement? Is facilitation at all a feasible method to use when huge asymmetries exist between two parties? And, again, what role and what room for manoeuvre does such a situation provide for the facilitator? Norway had no opportunity to force solutions on unwilling parties. It could do nothing about the asymmetry of power on the ground in the Middle East. Such a third-party role could only be reserved a strong mediator, basically a superpower like the USA. Such a role was not possible for Norway.

The Pieces in the Puzzle

The analysis of Norway’s role in the Oslo peace process presented here is based on a historical and empirical case study. It is hoped that this study will contribute to remedying the lack of historical and empirical case-study material within the huge literature on conflict resolution, mediation and third-party intervention. To dig deep into history stimulates serious thinking about the appropriateness of a single case study (the so-called single elephant issue) and how our understanding of theoretical patterns and different outcomes may be enhanced by examining one case only. A single case study permits a more intensive scrutiny of patterns and relationships; it can provide a common focus of attention for scholars from different disciplines; it can establish causal

24 Jones 1999, p. 19; see also pp. 18, 71.
25 Jones 1999, p. 144; see also pp. 18–19.
processes more clearly; and it can help us to emphasize the unique features of the case in question. The Oslo experience certainly has a number of unique features. However, explanations and descriptions of that case may also be used to say something meaningful about the general conditions of international mediation and – successful or unsuccessful – conflict management.\footnote{Bercovitch 1997, pp. 218–219.}

Accounts of the Oslo Back Channel and the peace process are already numerous. The Israeli perspective – which has been covered by the most important Israeli participants themselves, as well as analysed by scholars – is thoroughly accounted for. The situation is very much the same on the American side, where US involvement in the Middle East conflict has been given major attention by scholars, journalists and politicians for years. The USA’s liberal declassification policy also ensures crucial information on US foreign policy older than 25 years.\footnote{The most important publications are Shimon Peres, \textit{Battling for Peace} (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995); Uri Savir, \textit{The Process: 1,100 Days that Changed the Middle East} (New York: Random House, 1998); Yossi Beilin, \textit{Touching Peace: From the Oslo Accord to a Final Agreement} (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999); Hanan Ashrawi, \textit{This Side of Peace: A Personal Account} (New York: Shimon & Schuster, 1995); Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), \textit{Through Secret Channels} (London: Garnet, 1995); Warren Christopher, \textit{In the Stream of History: Shaping Foreign Policy for a New Era} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Several books and articles about the Oslo process have also been written by journalists: Amos Elon, ‘The Peace-makers’, \textit{The New Yorker}, December 1993; Jane Corbin, \textit{Gaza First: The Secret Norway Channel to Peace Between Israel and the PLO} (London: Bloomsbury, 1994); David Makovsky, \textit{Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government’s Road to the Oslo Accord} (Washington, DC: Westview, 1996); Mohamed Heikal, \textit{Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab–Israeli Peace Negotiations} (London: HarperCollins, 1996). Jane Corbin’s book is particularly interesting, as the author was close to several of the key actors; the book was also written during and immediately after the negotiations in Norway. Important scholarly books include William B. Quandt, \textit{Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab–Israeli Conflict Since 1967} (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution/Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Avi Shlaim, \textit{The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World} (New York: Norton, 2001); Rex Brynen, \textit{A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank and Gaza} (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000). For a complete overview of all literature, see the bibliography.}

In contrast to the situation on the Israeli and the US side, however, the Palestinians’ point of view is at best unevenly covered, and often missing. Although accounts do exist, they are less numerous, empirically weak, at best journalistic, often inaccurate and contain many errors.\footnote{Hanan Ashrawi’s very personal and outspoken account represents the major exception to this lack of information. However, she did not participate in the Oslo negotiations.} None of the major Palestinian actors have written accounts presenting and analysing the Oslo peace process from their points of view (at least not in English).\footnote{Mahmoud Abbas – a.k.a. Abu Mazen – has written a book, but his account gives little insight into the thinking of the PLO. His book addresses the meetings during the secret back channel negotiations, which he did not attend himself. In addition, the book is rather inaccurate.}

Documents and archives on the peace process during the 1990s have been neither declassified nor made available for research by the USA, Israel or the Palestinians. In addition, it is unclear whether any documentary evidence exists at all on the Palestinian side. If this evidence once existed, it may have been destroyed during Israel’s reoccupation
and systematic destruction of Palestinian physical and bureaucratic infrastructure from August 2000 and onwards.

The lack of access to documentary evidence is compensated for by extensive use of interviews. I have interviewed most of the key actors on the Israeli, US and Norwegian sides. However, here again the Palestinian side is a problem. It has been extremely hard to get access to key Palestinian actors. Israel’s reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza made this even more difficult. Palestinian leaders were hard to reach, but even more seriously were reluctant to talk about their own and the PLO’s involvement in the Oslo process. Understandably, there are serious problems connected to speaking openly on peace process issues, judging from the difficult internal situation for the Palestinian leaders and politicians. But whatever strong reasons that might exist, it is nevertheless a huge problem that crucial information is missing, information that could have contributed to a better understanding of the Palestinian reasoning and processes.

The Norwegian actors involved in the Oslo process have not written extensively themselves. The only account that really covers the Norwegian perspective is a book by British journalist Jane Corbin, and the Norwegian edition of this work contains an introduction by the three leading Norwegian actors, Terje Rød Larsen, Mona Juul and Jan Egeland. Although it would be to go too far to call Corbin’s book an authorized version, it seems clear that this book (and the subsequent BBC documentary) to a large degree presents the perspectives and views held at the time by Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul. Although criticism might be raised towards Corbin’s somewhat emotional approach to the Oslo process, the book gives a rather accurate and contemporary account of events and assessments during the process. Corbin had privileged access to the Norwegian actors at the very end of the process, and the book was written while everybody’s memory was fresh. It therefore provides valuable information. In addition, books written by the Israeli actors fill in the pieces in the Norwegian puzzle. Primarily, the Israelis have written their accounts in order to explain and justify the Israeli contribution to the process. Intentionally or not, they provide valuable information on the role of Norway.

---

30 This has also been confirmed by all three in interviews with me. As will be shown later, Jan Egeland played a crucial role only at the setup and start of the Oslo Back Channel. Corbin’s book, therefore, does not cover his views and perspectives to any significant extent.

31 In all that has been written, surprisingly little emphasis has been placed on Norway’s relationship to the Middle East conflict throughout the postwar period and the very special relationship that existed between Norway and Israel long before the exciting days of the secret Norwegian Back Channel. This history is very important for understanding how Norway became involved as a mediating country. My own research has focused on this background, particularly two books published in Norwegian: Da staten Israel ble til. Et stridsspørsmål i norsk politikk 1945–49 [When the State of Israel Was Born: A Matter of Political Conflict in Norwegian Policy 1945–49] (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1989); and Norge – Israels beste venn. Norsk Midtøsten-politikk 1949–56 [Norway – Israel’s Best Friend: Norwegian Middle East Policy 1949–56] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1996). Both of these works were based on recently declassified and still partly classified documents (to which I was granted access) at the archives of the Norwegian foreign
Norway has very liberal declassification procedures. Since the 1980s, many archives, in particular those of the ministry of foreign affairs, have been made available for research. For the period covered here (1993–96), Norwegian archives and documents are not generally available for research. However, for this study, which was generously funded by the Norwegian ministry for foreign affairs, I was given privileged access to all relevant, still classified, ministry files. The documents in the ministry are important, especially for the period after the signing of the Oslo Agreement in September 1993. However, I was faced with two major problems. Absolutely no documents were found in the ministry’s files on the negotiations in the Oslo Back Channel. No minutes, no memos, no letters seemed to have been filed. When, for instance, the Norwegian foreign minister had meetings to discuss the negotiations in Norway with the Israeli foreign minister, the US secretary of state or the chairman of the PLO, not a single word seems to have been recorded on official paper. Furthermore, while extracts from letters written by the Norwegian foreign minister have been quoted in books, these letters cannot be found in the archives of the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs. Nor have these letters been found among the private papers of the late Norwegian foreign minister Johan Jørgen Holst. However, despite inadequate and missing documents, difficulties with gaining access to and information from some crucial players, this analysis will provide significant new evidence and information, document previously unnoticed connections and present new perspectives. With the pieces in the puzzle put together, this analysis sheds new light on Norway’s role in an intractable conflict.

ministry, as well as the verbatim records of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, the archives of the Norwegian Labour Party and documents from the US State Department and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office – to mention the most important. Two articles based on these books have been published in English: ‘Norway and a Major International Crisis: Suez – The Very Difficult Case’, Diplomacy & Statecraft 9(3): 211–241; and ‘How Norway Became One of Israel’s Best Friends’, Journal of Peace Research 37(2): 189–211. In addition, I have also published the report ‘Norwegians? Who Needs Norwegians?’ Explaining the Oslo Back Channel: Norway’s Political Past in the Middle East, Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Evaluation Report 9/2000 (Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000). Based on this latter report, a further article has been published in English: ‘Explaining the Oslo Backchannel: Norway’s Political Past in the Middle East’, Middle East Journal 56(4): 597–615.

32 In particular, I am referring to the three books written by Peres, Beilin and Savir.

33 Interview with Marianne Heiberg, 13 May 2002. In connection with this interview, I was shown the very few of her late husband’s documents that Heiberg possessed.
IDEALLY, MEDIATION TAKES PLACE when enemies discover that the costs of continued conflict are too high. In the Middle East conflict, mediators for years tried to convince both the Israelis and the Palestinians that a peaceful solution was both desirable and possible. They all failed. Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians were sufficiently willing or ready to search for peaceful settlements. Why did all of these attempts to achieve peace in the past end in failure? And why did the major international, regional and national changes that took place at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s provide new openings for mediation efforts? Indeed, it was the new situation resulting from these changes that paved the way for Norway’s mediation role and the breakthrough in the Oslo Back Channel.¹

Unsuccessful Attempts in the Past

The Six-Day War in 1967 was a major turning point in the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Israel occupied the West Bank, the entire Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, the Golan Heights and, not least, the Old City of Jerusalem. The war made Israel responsible for the security and well-being of more than 1 million Palestinians, and led to the creation of another 200,000 refugees in addition to the approximately 600,000–760,000 Palestinians who had already fled in 1948.²

The war sparked off a spate of international efforts to end the conflict. The famous UN Resolution 242, unanimously adopted by the Security Council on 22 November 1967, became an important instrument in every negotiation and mediation attempt that followed. This resolution was short, simple, succinct and crucially ambiguous: it called for ‘withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories’. However, the ambiguity in the resolution, necessary to get all parties to accept it, led to a situation in which the Israelis used Resolution 242 to oppose withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. The simple addition of the word ‘the’ or ‘all’ (territories) would have given the resolution a more precise meaning. Furthermore, the resolution made no mention of the political and national rights of the Palestinians. The international community did not regard

¹ This chapter is based on a similar one in Waage 2000a, pp. 10–24.
them as a party to the conflict in their own right. They had no recognized representative in the UN to advocate their case internationally.  

After 1967, the Israelis found themselves faced with the new Palestinian nationalist movement, characterized by a growing self-awareness. The Palestinians refused to be regarded only as refugees. They wanted to prove to the world that they were a people with legitimate rights, and they demanded recognition of their losses and their nation. Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir reacted strongly. In 1969 she claimed that the Palestinians ‘did not exist.... There was no such thing as a Palestinian people.... It was not as though there was a Palestinian people considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them’.  

Not only did the Israeli government insist that there were no Palestinian people with legitimate rights in historic Palestine, it also claimed that this land belonged by historic right to the Jewish people and that any withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip would be a painful compromise for the State of Israel. After the Six-Day War, the Jewish state began an ambitious programme of settlement construction to strengthen its control over the Occupied Territories. As early as July 1967, Israeli Minister of Labour Yigal Allon presented a plan that secured the areas of the most strategic importance to Israel, especially the Jordan Valley, the Judean desert and, of course, Jerusalem. The rest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, heavily populated by Palestinians, was according to the Allon plan to become part of a future Jordanian–Palestinian state. This was never formally presented as a peace plan, but successive Labour governments based their policies on Allon’s visions.  

For the Arab states, the Six-Day War marked their third military defeat. Once again, the Israelis had proven themselves unbeatable; once again, military failure had discredited Arab governments. Between 1948 and 1967, Palestinian nationalism had remained basically dormant, and the struggle for Palestine had been left to the Arab states. But after the war in June 1967, the Palestinians began to fight their way back to the centre stage. Many Palestinians, observing the military failures of the Arab states, concluded that they could not rely on them to liberate Palestine and hence decided to take over their own struggle. The occupation meant that Israel controlled the whole of the prescribed Palestinian state (according to the UN’s 1947 partition plan) and created an additional grievance, which bolstered nationalist sentiments.  

The result of the Six-Day War helped PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to gradually extract the PLO from the control of the Arab states, who were not willing to wholeheartedly join their Palestinian brethren in the liberation fight against Israel. Under Arafat’s leadership, the PLO gradually came to adopt the idea of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and in Gaza, alongside Israel, as its political goal. Although many Israelis and
Palestinians realized that such a compromise would serve their respective interests, the political obstacles remained formidable.\footnote{Same references as above.}

At the same time, the Palestinians increased their military attacks on targets in Israel and the West Bank from bases in Jordan. The growing power of the PLO and harsh Israeli retaliation threatened the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom. In September 1970, King Hussein, in a ruthless military action, ordered his army to take control over the PLO bases, many situated inside the Palestinian refugee camps. Thousands of Palestinians were killed or wounded as King Hussein re-established firm control over the western part of Jordan. The PLO was driven out and moved their headquarters to Beirut. The presence of the PLO in Lebanon, together with thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war, created a new strong base for PLO operations against Israel.\footnote{Quandt 2001, pp. 76–85; Shlaim 2001, pp. 298–301, 340–347; Makovsky 1996, p. 3; Persson 1980, pp. 109–110.}

In the meantime, efforts by US Secretary of State William Rogers to mediate peace between Israel and Egypt on the basis of UN Resolution 242 (Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories in exchange for Arab recognition of Israel within secure borders) proved unsuccessful. Neither the Arab states nor the Israelis had any trust in the mediating role of the United States. The Arabs thought the Americans were biased and Israel’s best friend. The Israelis wanted direct negotiations with the Arab states. Rather than progress, the Middle East drifted towards another war. After 1967, the Palestinians and the Arab states had watched how Israel had systematically strengthened its control over the Occupied Territories. Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat wanted to create a new and more favourable basis for negotiations with Israel. In October 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel. During the Yom Kippur War, as it was called by the Israelis, Egypt reconquered the East Bank of the Suez Canal, and Syria initially reconquered parts of the Golan Heights. Though the Israelis eventually regained the advantage on the battlefield on both fronts, the war revealed Israel’s vulnerability, especially in situations where the Arab states managed to coordinate their efforts. The war was a major psychological victory for the Arabs.\footnote{Quandt 2001, pp. 67–70, 87–94, 98–129; Shlaim 2001, pp. 289–318; Neff 1995, pp. 141–142; Makovsky 1996, p. 3; Persson 1980, pp. 117–118, 127-129; Butenschøn 1998, p. 29.}

On the international level, the 1973 War increased tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union to a dangerous level, illustrating the potential of the Arab–Israeli conflict to trigger open conflict between the superpowers. The USA supported Israel, and the Soviet Union supported the Arab states, but neither wanted the conflict to disrupt the uneasy Cold War stability. The United States initiated a multilateral peace conference, co-chaired by the Soviet Union. The conference convened in Geneva in December 1973 but came to little. A more important input in the US attempt to mediate peace was not made in Geneva, but was carried out bilaterally by Henry Kissinger, a Jewish immigrant from Germany and an expert on international diplomacy. Kissinger held the position of US National Security Advisor from 1969 to 1973, and was secretary of state from 1973 to 1977. In a step-by-step process, where the most
acute and concrete problems were handled in the first round and the more fundamental questions put aside for later, Kissinger travelled around the Middle East talking to one party at a time. Kissinger used negotiations on military disengagement as the basis for his approach to the conflict. In this way, he improved the relationship between Israel and Egypt – and, as a consequence, between the United States and Egypt. Kissinger’s diplomacy and his approach to the conflict in the Middle East laid the groundwork for the Camp David Accords in 1978. On 18 January 1974, Israel and Egypt signed the Sinai I Agreement, and on 4 September 1975 they signed Sinai II. Kissinger also managed to mediate a Syrian–Israeli disengagement deal in May 1974. Kissinger’s attempts were unsuccessful, however, with respect to the Jordanian–Israeli dispute.10

All the same, Kissinger was increasingly faced with obstacles, and the US mediation attempts gradually failed. A major reason for the lack of success was the USA’s insistence on viewing the Middle East conflict from a Cold War perspective: Israel was regarded as a confident ally, whereas the Soviet Union’s increased influence in the Middle East, through its Arab allies, had to be stopped. The Americans did not recognize that the Palestinian question represented the core of the conflict, necessitating Palestinian representation in peace negotiations. As would be the case in every diplomatic initiative until Oslo, no PLO representatives were present at the top-level negotiations. The Palestinians were consistently kept outside the diplomatic scene. If they were represented, it was always by someone else. The PLO was not recognized as a part of the conflict. However, in October 1974 the Arab League declared that the PLO was the ‘sole legitimate representative’ of the Palestinian people. The following month, the PLO chairman was allowed to address the UN General Assembly. But the USA and Israel would neither recognize nor negotiate with the PLO unless the organization first accepted UN Security Council Resolution 242 and Israel’s right to exist.11

Jimmy Carter’s presidency (1977–81) put an end to Kissinger’s step-by-step diplomacy. For the first time, the United States had an administration that was outspoken about the rights of the Palestinians. In public, the newly elected president spoke of the need for a Palestinian ‘homeland’, Palestinian ‘legitimate rights’ and the need for the Palestinians ‘to participate in the determination of their own future’, even offering US support for a Palestinian homeland.12 Carter did not mention the PLO by name, but a speech in May 1977 created a firestorm in Israel as well as strong reactions in the USA, especially within the influential Jewish lobby. Two months later, 30 years of continuous Labour governments came to an end in Israel. Menachem Begin, former leader of the Jewish terrorist organization Irgun and by then leader of the Likud Party, acceded to power. After the 1977 election, Likud, together with a bloc of right-wing religious parties, held a parliamentary majority in the Knesset. This right-wing bloc did not support Labour’s vision of a territorial compromise with Jordan. Instead, the

new Israeli government, which also included religious nationalists, claimed all of the West Bank and Gaza as Israel’s ‘biblical patrimony’ and acted accordingly. Eventually, Likud and its allies hoped to annex all or most of the West Bank. In order to achieve this, the government encouraged massive Jewish settlements all over the Occupied Territories (not only in strategic areas, as envisaged by Labour), making territorial compromises far more difficult to reach.13

But, once again, new dramatic and unexpected events in the Middle East changed the mediation scene. After secret meetings between senior Israeli and Egyptian envoys during the autumn of 1977, Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat made a sensational announcement. He would do anything to achieve peace with Israel, he declared – even go to Jerusalem. After receiving a formal invitation from the Israeli prime minister, President Sadat made his historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977. The trip was a symbolic gesture destined to demonstrate that Sadat was willing to risk his and Egypt’s position in the Arab world in order to make peace with Israel.14

Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem marked the beginning of a whole series of Egyptian–Israeli meetings, where the USA, under the auspices of Jimmy Carter himself, acted as mediator. After 13 days of mediation at Camp David in September 1978, and in a subsequent follow-up agreement in March 1979, Sadat, Begin and Carter managed to reach two framework agreements. One dealt with the principles for a full Egyptian–Israeli peace agreement, under which Israel would return the whole of Sinai to Egypt in return for Egyptian recognition of Israel and the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries; the other agreement, more complex and less precise, constituted a formula for an interim period of self-government for Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. For the first time, a Palestinian right to autonomy had been established, with a proposed period of self-rule to be followed by a permanent status agreement. The Palestinians were to slowly take control over their own land over a period of five years. Israel would withdraw from parts of the West Bank and Gaza after a Palestinian ‘self-governing authority’ was elected. Talks would then take place over the final status of the Occupied Territories.15

However, while the Egyptian–Israeli aspect of the agreements was fulfilled, the Palestinian aspect of the Camp David Accords remained mired from the beginning. Sadat was widely hailed outside the Middle East and was, together with Begin, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. But as the Palestinians had not been invited to the negotiations, Chairman Arafat described the accord as a ‘dirty deal’. In the wider Arab world, Sadat was regarded as a traitor, and Egypt was expelled from the League of Arab States. Sadat himself was assassinated in October 1982 by militant Islamic soldiers. Because of the Palestinians’ adamant rejection of Camp David, the USA, a traditional

friend of Israel, was never put to the test on how far it might have been willing to push for the Palestinian case.\textsuperscript{16}

Camp David had been deliberately vague and ambiguous with regard to the ultimate status of the Palestinians after the five-year transitional period. The final status talks were made dependent on a prior agreement on transitional arrangements. The Egyptians, acting as representatives for the Palestinians, and the Israelis had very different views on what they were actually negotiating about. Sadat believed that the autonomy talks would gradually prepare the way for Palestinian self-government, with restrictions only on foreign and defence policy. Begin, on the other hand, who even disliked the term ‘self-governing authority’ and preferred to refer to Palestinian ‘autonomy’, had a very different notion. However, he approved the postponement of Israel’s claim to sovereignty during the five-year interim period, though he would not renounce it. After five years, Israel would assert its claim to sovereignty. If the Palestinians and the other Arab states agreed, the issue would be resolved. If not, autonomy would be maintained for the foreseeable future. During the same period, Israel would continue to build settlements on the West Bank and in Gaza. East Jerusalem was not even a part of the autonomy plan. The solution to the Palestinian refugee problem and the practical implementation of Palestinian self-rule remained very vague. In addition, the Palestinian self-governing authority would not automatically take control over land and water resources. Autonomy, according to Begin, only applied to persons, not to territory.\textsuperscript{17}

After being driven out of Jordan in 1970, the PLO rebuilt its infrastructure in Lebanon, particularly in the refugee camps in the south. The Palestinians also began launching rocket attacks and raids on northern Israel from southern Lebanon. Israel reacted strongly and responded with air attacks, at times with simultaneous military actions being carried out on the ground. In 1978, it invaded southern Lebanon. Likud leaders like Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, a right-wing hardliner with a military and intelligence background, believed that eliminating the PLO bases in Lebanon would force the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories to reach an agreement with Israel that would not involve Palestinian national claims. Consequently, the most important thing to do was to get rid of the most powerful expression of the Palestinians’ claims against Israel, the PLO. The PLO, with increasing international recognition, was regarded in Israel as the main threat to Israeli claims to all of Palestine.\textsuperscript{18}

In June 1982 Israel launched a full-scale war against Lebanon to crush the PLO once and for all, and at the same time to destroy the ability of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon to pose any threat to Israel. The invading Israeli army easily swept over the weak Lebanese and Palestinian defences. Thousands were killed and wounded. Arafat and his men were forced out, this time to Tunis, more remote from Palestine.

\textsuperscript{16} Neff 1995, p. 119; see also references above.
\textsuperscript{17} Same references as above.
than ever. The Reagan Plan, which came in the wake of the Israeli invasion, offered a new vision of Palestinian autonomy, but was quickly rejected – by Israel, by the Palestinians, and by the Arab states.  

The PLO was never so far away from Palestine as during the organization’s exile in Tunis. The war in Lebanon proved costly and divisive, and the PLO was weakened. In February 1985, Arafat signed an agreement with King Hussein, acknowledging a Jordanian role in a future peace process. The PLO wanted to participate in a joint peace delegation with Jordan, but the king demanded, in return for the PLO’s inclusion, acceptance of Resolution 242, renunciation of terrorism and explicit recognition of Israel’s right to exist. Arafat backed out.

As a result of the Israeli elections in 1984, Labour and Likud formed a joint government. In April 1987, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres managed to reach an agreement with King Hussein. Meeting secretly in London, Peres and Hussein agreed to an international conference that was to serve as an umbrella for bilateral talks between Israel and the Arab states. As so many times before, the Israeli government, headed by another of Likud’s warriors, Yitzhak Shamir, rejected any kind of multilateral negotiations. Shamir favoured a setting in which the superpowers would play an important role and where King Hussein would be the basis for direct negotiations between Jordan and Israel. King Hussein, however, did not approve the idea of bilateral talks, and the whole agreement faded away. Once again, the Palestinian issue seemed to vanish from the agenda, not least as a result of the Arab world’s increased preoccupation with the Iran–Iraq War.

For once in the turbulent history of the Middle East, it was the local Palestinians, those actually living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, who took matters into their own hands and permanently changed the conflict with Israel. In December 1987, a series of riots quickly erupted into a general uprising that spread from Gaza to the West Bank. This was originally triggered by a traffic accident in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, where four local Palestinians were killed in a crash with an Israeli military vehicle. In the beginning, the Israelis thought that the disturbances were simply another in the series of violent clashes that occurred from time to time in the Occupied Territories. Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin ordered harsh treatment of the Palestinian youngsters, who mainly threw stones at the Israeli soldiers. But, to his big surprise – and that of Israelis in general – these military methods failed to subdue the rebels. This time, the Israelis had fundamentally misjudged the depth of Palestinian anger and desperation.

The *intifada*, as the Palestinian uprising was called, challenged the legitimacy of Israel’s occupation and drew attention to its cost, both in moral and in financial terms. TV stations broadcasted worldwide how Israeli soldiers retaliated against stone-throwing...
Palestinian youngsters with brutal force. A new international focus was put on the fate of the Palestinian people. It became evident to the whole world that Palestinian nationalism could neither be ignored nor characterized as merely a consequence of PLO propaganda.\textsuperscript{23}

Once again, the United States entered the mediation scene. This time it was Secretary of State George Shultz who proposed a modified version of the Camp David Accords, the so-called Shultz initiative. This differed from Camp David on one major point: According to the agreement reached at Camp David, negotiations on the final status of the Occupied Territories were to begin after a five-year period of Palestinian autonomy. The Israelis had initially been extremely reluctant to accept this; for them, Camp David meant that they were to negotiate simultaneously to hand over the entire West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians. This they were not ready to do. The Palestinians were worried that Israel would be able to postpone the final status talks by delaying implementation of the autonomy period. In contrast, the Shultz initiative proposed that final status talks would begin shortly after an autonomy agreement, regardless of whether the latter had been fully implemented.\textsuperscript{24}

As expected, Yitzhak Shamir rejected the new US proposal. More surprisingly, so did the PLO. The \textit{intifada} still dominated the Palestinian areas, and there were no signs of progress on the diplomatic front. In July 1988, the political aspirations of the PLO received an unexpected boost when King Hussein renounced Jordan’s claim to the West Bank, effectively removing himself as a competitor to Arafat. However, the PLO’s leaders understood that the organization had to do something to get more support from the international community, in particular from the USA. The Americans and the Israelis could not ignore them forever.\textsuperscript{25}

The compromise solution was obvious – and had been for a long time: the Israelis and the Palestinians would have to share the land of ancient Palestine between them. Just like Israel, the PLO would also have to drop its claim to the whole area. The two-state solution did not, however, become official Palestinian policy until the end of 1988. In November that year, the PLO took its first step towards recognizing Israel. The Palestine National Council (PNC), the parliament of the PLO, declared an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with Jerusalem as its capital and Arafat as its president. It also accepted the two important UN Resolutions 181 and 242. The acceptance of Resolution 181, the famous partition resolution from 1947, implied for the first time Palestinian recognition of a Jewish state in Palestine. Support for Resolution 242 implied de facto recognition of Israel within the 1949 borders. The

\textsuperscript{23} Same references as above; Neff 1995, p. 119. The consequences of the \textit{intifada} will be discussed in more detail later.


acceptance of these two resolutions created a totally new legal and political basis for PLO diplomacy.26

As a part of this new international activity to start a peace process, Arafat was invited to address the UN General Assembly. However, US Secretary of State Shultz refused to grant Arafat – an official UN guest – an entry visa for the USA, whereupon the General Assembly took the unexpected step of moving to Geneva for an extraordinary session. On 13 December 1988, Arafat condemned terrorism and pleaded for peace, but the US State Department was still not satisfied. Arafat had not mentioned Israel explicitly, and the State Department again insisted that he had failed to address US conditions ‘clearly, squarely [and] without ambiguity’.27 The next day, at a Geneva press conference, Yasser Arafat met the test set by the USA and was rewarded with a public dialogue with the USA. Behind the scenes, Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Andersson and his team had played an important mediatory role, both in initiating a peace process and in establishing the dialogue between the Americans and the Palestinians.28

The election in Israel in 1988 resulted once again in a coalition between Likud and Labour. However, this time Likud had strengthened its position. Likud held the positions of both prime minister and foreign minister. The hawkish Labour politician Yitzhak Rabin remained minister of defence, and Shimon Peres became minister of finance. Attempts to bring the peace process back on track were consistently ruined by Shamir’s categorical refusal to even talk to any representative of the PLO. Then, on a visit to Washington in April 1989, Prime Minister Shamir announced that he favoured elections in the West Bank and Gaza in order to choose a Palestinian delegation to negotiate an autonomy arrangement with Israel. The negotiations, he said, should be based on the autonomy scheme drawn up at Camp David, an agreement Shamir himself had voted against.29

In January 1989, Ronald Reagan’s period as president and George Shultz’s as secretary of state came to an end. George H. W. Bush took up residence in the White House, and James Baker III headed the State Department. From the day they entered office, the new Bush administration – and in particular the new secretary of state – showed more courage when it came to handling the Middle East conflict. The Israelis and the Palestinians were told very clearly that if peace were to be achieved, they would have to limit their ambitions. To the Israelis’ surprise, accustomed as they were

to soft treatment from the Americans, Secretary of State Baker underlined that Israel would have to abandon its dreams of a ‘Greater Israel’.30

Egypt, which had been treated as an outcast in the Arab world since the signing of
the Camp David Agreements, had during the 1980s gradually regained its former impor-
tance in Middle Eastern affairs, and by 1989 it was in many ways well suited to
mediate peace between Israel and the PLO. Egypt had gradually built up good rela-
tionships with both the PLO leadership and Israeli Labour politicians, especially
Shimon Peres and his closest advisers. All realized that if there were to be any peace
process at all, the PLO would have to participate. But they were all faced with the
strong resistance of Prime Minister Shamir. He wanted to stick to his own plan, which
– among other things – favoured elections in the Occupied Territories to elect a Pales-
tinian negotiating team. Shamir had deliberately formulated his plan to ensure that the
PLO was kept out of the process. So, when the PLO wanted to test the seriousness of
Israel’s intentions and demanded to be included in the ongoing ‘Cairo Dialogue’,
Shamir immediately rejected this. For the Bush administration, however, this only
confirmed a long-held view that Yitzhak Shamir was not serious – neither about his
own plan nor about peace.31

In March 1990, Shimon Peres withdrew Labour from the coalition government, end-
ing an uneasy partnership with Likud that had lasted for six years. Three months later,
Washington suspended its dialogue with the PLO. The Palestinian organization had re-
fused to condemn a terrorist attack on a beach near Tel Aviv (in which no Israelis had
been injured) or to punish the member of the PLO Executive Committee who was be-
thind the terrorist operation. On the other hand, the talks between the PLO and the
Reagan and Bush administrations, following the USA’s acceptance of the PLO after
the Geneva UN meeting in mid-December 1988, had been narrowly restricted by Sec-
retary of State Shultz and showed no signs of progress. The terrorist attack, and Wash-
ington’s response to it in June 1990, continued to undermine the PLO’s long-cherished
hopes of a role in the peace process.32

The Changing World

The past had seen many attempts to negotiate peace, and just as many failures. How-
ever, by the beginning of the 1990s things started to change in the explosive Middle
East region in ways that had major implications for the development of the Israe-
li–Palestinian conflict. International, regional and national changes created new ope-
nings for negotiations between the two enemies.

30 Same references as above; interview with James Baker, 9 September 1999; Baker 1995, pp. 115–
gives an extensive account of both his own and the whole Bush administration’s involvement in
the peace process in the Middle East.
31 Same references as above.
After 1945, the international situation was dominated by the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Cold War was a major obstacle to any genuine peace process in the Middle East. Ever since Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser received his first deliveries of military equipment from Czechoslovakia in 1955 (having tried the USA first, where he was not taken seriously), the USA imposed a Cold War perspective on the Middle East conflict. As Washington saw it, the Soviet Union and the fight against communism lay at the core of the conflict. This perception led the USA not only to misjudge and misunderstand Arab nationalism in general, but also to misinterpret the Palestinians’ fight to regain their homeland. Washington saw Israel as its only faithful ally in the region. Consequently, Israel was provided with huge amounts of economic, military and diplomatic aid from the United States. The Jewish state had to be strengthened against its potentially communist Arab neighbours. The Soviet Union and its allies backed the Arab–Palestinian cause, and the Arab states received high levels of political support for the war against Israel. In the United Nations, for instance, the Soviet bloc was a faithful ally of the Arab world. The Soviet Union also supplied the Arab states with military equipment, enabling them to fight against Israel.\footnote{This subject is dealt with in various publications. For overviews, see for instance Neff 1995; Quandt 2001; Persson 1980.}

Throughout the 45 years of the Cold War, US–Soviet rivalry in the Middle East often made it impossible to undertake a genuine peace approach. The Soviet Union’s backing of the Arab states and the USA’s commitment to Israel encouraged the continuation of the regional rivalry, which in turn gave both the Arabs and the Israelis enough manoeuvring space to intensify the conflict every so often. Global competition was not conducive to regional conflict management, fuelling many regional conflicts, including the one in the Middle East.\footnote{Bercovitch 1997a, pp. 223–225.}

By 1989, the Cold War was over. Two years later, the Soviet Union and its empire collapsed. The Russians were confronted with huge internal problems and lacked the resources and will to continue the rivalry game in the Middle East – as in other regions. The United States, as the sole remaining superpower, felt that it could play an even more important diplomatic role.

Coping with conflicts and initiating conflict management of any form requires cooperation and leadership at the international level. This had been barely possible in the bipolar, competitive world of the Cold War. The new world order allowed the great powers to coordinate their efforts in order to mitigate or resolve regional conflicts in a different way than they had been used to in the past.\footnote{Ibid.}

Dramatic events also took place on the regional level. On 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and on 9 August Kuwait was formally proclaimed the 19th Province of Iraq. The subsequent escalation of the crisis and the first Gulf War had profound effects on all
of the actors in the Middle East, fundamentally altering the political landscape of the region and making Arab–Israeli peace a possibility.\textsuperscript{36}

The Gulf War crippled Iraq – one of Israel’s most implacable enemies. It also forced Israel to redefine its security concerns in terms of long-range missile threats from Iraq or Iran. The fact that Scud missiles from Iraq had reached Israeli territory terrified the Israeli people and their leaders. All of a sudden, the PLO did not seem to be the only dangerous enemy. The Gulf War also shattered the comforting myth of Arab unity. The majority of the Arab states supported the US-led war against Iraq. Here was a completely new coalition: suddenly, the majority of the Arab states found themselves in an alliance not only with the USA, but also with Israel. The PLO, however, did not belong to this mixed majority group. The PLO’s support for Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly one of Yasser Arafat’s greatest mistakes. It provoked harsh international criticism, even among the organization’s traditional friends. The PLO was cut off from the financial and political backing it had enjoyed from the Gulf states.\textsuperscript{37}

More than 300,000 Palestinians were expelled from Kuwait, and both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait stopped their payments to the PLO, virtually cutting the PLO’s budget in half. The financial crisis, in turn, triggered a process of disintegration throughout the whole organization. The PLO’s staff was drastically cut, and many missions abroad were closed. Perhaps most importantly, educational, welfare and social services for Palestinian refugees were suspended. Its support for Iraq proved devastating for the Palestinian organization. The PLO found itself in an extremely weak position, both with regard to the West and with regard to most of the Arab states. Since the Cold War was over, the Palestinian organization had already lost the protection and support traditionally provided by the Soviet Union. After the Gulf War, it faced bankruptcy and had scant political room for manoeuvre. From such a position of weakness, the PLO was ready to explore any diplomatic initiative that would include a Palestinian delegation.\textsuperscript{38}

Other important changes also took place on the national level, within the Israeli and Palestinian camps, contributing to a renewed negotiation process. Not only had the PLO’s exile in Tunis led to the marginalization of the PLO leadership, but Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza also felt abandoned, left to their own devices, with their leaders far away and they themselves living under the heavy burden of Israeli occupation. Increasingly frustrated, these Palestinians felt that they had to do something themselves instead of relying on the distant PLO leadership. Initiated and sustained by local Palestinians, the intifada began in December 1987. Over the years, a totally new Palestinian elite had gradually emerged, not dominated by the traditional old notables or the PLO leadership-in-exile. The creation of a new elite also explains why the Palestinians, who had endured Israeli occupation for 20 years, began to make significant


\textsuperscript{37} Same references as above.

\textsuperscript{38} Same references as above.
headway. The new elite, drawn mainly from small villages, refugee camps or small towns, and with a background from Palestinian universities, was more extensive than the old one. It succeeded in drawing attention to the plight of the Palestinians. Gradually, the belief took hold among the Israelis and the Americans: self-rule could be negotiated with local Palestinians, relegating the PLO leadership to a marginal role. If Yasser Arafat and the official PLO leadership wanted to continue to maintain their authority after the outbreak of the intifada, ‘they simply had to get involved in any negotiations or be swept aside by the growing self-confidence of the local Palestinians’.

The intifada also made an important impact on Israeli political reasoning. Many Israelis questioned the wisdom of trying to maintain full control over the West Bank and Gaza. Both the Israelis and the PLO felt a growing threat from the rise of militant Islam in general. Hamas – the Islamic Social Movement with the acronym HaMaS, which stood for ‘ardour, excitement, mobilization’ – had an implacable approach to the conflict with Israel, and support for this fundamentalist organization was rapidly growing among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Hamas had begun to challenge the PLO as the sole leader of the Palestinians – a source of particular concern for Chairman Arafat. The Israeli political leadership also feared this development. The possibility that a fundamentalist Palestinian leadership could have a common cause with Iraq or Iran against Israel, producing an even greater military threat, was a reason for deep concern, not least to Israeli Defence Minister and, from 1992, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. These worries constituted a common cause for Israel and the PLO. Arafat’s political life was at stake, and he became ‘dependent on Israel to recognize him as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians and to help him fulfil his goals of liberating Palestine’. The Israelis needed a stable, friendly Palestinian partner to govern the Occupied Territories. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that only Arafat could give them such a regime – the other options were much worse.

On 23 June 1992, the rightist government of Yitzhak Shamir lost the elections, ending 15 stormy and expansionist years under the rule of Likud. The Labour Party, headed by Yitzhak Rabin, replaced Likud. The hawkish Labour leader had campaigned on a political platform that included negotiating a Palestinian autonomy plan within nine months. These were profound changes in Israeli politics.

Unlike his predecessor, Rabin was seen by both the Bush administration and the media as a leader the United States could get along with. His election campaign for peace within a limited period of time also raised expectations. On the other hand, the new prime minister was a former general, well-known for his commitment to Israeli security. When the intifada broke out, Rabin, as minister of defence, had been given the responsibility for getting the situation in the Palestinian areas under control. But the harsher the measures he ordered, the stronger the resistance grew. However, his brutal

40 Pruitt 1997b, p. 243
41 Ibid.; Zartman 1997, p. 197
and unsuccessful attempts at crushing the Palestinian intifada made him realize that a shift in course was necessary. Rabin included more dovish advisers in his governing team. Shimon Peres became foreign minister and Yossi Beilin his deputy at the foreign ministry. These two had been working for a long time towards accepting a peace settlement with the Palestinians.43

Among the lessons of the Gulf War was the realization that the United States no longer regarded Israel as the only ‘strategic asset’ in the region. The Cold War was over, and the USA now felt free to broaden its regional alliances in the Arab world. The traditional ‘special relationship’ between the USA and Israel seemed to be crumbling. Indeed, Shamir’s defeat at the polls seems to have been precipitated by the fact that the Israeli public regarded him as incapable of making progress with the peace negotiations, thereby allowing the relationship with the USA to deteriorate. By contrast, the new prime minister felt that recent international and regional changes offered Israel a short-term opportunity, with the possibility of solving once and for all the conflict between Israel, the Palestinians and the neighbouring Arab countries. In addition, the rise of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Occupied Territories was seen as a powerful manifestation of the coming threat of Islam. These factors convinced Rabin of the importance of a peace process in general, and the Oslo opportunity in particular.44

The intifada made a deep impression on Israeli society, and Rabin believed that making peace with the Palestinians would put an end to violence and terrorism by Palestinians against Israelis. By now there was considerable public pressure in Israel for withdrawal – even unilateral withdrawal – from the Gaza Strip, often referred to as the ‘Gazan hellhole’. According to Shimon Peres, the problem was that ‘nobody wanted Gaza’.45 Rabin thought, however, that the PLO leadership would be in a better position to control the Palestinian uprising than the Israeli army. A peace agreement of any kind would relieve Israel of the burden of occupation. Finally, there was a deep-seated wish in Israel to end the country’s isolation in the region and its pariah status in the international community. Without the blessing of the Palestinians, an opening to the Arab markets and normalization would be difficult. The PLO very much controlled Israel’s path to peace with its neighbours. Except for Egypt, no Arab government had ever taken the risk of concluding peace with Israel – until the PLO declared itself willing to do so.46

---

45 Peres 1995, p. 322.
The Madrid Conference

The Madrid Conference, which opened on 30 October 1991, was in a way the direct outcome of the changed international, regional and national situation. The conference was co-sponsored by the USA – by this time in reality the sole superpower – and the now-crippled Soviet Union, which was still however an important actor. But the Madrid Conference would probably never have seen the light of day without the efforts of US Secretary of State James Baker, whose achievements in getting the peace process off the ground were significant. Baker invested a great deal of time and energy in bringing the peace message to the parties concerned. He constantly made it clear to all of them that if peace in any form were to be obtained, their ambitions would first have to be scaled down. Like many others, Baker and his advisers were of the opinion that the time was ripe for direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel, however, still refused official PLO representation. As a result, the Palestinians were only allowed at the negotiating table – for the first time ever in an official international setting – under the umbrella of the Jordanian delegation. Here, though, they could speak for themselves and, not least, speak directly to the Israelis. The Madrid Conference thus marked a watershed in the Arab–Israeli conflict.47

The Madrid framework of negotiations established a formal and direct diplomatic link between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The framework had two basic elements: a bilateral track and a multilateral track. The bilateral negotiations were the first ever direct talks between Israel and Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. According to the original framework, the bilateral part was to deal with the basic issues in the conflict, whereas the multilateral component was intended, as James Baker saw it, ‘to address those issues that are common to the region’.48 Five working groups were established to deal with five issues of importance to the countries in the Middle East: water, the environment, arms control and regional security, refugees, and regional economic development. The negotiations later moved to Washington, where the basic bilateral issues of the conflict came to dominate the agenda totally. The multilateral part of the conference opened in Moscow in January 1992, in the shadow of the bilateral track.49

Both Israel and the Palestinians entered into the Madrid process half-heartedly and for entirely different reasons. For Israel, improving relations with the USA was an important motivation. With the full backing of US President George Bush, Secretary of State Baker had brought considerable pressure to bear on the vehemently anti-Palestinian Israeli Prime Minister Shamir. The Bush administration withheld loan guarantees in order to force the Israeli prime minister to the negotiating table. Not

since the days of Eisenhower had a US administration used the economic weapon against Israel. In addition, Baker openly urged Israel to ‘reach out to the Palestinians as neighbors who deserve political rights’.

In Baker’s view, Shamir’s ambitious settlement programme ought to be stopped. Despite strong political pressure, both internally in the USA and from Israel, the Bush–Baker team consistently characterized East Jerusalem as belonging to the Occupied Territories. Thus, Jerusalem was not, as many Israelis and Americans saw it, Israel’s eternal capital. The Bush administration made it clear that the final status of Jerusalem was to be defined by negotiations. Consequently, at the Madrid Conference the Israelis had no intention of joining in or adding any momentum to the process, intending only to register their presence in order to please the Americans. To underline this hawkish attitude and to ensure a correct and precise presentation of at least Likud’s expansionist policies, Shamir decided to represent Israel himself: ‘Everybody knows what I represent’, he stated, deliberately pouring cold water onto the peace process even before it had started.

For the Palestinians, the situation was completely different. Madrid offered a ‘golden opportunity for recognition and status improvement’. Formally, there were no PLO representatives at the Madrid conference. The Israelis were still unwilling to talk to what they considered a terrorist organization. The Palestinian delegation consisted only of local Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, individuals who were not formally PLO officials or residents of East Jerusalem. The delegation was headed by Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi from Gaza, one of the PLO’s founders. He had a strong and articulate spokeswoman in Hanan Ashrawi, Professor of English at Birzeit University on the West Bank. In reality, however, every issue that was raised was referred back to Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership – and even the Israelis were aware that they were negotiating with Arafat ‘by fax’. But, unlike Shamir, the Palestinians did not attend the Madrid Conference merely so that their presence could be registered. The PLO was, at least initially, interested in progressing talks.

For obvious reasons, the Palestinians were not keen to discuss matters of great importance while they themselves were formally only present as part of the Jordanian delegation, and sought instead ways of talking with the Israelis directly. This meant that, from the very outset, the official diplomatic track was plagued by obstacles. Not only did the Palestinians in Madrid and Washington lack a true mandate to negotiate, but the intense media scrutiny and recurrent leaks hampered progress within the offi-

---

50 Quoted after Neff 1995, p. 126; see also Quandt 2001, p. 296.
52 Zartman 1997, p. 197.
cial framework of the conference. The negotiation teams failed to establish the level of mutual trust necessary for reaching a risky compromise. However, strong forces on both sides now wanted a real peace process and did not want to let this rare opportunity slip away. A way had to be found out of the deadlocked situation. While the process degenerated into a meaningless battle over words in Washington, highly placed individuals – both Israeli and Palestinian – began to express the view that a way had to be found to allow direct contact between the two sides: ‘Israel is neither speaking to the right people nor speaking about the right things’, one of Shimon Peres’s closest advisers told his boss frankly.\(^{55}\) Peres and his inner circle considered it pointless to waste time in Washington by pretending that the PLO was not there. By the beginning of 1993, the Madrid process had completely run out of steam. Reluctantly, the new Israeli government decided to do the previously unthinkable – to talk directly to the PLO.\(^{56}\)

\(^{55}\) Quoted after Makovsky 1996, p. 41.

The Oslo Back Channel was not Norway’s first peace effort in the Middle East. Indeed, Norway had been involved with different conscious mediation and confidence-building efforts in the Middle East for years prior to the opening of the secret Oslo Back Channel. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, Norway had been one of Israel’s staunchest and best friends. In the late 1970s, and later than most other Western countries, Norway gradually established relations with the PLO. But the relationship between Norway and the PLO was much weaker and much more recent than the already established and close friendship between Norway and Israel. Is this political past insignificant when it comes to understanding and explaining Norway’s role in the Oslo Back Channel? Or does this constitute a decisive explanation for the Norwegian involvement?¹

Establishing a Very Special Relationship

A very special relationship existed between Norway and Israel long before the exciting days of the secret Norwegian back channel. After its founding in 1948, Israel became much more than just one of the many states with which Norway was on friendly terms. Norwegians developed an enormous admiration for Israel, almost akin to religious veneration. And this was not confined to Norway’s religious and conservative circles. Indeed, it was within the Labour movement that this religious ‘conversion’ was most clearly seen. And the Labour Party governed Norway for most of the post-war period.²

Several factors explain the development of this relationship between the two social democratic governments and parties, and the extraordinary admiration and support felt towards the new Jewish state across the whole spectrum of the Norwegian political environment. Of course, as in many European countries after 1945, general feelings of guilt with regard to the fate of the Jewish people during World War II underlay the

¹ As will be discussed later, one must distinguish between the factors explaining the entry or beginning of the process and the factors explaining the process itself and the results it led to.
² This chapter is based on my previous research; see, in particular, Waage 1989, 1996, 2000a, 2000c and 2002.
Peacemaking Is a Risky Business

largely one-sided pro-Israel attitudes in evidence. Moreover, Norway had long been a
country where folk religion, rooted in a conservative, fundamentalist Christianity, tra-
ditionally had a firm foothold. The fact that Norway has a state church meant that the
teaching of Christianity had a strong position, both in the state school system and in
the more general upbringing of new generations. This deep-seated religious founda-
tion, this familiarity with scripture and history, was instrumental in creating a positive
attitude towards the new and modern Israel. Most Norwegians felt a naturally close –
albeit not always clearly defined – relationship with the Jews. The more religious
segments of the Norwegian population saw the creation of Israel as a fulfilment of
Biblical prophecies. Once the Jewish State stood there as a reality, strong ties were
forged between present and past, between religion and politics.

Both the Christian community and the socialists in the governing Labour Party tend-
ed to view the State of Israel through the eyeglass of religion. For the more fervent
Christians, Israel marked the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. For the Labour
movement, it was their dream of a socialist paradise come true. Both agreed that a
‘land of milk and honey’ was being created. They admired how the Jews stubbornly
fought for a state of their own and, not least, how they had managed to overcome what
they saw as aggressive Arabs. For politicians within the Norwegian Labour Party, the
main reason for their almost religious support was their conviction that a socialist com-
community was being built up from the ground. Everything in Israel corresponded, on the
whole, to how leading Labour Party politicians felt a model society should be created.

This was the basis for Norway’s one-sided Middle Eastern policy in the late 1940s,
1950s and 1960s. These factors were all decisive in making Norway one of Israel’s
best friends. With the exception of efforts by a few officials at the foreign ministry, no
attempt was made to even try to understand the complexities of the Middle East con-


For most Norwegians, the only country and the only people that counted were Israel
and the Israelis. The fate of the Palestinians was totally neglected. The prevailing
opinion among politicians, within both the governing party and the opposition, was
that Israel could not be blamed for the flight of 600,000–760,000 Palestinians. These
had fled because the surrounding Arab states had told them to do so. The Israelis had

3 All of these attitudes are documented in detail in Waage 1996. It would be far beyond the scope of
this chapter to try to include all possible references, but some illustrative examples can be men-
tioned: Arbeiderbladet, 26 and 29 November 1949, 9 and 20 December 1949, 8, 11 and 18 May
1951, and 28 July 1951; Gerhardsen 1976, pp. 131–139.

4 Utenriksdepartementet (hereafter, UD) 34.8/4, I, memorandum of 20 May 1948, Peter Anker (Head
of Department), with supportive comments from all of the officials dealing with the Middle East
conflict, including Foreign Minister Halvard Lange; Francis Irgens (Diplomatic Minister, Cairo)
to Foreign Ministry 20, 22 and 25 May 1948; memorandum of 22 May 1948, Rasmus Skylstad
(Secretary General); Per Prebensen (Ambassador, London) to Foreign Ministry, 28 May 1948;
Finn Moe (UN Ambassador) to Foreign Ministry, 25 May 1948; 30.5/6, II, memorandum of 3
June 1948, Anker; 30.5/10/3, I, Helge Akre (Chargé d’Affaires, Moscow) to Foreign Ministry,
25 September 1948.
asked them to stay. No one, not even officials at the foreign ministry, wanted to encourage or pressure the Israelis to take back at least some of the Palestinians. On the contrary, the Norwegian foreign ministry, the government and the political establishment as a whole were of the opinion that Israel had more than enough with its own problems. It would have to be up to the Arab states to take care of their fleeing brothers and sisters. The solution was, in other words, to have all the Palestinians integrated into the Arab countries.\footnote{Arbeiderbladet, 26 and 27 April 1949, 5 May 1949, 24 June 1949, 20 July 1949, 24 October 1950, 11 May 1951, 15 October 1955, 22 November 1955, 22 December 1956; Universitetsbiblioteket (hereafter, UB), Arne Ordings dagbok, 29 March and 26 April 1949; UD 30.5/10/3, I, press release, 26 April 1949, Erik Dons (Head of Division); 30.5/10/3, II, Arne Sunde (UN Ambassador) to Foreign Ministry, 3 June 1949; Stortingstidende (Parliamentary verbatim records, hereafter, S.tid.) 1950, pp. 70–71; National Archives (hereafter, NA) RG 59 840.04, memorandum of conversation of 30 November 1956.}

This attitude must, of course, be seen in the light of the massive Norwegian support for Israel. If all the Palestinians were allowed to return to their homes in what had now become the State of Israel, this would undermine that state. Israel was daily absorbing hundreds of Jewish immigrants from all corners of the world. That was Israel’s problem, and the new state had set about solving it as best it could. The politicians felt that the Arab states ought to show the same sense of responsibility and integrate the Palestinians into their midst. The foreign ministry, not that preoccupied with seeing the conflict from the Israeli side, took a more practical approach and saw integration as the only possible solution.\footnote{Same references as above.}

The Labour Party was prepared to do its utmost to rescue what it saw as a Jewish state threatened on all sides by aggressive Arabs. Border incidents, escalating from 1955, were always explained in terms of Israeli responses to Arab aggression. Israel was never criticized, not even when the number of Arab casualties far exceeded the Israeli losses. In the eyes of the Norwegian Labour Party, Israel had only good intentions and had to protect itself against aggression. The Labour Party – and in particular Norway’s most powerful Israeli supporter, Labour Party Secretary Haakon Lie – felt that it had to take immediate action to rescue the Jewish state from being wiped off the map.\footnote{Arbeiderbladet, 6, 7, 9 and 11 April 1951; 17, 20, 22 and 26 October 1953; 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 March 1955.}

However, the Six-Day War in 1967 gradually contributed to a change of attitude: the fate of the Palestinians was seen in a new and different light. More and more believed that there could be no political solution to the problems in the Middle East unless the rights of the Palestinians were included.

Prior to 1967, Israel had been regarded as the weak and threatened party in the Middle East. The Arab states, in turn, had been viewed as strong and aggressive and with only one goal – to destroy the little Jewish state. But the massive Israeli victory in 1967 triggered a re-evaluation process in political circles in particular and among the Norwegian public in general concerning the parties’ respective military strengths. Who was weak? Who was strong? As a consequence of the war, Israel had occupied...
the West Bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights and, not least, the old part of Jerusalem itself. However, while a new and more favourable attitude towards the Palestinians was being forged, there still was a long way to go before this gained broad and common support. In an opinion poll taken immediately after the Six-Day War, 74% said that they sympathized with Israel.\footnote{Olsen 1998, pp. 70–71; Jebsen 1997, pp. 14–15; Tveit 1996, pp. 394–405; Tamnes 1997, pp. 377–378. For opinion polls in this period, see Strøm 1971, pp. 169–170.}

In 1967, leading figures in the Norwegian Labour Party were celebrating the Israeli victory. But they had become older, and were on their way out of the party. The younger generation that was in the process of assuming leading positions had kept quiet in the beginning, but became increasingly vocal and critical. These were aware of Israel’s military superiority, its occupation of new territory, the fate of the Palestinians and the terrible conditions in the refugee camps. They knew about the nationalist movement among the Palestinians and the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This new generation began to work for justice for the Palestinians. They wanted information and contact with the other side in the Middle East conflict. These new approaches were part of the political radicalization that swept through Norwegian society in the 1970s.\footnote{Olsen 1998, pp. 80–86, 103–112; Jebsen 1997, pp. 14–15; Tveit 1996, pp. 394–405; Tamnes 1997, pp. 377–378.}

While Israel was in the process of losing its absolute hold on Norway’s opinion, the opposite was happening for the PLO. At the beginning of the 1970s, the PLO adopted a more moderate approach and demonstrated a new will to compromise. At the same time, the organization improved its international position. The PLO obtained observer status at the UN, and Chairman Yasser Arafat was granted the opportunity to speak to the UN General Assembly in November 1974.\footnote{Tamnes 1997, pp. 377–378; Tveit 1996, pp. 558.}

These international developments had major implications for Norwegian Middle East policy. Labour’s new foreign minister from October 1973, Knut Frydenlund, was not blind to this new climate both at home and internationally. He felt that Palestinian representatives should be included in international organizations like the United Nations. In 1974, he accepted that PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat should be given the chance to address the UN General Assembly and instructed Norway’s UN ambassador to vote in favour of the motion.\footnote{UD 25.11/19e, 1, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 1, 8 and 11 October 1974; minutes from meeting between Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Andersson and Frydenlund, 9 October 1974; memorandum of 4 November 1974, Kjeld Vibe (Head of Department); Tamnes 1997, pp. 378; Tveit 1996, pp. 559–575; Stoltenberg 2001, pp. 262–263; Johansen 1978, pp. 86–90; Johansen 1980, pp. 53–56; Jebsen 1997, pp. 16–18.}

However, this decision went way too far for the political establishment and for most Norwegians. This was the first time Norway had voted contrary to Israel’s desires. The Norwegian vote led to strong reactions in Norway, not least within the governing Labour Party. A storm of protests was directed at the foreign minister. The supporters
of Israel within the party made it crystal clear that they were still a factor when it came to Norwegian Middle East policy. In close cooperation with the Israeli embassy in Oslo, the parliamentary organization Friends of Israel led the storm against Frydenlund. A petition was signed by 200 leading politicians. Johan Jørgen Holst, later to become a crucial Oslo actor, was strongly involved in this pro-Israel, anti-Arafat campaign, and he took an active part in formulating the petition. The campaign almost caused the resignation of the foreign minister. Knut Frydenlund had obviously misjudged the extent of both the opposition and, not least, the Israeli lobby’s ability to mobilize support for its cause.12

The whole episode resulted in a severe political backlash for Knut Frydenlund personally. Looking back, Frydenlund said that the decision had been historically correct, but politically wrong because it differed too much from the prevailing Norwegian attitudes to the conflict in the Middle East.13 The upshot was that the episode secured the continuation of the pro-Israel line. That same autumn, the Norwegian UN delegation fell back on Norway’s traditional anti-Palestinian position. Norway had definitely joined an odd fellowship and had marked itself out as ‘one of the most pro-Israeli countries in the world’.14 The PLO continued to be treated as though it had leprosy.15

By the end of the 1970s, a shift was taking place within some segments of the Norwegian political milieu. Labour Party politicians, high-ranking Norwegian officials and military leaders all met with the higher echelons of the PLO. Norway’s contribution to the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) from March 1978 onwards had major implications for the shaping of Norwegian Middle East policy. The UNIFIL presence and the establishment of relations with the PLO led to a stream of Norwegian visitors to the Palestinian organization. For the first time, the defence ministry became actively involved as the confrontations with the Israelis led to diplomatic


14 Johansen 1978, p. 88: ‘[D]en norske regjering ... hadde markert seg som “en av de mest Israelvennlige i hele verden”’. This comment was made by Dagbladet’s New York correspondent, who had been following the proceedings in the UN for years.

15 UD 25.11/19, 122, memorandum of 21 November 1974, Foreign Minister to the members of the government; 25. 19/11, 123, memorandum of 29 November 1974, Vibe; memorandum of 29 November 1974, Arne Arnesen (State Secretary); Tamnes 1997, p. 378; Tveit 1996, pp. 559–575; Stoltenberg 2001, pp. 262–263; Johansen 1978, pp. 86–90; Johansen 1980, pp. 53–56; Jebesen 1997, pp. 16–18; Heradstveit 1974, pp. 24–25. Another example of the power of the Israel lobby was when the chairman of the Labour Party, Reiulf Steen, had voiced some criticism of Israel to the press in 1976. Steen was promptly approached by the Israeli ambassador, who told him that it was he who held the majority in the parliament. The same ambassador pointed out to Norwegian journalists that he only had to make a single telephone call to either Labour Party headquarters, Labour’s group in the parliament or some of the other political parties in the parliament to get his way. Johansen 1980, p. 55; Jebesen 1997, p. 18.
frictions between the two ‘best friends’. New information flowed into the foreign and defence ministries.16

Norwegian–Palestinian contacts were developed within the old pro-Israeli bastion, the trade union LO. But, although Norway had started to move towards a more balanced Middle East policy, it had become clear during the 1970s that Norway was isolated in Europe as regards its restrictive policy towards the PLO. The heated debate over Arafat’s UN performance in the autumn of 1974 had taught Foreign Minister Frydenlund a lesson when it came to experimenting with new approaches: changing Norwegian Middle East policy in a more pro-Palestinian direction was dangerous and should only be attempted with great care. Still, Frydenlund wanted to make Norwegian Middle East policy more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, though he continued to meet severe opposition and was not able to modify the strong pro-Israel stance.17

Official Norwegian policy changed hardly at all after 1974. In the meantime, huge changes had been going on internationally and Israel had become more isolated. The Jewish state still refused to negotiate with the PLO or to give up any of the land it had conquered. This was becoming increasingly unacceptable for a growing majority of the world’s states. In fact, it would have been difficult to find a single pro-Israel country in the whole of the European Community. Even the Netherlands, traditionally considered a pro-Israeli country, sharply criticized Israel for its line on the Palestinian question and voted against Israel in international forums. With its restrictive policy on Palestinian matters, Norway was isolated, a remote country – in every sense – in this European context. A decreasing number of countries were voting with Norway on Middle East questions in the UN, while Norway had one of the most restrictive policies towards the PLO in the whole world.18


Small Beginnings

Surprisingly enough, it might seem, it was Norway’s traditional position as Israel’s best friend that made the remote country suitable and attractive as a possible mediating partner. And, even more surprisingly, at least at first glance, it was neither Norway itself nor Israel that drew Norway into this position; instead, it was PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat who took the initiative and brought Norway’s name forward. Arafat considered Norway important because of – rather than in spite of – its close relations with Israel. He saw Norway as an important channel that could be used in possible negotiations in the future, a serious and decent country that could not be accused of primarily wishing to promote its own national interests. In addition to its close links to the adversary, Norway also had strong ties with the USA, something that was definitely needed. In one way or another, the USA would have a major role to play in any peace negotiations in the Middle East.\(^{19}\)

The idea of Norway as a suitable mediator was raised seriously for the first time in 1979, in connection with the Camp David Accords. The US government asked Norway to guarantee oil deliveries to Israel, to replace oil from Iran and Sinai. For the Norwegian government, this request created a dilemma. Norway’s UNIFIL engagement required closer contacts with the Palestinian side, and these contacts would have to be built from scratch by Norway’s new chargé d’affaires in Beirut from March 1978, Hans Wilhelm Longva. This relationship and confidence-building process was Longva’s major task. However, the US request for an oil guarantee to Israel could easily have ruined this work, thought the Norwegians.\(^{20}\)

It was during the process of sorting out this dilemma that Norway’s possible role as a future mediator was raised by Yasser Arafat. The Norwegian foreign ministry asked Longva to discuss the oil guarantee issue with Arafat and to find out whether he was opposed to the idea. It came as a surprise, both to Longva and to the foreign ministry in Oslo, when Arafat replied that he found the deal unproblematic. Israel would get its oil anyway. However, as a trade-off for his acceptance of a possible Norwegian–Israeli oil deal, Arafat wanted something in return. He wanted to come to Norway some time in the future if he needed a secret back channel to the Israelis. At the time, Israel was governed by the hawkish Likud and wanted nothing to do with the PLO.

---


\(^{20}\) UD 52.4/87b, 1, memoranda of 22 and 25 January, 2, 12 and 14 February 1979, Olav Bucher-Johannessen (Special Adviser); memorandum of 26 March 1979, Georg Kristiansen (Secretary General); memorandum of 23 February, 28 March and 2 April 1979, Foreign Minister to members of government; memorandum of 3 April 1979, Thorvald Stoltenberg (State Secretary); 44.1/71, 2, memorandum of 1 April 1979, Jens Evensen (Special Adviser); S.tid 1977–78, pp. 3105–3106; Tamnes 1997, pp. 197–198, 379–380; Jøbensen 1997, pp. 23–24; see also UD 25.11/19, 157, minutes from meeting between Nordli and Begin, 11 December 1978, Trolle Andersen, 12 December 1978; Stoltenberg 2001, p. 264.
Foreign Minister Frydenlund was positive and willing to serve as a possible back channel option.\(^{21}\)

In the coming years this option resurfaced on a number of occasions. Knut Frydenlund was the driving force in Norway, while Longva, his representative on the ground, was becoming increasingly and extraordinary close to Arafat. Frydenlund and Longva acknowledged that a future solution could only be found in a two-state solution, a partition. However, nothing concrete came out of the Norwegian talks with the PLO at this time.\(^{22}\)

The Crucial Role of the Norwegian Labour Party

In 1981, the Labour Party lost power in Norway. From the beginning of the 1980s, it was the Labour Party in opposition that forced through the profound changes in attitudes towards the PLO. ‘Norway is today one of the most restrictive countries in the world in relation to, for instance, the Palestinian problem. This is not said as a criticism of others; it is more a criticism of myself.... I believe that neither Israel, Norway nor the Middle East conflict will profit from a continuation of this restrictive line’, said Knut Frydenlund from the opposition benches.\(^{23}\)

The Norwegian Labour Party was following in the footsteps of other social democratic parties in Europe. There – in particular in Austria and Sweden – the pro-Palestinian process had been going on for years and was far ahead of the small steps taken in Norway.\(^{24}\)

From the autumn of 1981, several Labour Party leaders met with Arafat. Just by meeting the ‘symbol of terrorism’ themselves, they were crossing a threshold. The Labour Party leader from 1975–81, Reiulf Steen, was the first to meet with the Palestinian leader. In December 1982, Steen went to Tunis to interview Arafat for the newspa-


\(^{23}\) S.tid 1981–82, p. 1660: ‘Norge er i dag et av de land i verden som fører den mest restriktive linje når det gjelder Leks Palestina-problemet. Jeg konstanterer dette ikke som noen kritikk av andre; det er mer som selvkritikk.... Jeg tror verken Israel, Norge eller Midtøsten-konflikten er tjent med en fortsettelse av denne restriktive linje.’

\(^{24}\) Lie 1983, p. 135; Jebsen 1997, p. 22. The pro-Palestinian process among the social democratic parties in Europe is observable in the debates of the Socialist International (SI). From the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 until the war in 1967, the debate in this international forum was totally dominated by the Israeli perspective. From the beginning of the 1970s, the social democratic parties in Europe, with the exception of the Norwegian, became increasingly interested in the political aspects of the Palestinian issue. Socialist International (hereafter SI), records, 1946–83, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Devin 1993, pp. 127–151.
Norway’s Political Past in the Middle East

per *Verdens Gang* (VG). The interview appeared on the front page of the newspaper’s 20 December edition, and Arafat was quoted as saying to Steen that Norway was especially qualified to play a key role in the work for peace in the Middle East. The PLO leader particularly emphasized Norway’s close relations with the USA. However, Steen’s interview was partly a cover. He had been asked by an old friend, Abba Eban, Israel’s ambassador to the UN in 1948–59, ambassador to the USA in 1950–59, deputy prime minister in 1963–66 and foreign minister in 1966–74, to act in his place at a meeting with Yasser Arafat and Issam Sartawi, a moderate Palestinian who represented the PLO at meetings of the Socialist International. With the help of Reiulf Steen, Eban wanted to try to establish a direct channel between himself and the PLO chairman. However, nothing concrete came out of Steen’s efforts.25

Two weeks later, on New Year’s Eve 1982, an ‘official’ Labour Party delegation (sent to the Middle East after approval by Labour’s board) visited Arafat in Tunis. The delegation consisted of Knut Frydenlund, his close adviser Bernt Bull, Thorvald Stoltenberg, parliamentarian Liv Aasen and, from Denmark, the former foreign minister Kjeld Olesen and parliamentarian Lasse Bundtz. Again, Arafat raised the question of a Norwegian and/or Scandinavian role in a future peace process. As Arafat saw it, Norway and the other Scandinavian countries could help establish contacts between the USA and the PLO. But, even more important and useful, the Norwegian Labour Party could help to establish direct contact between the Israeli Labour Party and the PLO. Arafat asked his Norwegian guests to deliver this message to the Israeli Labour Party.26

Arafat’s initiative was enthusiastically followed up by Thorvald Stoltenberg. He was anxious on behalf of the Norwegian Labour Party to make a Norwegian contribution to peace in the Middle East. He believed that the building of a personal relationship with Yasser Arafat and the PLO was an important part of the Norwegian peacebuilding efforts, and he considered Norway’s close friendship with the Israeli Labour Party as its main asset. The Labour Party network was the obvious one to use. Stoltenberg called an acquaintance in Israel, but received a negative response. Arafat, however, wanted to continue the contacts established with the Norwegians. During the winter of 1983, he called Stoltenberg and told him that he wanted to send Issam Sartawi to Oslo to discuss further progress. However, while participating at a Congress of the Socialist International, Sartawi was shot dead by the Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal. The murder of Sartawi came as a serious blow to the Norwegian hopes of setting up a direct channel between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The loss of Sartawi also meant that

---


many of the European social democratic parties lost one of their most important links to the moderates in the PLO. The incident did not, however, influence the Norwegian Labour Party’s goal of normalizing relations with the PLO. But the work of mediation and reconciliation suffered severely for years after this episode.  

Stoltenberg was not acting as a one-man show, however. He was supported by the leading politicians in the Labour Party, such as party leaders Reiulf Steen, Gro Harlem Brundtland and Thorbjørn Jagland. There was a broad consensus within the higher echelons of the Labour Party in favour of developing a network of Palestinian contacts. In April 1983, Arafat went to Stockholm to meet social democratic leaders in Scandinavia. Gro Harlem Brundtland met Arafat for the first time, and the question of a direct Israeli–Palestinian channel was discussed again. After the meeting, the social democratic leaders decided to continue to work for possible openings for any such negotiations. Many small attempts at promoting peace were tried, but no progress was achieved.  

When the Labour Party regained power in May 1986, Knut Frydenlund again became foreign minister but died within a year. Thorvald Stoltenberg took over in February 1987. The new government immediately spoke out in favour of a more PLO-friendly approach, signalling a turning point in the Norwegian Middle East policy. Again, the PLO contacted Norway, this time through Hans Wilhelm Longva, who had been appointed Norwegian ambassador to Kuwait. Longva had maintained his close connections with the PLO, which was now eager to start a dialogue with the USA. In December 1987, Foreign Minister Stoltenberg raised the question with the Americans, but they showed little interest. Instead, this task became Sweden’s major diplomatic contribution to peace in the Middle East. In December 1988, Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Andersson and his team managed to open a dialogue between the US government and the PLO. Stoltenberg left this question to his Swedish colleague. There was no separate role for Norway to play at this stage. However, Stoltenberg and Andersson were regularly in touch, and Andersson kept Stoltenberg informed at every stage about Sweden’s work and ambitions for the Middle East conflict in general and the PLO in particular. But in this US–PLO process, Norway only played the role of a small helper. This was Sweden’s show.

The Israeli reluctance to engage in direct peace negotiations continued to be the major problem for Norway and Sweden. In addition, the relationship between Israel and Sweden was not particularly friendly. This was where Norway had the advantage: its relationship with Israel was still close; and although the Labour government had worked towards a closer relationship with the PLO, it – not least Stoltenberg himself – was very conscious of the need to maintain the Norwegian–Israeli relationship. Norway would have an edge on Sweden when it came to bridge-building between Israel and the PLO. In several letters to his party comrade and friend Shimon Peres, Stoltenberg raised the question of direct contact between the two arch-enemies, but the response was bleak.

In January 1989, Thorvald Stoltenberg visited Arafat in Tunis. This was the first official visit by a Norwegian foreign minister to the PLO chairman. From then on, the Norwegian engagement widened considerably. At the meeting, Arafat again repeated that Norway had an important role to play. A formula for a future peace solution was also elaborated. This peace plan was not just very much in line with the approach taken in the Oslo Back Channel four years later, it was almost identical. Again Arafat emphasized that Norway could play an important role because of its close ties with Israel, the USA and the European Community. Norway also had a moral standing internationally, claimed Arafat. But this time Arafat had another concrete assignment for the Norwegian foreign minister: he wanted Stoltenberg to forward a message to the Israeli foreign minister, Moshe Arens. The message was that the PLO was ready to enter into direct bilateral talks at whatever level the Israelis might want. Israel and the PLO could meet secretly or publicly. The PLO was also willing to have contacts with Israel through a third party. Oslo could be an appropriate place to meet, and it could be useful if Norwegian research institutions were to arrange seminars at which the parties could meet. In such a way, indirect contacts could be established.

Foreign Minister Stoltenberg grasped the opportunity and accepted the challenge given to him and Norwegian diplomacy by Arafat in January 1989. A follow-up round

---

30 The two major problems were, first, the murder of the Swedish UN mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, in 1948, which was probably ordered by Yitzhak Shamir, Israel’s foreign minister in 1980–83 and prime minister in 1983–84 and 1986–92, and, second, the pro-PLO policy conducted under the regime of Olof Palme in the 1970s and 1980s.


32 For Israel, it was important that Norway stood outside the European Community. In the eyes of many Israelis, the European Community had been far too critical for far too long and had advocated far too much of an interventionist style.

was handled by Longva after Stoltenberg’s return to Oslo. Longva reported that Arafat was still keen and was even more precise as to the exact content of the part Norway could play: as a consequence of his conversation with Stoltenberg and friendship with Longva, the PLO chairman now wanted Norway to play the same role in the negotiations between Israel and the PLO as Sweden had between the USA and the PLO. In addition, the whole Oslo Back Channel approach was now directly, concretely and in detail elaborated by Arafat himself. As Stoltenberg saw it – and as his adviser, head of department at the foreign ministry Knut Vollebæk, formulated it – the role of Norway could be to ‘see that views, evaluations and messages could be passed on in a highly confidential way. The Norwegian foreign ministry should be willing to provide the necessary human and technical resources. The necessarily secret nature of the project may require that it be kept within a narrow circle and given special security arrangements’. Of course, nothing was said publicly about the results of the Stoltenberg–Arafat meeting.

On his return to Oslo, Stoltenberg was wise enough to underline the traditionally close relationship between Norway and Israel: ‘Norway has always felt very close to Israel’, he claimed. ‘This has not changed’. However, such statements did not help him much. The Israelis viewed the situation differently and were not pleased, to put it mildly, with the new Norwegian opening towards Arafat and the PLO. When Stoltenberg visited Moshe Arens and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in Jerusalem in March 1989, no appreciation was forthcoming. Stoltenberg tried to explain why Norway had changed its attitude towards the PLO, but he got nowhere. The Israelis dug their heels in even harder, and a disappointed Stoltenberg was forced to shelve his mediation plans. Arafat was told that Norway still stood by its promise to act as mediator between Israel and the PLO, but Stoltenberg’s meetings in Jerusalem gave him no reason to believe that this could be achieved under Shamir’s regime in Israel.


37 Butenschøn 1989, p. 11: ‘Norge har en sterk følelse av nærhet til Israel.... Dette er ikke endret.’

In the autumn of 1989, the Norwegian Labour Party lost the election and a non-socialist government took over. Mostly for domestic reasons, the new government had little interest in conducting an activist line vis-à-vis the PLO. For most members of the Christian People’s Party, the PLO represented the main obstacle towards peace. Arafat was still regarded by many in the party as enemy number one in the Middle East. The new foreign minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, did not hesitate to clarify that he and the new government had a different conception of the PLO than the previous government. In the Norwegian parliament, Bondevik presented certain ‘adjustments’ in Norwegian Middle East policy to create a better ‘balance’ in Norway’s relationship to the two parties. He wanted a more critical position on the PLO, and a stronger emphasis on Israel’s right to exist within safe and recognized borders. This was emphasized in a draft speech by the new state secretary, Knut Vollebæk: ‘At the same time we wish to state more powerfully than before that respect of Israel’s rights is critical for any progress in the work for peace. This is a not a cosmetic adjustment’. In addition, in an interview with the press, Foreign Minister Bondevik explained the religious aspects of his position on the Middle East conflict, stirring up a varied response as he did so: ‘God holds his hand over the people of Israel in such a way that He will protect its right to the land. I have never stopped being puzzled by the way God holds His protecting hand over the people of Israel.’

Official Activities and the Link to Terje Rød Larsen

The non-socialist government was in power for just a year. In November 1990, Thorvald Stoltenberg was again appointed foreign minister. He still believed that Norway’s contribution to solving the conflict in the Middle East would consist of persuading Israel to negotiate with the PLO. This was a calculated political choice on the part of Stoltenberg and was the line he had pursued since the beginning of the 1980s. When he entered office in 1990, the change of policy direction was both resolute and well-considered.

At the same time, Stoltenberg recruited new people who later became instrumental in the breakthrough in the Oslo Back Channel process. Jan Egeland was appointed to the post of political adviser, and in February 1992 he advanced to the position of state...
secretary. Jan Egeland brought with him a new and much more activist approach to the foreign ministry. Another appointee was the young diplomat Mona Juul, who became one of Egeland’s assistants. In 1988, Juul had been appointed to her first job as secretary at the Norwegian embassy in Cairo. Mona Juul was married to Terje Rød Larsen, who travelled with her to Egypt and lived there in 1989. Their stay in the Middle East was to prove decisive for the couple. In 1981, Terje Rød Larsen had been one of the founders of the research institute Fafo, which was affiliated to the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions. The ever-active and entrepreneurial Rød Larsen, with no particular knowledge of the Middle East, used the opportunity to examine whether Fafo could expand its research activities to the troubled region. Rød Larsen wanted Fafo to conduct a socio-economic study of the living conditions of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.43

In his usual energetic style, Rød Larsen decided to try to implement such a research project. He requested and managed to obtain sufficient financial support from State Secretary Knut Vollebæk to start designing and implementing a pilot survey. After discussing and clearing the request for money with Foreign Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, Vollebæk saw Rød Larsen’s initiative not primarily as a request for research money, but as one of several Norwegian peace initiatives in the Middle East. Vollebæk regarded the living-conditions survey as an important tool in ongoing Norwegian activities for achieving peace in the region. In many ways, Vollebæk himself represented continuity at the ministry of foreign affairs: he had been one of former (and later) foreign minister Stoltenberg’s closest civil servants and advisers when the Labour Party was in government, and served as state secretary (1989–90) and foreign minister (1997–2000) when the government was in non-socialist hands. Although political rhetoric on the Middle East conflict had changed when Bondevik took over, the goal and direction of Norwegian peace efforts were so firmly established that the Bondevik regime, even if it had wanted to, would have had serious problems changing things. But the non-socialist government was not interested in any change and felt that the ongoing bridge-building efforts were important and should be continued, which was evidenced in their support to Terje Rød Larsen.44

The preparations for Fafo’s research project brought Rød Larsen into direct contact with prominent figures on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides. The project also opened Rød Larsen’s eyes not only to the terrible conditions inside the Occupied Territories, and Gaza in particular, but also to the Middle East conflict in general. Perhaps it was not that insoluble after all? As Rød Larsen saw it, the parties needed a forum where they could meet and talk and substitute trust and understanding for suspicion and enmity. Rød Larsen became convinced that the distance between the two enemies was not as great as either they themselves or the rest of the world seemed to think. He

became equally convinced that he could contribute towards solving a conflict, where for years other peacemakers had failed.\footnote{Interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul, 16 June 1999; Heiberg 1993, pp. 6–10 (preface by Terje Rød Larsen); Corbin 1994a, pp. 19–23.}

However, so far Rød Larsen was only acting in his personal capacity as leader of a research organization. He had no official backing from the foreign ministry. At this early stage, in 1989–91, all of the activities initiated and organized by Rød Larsen were private and personal. Of course, the foreign ministry ‘knew’ about them via Mona Juul, but it seems as though neither Foreign Minister Stoltenberg nor his deputy Jan Egeland were informed. There is no written documentation of any formal decisions or meetings involving Rød Larsen at the foreign ministry. Whether or when Stoltenberg and/or Egeland were informed of Rød Larsen’s activities in the Middle East, or whether they attached any importance to them, if they knew of them, is also most unclear. There was no formal link at this stage between Rød Larsen’s activities and the political leadership at the foreign ministry.

With Thorvald Stoltenberg’s and Jan Egeland’s new emphasis on peacemaking in the Middle East, there was much activity in Oslo, but this lacked any real direction. However, a visit to Oslo in February 1992 by the PLO economic expert Ahmed Qrei, with the \textit{nom de guerre} Abu Ala, proved decisive for future developments, despite the fact that nothing concrete came out of his meeting in Oslo at the time. Abu Ala was later to become the PLO’s chief negotiator in Oslo.\footnote{Interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul, 16 June 1999; Corbin 1994a, pp. 27–28. I have been unable to find any documentation from this meeting in the foreign ministry’s archive.} Towards the end of April 1992, another important Oslo actor became linked to the Oslo team, which still lacked anything resembling a master plan for future peace negotiations. Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin was to become the key Israeli figure in the Oslo Back Channel, and in April 1992 he was introduced to Rød Larsen. Beilin already had important contacts in Norway. In 1987, he had visited Oslo and met Stoltenberg and Holst, but he had never met Rød Larsen before.\footnote{Interview with Yossi Beilin, 23 March 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 49–53; Corbin 1994a, pp. 21–24; UD 34.4/87, 5, memoranda of 29 September, 1 and 12 October 1987, Vollebæk; minutes from meeting between Beilin and Holst, 1 October 1987, unknown author, 6 October 1987; Stoltenberg 2001, pp. 270–271.}

Foreign Minister Stoltenberg searched for ways to contribute to the halted peace negotiations. He set both the political level at the ministry and his diplomatic corps to work. In addition, he used his Israeli Labour Party connections and re-established his dialogue with both the PLO and the ‘internal’ Palestinian leaders. In January 1992, Faisal Husseini visited Oslo, and Stoltenberg lost no time in telling him that Norway was eager to do ‘whatever we can to support the peace process’.\footnote{UD 25.11/19o, 1, minutes from meeting between Stoltenberg, Egel
dan and Hussein, 9 January 1992, Ravn, 10 January 1992: ‘Norge er rede til å gjøre hva vi kan for å støtte opp om fredsprosessen.’} Norway was more than willing to contribute, but would not do anything that might harm the ongoing process. In fact, Norway was afraid of being just ‘another cook in the kitchen’. These
initiatives led nowhere, however. At this stage, neither Stoltenberg nor the other Norwegian players had any clear idea of the direction in which the process was heading, or in fact if it was heading anywhere at all.49

At this point, Terje Rød Larsen, and probably also Yossi Beilin, felt that any future peace process would have to be built by local Palestinian leaders living inside the Occupied Territories, as opposed to the dogmatic PLO people in Tunis who had lost contact with their people and the real world. Faisal Husseini was by many seen as the ideal candidate. Husseini was one of the original PLO founders and was the most significant of the Palestinian leaders in East Jerusalem. It was also perfectly clear to the involved actors in this drama that the stalled peace negotiations in Washington needed a push or an alternative track. Rød Larsen seemed already to have been playing with the idea that Norway, and Fafo in particular, could be a perfect venue for a secret Israeli–Palestinian meeting. This back channel should by no means replace the Washington process, only help it back on track.50

By this time, it seems as though it was Terje Rød Larsen who was getting the sides involved in the Norwegian peace track. He was the one taking the initiatives; he was the one following up; he was the one arranging the contacts and the meetings, eagerly and efficiently. Of all the players in this drama, Terje Rød Larsen was the most active and effective. The players in the region seemed more or less passively to respond to his ideas. In June 1992, a meeting was held between Rød Larsen, Yossi Beilin, the Israeli academic Yair Hirschfeld (soon to become another important Oslo actor) and Faisal Husseini. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss a Norwegian option to help the peace process in Washington. However, the meeting led nowhere. Of all the balloons being launched, none seemed to land on the Norwegian peace track.51

Towards the Oslo Back Channel

This lack of success, however, did not prevent the Norwegian peacemakers from continuing their efforts. On 9 September 1992, State Secretary Jan Egeland went on an official visit to Israel. The real purpose of the trip was to find out whether the Israelis

49 UD 25.11/19ø, 1, minutes from meeting between Stoltenberg, Egeland and Husseini, 9 January 1992, Ravn, 10 January 1992.

50 Faisal Husseini had also visited Oslo from 30 April to 3 May 1989. He had met with Stoltenberg – and others – discussing the peace process and Norway’s potential role in that process. UD 25.11/19, 256, memorandum of 5 May 1989, Berstad; see also interview with Yossi Beilin, 23 March 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 49–64; Corbin 1994a, pp. 22–23. For information on Husseini, see Ashrawi 1995, pp. 58–59; Beilin 1999, pp. 18–19.

51 Before this June meeting, Rød Larsen had sent a letter dated 26 May 1992 to Beilin, pressing the issue of a secret Norwegian track. In the letter, he explained to Beilin that, after the April meeting between the two, he had become much more optimistic about the prospects of obtaining progress. The subsequent meeting he had had with Faisal Husseini had strengthened his optimism. Interview with Yossi Beilin, 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 51–53; Corbin 1994a, pp. 22–23; Stoltenberg 2001, pp. 270–271.
and the Palestinians seriously wanted a secret back channel set up in Norway. Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin was Egeland’s contact, and a secret meeting was set up in Tel Aviv. In addition to Egeland, both Juul and Rød Larsen were present. Beilin was joined by Yair Hirschfeld. Speaking on behalf of Foreign Minister Stoltenberg, Egeland confirmed that Oslo was willing to host secret meetings between the two parties. Moreover, Egeland added that the Norwegian foreign ministry was behind Fafo and would back and finance a back channel project.52

But also this peace attempt, involving governmental figures on the Norwegian and Israeli sides, came to nothing, primarily because of the reluctance of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Egeland contacted Beilin several times, trying to arrange a meeting during the autumn of 1992. Rød Larsen also contacted him. To the Norwegians, Beilin seemed very busy, and Faisal Husseini’s travelling plans made the situation even more chaotic. The Norwegian team assumed that the Israelis were not ready for an Oslo meeting after all.53

On the Palestinian side, frustration was growing, particularly within the Palestinian team in Washington. The negotiations in the US capital were stuck. The need for a back channel, to sort out difficult questions, was obvious. In this situation, and unwittingly, Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi triggered the whole Oslo Back Channel. She suggested that Yair Hirschfeld should go to London on 3–4 December 1992, where the Steering Group of the multilateral part of the Madrid process was having a meeting, and should meet the PLO representative Abu Ala.54 For various reasons, many of the people who were later to play a part in the back channel happened to be gathered in London that December weekend: Yossi Beilin was heading the Israeli delegation to the multilateral talks; Abu Ala was there to guide the Palestinian delegation; Rød Larsen was in London attending a trade union conference, which had nothing to do with the peace process in the Middle East; and, finally, Yair Hirschfeld had also decided to travel to London after his conversation with Hanan Ashrawi. However, Hirschfeld was uncertain as to how a secret meeting with Abu Ala should be arranged. This was where Rød Larsen entered the scene. He was a man whom Hirschfeld and the Israeli side both knew and trusted, and he happened to be in London. Hirschfeld called him

52 Interviews with Thorvald Stoltenberg, 26 February and 9 March 1999; interview with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999; interviews with Yair Hirschfeld, 7 May 1998 and 22 March 1999; interview with Yossi Beilin, 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul, 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 56–58; Stoltenberg 2001, p. 271; Corbin 1994a, pp. 23–24; Salvesen 1994, pp. 346–347; UD 25.11/19n, 3, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 2 September 1992; Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, 7 September 1992. Many memoranda summing up the various meetings of the two state secretaries are filed here, but none of them relates directly to the peace process or to Norway’s potential role.

53 Same references as above; UD 25.11/19o, 3, Egeland to Husseini, 22 September 1992; Egeland to Beilin, 22 September 1992; memorandum of 7 October 1992, Sverre Bergh Johansen (Assistant Head of Department); Corbin 1994a, p. 28.

54 Hanan Ashrawi claims that if she had had any idea that the talk between Yair Hirschfeld and Abu Ala would develop into political negotiations, she would not have recommended the latter. He was unknown and an expert on economic matters; interview with Hanan Ashrawi, 23 March 1999.
and asked whether he had any information about Abu Ala, and whether he had any advice as to how such a secret meeting could be set up. Rød Larsen immediately realized the importance of such direct contact and seized the opportunity that had presented itself. He suggested that Hirschfeld and Abu Ala should meet the next morning at his hotel. It seems as though, even at this early stage, Rød Larsen had proposed a follow-up meeting, of any kind and level, to be held in Norway. Although he made it clear to Hirschfeld that he was not acting on behalf of the Norwegian government, Rød Larsen stressed his close contacts with both the foreign ministry and the governing Labour Party, of which Hirschfeld was already aware.

While Terje Rød Larsen and most of the other Oslo players were in London, Arafat’s old friend, Hans Wilhelm Longva, was visiting the PLO headquarters in Tunis. Longva was sent to Tunis as a direct consequence of two meetings he had had with Foreign Minister Stoltenberg and State Secretary Egeland in late November. As always, Longva got immediate and trouble-free access to Arafat and his close advisers. The purpose of Longva’s visit seems to have been multi-faceted: all of his political conversations were centred around the peace process and the lack of progress. During Longva’s meeting with Arafat on 27 November, the PLO chairman became deeply pessimistic over what he described as a serious crisis. Also internally on the Palestinian side, Arafat felt threatened by the rise and progress of Hamas, the growing lack of support for and trust in the PLO from Palestinians living on the West Bank and in Gaza, and the threats of resignation by some of the Palestinian negotiating team. Again, Arafat pleaded for help from a third party – Norway. There would be no progress in the negotiations without third-party intervention, he maintained. Since Norway was a suitable third party, he hoped that the country would be willing to take on such a role if – or rather when – it became necessary.

Abu Ala had not informed the PLO leaders in Tunis about the London meeting in advance. Beilin knew nothing of what was going on, nor had he been informed in advance. Two weeks later, Rød Larsen travelled to Tunis to meet the PLO leaders for the first time. He met with Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas, at this time mostly known by his nom de guerre Abu Mazen. Abu Mazen was head of the PLO’s Department for National and International Relations. The two PLO leaders had in the meantime been informed about the talks in London. Longva had also urged the chairman to receive Terje Rød Larsen. What was by then clear to Rød Larsen and the other Norwegians

---


56 Same references as above.

57 UD 25.11/19s, 1, two cables, Foreign Ministry to various embassies, 10 December 1992; memorandum of 23 December 1992, Rolf Willy Hansen (Head of Division); interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva, 30 June 2000; Stoltenberg 2001, p. 270.
involved was that the leaders in the Palestinian areas would not or could not do anything without the approval of Arafat. Faisal Husseini had made this very clear: Arafat exercised sole power. Whatever the Norwegians might think or feel about the dogmatic, old-fashioned and undemocratic leaders in Tunis, there would be no solution without the PLO.\(^{58}\)

Back in Oslo, Rød Larsen, Juul and Egeland called Beilin in Jerusalem to persuade him to continue to work on the back channel option and the meetings in London. Beilin assured Egeland that Hirschfeld had his approval and blessing. However, if any secret meeting should transpire, he – because of his position as deputy foreign minister – would exercise his right to deny any knowledge of it. If Hirschfeld as an Israeli citizen was willing to meet a PLO representative to sort out the many sensitive questions, that was a good thing. However, no one should know that Israel’s deputy foreign minister was involved. Beilin’s conditions were crystal clear: Hirschfeld was not speaking on behalf of the Israeli government. There existed no secret negotiations, only a discussion of central items. In January, the back channel option was finally given a careful ‘yes’ from Beilin. On 20 January 1993, the two enemies met in the small Norwegian town of Sarpsborg.\(^{59}\)

---


THE MODEST FACILITATOR

The greatest acts of statesmanship were made by people who did not know what they were doing’, the famous historian A. J. P. Taylor once remarked.¹ For the two Israelis, the three Palestinians and the various Norwegians gathered at Borregaard Manor on a cold winter’s day on 20 January 1993, this was, if not the complete truth, at least close to it. The various individuals who met in Sarpsborg that day had only been working on Israeli–Palestinian peace issues to a limited and varying degree. They were not the most experienced and knowledgeable figures that would normally handle peace issues for their respective governments. They had travelled to Sarpsborg in order to participate in an informal dialogue group.

This secret meeting in Norway set off the first phase in the Oslo Back Channel. After five exploratory rounds of pre-negotiations, the meetings in Norway ended with a joint Israeli–Palestinian document – the Sarpsborg Declaration of Principles (DoP) – and a decision by Israel to upgrade the negotiations in May 1993. Until then, the Israeli government was not formally a part of the process. How did the negotiations in the Oslo Back Channel start, and how did they develop? Were they rooted in any grand design or orchestrated plan? What was the role of Norway, and what room for manoeuvre did this phase provide for the Norwegians?²

Reasons for Leaving Washington – and Choosing Oslo

The negotiations in Washington were deadlocked. The publicity surrounding the talks made serious and constructive discussion almost impossible. Informal meetings, showing substantive progress, were blown to pieces as soon as the media got to know of them. When Israelis and Palestinians pinpointed where their problems lay and defended their attitudes in front of the whole world, it became increasingly difficult to be flexible or to change one’s mind. The lack of secrecy was a key problem. Little or no progress was being made.³

¹ Quoted after Elon 1993, p. 80.
² The first round was held in Sarpsborg on 20–22 January 1993. The subsequent four rounds were held on 11–12 February (Sarpsborg), 20–21 March (Sarpsborg), 30 April –1 May (Holmenkollen, Oslo) and 8–9 May (Thomas Heftye villa, Oslo).
The Israelis and the Palestinians were approaching the negotiations in Washington from completely different angles. The Israelis were interested in interim agreements that might buy time, calm things down and allow a local and moderate Palestinian leadership to emerge. This idea was also prevalent among the Americans. They thought that the Palestinians inside the territories were more moderate and realistic than those outside. The PLO in Tunis, the Americans thought, would always feel the need to defend the rights of the Palestinian refugees, including their right to return to their original homes. On this issue, Israel was absolutely immovable.4

However, those who emphasized the value of the ‘insiders’, as the Norwegians also did, missed an important element: the so-called moderates on the West Bank and in Gaza were broadly speaking not very moderate, and their base of support was quite narrow. With one exception, none of the Palestinian delegates in Washington had a solid power-base in the Occupied Territories, although each enjoyed respectability within his or her social constituency.5 When they spoke in Washington on behalf of Palestinians, it was because the Palestinians regarded them as representing the PLO. The grass-roots leaders were often more radical than the PLO. They sometimes belonged to the left. Sometimes they were even a part of the growing Islamist movement.6

The Americans and the Israelis tended to believe that this time-buying, interim approach could be accommodated within the context of the five-year transitional agreement envisaged at Camp David in 1978. For more than ten years, the PLO had spurned the Camp David Accords. The whole point of the conferences in Madrid and Washington was to begin the step-by-step process that would gradually give the Palestinians autonomy on the West Bank and in Gaza. The Palestinians had never been willing to start such an approach before.7

The so-called final status issues would be postponed until later. But, during the negotiations in Washington, the Israelis and the Palestinians did not manage to solve any of the major issues at stake: the nature of self-rule, security arrangements, jurisdiction or authority over settlements. The Rabin government, like the former government headed by Shamir, wanted to ‘keep options open’ in the interim period by not agreeing to anything that would prejudice final status talks. This meant defining Palestinian jurisdiction in functional rather than territorial terms.8

For the Palestinians, the important issue was to gain recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people and to force the issue of statehood as the ultimate goal as soon as possible. Consequently, the Palestinians would not agree to an interim agreement unless it guaranteed the eventual establishment of an independent

---

5 The exception was the leader of the Palestinian delegation, Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi, who was one of the founding fathers of the PLO and had a following in Gaza. Heikal 1996, p. 416.
7 Same references as above; see also Perry 1994, pp. 121–123; Peres 1995, pp. 320–321.
The Modest Facilitator

state. The PLO also needed to demonstrate that it could end Israeli occupation and limit land confiscation and the building of new settlements, at least enough to meet the concerns of the population on the West Bank and in Gaza.9

The Palestinians also wanted assurances that the outcome of the talks with Israel would not be prejudiced by any prior arrangements. They wanted to make sure that all issues were on the table. The Palestinians believed that US Secretary of State James Baker had committed himself to this. But Baker had committed himself to nothing. He wanted to bring the parties to the table. The Palestinians had to see for themselves if they could win any concessions from Israel. And Israel’s stance was crystal clear: all that was up for negotiation were the interim arrangements, to decide the character of Palestinian self-rule.10

Faced with these very different goals, the Americans firmly, and not very unexpectedly, sided with Israel, insisting that small steps needed to be taken first. These small steps were often referred to as confidence-building measures, which would be followed by negotiations on a transitional period. Only later would the final status issues be dealt with. Naturally, it was the questions related to the final status that were uppermost in the minds of the Palestinians. Since the Palestinians were the weak party and the ones with the most to gain, they simply had to go along with the Israeli–American approach. Or so it was thought in Washington.11

The former Israeli government under Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir had insisted on a Palestinian delegation without any PLO representatives. In order to bypass the PLO, a joint Jordanian–Palestinian delegation was constructed, consisting of Palestinian residents from the Occupied Territories (the West Bank and Gaza). This was the only way the Palestinians would be permitted to sit at the negotiating table. So they, very reluctantly, accepted this demand put forward by the Israelis and supported by the Americans. Before long, all parties understood that this situation was ludicrous and would get them nowhere.12

The Israelis felt that the Palestinian delegates in Washington were stubborn, inflexible and legalistic. Many of them had been deported or imprisoned by Israel in the past. Living under Israeli occupation, they were also pressing the settlement issue to the forefront of the negotiations: settlement activity had to be stopped. ‘The PLO people sitting in Tunis did not have the traumatic past of someone such as [chief Palestinian delegate] Haider Abdul-Shafi whom [Israel] deported in 1967. Every day he would bring up Jewish settlements and human rights. Those talks hardly moved.’13 On the other hand, the Israeli negotiators in Washington also seemed to have respect for the

---

10 Same references as above.
skills of the Palestinians present in the US capital, for instance the leader Haidar Abdul-Shafi and the Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi. The problem, from the Israeli point of view, was that they were talented and not ignorant or weak adversaries. Ashrawi was a highly effective communicator, much sought after by the media. For once, the Israelis were faced with someone whom many regarded as capable of communicating the Palestinian cause in a highly sympathetic and understandable way.\textsuperscript{14}

But the Palestinian delegation in Washington lacked a mandate to negotiate. Every issue, large or small, was referred back to PLO headquarters in Tunis. Arafat would not allow the Palestinian delegation to make progress as long as he was excluded from the process. While the whole world was following the talks in Washington, he was left in Tunis. He found himself eclipsed at a time when brighter Palestinian stars were rising in the United States, and he was not entirely wrong. Arafat thought that the Americans were trying to promote an alternative Palestinian leadership with more moderate views. He became increasingly nervous about the prominence of his Washington negotiators. The relationship between the delegation and Tunis developed into a mixture of interdependence and tension. While Arafat needed them, he felt that media attention had turned their heads and that the information they sent back to the headquarters was inadequate. The delegation depended on the PLO for political and financial reasons, yet they resented having to refer back to Tunis for decisions on every small issue.\textsuperscript{15}

Consequently, the PLO chairman instructed the delegates to do just enough to sustain the Washington talks without moving them forward. The Israelis should be taught the Palestinian saying that the ‘Palestinian leadership is located where Arafat is’.\textsuperscript{16} The Israelis gradually understood this. They realized that they were actually negotiating with Arafat ‘by fax’.\textsuperscript{17} However, the Israelis had only themselves to blame, having demanded the exclusion of the PLO.\textsuperscript{18}

Formally speaking, the Israelis were prohibited by law from meeting members of the PLO. However, a bill to repeal this law passed its first reading on 2 December 1992 with a margin of only one, and the ban was officially lifted on 19 January 1993. Private individuals were no longer prohibited from participating in meetings or symposia with PLO members. However, the new Labour government had no intention of instituting negotiations with the arch-enemy. There was still a huge psychological threshold to


\textsuperscript{16} Quoted after Groth 1995, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{17} Savir 1998, p. 5.

overcome. For most Israelis, the PLO was still regarded as the main enemy, and Arafat was the incarnation of terrorism.\(^19\)

As a result, the Israeli government initially believed that the indigenous Palestinian leadership that comprised the negotiating team in Washington would gradually gain stature and independence and be able to negotiate without the close and stifling supervision of the PLO. The key to peace, in other words, was to freeze out Arafat and gradually build peace with the local Palestinian leaders on the West Bank and in Gaza. As a consequence of such a stance, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin instructed his delegation in Washington to give nothing. The Palestinians initially hoped for at least some change of policy after the Israeli election in June 1992. After all, the Labour Party had won on a peace platform. But, as Hanan Ashrawi discovered, the Palestinian hopes were quickly shattered: ‘Instead of announcing the expected settlement freeze, Rabin began a whole process of equivocation on “political” versus “security” settlements. Instead of a rational discussion on Jerusalem, Rabin reiterated the absolutist ideological prophetic position: “the eternal capital of Israel forever and ever”. Instead of human rights, we got the “security of Israel”. And instead of a new delegation to signal a new phase and policy, we got Elyakim Rubinstein and his crew again.’\(^20\)

This should not have come as a big surprise to the Palestinians. There were many similarities between Labour and Likud: ‘Both Labour and the Likud had a blind spot when it came to the Palestinians, preferring to treat the Arab–Israeli conflict as an interstate conflict. Both parties were deeply opposed to Palestinian nationalism and denied that the Palestinians had a right to national self-determination. Both refused to negotiate with the PLO, and this refusal was absolute rather than conditional. Both were also unconditionally opposed to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.’\(^21\) However, there were also important differences, both in ideology and practical policy. Shamir’s outgoing government had been one of the most hawkish governments in Israel’s history. He and his government had no intention of reaching an agreement. When Rabin took over, he emphasized the differences and played down the similarities. But Rabin was indeed suspicious of Arabs and deeply committed to protecting Israel’s security. These attitudes were decisive for the cautious Rabin.\(^22\)

In contrast to the rest of the government, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres believed that the Israeli position in Washington was a mistake. He believed in Israeli withdrawal and in Palestinian autonomy on the West Bank and in Gaza. Peres was a strong believer in the economic dimensions of peacemaking and thought that Israel would benefit from extending its economic influence throughout the region. The ‘New Middle East’ should become like the European Union. In order to achieve all this, Israel needed the help of the chairman of the PLO: ‘As long as Arafat remained in Tunis ... he

---

represented the “outsiders”, the Palestinian diaspora, and would do his best to slow down the peace talks. I suggested that we propose to Arafat and his staff that they move to Gaza. Once there, they would have the right to vote and to stand in elections; and if elected, they would represent the Palestinians directly in the negotiations with Israel. My criticism of the Washington talks was that we were trying to reach a declaration of principles without any reference to specific territorial issues.”

Peres and his political advisers did not believe in keeping all options open until the final status talks. They did not want to pretend that the Palestinian delegation was independent of the PLO or to insist on discussing only functional autonomy; they believed in some kind of territorial compromise. For them, the Washington talks were a complete waste of time, but they could not do much about it. Peres was marginalized in the new government’s peace efforts. Prime Minister Rabin wanted single-handedly to guide the peace process himself without help or interference from his Labour Party rival Peres. Rabin disagreed with Peres both on tactics and on the strategic principles underpinning Israel’s negotiating position.

From the middle of 1992, both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides agreed that the talks were virtually useless and that a parallel track was needed. According to the main Oslo architect on the Israeli side, Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, the original idea was to establish a secret track and to dismantle the obstacles blocking progress in Washington. The secret track should solve the problems, conclude the process and, with the agreement of the respective Israeli and Palestinian leaders, lay the completed work on the negotiating table without the existence of the track ever being known. To the world, it would seem that all the problems had been solved by the official negotiations. Beilin, who belonged to the most dovish part of the Labour Party, was of the firm opinion that the PLO was a ‘necessary condition’ for an agreement with the Palestinians.

The PLO, in particular, had a lot to gain by the creation of a secret channel. ‘There was no risk in it for us’, as Abu Mazen, Arafat’s second-in-command and closest adviser on the Oslo track, pointed out. ‘If the dialogue proved fruitful we would have achieved something we were after, and if it turned out to be just small talk with an academic this could not hurt us. So we could lose nothing’. For the PLO, there was no reason to believe that secret talks in Norway would be any more successful than any previous attempts to reach agreements with Israel. ‘This channel [had] been created by


accident. It was never designed, it was never planned … we were trying to negotiate with the Israelis a long time’, Abu Ala recalls. However, the PLO leadership in Tunis was desperate to get back to centre stage. The growing power and influence of the ‘insiders’ worried Arafat. In addition, by 1993 the criticism of Arafat and his associates internally on the Palestinian side was also harsh. Within Fatah, the most prominent co-founders had died, one by one, until the last Fatah leader whose rank could be compared with Arafat died in 1991. To Arafat, the growing strength of the Islamist organizations in the Occupied Territories was another source of worry. It definitely increased Arafat’s and the PLO’s urgency to reach an agreement with Israel and thus secure the PLO’s hegemony over its key constituency.

Consequently, Arafat sought to reach agreements through alternative secret tracks. While the Palestinian delegation in Washington held on to the basic negotiating strategy (which the PLO had also agreed upon), the PLO leadership was averse even to creating an impression of progress on technical issues. At first, the PLO leaders had wanted the Washington talks to succeed. They had adopted flexible policy positions and negotiating guidelines. Later on, as the back channel negotiations took a serious turn and showed signs of genuine progress, Arafat and Abu Mazen began to issue more hardline instructions in a deliberate attempt to block the Washington talks and to clear the way for the Oslo backstage negotiations, where the PLO leadership had full and sole control. Arafat wanted to demonstrate that without the PLO, no talks stood a remote chance of success. He was determined to leave no doubts as to who was in charge. He was immovable on UN Resolution 242 as a basis for negotiations. To Ashrawi, he pointed out that if Israel rejected Resolution 242, she could then bring up Resolution 181 – the UN partition plan for Palestine from 1947, an even more impossible point of departure for negotiations. Arafat also insisted that UN forces should take over the Occupied Territories and that the interim phase should be limited to only six months. All of this was, inevitably, completely beyond what the most hopeful Israeli peace ‘dove’ might dream of in a nightmare.

For Arafat, there were several advantages of a setting like the one in Norway. First, it gave Arafat complete control. For the sessions in Madrid and Washington, Arafat had set up a huge delegation of ‘insiders’ and sent them to the negotiations as a form of patronage. This setting was expensive and complicated. It also strengthened Arafat’s feeling of being sidelined. In Oslo, the negotiations were purely between pro-Arafat officials and the Israeli Labour Party, ignoring not only the respective opposition groups and parties, but also the ambitions of Arab and other states, including the United States. Interestingly enough, Norway’s minimal global ambition, along with its

---

limited political influence, was prominent on Abu Mazen’s list of Oslo virtues.\(^\text{30}\) Second, the secret and personal nature of the talks in Oslo was preferable for Arafat. Finally, only Oslo would give the PLO recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. And, on the Israeli side, a new acknowledgement had emerged beyond the circle surrounding Peres: Chairman Arafat was gradually seen as an easier negotiating partner than the Palestinians present in Washington.\(^\text{31}\)

### The Sarpsborg Setting

From day one, there was a huge asymmetry between the Israelis and the Palestinians, not only on the ground in the Middle East but also between the two delegations in Norway. The two Israeli representatives were an odd pair in the world of high-level diplomacy. Yair Hirschfeld was an eccentric, bearded, 49-year-old man with untamed hair, looking like a cross between Bob Dylan and Karl Marx. He was Professor of History at the University of Haifa. He brought with him his former student and friend, Ron Pundak, a 38-year old historian with short-cropped hair and John Lennon glasses, who had recently received his doctorate. Pundak had worked together with Hirschfeld since 1991. Together they had been running the research institution Economic Co-operation Foundation.\(^\text{32}\)

However, Hirschfeld and Pundak were not merely ‘accidental tourists in history’.\(^\text{33}\) Hirschfeld, in particular, had been working towards achieving an Israeli–Palestinian peace for years. He had frequently met with Palestinian activists from the West Bank and Gaza. He believed in economic development as a basis for a political compromise. He had firm opinions on how and where to move. Hirschfeld and Pundak dared to do what governmental officials or high-ranking politicians would not. They took big risks, and they had huge plans. ‘Bureaucracies are too clumsy’, an Israeli bureaucrat frankly admitted. ‘They rarely lend themselves to starting something big. For this, you need a couple of nuts.... [Hirschfeld and Pundak] were determined not to let any given “reality” stand in their way.... So in the end they succeeded where the striped-pants diplomats had failed’.\(^\text{34}\) ‘My peace plan had been ready for years. I was just waiting for the right moment to show up’, Hirschfeld explains.\(^\text{35}\) ‘If we had not been satisfied with the food or with the environment, we would have moved with Abu Ala somewhere else’, Pundak adds. ‘It is the parties who did this, they did not need the Norwegians. They only needed a quiet and peaceful place.’\(^\text{36}\)

---

\(^{30}\) Abbas 1995, p. 113.
\(^{32}\) Elon 1993, pp. 77–78; Savir 1998, pp. 9–10; Corbin 1994a, pp. 42–43, 90.
\(^{33}\) Elon 1993, p. 77.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
\(^{36}\) Interviews with Ron Pundak, 21 March 1999 and 23 October 2002; see also Beilin 1999, p. 66; Elon 1993, pp 77–78; Savir 1998, pp. 9–10; Corbin 1994a, pp. 42–43.
The Oslo option would allow the Israelis to explore the views held by the PLO without any Israeli commitment or any appearance of official sanction. For the ardent peace advocate Yossi Beilin, discussions under the cover of the Norwegian research institution Fafo offered three potential benefits. First, such a setting would not violate Israeli law: it would only be private Israelis participating in a seminar under Fafo auspices. Second, the nature of such discussions would be more academic than political, allowing an exploration of PLO views without Israeli commitment. And, third, the back channel would operate under Fafo funding, avoiding any official Israeli support or legitimization. For the Israelis, this was both intriguing and beneficial.\(^\text{37}\)

The two Israeli academics undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the negotiating process. As academics with longstanding interests in the Palestinian issue, they were able to serve as a bridge between the two sides and engage in secret and informal negotiations. The only official backing Yair Hirschfeld had got when he left for Norway was from Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin. Hirschfeld and Beilin had also been working closely together for years.\(^\text{38}\)

Since the end of the 1970s, Yossi Beilin had held important and influential positions in the Israeli Labour Party and government. However, he was a controversial figure, considered far too ‘dovish’ even for many politicians and supporters of Labour. He was very critical of Israel’s policy towards the Palestinians, and he had views on how to achieve peace that were difficult to swallow for mainstream Israelis. Beilin had for a long time favoured and promoted direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO. For the majority of Israelis, this was heresy, and Beilin endured both scorn and enmity for his political opinions. He also supported the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and in Gaza, although on the basis of a territorial compromise and an indivisible Jerusalem. Although he never met PLO representatives directly, Beilin had many contacts with Palestinians living on the West Bank and in Gaza, and he had several meetings with such prominent Palestinians as Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi. In 1991, Beilin established the Economic Co-operation Foundation, run by Hirschfeld and his former student Pundak.\(^\text{39}\)

After being informed about the meetings between Hirschfeld and Abu Ala in London in December 1992, Beilin had decided not to share information on this track with anyone. He knew that if he informed Foreign Minister Peres, which was the natural thing to do, Peres would feel obliged to brief Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Beilin assumed that Rabin would demand an end to the Oslo track – before it had even started. On the other hand, if the process in Norway – against all odds – should succeed and show signs of progress, then, Beilin decided, he could report retrospectively. If it led nowhere, it would just be another episode in the long-running drama of Israeli–


\(^{39}\) Waage 2000a, pp. 71–74.
Palestinian relations, an ‘extended seminar on regional development which just happened to be taking place in Norway’.\textsuperscript{40}

The Palestinians knew that Yossi Beilin was standing behind Hirschfeld and Pundak. According to Beilin, they also assumed that Foreign Minister Peres was informed. Whether the PLO would have invested so much in the Oslo track if they had known that Beilin at this point was the only Israeli government official aware of what was going on, of course, will remain a question for speculation.\textsuperscript{41} It is clear, however, that Abu Mazen believed that Hirschfeld’s initiative in London was not spontaneous, but planned. He was also convinced, however mistakenly, that the Norwegian government played a part. Mazen could not believe that Hirschfeld wanted to have meetings with the PLO as just a university academic seeking knowledge. After the meeting in London, Arafat, Mazen and Abu Ala – the only three on the PLO side being informed – thought that Hirschfeld was only trying to pretend that the meeting was unofficial. Hirschfeld was giving the impression ‘that he was speaking as an academic’, that he ‘was not committed to anything’ and ‘that, although he was close to Israeli officials, he had no authority to speak for them, and his words were not binding’.\textsuperscript{42} Before the trip to Norway, the PLO still thought that Hirschfeld, by claiming he was just an academic, was protecting himself as well as those who stood behind him. However, the PLO was mistaken. On the Israeli side, only Beilin knew what was going on.\textsuperscript{43}

The pyramidal structure of the PLO delegation showed the importance attached to this effort by the leaders in Tunis. On the Palestinian side, the Oslo track was handled by the top from day one. Arafat himself was in charge of the back channel, and the process was administered by his loyal servant Abu Mazen, the head of the PLO’s Israel desk, who was considered by the Israelis to be the PLO’s top political pragmatist. Abu Mazen had been among the first PLO representatives to suggest a reassessment of PLO policy. During the 1970s, he had become convinced that refusing to talk to Israel was a mistake. Later, during the 1980s, he disagreed on the PLO’s insistence on a comprehensive settlement. He favoured an interim solution. Abu Mazen argued that the PLO should create ‘facts on the ground’, just as the Zionists had done in Palestine as a consequence of the Balfour Declaration.\textsuperscript{44}

To Norway, the PLO sent Abu Ala.\textsuperscript{45} This 55-year-old Palestinian, a refugee from Jerusalem, tiny, bald and dressed more like a European businessman rather than an

\textsuperscript{41}Beilin 1999, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{42}Abbas 1995, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{43}Abbas 1995, pp. 113–114.
\textsuperscript{44}Heikal 1996, p. 438; see also Heikal 1996, pp. 320–325, 437–438.
\textsuperscript{45}It is worth noticing that, on pp. 112–113 of his book, Abu Mazen gives Abu Ala a rather minor position within the PLO. According to Mazen, Abu Ala was ‘a member of the [Washington] negotiations follow-up committee by virtue of his position as supervisor of the multilateral negotiations that had a technical, specialist character. He was fully occupied with these negotiations, but was aware of the proceedings of the bilaterals because of his membership of the follow-up committee, though it must be admitted that his knowledge of that committees’ activities was not ex-
underground leader, was in charge of the PLO’s financial and economic questions, as well as the Palestinian bank Samed. Abu Ala had known Arafat for some 30 years, advised him on economic matters and had been a member of Fatah since 1968. But he had not belonged to the inner circle surrounding Arafat. In 1991–92, Abu Ala had been guiding the Palestinian involvement in the multilateral part of the Madrid–Washington process. The Israelis regarded Abu Ala as an astute pragmatist. However, he was relatively unknown in Israel, even to experts, so it remained unclear to the Israelis how authoritative he was.46

Arafat and Mazen decided that Abu Ala, heading the delegation, should be accompanied by two other trusted PLO aides. Abu Ala chose these men, but their presence also reflected the authority of those in Tunis backing the Oslo Back Channel. Hassan Asfour, aged 42, was Abu Mazen’s trusted and loyal assistant. He was extremely well-informed about every aspect of the Palestinian position on the various issues raised during the peace process. As Mazen’s assistant, following the negotiations in Washington, he was responsible for the contact with the official Palestinian delegation in the United States. Abu Ala was a canny operator, but he lacked the detailed political knowledge that Asfour had at his fingertips. Asfour’s English was limited, but this was obviously not regarded as a disqualifying element. Asfour was an up-and-coming figure in the PLO and used to be regarded as a hardliner within the Palestinian movement.47

The third member of the Palestinian delegation was the economist Maher al-Kurd, whose major attribute was his excellent English, which was obviously needed. Asfour’s English was poor, and, according to Abu Mazen, Abu Ala’s English could not even cope with discussions on political and legal matters. Maher had been working as an economic adviser in Abu Ala’s department before being transferred to work for Arafat. His mission in the small delegation was also to be Arafat’s eyes and ears. Maher was later removed and replaced by Muhammad Abu Kush.48

This oddly composed bunch of Israelis and Palestinians was coupled with a rare Norwegian team. On the Norwegian side, the Fafo research director and diplomat-in-making Terje Rød Larsen was undoubtedly the key figure. Rød Larsen could hardly be described as resembling a traditional Norwegian diplomat. He was a sociologist by training and one of the co-founders of the research institute Fafo. He had close links with the Norwegian Labour Party, not least to the Norwegian trade union leadership.

48 Abbas 1995, pp. 114–115; Corbin 1994a, pp. 43, 96–97, 109; Savir 1998, p. 12. Muhammad Abu Kush was a lawyer by training. He lived in Germany and served in the PLO’s delegation at the UN dealing with social and economic matters. He joined the Oslo Back Channel for the first time at the Grefsheim meeting. His position was clearly that of Abu Ala’s assistant. Abu Ala had found it impossible to work with Maher El Kurd. Ala knew that Kurd’s first loyalty was to Arafat and suspected that he was being undermined.
and he had never been a part of or trained by the ministry of foreign affairs. The Israeli chief negotiator Uri Savir, arriving later in the Oslo process, gives a very telling description of his first meeting with and impressions of this key Norwegian figure: ‘Next to [Yair Hirschfeld], wearing a light overcoat and fifties-style sunglasses, stood a tall rather dapper man in his late forties who could easily have passed for a French detective film hero but was actually Terje Larsen, a social scientist, serious intellectual, and committed humanist with a rare taste for complexity – a man, I soon discerned, of many talents.’ What was to impress Savir the most was Rød Larsen’s ‘extraordinary psychological skills, which he exercised with almost saintly Norwegian patience. Even the most daunting setback usually left him unfazed, and he was to play a critical role in easing many crises ahead’.

All of the Oslo actors agree on the crucial role of Terje Rød Larsen. He was a ‘keen amateur psychologist’. He believed in ‘the sociological approach when dealing with small groups. He was convinced that, if he could encourage them to form a tight-knit group by discussing and sharing their feelings and their emotions, they would be able to build trust, and even intimacy, on a personal level.’ It was Rød Larsen who created the ‘magic’ and the special ‘spirit’ of the Oslo Back Channel, the ‘unique atmosphere that fostered respect and friendship and ultimately made the agreement possible’.

Terje Rød Larsen’s wife, the diplomat Mona Juul, had been working with Middle East issues for some years. Her first assignment from 1988 to 1990 was as secretary at the Norwegian embassy in Cairo. After returning to Oslo, she continued to work on Middle East questions. In 1991, she moved to the secretariat providing immediate services to the foreign minister and the state secretary. This position made Juul the link and liaison between the back channel and the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs.

Terje Rød Larsen is often described as an entrepreneur, or – as Abu Ala has remarked – the ‘bulldozer’ of Oslo. As Rød Larsen sees it, anything that is worth doing can be done. This conviction seemed to be the driving force both in the establishment of Fafo and in the Fideco fishing industry project. In the Fafo case, the conviction resulted in a great success. In the case of Fideco, it proved disastrous. In his peace-in-the-Middle-East project, Rød Larsen jumped unprepared into deep water. He had limited knowledge of the Middle East conflict. Hirschfeld’s initial impression was that Rød Larsen was ‘sincere, that he will keep a secret, that he will not run and that he is reliable. [But the Norwegians] had very little experience. We could tell them all

50 Corbin 1994a, p. 87.
51 Corbin 1994a, p. 8.
52 Savir 1998, p. 11; Corbin 1994a, pp. 8–9, 12–13; Lundberg 1998, p. 31; Waage 2000a, p. 70.
54 Eriksen 1992, 1994. Terje Rød Larsen’s involvement in the Fideco fishing project in northern Norway at the end of the 1980s ended in bankruptcy, later forcing Rød Larsen to resign from the Norwegian government in 1996, where he had been minister for planning and information for only two months.
kinds of stories which they would take at face value’. When Rød Larsen arrived in Cairo to live there together with his wife in 1989, he later admitted that he ‘knew nothing of the Arab–Israeli conflict and had no particular interest in the Middle East; his sole intention was to take an extended break after years of intensive work and play a lot of tennis, but he soon became bored and started looking for ways to occupy himself’.66

Fafo’s survey of living conditions in the Occupied Territories became Rød Larsen’s main interest in this period, and he definitely needed some of his strong character in the struggle to establish the research project during the first intifada. Generally, Terje Rød Larsen is seen as being incredibly self-confident and supremely persuasive. He is charming and has a lot of social skills, and he simply ploughs ahead despite obstacles. These capabilities contributed to getting the Israelis and the PLO representatives to the negotiating table and kept them together in the Oslo Back Channel. But were these qualities enough to solve the formidable obstacle confronting him in the Middle East: the legacy of 50 years of conflict and bloodshed?67

**The First Meeting**

Borregaard Manor, situated in the small Norwegian town of Sarpsborg, was chosen as the venue for the first meeting on 20 January 1993. While the A-teams of both sides were discussing peace in the United States without any success, the B-teams were exploring new openings and possibilities in Norway. All of the participants at Borregaard Manor, the Norwegians included, were close to the corridors of power, but none of them held politically powerful positions themselves. They did not have the slightest chance of making huge concessions or commitments on behalf of their respective governments or people. They had only grasped the new opportunity given to them.

The aim of the first meeting in Sarpsborg was undefined and left purposely vague, almost to the point of seeming to be being there just to have a look at the enemy. ‘[W]hat are we going to say? And what are the points we are going to raise and talk about?’, Abu Ala asked Abu Mazen before leaving for Norway.68 The plan was definitely not to establish a back channel. At best, the aim was to develop more informal political contacts just to see if anything could be done to help or improve the stalemate in Washington. Whatever new ideas or results that might be produced in Norway would be transferred back to the official negotiations in Washington, without the world even knowing of the existence of the secret meetings. The ambitions of the participants

---

56 Beilin 1999, p. 50.
were only to try to overcome some of the obstacles encountered in the official negotiations.  

The Norwegians organized the first meeting within the framework of a Fafo seminar. Fafo researcher Marianne Heiberg was invited to give a lecture. She had participated in the institute’s living-conditions study in Gaza and the West Bank, and was invited to Sarpsborg in order to present the findings of the study. She was in addition the wife of Johan Jørgen Holst, the Norwegian defence minister who was soon to become foreign minister and an important Oslo actor. Heiberg, however, had no idea of the real agenda at the ‘seminar’ in Sarpsborg or that her performance was only part of a camouflage for the whole setup. State Secretary Jan Egeland also arrived for lunch with the visitors on the first day. Although Egeland’s visit only lasted a couple of hours, his presence signalled the seriousness, the high-level approval and the support given to the enterprise by the Norwegian government.  

Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg did not visit Sarpsborg, but definitely approved and supported the peace project. He left the concrete follow-up to Egeland and his trusted secretariat employee, Mona Juul. As Stoltenberg saw it, Norway’s contribution to the solution of the conflict should be to persuade Israel to negotiate with the PLO. This had been Stoltenberg’s goal ever since the beginning of the 1980s. And in Sarpsborg his long-term goal was fulfilled: for the first time, Israel was negotiating directly with the PLO. Such a meeting, of course, could not have been arranged without the foreign minister’s backing and understanding. Nor, as Stoltenberg saw it, could it have been done without the prime minister’s knowledge and acceptance. Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland had been informed by Stoltenberg about his peace activities in the Middle East in late 1992. She gave the project her support and agreed that everything had to be kept secret.  

In Sarpsborg (20–22 January 1993), the real business started first in the afternoon of the second day. By then, Jan Egeland, Marianne Heiberg and Mona Juul had left for Oslo. Terje Rød Larsen explained to the participants what he regarded as the basic rules for the Norwegian presence: ‘If you two are going to manage to live together, you’ve got to solve this problem between you. You own the problem. If you need some help from us, please ask for it. We can provide money, houses, services – and we can be intermediaries on the phone. After lunch you can go into the meeting room

---

59 Interview with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999: ‘There was never any grand design’; see also interviews with Ron Pundak, 21 March 1999; Yair Hirschfeld, 7 May 1998, 22 March 1999 and 22 October 2002; Yossi Beilin, 23 March 1999; Avi Gil, 21 March 1999: The Israeli participation in the Oslo Back Channel was ‘not a part of a grand plan’; interviews with Hanan Ashrawi, 23 March 1999 and 19 October 2002; interviews with Shimon Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002.

60 Interview with Marianne Heiberg, 13 May 2002; Corbin 1994a, pp. 38, 44–45; Beilin 1999, pp. 64–65; Makovsky 1996, pp. 21–22; Elon 1993, pp. 80–81.

and I will wait for you outside – unless you get into fisticuffs!’ The aim for the Norwegians was to act as a modest facilitator and not interfere or mediate the conflict.\textsuperscript{62}

At their first meeting, the Israelis and the Palestinians had to establish some rules of the road for their drive through the Middle East conflict’s heavy traffic jams and fatal accidents. Three ground rules were established: no dwelling on past grievances, total secrecy, and retractability of all positions put forward in the talks. All these had been major stumbling blocks during the talks in Washington.\textsuperscript{63}

Another important decision was also taken: the meetings in Norway ought to have a purpose and a goal that was more than just academic. The aim should not be to elaborate on a peace accord. Rather, the aim should be to work out an agreement on how such an accord could be reached. The two parties should work towards agreeing on a ‘declaration of principles’. Thus, two major decisions were taken in Sarpsborg: to work out an agreement on the principles and to establish a way to proceed. The first exercise would be to identify the issues forming the basis of the conflict. Then, which of these questions could possibly be agreed upon at all should be established. Flexibility and agreement would only be possible by identifying these issues. Any other questions that were impossible to reach agreement on should be postponed until later. This principle came to underpin the secret Oslo Back Channel.\textsuperscript{64}

For the Israelis, a declaration of principles would be a very effective way of checking the details of the Palestinian position on all issues. Beilin told Hirschfeld and Pundak to try to divine the PLO’s thinking, test its seriousness and determine where gaps could be bridged. Beilin doubted that the talks would amount to more than passing conversations. For years, such meetings had been held between Israeli ‘doves’ and PLO officials in various seminars in Europe, and no fruits had been harvested from such efforts. It seemed absolutely impossible to get a comprehensive settlement. The best any actor could hope for, wherever they might be, was an interim agreement, and in the meantime to build trust, cooperation and mutual interest in order to agree on a final status later on. A step-by-step process was the only road to pursue.\textsuperscript{65}

But even agreeing on the principles underlying a peace accord would be an extremely hard exercise for the Israelis and the Palestinians gathered at Borregaard Manor. In Washington, the two delegations could not manage to agree on anything at all, not even anything resembling a declaration of principles. Now, this little group in Norway was to try to do so instead. Their chances of succeeding could hardly be overwhelming. And none of the participants involved – be they Beilin in Israel, Arafat and Mazen in Tunis, or the various individuals gathered in Norway – initially believed that progress or peace would be possible to achieve.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{62} Corbin 1994a, p. 45; interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002.
\textsuperscript{63} Makovsky 1996, p. 22; Corbin 1994a, pp. 45–47.
\textsuperscript{64} Makovsky 1996, pp. 21–22; Corbin 1994a, pp. 45–48; Elon 1993, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{65} Same references as above; Beilin 1999, pp. 62–66.
\textsuperscript{66} Same references as above.
Gaza First

In Norway, the atmosphere was positive and constructive. It was not characterized by polemics and quarrels over all of the various sins committed in the past, as was usually the case when Israelis and Palestinians met for negotiations. The participants quickly reached consensus over an important point of departure: the peace process would have to start with the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Occupied Territories. To the surprise of the Israeli participants, Abu Ala suggested that such a withdrawal ought to start with Gaza. ‘Why has there not been a withdrawal if Gaza gives you all these headaches’, he asked. ‘If that happens it would herald the beginning of the cooperation with Israel, because Gaza needs a Marshall plan, and it could be made a free zone’, he continued. ‘Solving the problem of Gaza will resolve severe economic and social problems. I am not asking for a response from you now, but you should study this idea for the future because it represents an aspect of future cooperation.’

The Israelis were genuinely taken by surprise. The Palestinians had always rejected ‘Gaza first’ proposals. The idea was an old one. When US President Jimmy Carter sent his secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, to visit Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat in August 1977, one of the proposals raised was that the Palestinians should be granted self-rule in Gaza and Jericho. Sadat’s response was enthusiastic. So, initially, was that of Chairman Arafat. But, after internal discussions within the PLO, Arafat rejected the offer. Sadat raised the ‘Gaza first’ idea again under the Camp David negotiations in 1978. He felt that Egypt had a special responsibility for Gaza, and it was also essential for him to achieve something for the Palestinians. The beginning of self-government in Gaza could be a small step forward, a possible point of departure. But the idea was a non-starter. It was by then clear that this was something completely unacceptable to the Palestinians.

Still, in 1980 Shimon Peres continued to press forward the idea of ‘Gaza first’. Gaza would never be Israel’s salvation, Peres argued. Continuing the heavy Israeli presence in Gaza obviously did not serve what Peres saw as Israel’s interests. Israel did not have the ‘means to save Gaza from its own grim predicaments: the overcrowding, the poverty, the refugees’. Israel had ‘neither interest nor business running the life of the Gaza Strip or policing its squalid, teeming streets. Our rule over Gaza was an ongoing, ghastly mistake. I was frankly sorry that we had created any Jewish settlements there at all. It was like robbing the poor; there is so little land there anyway. The settlements contribute nothing to national security, but they tie down large numbers of IDF troops in ensuring their own security.... [I]n all honesty, nobody wanted Gaza.’

---

67 Abbas 1995, p. 121; see also Corbin 1994a, pp. 46–47. According to Abu Mazen, these are minutes from the meeting, translated into English because Abu Ala originally spoke in Arabic.


69 Peres 1995, p. 322; see also Peres 1993, pp. 20–22.
ister Rabin’s view on Gaza was no less unambiguous: ‘I want Gaza to sink into the sea’, he told a group of journalists. 

Consequently, both the prime minister and the foreign minister (supported by a majority of the Israeli people) wanted to get rid of Gaza. Rabin had really learned his lesson when he, as defence minister, had tried unsuccessfully to curb the intifada. From an Israeli political and military point of view, Gaza during the intifada in 1987–89 was nothing less than a nightmare. So, the ‘logical thing to do’, as Shimon Peres saw it, was to ‘place the responsibility for the future of Gaza in the hands of the people who lived there, and to help raise their living standards to a respectable level’. But Peres acknowledged that he had made two ‘mistakes’ when he had proposed ‘Gaza first’ in the past. First, he had not understood that any proposal coming from the Israelis was bound to be rejected by the Palestinians. Second, the Palestinians suspected that getting Gaza back would be the end of a process of reconciliation rather than the beginning. In other words, ‘Gaza first’ would become ‘Gaza only’. This had been the main argument against any ‘Gaza first’ proposals ever since the talks at Camp David in 1978.

For more than a decade, Shimon Peres, as well as Yossi Beilin, had continuously and unsuccessfully been advocating such a ‘Gaza first’ solution. Israel would cede control over the overpopulated, poor, and politically and religiously more conservative Gaza Strip to the Palestinians before dealing with the much more complicated case of the West Bank. It is important to bear in mind that the Palestinian refugees, both in Gaza and on the West Bank, lingered in a kind of stateless limbo. The ‘fortunate’ ones lived on the West Bank, where they developed relatively thriving communities. The situation in the teeming refugee camps of the Gaza Strip, with their open sewers and poverty, was far grimmer. The Palestinians had few civil rights and lived under a kind of military dictatorship. Thousands worked in Israel, taking menial jobs that Israelis themselves found undesirable. In addition, the Israeli government could close the borders at will and prevent the Palestinians from getting to work. For Israel, Gaza was a burden the country could neither solve nor get rid of. New ways had to be found to solve the Gaza question. This had become very clear to the Israelis after the first intifada, which had started in Gaza and quickly spread to the West Bank.

The shrewd politician that he was, Peres transmitted the Gaza message to the Egyptians. First, he discussed the option with Ozama el-Baz, top political adviser to

---


\[71\] Peres 1995, p. 323; see also Peres 1993, pp. 20–23.


\[73\] The Gaza Strip is 50 kilometres long and 7 kilometres broad. Together with Hong Kong, it is the world’s most overpopulated area. On 70% of this small strip live 1.2 million Palestinians. On 30% of the area live 6,000 Jewish settlers.

Peacemaking Is a Risky Business

Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak. Then, during the autumn of 1992 he raised the question with Egypt’s foreign minister, Amr Moussa, and with President Mubarak himself. Peres urged the Egyptians to persuade the Palestinians to reconsider their objections to the ‘Gaza first’ proposal. Peres wanted to use this offer in order to break the ice in Washington. In another meeting with the Egyptians in November 1992, and without the knowledge of Prime Minister Rabin, Peres decided to sweeten the pill with the ‘Gaza plus’ proposal (this was also an old idea from the days of Camp David): he suggested ceding to the Palestinians Gaza and either Jenin, Tulkarem or Jericho. These were Palestinian towns on the West Bank without any Jewish settlements. The question of settlements was always complicating the issue. Peres’s proposal was meant to demonstrate to the Palestinians that Israel intended to deal with West Bank territorial issues as well. Consequently, it was Shimon Peres, and not the PLO, who added Jericho to the Gaza deal. However, the PLO also rejected the ‘Gaza plus’ proposal in November 1992.  

It is no wonder, therefore, that the Israelis did not believe what they were hearing when Abu Ala, only two months later, put forward the Gaza option as a place to start, without making any reference whatsoever to either Jericho, Jenin or any other concrete proposals involving the West Bank. Why had the Palestinians not picked up on the suggestion to add a West Bank town to the ‘Gaza first’ proposal? Was Arafat not involved, the Israelis asked themselves with good reason? ‘Was this a sign of weakness? Failure of internal coordination? Or was this just an experimental probe, to discover whether there was anyone standing behind Yair [Hirschfeld] and Ron [Pundak]’, a surprised Yossi Beilin asked himself when he was informed about the first meeting in Norway. To Beilin, it seemed clear that the PLO was under pressure. Arafat could not accept that the most important representative of the Palestinian people was playing no part in the bilateral or multilateral track and was willing to challenge this state of affairs. Arafat was definitely seriously challenged by the ‘insiders’. In addition, the PLO was in danger of losing its primacy over Hamas. A settlement with Israel, in which ‘PLO-Tunis had a major role to play, including a foothold in Gaza, could constitute a lifeline and, specifically, a way of bypassing some of the obstacles that had emerged in Washington’, thought Beilin.

Shimon Peres had grasped one important element in understanding how to deal with Arafat and the PLO people in Tunis: a dialogue with the PLO had to be ‘based on tempting Arafat with real estate – the lure of land’. Allowing Arafat back to the Occupied Territories would be an offer he could not resist. Obviously, Arafat had been aware of Abu Mazen’s views on getting a foothold in Palestine. ‘If the Israelis gave me one square metre of Palestine, I would raise a flag and try to expand from there’

---

76 Beilin 1999, p. 70.
78 Corbin 1994a, p. 55.
had been – and continued to be – Abu Mazen’s reasoning.\textsuperscript{79} It appears that the PLO chairman had not considered accepting this in full earlier. However, the idea that a small area of autonomy was better than nothing was beginning to gain ground in Arafat’s mind. Arafat too was returning to the old ‘Gaza first’ idea, discussed and rejected so many times since 1977.\textsuperscript{80}

Compared with the past, the major difference now was that the Palestinian leader and the Israeli foreign minister had developed similar interests and views. Arafat’s fear of isolation, the deteriorating situation of the Palestinian population, especially in Gaza, with the subsequent pressure on the PLO to do something to help, the threat from Hamas and the bankruptcy of the PLO – all of these explanatory factors on the Palestinian side were suddenly linked to Israel’s desire to get rid of Gaza and the Israeli leaders’ fear of terrorism. In short, Israel’s desire to get rid of Gaza was coupled with Arafat’s weakness and shrinking power base. Seen in such a light, the attractiveness of the ‘Gaza first’ option to Arafat, Peres and later on Rabin becomes more obvious and easier to understand. They were mutually dependent on each other if they were to obtain their own goals.\textsuperscript{81}

For the Israelis, a withdrawal from Gaza, their social and security nightmare, would be the first move to get the PLO back into the peace process. ‘Gaza first’ could also satisfy Palestinian demands that an interim phase had to include a transfer of territorial authority – jurisdiction over a specific geographical area. Seen in such a way, an early withdrawal from Gaza represented a departure from previous interim solutions. Ever since the negotiations at Camp David, interim solutions had focused on the transfer of functional authority. The Palestinians could be given control of various government functions prior to an Israeli withdrawal, but not control of a specific territory.\textsuperscript{82}

**The Birth of the Sarpsborg DoP**

In Norway, the Palestinians put forward ideas radically different from those discussed in Washington. The Palestinians argued that the talks in Washington had shown that a comprehensive settlement was unattainable. They had drawn the conclusion that only an interim agreement had any chance of success and proposed drawing up a declaration of principles for such an accord. In addition, they suggested that the Israeli withdrawal should start with Gaza. All of these concessions were departures from PLO’s traditional demands.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{79} Heikal 1996, p. 440.
\textsuperscript{81} Jones 1999, pp. 117–121.
\textsuperscript{83} Heikal 1996, pp. 437–438.
To the Israelis, the PLO’s Gaza proposal came as a great surprise, although a pleasant one. The emphasis on the economic aspects, with Abu Ala’s specific mentioning of a ‘Marshall Plan’ for Gaza, was another positive surprise. But what surprised the Israelis most was the different attitude. Completely contrary to what they had expected, they sensed a serious commitment to peace – from the arch-enemy itself. Ironically, it was the Palestinians’ very cooperation that most disturbed and puzzled the Israelis: ‘The thing that surprised me, and also worried me a little’, Shimon Peres admits, ‘was Arafat’s unexpected flexibility. The whole time I had doubts about whether they were pulling our leg, or whether it [was] possible to work with them’.

In Norway, it seemed almost easy to negotiate with the PLO representatives. Key issues were touched upon from the very first meeting and were elaborated further at the remaining meetings in the first round. But a weekend in Sarpsborg was not enough to solve the conflict in the Middle East. And nothing was put down on paper. The two Israelis and the three Palestinians left to report to their respective superiors on the proceedings.

Although they all had a positive impression of each other, they were basically suspicious. Who were these people? From whom did they receive their instructions? To whom did they report? What kind of authority did they have? How serious were the ideas presented? Was this Norwegian channel a fruitful way to go? In the following two weeks, Terje Rød Larsen received numerous telephone calls with these kinds of questions. He could do little else than try to convince those who called about the seriousness of the other party and the necessity of continuing the talks. What he knew was limited. And even the three Norwegians had doubts. Jan Egeland questioned the role played by the two Israeli academics, and even Rød Larsen found it a bit difficult to understand why they had been chosen to front a risky Israeli peace enterprise. The Norwegians regarded Abu Ala as more of a technocrat than an important political figure. And they knew little about Abu Mazen. There were many unknown factors. They felt that they were definitely taking a risk. But Egeland, Rød Larsen and Juul, with the support of Stoltenberg, decided to give this peace project the benefit of the doubt. The Norwegians wanted results.

On the Palestinian side, Arafat and Mazen were informed. On the Israeli side, it was still only Beilin and his close political adviser Shlomo Gur that knew about the talks. Of all the difficult questions, this bothered Beilin the most. There were strong arguments both for and against informing Peres. But still Beilin feared that if he reported to Peres, Peres would feel obliged to inform Rabin. Then, the whole track might be lost.

Rød Larsen and Egeland contacted Beilin after the first meeting in order to clarify the situation and to press for a higher level of Israeli representation. Abu Ala had told

---

84 Quoted after Lundberg 1998, p. 36; see also Beilin 1999, p. 67.
Rod Larsen that he wanted to ensure there was serious political backing behind the odd couple of Israeli academics. Terje Rod Larsen invited Beilin to join them. Clearly, the Norwegians also felt the need for a stronger Israeli participation and commitment, but Beilin refused.87

Instead, the small Israeli peace team, Beilin included, worked on a new document. As they saw it, this document should not be in the nature of an Israeli statement of position as a basis for negotiation. It should take account of the Palestinian proposals and the Israeli reactions to them. The intention of Beilin and his team was to strive towards the construction of broader options to give both sides room for negotiation.88

The drafting process started at the second meeting (11–12 February) and was concluded during the third round of meetings (20–21 March). The location and participants were the same. Abu Ala presented a proposal that had been approved by the PLO. This contained terms of reference for an interim agreement on autonomy for Gaza and the West Bank and for the implementation of a final accord. It formulated goals for negotiations leading towards those ends and laid down what jurisdiction the Palestinians would have in the interim period. The PLO also suggested a massive international aid effort for Gaza, some kind of a Marshall Plan. But the proposal Abu Ala brought with him from Tunis also contained reference to the most difficult question of all: the future of Jerusalem.89

Hirschfeld and Pundak presented the draft they had prepared together with Beilin. Their paper was a declaration of principles written from an Israeli point of view. It echoed the concept of ‘Gaza first’ and contained ideas about economic cooperation.90

The principle of gradualism – a staged withdrawal of Israeli forces and gradual autonomy for the Palestinians – was a new idea. It was Hirschfeld’s, and it was not as obvious as it might seem. There had been no gradual transfer of power in the original autonomy plan for Gaza and the West Bank agreed upon in the 1978 Camp David Agreement. And in the agreement between Israel and Egypt over Sinai, the territory was handed over in one piece at the agreed time. The Israelis, ever since Camp David, had problems accepting the possibility of handing over everything at once, reluctant as they were to see the future loss of the Occupied Territories. In Norway, Hirschfeld now suggested a transfer of one authority after another to the Palestinians, month by month. In such a way, matters like health, education and cultural affairs could be handed over one after another. The Palestinians would also be allowed to build and run utilities in Gaza, such as an electricity company, a water authority and a seaport.

---

87 Corbin 1994a, pp. 51–52; Beilin 1999, pp. 66–70.
88 The ‘guiding principle throughout the talks was to try to avoid conventional negotiating tactics, where the parties began with speeches intended to mark out the distance between them and then move towards a compromise’: Beilin 1999, p. 68.
89 Corbin 1994a, pp. 59–63; Beilin 1999, pp. 70–72; Makovsky 1996, pp. 23, 31–34; Peres 1995, p. 326; Elon 1993, p. 81; Lundberg 1998, pp. 38–39; Abbas 1995, pp. 132–133. The Sarpsborg document was basically formulated at the meeting in February, but was further refined during the rounds held in March, April and May.
90 Same references as above.
Institution-building was seen as important and would be developed in order to prepare for the negotiations determining the future status of Gaza and the West Bank. Hirschfeld argued that this would indicate that Israel was prepared to allow the infrastructure of a state to be constructed, even without the guarantee of an eventual state. The Palestinians would in any case need time to build their own institutions. The interim self-government would have the legitimacy and the authority to conduct final status negotiations – at which the Palestinians would be able to draw any lines in the sand that they felt were important. Gradualism would also reassure the Israelis, giving both sides some authority but leaving any powers not explicitly transferred to the Palestinians in Israeli hands. All of the thorny issues were postponed to a later stage. However, accepting this principle of gradualism also meant that during the first two or three years the process of Israeli withdrawal could be halted or even reversed. To the Israelis, the great surprise was – once again – that the Palestinian side accepted this.

During the meeting in February, the Israelis and Palestinians hammered out a joint ‘Declaration of Principles’, synthesizing their two versions into one. The six-page document contained 15 articles and was accompanied by annexes on the status of Jerusalem in the Palestinian elections, as well as Palestinian economic and regional development.

The Sarpsborg DoP consisted of three major elements. Several of its terms stood out as departures from both existing Israeli and PLO policy. First, Israel agreed to withdraw completely from Gaza ‘within two or three years’. The Gaza Strip would then become a trusteeship under Egypt, or come under a UN or multinational mandate for a limited period of time. The exact nature of this trusteeship was not defined. Meanwhile, negotiations would continue on an interim autonomy scheme for the West Bank. Second, the declaration proposed that a small ‘Marshall Plan’ for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank be developed, in which the international community would undertake, through aid and investment, to invigorate and expand massively the economy of the Occupied Territories. Third, economic cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian interim authorities should be developed.

However, the first Sarpsborg draft was far from an agreement. From an Israeli perspective, it was too ambiguous regarding Jerusalem. It contained nothing on borders, settlements or security. But the Israeli representatives had agreed to discuss, in future talks, the final status of the Occupied Territories, including the status of Jerusalem, Israel’s self-declared eternal and indivisible capital, as well as settlements, refugees, sovereignty and borders. Consequently, all problematic issues were transferred to the negotiations on a permanent settlement. As had been the case at Camp David in 1978–

---

93 Peres 1995, p. 326.
79 and in Washington in 1992–93, in Norway in 1993 Israel was only willing to discuss interim arrangements. By removing any problematic questions from the agenda, the participants in Sarpsborg avoided a situation in which such issues could jeopardize the interim process. 'Naturally, we did not guarantee our willingness to compromise on these issues, any more than on those of frontiers and Jewish settlements and other questions, but the very fact that these issues were now on the agenda was enough to solve a series of problems which had prevented agreement on autonomy since discussions on the subject had begun following the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt'.

Not surprisingly, Israel removed the questions of sovereignty and borders in later drafts. As early as February, the Israelis felt that the talks in Norway had run into problems on four issues: jurisdiction (how to define the geographical and legal ambit of Palestinian autonomy), arbitration (how to set up a mutually acceptable machinery for resolving disputes), security (the extent to which Israel would retain control over security in the territories during the interim period) and Jerusalem (whether East Jerusalem Palestinians would be entitled to stand as candidates and/or vote in the elections for the council of self-government). This last question was however solved during the meeting in March. According to the Sarpsborg DoP, the Palestinians would be allowed to cast their votes at their respective religious sites. But all of these issues were troublesome, and they continued to haunt the negotiations through the coming months.

But whether liking or disliking the Sarpsborg draft and anticipating numerous problems, representatives for the Israelis and the PLO had at least agreed on a joint document. Such an agreement was rare indeed. And not only had they managed to agree on something, however vague and problematic, but they had even agreed to take the document home and present it to their respective leaders.

After the February meeting, Beilin finally decided to inform his boss about what was happening in Norway. Up until this moment, Peres had no idea of the informal Oslo Back Channel, Beilin claims. However, two days after the Israelis and Palestinians left Norway, Beilin received a message from Terje Rød Larsen. Arafat and Mazen had in principle approved the Sarpsborg document. They were willing to move towards a compromise on the remaining unresolved issues. To Beilin, it now became clear that

---

98 However, the actors seem to disagree on precisely when Peres was informed of the secret channel. Peres himself claims it was after the January meeting and that he informed Prime Minister Rabin on 9 February 1993. The prime minister had asked Peres to suspend the talks until after a visit to the Middle East by the new US Secretary of State Warren Christopher in late February. Peres did not follow the instructions from his boss. On the contrary, he told the Oslo team that they could carry on. Yossi Beilin, who had actually been nervous about how he deliberately had kept the foreign minister in the dark, gives a very different version. Peres 1995, pp. 326–328. Corbin 1994a, pp. 56–58, 61–63 supports Peres’s account of the events.
the time had come to involve the foreign minister, who would feel obliged to inform the prime minister as well.  

Beilin told Peres that the Oslo Back Channel was an interesting exercise, and not only on an academic level. The Palestinians had put a proposal on the table that would be of great interest to him. Beilin handed a document over to his superior, summarizing the talks and agreements in Norway. Peres had never heard about these Palestinians before, but he promised to read the document.

After a couple of days, Peres convened a meeting consisting of the original ‘Oslo Club’ – Hirschfeld, Pundak, Beilin and Gur. In addition, Peres brought in Avi Gil, his trusted office manager. Peres had strong objections to the Sarpsborg document. ‘It’s an awful paper ... but it looks like something serious is going on’, he bluntly told Beilin. Beilin also had reservations. The declaration of principles from Sarpsborg had proposed that Gaza should have some kind of trusteeship arrangements during the interim period. The trusteeship proposal was originally proposed by Hirschfeld and probably planned as a Namibia-style UN administration of Gaza to ensure gradual Israeli withdrawal and prepare for the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state. The suggestion caused a furious reaction from Peres. He, like most Israeli policymakers, feared it would serve as a precedent for UN involvement in Israeli administration of the Occupied Territories. Ever since 1948, the Israeli government had consistently fought any kind of UN involvement in what it felt were internal Israeli affairs. Peres was also unhappy with the voting rights for the Palestinians in East Jerusalem.

However, not unexpectedly, Peres liked the ‘Gaza first’ proposal and the major focus on the economic aspect of peacemaking. The Sarpsborg DoP had a distinct economic dimension attached to it. Mainly, this reflected the background and interests of the main participants. On the Palestinian side, Abu Ala had broad financial experience. A couple of years earlier, he had prepared a detailed economic plan, setting out the difficulties facing the PLO’s economy in the years to come. Abu Ala had stressed the economic advantage of establishing peace with Israel and a fixed Palestinian state, and proposed economic cooperation in the Middle East region – including Israel. Abu Ala had an expansive vision of such an economic development in the region. His mind was set on, among other things, a maritime canal linking the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea, a free trade area in the region and a new port in Gaza.

On the Israeli side, Hirschfeld was also convinced that the way to peace lay in economic cooperation. Hirschfeld had been driving around on bumpy roads on the West Bank and in Gaza, searching for local Palestinian leaders willing to work with him on

---

99 Beilin 1999, pp. 70–75.
100 Same references as above.
101 Corbin 1994a, p. 62.
103 Same references as above; see also interview with Abu Ala, 29 October 2002.
such an approach. For years, Hirschfeld, Pundak and Beilin had been working together. They believed in economic development as a major means of achieving peace.\footnote{Waage 2000a, pp. 70–72; interviews with Yair Hirschfeld, 7 May 1998, 22 March 1999 and 22 October 2002.}

This economic route to peace was just as much, if not even more, emphasized by Shimon Peres. He had for many years focused on a liberal institutionalist vision of the Middle East as an economic community, modelled on the European Community. ‘Modern technology can make the Gaza port one of the most useful on the Mediterranean coast’, Peres had claimed.\footnote{Peres 1993, p. 139; interviews with Shimon Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002.} And even the facilitator Terje Rød Larsen shared this economic view of peacemaking. That aside, he personally had close links to the trade union movement. He had been working, through Fafo’s living-conditions study, on improving the economic conditions for the Palestinians in Gaza and on the West Bank. However, the most difficult questions were not economic in character. What to do with Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, a future Palestinian state and security were basically political, military and legal questions. They were not to be solved through an economic approach or with grand plans for regional development of the Middle East.\footnote{Jones 1999, pp. 120–121.}

Although Peres had serious objections to the Sarpsborg DoP, he felt that the document reflected his own basic approach. And Beilin, knowing that Peres put great emphasis not only on the economic aspects but also on the ‘Gaza first’ part of the proposal could confirm that it looked as though the PLO was ‘on the hook’.\footnote{Corbin 1994a, p. 56.} The leaders in Tunis, on their side, also knew that Gaza was a major magnet for Peres. Discussing the talks in Norway with Arafat and Mazen, Abu Ala warned against singling out only one part of the Occupied Territories. He wanted the Israelis to discuss the whole area, Jerusalem included. But Arafat and Mazen, aware of Peres’s interest in the idea of ‘Gaza first’, insisted on keeping Gaza a major concept in the DoP.\footnote{Interviews with Shimon Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002; Beilin 1999, pp. 70–75; Makovsky 1996, pp. 31–34; Peres 1995, pp. 326–328; Corbin 1994a, pp. 56–58, 61–63.}

Peres felt that the Norwegian track was so serious that he had to involve Prime Minister Rabin. A meeting between the two old rivals was set up, probably in late February. Rabin was given a copy of the Sarpsborg document. He was not very enthusiastic about what was presented to him, but he did not call for a halt in the talks in Norway. He wanted the talks to continue as a private academic discussion. Rabin did not want to give the Palestinians the impression that he was backing the Oslo project. Personally, he was unimpressed by the proceedings so far and could not see that anything of significance had been achieved. But, for whatever reasons he may have had, he did not terminate the talks in Norway.\footnote{Same references as above.}
Norway and the USA: Two Close Allies

In 1985, peace researcher Jan Egeland published a thesis in political science with the striking title ‘Impotent Superpower – Potent Small State: Potentials and Limitations of Human Rights Objectives in the Foreign Policies of the United States and Norway’. In this thesis, Egeland argued that a small, rich, well-liked, non-threatening country like Norway was considerably better suited than a superpower like the United States or any medium power, like Britain or France, to broker peace accords and human rights around the world. Unlike more powerful countries, Norway could not be suspected of hidden agendas, whether political or commercial. Norway could not be regarded as a country threatening or imposing on anybody.110

In the Middle East peace process, the small state Norway played a very different – but, in a short-term perspective, a seemingly much more successful – role than the superpower the USA. For more than 50 years, most of the mediation initiatives in the Middle East were undertaken by the United States – in one way or another. The Americans had resorted to mediation for various reasons. The USA had strong military, strategic and oil interests within the region. Mediation attempts in the Middle East were also related to domestic politics. At the same time, the Middle East was a crucial region in the conflict with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, no other state made any significant attempt to mediate the conflict. The Europeans let the Americans take sole control of peacemaking diplomacy.111

When the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, the USA remained the principal mediator in the Middle East. Having Norway – or others – as additional actors in the mediation market was something new, and by this time seen as acceptable by the United States. Of course, the peace process in the Middle East could no longer be seen as part of a global struggle against a dangerous, communist rival, as had been the case during the Cold War.112

The United States did not fear Norwegian involvement. Norway could by no standard be seen as a dangerous rival. Norway was a friend and an ally. It was small and unthreatening. In fact, the Americans had no reason to believe that the Norwegians could accomplish something they could not themselves. Consequently, the Norway channel was not taken seriously by the Americans.113

However, the Norwegians took the talks in Norway very seriously, although they were of a very different nature than the ones conducted by the superpower itself. Norway had always been preoccupied with being on close and friendly terms with the United States. The Oslo Back Channel made it anxious. One of the most important Norwegian interests to protect in this peace game was Norway’s very own relationship with the USA. The Norwegians also knew that there was no road to peace in the Middle East that did not pass directly through the United States. Norway did not want to

---

111 Touval 1999, pp. 3, 7–8, 14–18.
112 Same references as above.
113 Same references as above.
be accused of going behind the back of its ally and protector. On the contrary, US backing was important and had to be secured. Therefore, the Norwegian peace team from the very beginning made sure that the Americans were informed.  

As early as November 1992, when the Oslo track was only in the planning stage and far from having materialized, the Norwegians informed the Americans about what they were up to. Egeland contacted Dan Kurtzer, deputy to the assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs in the US State Department. The reason was Egeland’s meetings with Beilin in Israel in September. Kurtzer was told that Norway was in a position to establish links between some Israeli and some Palestinian figures. At this stage, the Norwegians had no plans to establish a link directly to Arafat and the PLO in Tunis. They still believed that Faisal Husseini and other West Bank leaders were where their cards ought to be placed. The Norwegians obviously expected encouragement from Kurtzer, often regarded as one of the ‘doves’ in the State Department.

Although Dan Kurtzer was not directly opposed to the attempt being made, his response was not very enthusiastic. It was a kind of ‘I listen to what you have to say’ approach, meaning that the Americans would neither approve nor close the door on such a back channel option. The USA did not want to be involved, but as long as the Israelis and the Palestinians were talking to each other in order to sort out some of the problems causing deadlock in Washington, the Americans had no objections. Kurtzer also emphasized that the USA would not oppose secret meetings in Oslo as long as it was clear that the Americans had not encouraged Norway to involve the PLO directly.

Egeland continued to approach and inform Kurtzer as the talks went on. He felt obliged to do so. But Kurtzer continued to be neither enthusiastic nor very supportive. On the one hand, he deliberately kept his distance. But, on the other hand, he did not seem to take the information very seriously. Kurtzer told the Norwegians repeatedly that Arafat was an unreliable negotiating partner. Kurtzer also stressed that the talks in Norway had little value without Rabin’s backing.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm on Kurtzer’s part, the Norwegians continued the talks and continued to inform the Americans. Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg raised the question himself directly with the new US Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Both foreign ministers attended a NATO meeting in Brussels on 28 February 1993. Stoltenberg presented the talks in Norway as something supplementing the negotiations in Washington. In addition to the oral information he provided, Stoltenberg also handed over a copy of the Sarpsborg DoP to the US secretary of state. Christopher thanked Stoltenberg for the briefing and asked to be kept informed. Christopher also promised follow-up discussions, yet remained non-committal. This was partly because

---

116 Same references as above; Waage 2000a, p. 83–84.
117 Same references as above.
of the new secretary of state’s personality, but also because, after less than two months in office, he very naturally must have felt that he had many other and more pressing matters on his mind. Just like Kurtzer, Christopher seemed to regard the Norway channel as just one of many informal academic channels in which Israeli peace ‘doves’ and members of the PLO took part. Christopher’s promised follow-up discussions never took place. Nor did other US officials seek additional information on what was going on in Norway. They were all apparently content with the hints and general briefings received.\textsuperscript{118}

Israel too informed the United States. Like Norway, Israel had a number of reasons for protecting its relationship with its close supporter and friend. Consequently, both the Norwegians and the Israelis informally and unofficially provided the US State Department with information. As early as 5 December 1992, Hirschfeld told Kurtzer in London that he had met the PLO representative Abu Ala and that they had agreed to hold talks in Norway. Kurtzer had already at this stage told Hirschfeld, according to the latter, that such talks could be useful as long as they remained unofficial. When Kurtzer went on a private visit to Israel (in order to celebrate Pesach, the Passover), he met both Beilin and Hirschfeld. Kurtzer had been close to Beilin ever since he had served in Israel in the early 1980s as first secretary for political affairs at the US embassy in Tel Aviv. He was used to having regular discussions on the development of the peace process with Beilin since the negotiations started in Madrid in 1991. Kurtzer was so trusted by Beilin and Hirschfeld that they even showed him the Sarpsborg DoP.\textsuperscript{119} Towards the two Israelis, Kurtzer was positive and supportive. Privately, he again rejected the Norwegian initiative. Though Kurtzer felt that the approach contained in the Sarpsborg DoP was a creative one, he felt it had no authority. He regarded the document as just another academic exercise. As long as Rabin was not actively involved, the Norway project was nothing to attach any importance to. In addition, the Sarpsborg DoP was regarded by several members of the US peace team as being too far away from what could be seen as acceptable to Israel. This was another reason for not taking the information from Norway seriously.\textsuperscript{120}

The US lack of interest in the Norway channel demonstrated clearly that the new Clinton administration regarded Prime Minister Rabin as the sole Israeli decisionmaker on the peace process. In addition, US Assistant Secretary for the Near East Edward Djerejian, US Special Counsellor for the Middle East Dennis Ross, his assistant Aaron Miller, Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff Samuel Lewis and


\textsuperscript{119} Makovsky 1996, p. 27 claims that the Norwegians also sent Kurtzer a copy of the Sarpsborg DoP at the end of March 1993.

former US secretary of state James Baker III put huge emphasis on Rabin’s lack of involvement in Oslo as the major reason why the Americans did not believe in the Norway track. Neither the former Bush administration nor the new Clinton team paid attention to peace initiatives originating from Shimon Peres. ‘We did not take Shimon seriously’, James Baker frankly admits. Consequently, when the Americans were informed that the Norway channel was the work of Beilin and Peres, there were very few reasons for them to believe that this would be an important road to peace.

In addition, officials at the State Department were aware of several other back channels being pursued at the same time. The US officials frequently heard of secret contacts. They had no reason to believe that the talks in Norway were any more serious than any of the other talks going on or the tracks being constructed at the same time, and consequently had no reason to investigate further. ‘Given the Norwegian Foreign Ministry channel and the two or three other channels that we were aware of with the PLO, wouldn’t it be ironic if the talks in Washington were a facade and Israel and the PLO are dealing [directly] with one another’, asked Edward Djerejian, head of the US peace team.

For all of these reasons, the Americans neither took seriously nor monitored the information about the talks. Quite simply, the likelihood of a success was just too improbable for them to believe in. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, and with the Cold War over, the United States had worked hard to get all the parties in the Middle East to attend a peace conference. It had been even harder for the superpower to get the Israelis, their Arab neighbours and the Palestinians, for the first time ever, to agree to sit around the same negotiating table. There were no reasons for the United States to believe that someone else could broker peace. The road to a peaceful solution had to go through Washington. ‘When you invent the wheel, you believe nobody else could have a car’ was an illustrative saying for the prevailing attitudes in Washington.

---

121 Interview with James Baker III, 9 September 1999; see also Makovsky 1996, p. 28.
123 Other examples of secret tracks were the AAAS meetings or meetings between Member of Knesset Ephraim Sneh and PLO official Nabil Shaath in Washington and at several international symposia on the Middle East.
125 Quoted after Makovsky 1996, p. 29; see also the same references as above.
The Modest Facilitator

Israel and the PLO had different, but serious, motives for continuing to pursue the Norwegian track. They had strong reasons for preferring Sarpsborg to Washington. Their reasons for continuing the talks in Norway had very little to do with Norway or with the input given by the Norwegians. So, what had the Norwegian actors actually been doing in this preliminary, first round of discussions?

The secret negotiations between Israel and the PLO can be divided into two phases. There were five rounds of exploratory pre-negotiations. It was clear from the beginning that Norway would play the role of a modest facilitator, not a mediator. Terje Rød Larsen took charge of the arrangement. Fafo’s living-conditions project constituted the cover. Rød Larsen arranged the time, the place and the transportation. Jan Egeland approved the plan and offered financial backing. ‘Fafo acted as the quiet, efficient and informed operator organizing dozens of meetings, booking hundreds of hotel rooms and tickets, and making thousands of phone calls. The Norwegian government provided the political backing, the resources and the prestige necessary to embark on and carry out this unique venture.... Without Fafo and its Director Terje Rød Larsen, Norway could not have provided the services so necessary to the parties during those days of distrust rather than mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO’, as Jan Egeland describes the situation.126

Yair Hirschfeld and his assistant Ron Pundak were put on Fafo’s payroll. Nothing could possibly be traced back to the Israeli government. Neither Fafo’s board nor anyone else at Fafo was told that the institute was hosting secret talks between the PLO and Israel. Director Rød Larsen definitely took a risk: if this were discovered and leaked at too early a stage, and it became clear that no one had been informed in advance, he could easily be accused of total irresponsibility. But Rød Larsen was convinced that the only way to keep this ‘project’ secret was to involve as few people as possible.127

The Norwegians did not play anything resembling a mediating role in this first phase. They played such a small and insignificant role that Yossi Beilin, probably mistakenly, thought after the second round that they were not even aware of the topics and issues being discussed. ‘Neither Larsen nor Egeland knew of the content of the discussions, and neither had been informed of the “Gaza first” option. They asked no questions.’128

On the other hand, Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul stressed the need to create an informal atmosphere during the talks. They used a variety of means to achieve this. They gave careful thought to the choice of a suitable site. Such a site had to be secluded, tranquil and inviting. They waited for hours outside the negotiating room, checking only that the Israelis and Palestinians had everything they wanted and needed. The job done by the Norwegian couple seems to have started with nothing more than this,

128 Beilin 1999, p. 69; see also interview with Ron Pundak, 21 March 1999.
providing complete secrecy and deniability. In addition, they provided shelter, good food and drink. They made the two parties share all meals. They accompanied the actors on walks outside, in between meetings, and provided pleasant small-talk inside, always being there to provide whatever the actors might need. The role they played seemed so modest that it might almost be described as not playing a role at all.\(^\text{129}\)

However, there is no doubt that there were already signs of a more important Norwegian role. The Norwegians were not only ‘serving sherry’, as some critics have claimed. They offered continual encouragement to both sides. They managed early on to create a sense of shared danger and excitement, of closeness, friendship and humour, of being bound together in a common destiny. This was the essence of the spirit of the talks. The Israeli chief negotiator Uri Savir, being a latecomer in the Oslo game, explains how Terje Rød Larsen went about ‘indoctrinating’ him into the ‘spirit of the talks – the Oslo “spirit”’.... He evidently considered me a staid young technocrat, perhaps too stiff for the mission at hand. He explained that humor was an important element in the talks, and that the interchange should be informal, as it had been so far with the two professors. For Terje, the essence of the Oslo channel was to come up with creative solutions by a process of free thinking, not traditional hard-nosed bargaining. He believed that the relaxed Norwegian atmosphere would have an osmotic impact on the talks and hoped that we could achieve a blend between Oslo and Jerusalem.\(^\text{130}\)

Jan Egeland, in particular, was very conscious of what the role of a small state like Norway could be in a conflict like the one in the Middle East. That role could not be to mediate the dispute. On the contrary, Norway’s strength was to keep a low profile and facilitate. The intention of the Norwegians was to bring the parties together and to use good offices to promote trust. If the meetings should develop into negotiations, the Norwegians would not take a stance on the substance of the talks. There would therefore be no Norwegian participation in the negotiations. ‘For the Norwegians, the most important precondition to the setting up of the secret channel was the willingness of both the Palestinians and the Israelis to approach the talks in good faith.’\(^\text{131}\)

Without the willingness of the parties, there would have been neither a Norwegian role nor a Norwegian back channel. Norway played no independent role in this game – at least at this point.\(^\text{132}\)

Terje Rød Larsen was also very conscious of and protective with regard to Norway’s and his own possible role in this Middle East drama. Although both the Israelis and

\(^{129}\) Interview with Uri Savir, 19 November 1999; interview with Abu Ala, 21 October 2002: ‘Norway was an excellent facilitator’; interview with Avi Gil, 21 March 1999; interview with Yoel Singer, 4 June 2002; Corbin 1994a, pp. 40–52, 60–61; Elon 1993, pp. 80–81; Makovsky 1996, p. 22.

\(^{130}\) Savir 1998, p. 11; interview with Uri Savir, 18 November 1999; see also same references as above.

\(^{131}\) Corbin 1994a, p. 40.

\(^{132}\) Corbin 1994a, p. 40; see also interviews with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; interview with Geir O. Pedersen, 18 October 2002; same references as above.
the Palestinians several times invited him into the negotiating room, he was careful not to intrude. He told the participants frankly that he really considered the negotiations to be their business. The role of the Norwegians was to stay away from real negotiations. Terje Rød Larsen would not agree to go into any of the meetings unless the parties insisted. He preferred to stay outside, to fetch and carry papers, and to arrange computers and telephone links whenever this was required. Rød Larsen was in a state of ever-readiness. As he saw it himself, his role would be to build a feeling of trust and relaxation by getting to know the individuals and helping them to get to know each other. According to Corbin, Rød Larsen ‘used his knowledge of Palestinian and Israeli fears and aspiration, not to arbitrate or put forward solutions, but rather to encourage the parties by convincing them that Norway understood their difficulties. He was reassuring and, to the amusement of both sides, confident that their discussions would bear substantial fruit. His conviction was flattering for the guests, even though they were privately very sceptical. Larsen concentrated on creating a unique atmosphere around these and subsequent encounters’.\footnote{Corbin 1994a, p. 48; see also interviews with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; Corbin 1994a, pp. 40–52, 60–61; Beilin 1999, pp. 68–69; Makovsky 1996, p. 22; Elon 1993, pp. 80–81.}

Sometimes the Israelis and the Palestinians invited Rød Larsen and Juul to sit in with them in the negotiating room. More frequently, the actors themselves came out and reported on what was going on inside. Sometimes, though, they gave no hint of what was happening. Rød Larsen and Juul also occasionally received copies of documents. Consequently, although in different ways, the Norwegians received several briefings from each side, both before, in between and after meetings. Terje Rød Larsen was in daily contact with Tunis and Jerusalem between sessions, passing messages from one party to another. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians complained to the Norwegians about the negotiating position of the other. This was partly a tactic intended to soften each other’s position. Terje Rød Larsen also ensured that momentum was maintained even when there were serious disagreements.\footnote{Interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; interviews with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; Corbin 1994a, pp. 40–52, 60–61; Beilin 1999, pp. 68–69; Makovsky 1996, p. 22.}

Mona Juul served as the liaison with the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs, keeping the state secretary and the foreign minister fully informed of all details with regard to the progress and the broader picture. Foreign Minister Stoltenberg deliberately maintained a certain distance between himself and the details. Stoltenberg and Egeland also helped to bring the talks forward when necessary. In addition, they formed
the important link to the USA. Except for these three and the prime minister, no one in the foreign ministry knew about what was happening.\footnote{Interviews with Thorvald Stoltenberg, 26 February and 9 March 1999; interviews with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; Waage 2000a, p. 83; Stoltenberg 2001, p. 272; Abbas 1995, p.114; Elon 1993, p. 81; Corbin 1994a, pp. 38, 45, 60–61; Beilin 1999, p. 67.}

The presence of State Secretary Jan Egeland in the first round, and also his visit to the participants several times later on, lent a certain formal aura to the gathering and endowed the whole enterprise with a status that might have been somewhat premature at this early stage. It is uncertain whether the participants themselves were informed about the high-level backing of the Norwegian prime minister and foreign minister. They certainly assumed it.\footnote{Same references as above.}

There seems no doubt that the Norwegians were largely responsible for holding the Oslo Back Channel together. At a very early stage in the negotiations, the Israelis and the Palestinians seemed to have great trust in the Norwegian couple. When the participants had managed to agree on the Sarpsborg DoP, before leaving Norway and before they had shown the document to their respective leaders they gave a copy to Terje Rød Larsen, who passed copies to Stoltenberg and Egeland. This was a very clear indication of the great trust placed in the Norwegians.\footnote{Interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; Abbas 1995, p.114; Elon 1993, p. 81; Corbin 1994a, pp. 38, 45, 60–61; Beilin 1999, p. 67.}

Another important role played by the Norwegians from the very start was the role of messenger, delivering information and bringing reassurances during very difficult and uncertain phases of the negotiations. Rød Larsen was the one providing crucial information from one party to the other, often in such a way that the party receiving the information was not even aware of the role that Rød Larsen played. One of the most important challenges for the participants in Norway was that of becoming convinced that the other party was serious. Rød Larsen was an important sounding-board. The ‘messenger’ Rød Larsen also took it upon himself to play the role of the ‘reassurer’ Rød Larsen. This was important for both sides.\footnote{Interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; Corbin 1994a, p. 52; Elon 1993, p. 82.}

The Israelis had doubts about Abu Ala. To them, he was an unknown quantity. The Israelis had never had any contact with the PLO. They did not know what the PLO really represented. They wanted proof that Abu Ala was speaking for Arafat and could commit the PLO in the future. Terje Rød Larsen assured them that this was the case. He informed the Israelis that Arafat had accepted the Sarpsborg DoP as a point of departure.\footnote{Beilin 1999, p. 71; Elon 1993, p. 82.}

The importance of Terje Rød Larsen’s role as a messenger and reassurer came very much to the forefront when the PLO began to demand that it was time for the Israeli negotiators to demonstrate their bona fides. The PLO was threatening to break with
the negotiations. Rød Larsen became a target for Abu Ala’s enormous frustration and anger with his Israeli counterpart. The emotional outbursts, poured out on the innocent Rød Larsen, became another part of the working pattern within the Oslo Back Channel. Rød Larsen tried to be understanding and patient. He tried to do everything he could in order to calm emotions and keep the process on track. He listened, he reassured, he took long walks with Abu Ala. He and Juul acted as buffers for these strong emotions, and they were often able to defuse tension. Sometimes they offered to discuss the issues causing the tensions with both parties. But still they did not participate in the actual negotiations. The role they played as the third, non-threatening party was crucial.\textsuperscript{140}

The PLO had serious doubts about the two Israeli academics and their lack of official backing. On a number of occasions, and increasingly loudly, Abu Ala demanded a higher level of Israeli backing and presence. Unless the Israelis sent someone official to negotiate, he would attend no more meetings. Rød Larsen reassured and got Abu Ala to continue, first by telling him that he had spoken with Beilin on the phone. He knew that Hirschfeld and Pundak had Beilin’s support and backing. As long as the talks were on a very preliminary level, this was good enough. In the March and April meetings, the two sides continued to exchange ideas and improve the original draft. But the talks became increasingly more substantive, and Abu Ala continued to press for a high-level Israeli presence. Rød Larsen told Abu Ala that Peres and also Rabin were behind the two Israeli academics. Hirschfeld and Pundak had been ordered not to reveal their high-level political backing, whereas Rød Larsen could talk much more loosely and could play a much more independent role. He had a strong sense of intuition and a firm understanding of human psychology, quickly picking up what was needed from him in order to move the Oslo Back Channel forward.\textsuperscript{141}

But the Palestinians continued to push for clearer indication of how far up in the Israeli chain of command knowledge and approval of the channel’s activities extended. Despite the Norwegians’ intentions to stay on the sidelines, Terje Rød Larsen was drawn further in. He travelled to Israel to talk to Beilin personally, very much on Abu Ala’s request, both to confirm that Beilin stood behind the track and to get more official Israeli backing. But Abu Ala was not satisfied with these assurances and insisted on official negotiations. In early May, Abu Ala told Rød Larsen that the Oslo talks would end unless Israel upgraded the negotiations to an official level. Rød Larsen begged him to continue. At the same time, he begged the Israelis to upgrade. In fact, Rød Larsen was the only one Abu Ala could pressure into taking action. And Terje Rød Larsen acted – and succeeded. In May 1993, the Israelis upgraded the talks. The Oslo Back Channel went into a new phase.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{140} Interview with Terje Rød Larsen 21 October 2002; interview with Mona Juul 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; Elon 1993, pp. 82, 84; Makovsky 1996, p. 43; Corbin 1994a, pp. 64–65, 70–71.

\textsuperscript{141} Interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; Beilin 1999, p. 75; Elon 1993, p. 82; Corbin 1994a, pp. 64–65, 70–71.

\textsuperscript{142} Interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; Elon 1993, pp. 82, 84; Makovsky 1996, p. 43; Corbin 1994a, pp. 64–65, 70–71.
Chapter 4

THE ACTIVE MEDIATOR

AFTER FOUR MONTHS OF UNOFFICIAL TALKS, the participants involved in the Oslo Back Channel had established a working relationship and written a preliminary declaration of principles. Significant progress had been made. However, this was not sufficient to move the talks further. The Palestinians were frustrated by the lack of identifiable high-level Israeli involvement and threatened to break off the talks. On the Israeli side, the Oslo participants were continuously surprised and optimistic because of the flexible approach shown by the PLO. Abu Ala was seen as ‘a man of his word, a man with whom we could do business’.\(^1\) In addition, as Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres judged the situation, the reports from Oslo ‘indicated that the PLO was in serious difficulties, both financial and political, and that the time, therefore, was right for Israel to clinch a deal with the organization’.\(^2\)

The upgrading of the Israeli level of representation in May 1993 had a tremendous significance. It transformed the still-secret talks in Norway from an academic exploratory discussion into genuine, official negotiations. In this new phase, the Oslo Back Channel turned into the main channel for negotiations between Israel and the PLO. And in September 1993 this resulted in an agreement and a mutual recognition between the two adversaries. How did these decisive rounds of negotiations develop? What are the main factors that explain the outcome? What kind of role did Norway play? What room for manoeuvre did the new setting provide the Norwegians?\(^3\)

Upgrading the Talks

The upgrading of the talks in Norway meant new actors on a different level. On the Palestinian side, the changes were minor. Chairman Arafat had been involved in the Oslo process from the very start. However, from May 1993, after really grasping the significance of what was going on – and, not least, what could be achieved – both

\(^3\) The sixth round was held on 21 May 1993 at the Thomas Heftye villa in Oslo; the seventh round was held on 13–15 June both at the private residence of Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul in Oslo and at the Thomas Heftye villa; the eighth round was held on 25–27 June in Oslo; the ninth round was held on 4–6 July at Grefshiem; the tenth round was held on 10–11 July at Halvorsbøle; the eleventh round was held on 25–26 July at Halvorsbøle; and the twelfth and final round was held on 13–14 August in Sarpsborg. Makovsky 1996, pp. 45–46; Corbin 1994a, pp. 64–77.
Arafat and Mazen revealed an even closer interest. The leader of the PLO and his second-in-command were running the Oslo negotiations themselves. ‘The idea that a small area of autonomy as a start might be better than nothing was beginning to find favour in the PLO chairman’s mind.’

On the Norwegian side, for reasons that had nothing to do with the peace process in the Middle East, there was a change in the top level of participants. This was to have huge consequences with regard to the role played by the Norwegians in the months to come. On 2 April 1993, Thorvald Stoltenberg left his position as foreign minister to take up a position as United Nations mediator in the war in the former Yugoslavia. Stoltenberg had reluctantly accepted this job offer. There were two main reasons for his reluctance: First, he wanted to do everything possible to get Norway into the European Community. Second, he was eager to secure the Oslo Back Channel and a peace agreement between Israel and the PLO. With the two Middle East antagonists negotiating in Norway, it was difficult to leave these goals behind. However, after a second request from the UN Secretary-General, Stoltenberg felt a strong obligation to take on the task as UN special envoy in Yugoslavia and finally gave in.

As a result, the Oslo Back Channel lost its mentor. Without all the long-term work done by Thorvald Stoltenberg, Knut Frydenlund and others in the past, without the political commitment, without all the door-opening and the political and economic resources put into the enterprise by them, Terje Rød Larsen, Mona Juul, Jan Egeland and the other Norwegian actors would have had difficulties succeeding when they stumbled into the Middle East peace process. Indeed, according to Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, without Stoltenberg’s ‘enthusiastic support the Norwegian track would never have got off the ground at all’. Stoltenberg showed ‘willingness to meet all the logistical expenses of the project. Financial considerations were never mentioned as grounds for restrictions on flights, accommodation, preparation of materials.... The cost of maintaining secrecy and security was a heavy burden on the Norwegians.... Stoltenberg was the man who endorsed this, who monitored the talks, reported on them to Warren Christopher and saw their success as a political goal of the highest order. Would his replacement be equally committed’, wondered Beilin.

Beilin did not have to worry. State Secretary Jan Egeland kept his position. Egeland was strongly committed to the back channel project and was the driving force within the foreign ministry. Norway’s new foreign minister, 56-year-old Johan Jørgen Holst, was a man with a broad practical and academic background in international affairs. In addition, he had considerable political experience and had held several government positions. He had been state secretary in the ministry of defence in 1976–79, state sec-

---

The Active Mediator

The new foreign minister was no newcomer to the conflict in the Middle East. As already mentioned, he had taken an active part in the pro-Israel, anti-Arafat campaign that almost led to the resignation of Foreign Minister Frydenlund in 1974. But he had also, from his various positions in the defence ministry, travelled, reported and participated in the gradual transformation of Norwegian Middle East policy. Holst definitely knew where the Middle East was on the political map when he entered the foreign ministry in April 1993.8

So Norway had got a new foreign minister, and the Oslo Back Channel a new and well-informed actor. Holst was very different from Stoltenberg. He had a more introvert personality and was generally seen as shy, arrogant, extremely hard-working, a control freak, ambitious and demanding. Holst’s personal style had in the past led to a somewhat tense relationship with the Norwegian parliament. But Holst was widely recognized as a capable and intelligent politician, with an extraordinary intellectual capacity. Holst was a perfectionist, a clever analyst and a brilliant formulator. His knowledge of foreign and security policies questions was nothing less than outstanding. Holst had studied in the United States and had a standing and a contact network across the Atlantic like few other Norwegians. During the 1960s and 1970s, he had been seen as a big hawk when it came to security policies, and he belonged to the right wing of the Norwegian Labour Party, where support for the United States and Israel had traditionally been based. But during the 1980s, Holst changed politically. From being open-minded about having nuclear weapons in Norway in the 1960s, Holst criticized Nato’s nuclear strategy in the 1980s. For Holst, this position led to a new, tense relationship with the United States during the Reagan period. However, when the Cold War ended, many of these conflicting questions became easier to handle. Holst’s relationship to his political friends in the United States recovered. The new era also led to new challenges. Holst, who had always been preoccupied with the

8 Waage 2000a, pp. 38–45.
broader, principal and politically important questions, threw his energy into new areas, such as the environment and peacemaking.\(^9\)

Holst and Stoltenberg had different ways of operating on the political scene. Stoltenberg was first and foremost a consensus-builder. With his warm and charming personality, he built many bridges between opponents within his own party, as well as on the international scene. Stoltenberg was renowned for his breakfast meetings with world leaders at his private flat, and for his tendency to talk his way through difficult questions instead of writing up well-formulated analytic memos. Confronted with the Oslo Back Channel, Stoltenberg had preferred a low-key approach. He had wanted to keep the channel at a certain distance from the government, using Fáo as a cover. Holst, on the other hand, was eager to take the driver’s seat himself. He knew nothing about the back channel when he was appointed, but was convinced about the project, probably by Terje Rød Larsen. Holst wanted to invest a lot of energy into it, and he wanted political involvement on the highest level. The foreign minister would be the key person, with complete political responsibility and an active, personal role. This decision reflected Holst’s personal style. But it also reflected the development of the secret talks. When Holst took over as foreign minister, the exploratory rounds were completed and the upgrading of the talks was being warmly pursued. The Oslo Back Channel was now taken much more seriously in all three capitals and headquarters involved.\(^10\)

However, it was on the Israeli side that the shift was most significant. From being a channel run by two academics, with only the deniable and secret backing of the deputy foreign minister, the Israeli side was taken over and run by the foreign and prime ministers themselves. As a direct consequence of this new top-level involvement, a high-ranking diplomat and lawyer took over and led the Israeli delegation. Hirschfeld and Pundak still attended the meetings, but from now the two academics were definitely in the back seat.\(^11\)

In May 1993, Prime Minister Rabin eventually reacted to the information from Oslo. Beilin had informed Peres that unless Israel upgraded the talks, there would be no more Oslo Back Channel. The PLO was threatening to break off the talks. This would have meant throwing away a huge opportunity. Hirschfeld and Pundak were convinced that they could proceed no further within the same setting. The level of representation had also been substantially increased on the Norwegian side. At the meetings on 8 and 9 May, for the first time, Norway’s new foreign minister participated in two


\(^10\) Same references as above; interviews with Terje Rød Larsen, 16 June 1999 and 21 October 2002.

of the sessions himself. Things were getting serious, and the Israeli participation still consisted only of two academics.\footnote{Same references as above.}

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was already convinced by the fruitfulness of the Oslo track. He was interested in a rapid and successful conclusion and had decided to act. But Peres needed to convince a sceptical, noncommittal and unenthusiastic prime minister. At a meeting with Rabin on 13 May, Peres emphasized that the PLO delegation in Oslo was ‘more flexible, more imaginative and more authoritative than the West Bank–Gaza team negotiating in Washington’. In Oslo, interesting proposals were being put forward in order to ‘define the jurisdiction of the autonomy and to establish Israel’s residual status and powers during the interim period’.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 329.} The ‘Gaza first’ proposal, making it possible for the Israeli government to get rid of the problematic strip, was most definitely in the interests of Israel. It was time to take the bull by the horns, to make the negotiations official, reach an agreement and get it signed, argued Peres.\footnote{Same references as above.}

The enthusiastic Peres suggested to the cautious Rabin that he himself should go to Oslo and negotiate personally with Abu Ala. Rabin flatly refused. For Rabin, it was out of the question to send the Israeli foreign minister to meet and negotiate with a member of the PLO, still regarded by most Israelis as a terrorist organization. Such a move would raise the level of the talks too quickly. It would commit the Israeli government too far too soon.\footnote{Same references as above.}

Rabin doubted that anything would come out of Oslo. However, he decided to give Peres and the talks a chance. The Madrid/Washington process had neither produced nor was likely to produce any results. But Rabin had won the election in Israel on a peace platform: he had promised to complete negotiations on an interim agreement within six to nine months. Ten months had already passed, and Rabin had achieved nothing on the peace front thus far. Considering himself to be a man of his word, Rabin regretted his failure to fulfil one of his most important election promises. Therefore, he needed results, or at least some progress, in order to show the Israeli people that he had tried. The Oslo Back Channel, a rather harmless enterprise, could be seen as a possibility. This could be an explanation for Rabin’s partly unexpected approval.\footnote{Same references as above.}

A compromise was reached between the prime minister and the foreign minister: Peres was not permitted to go to Oslo. However, the highest-ranking civil servant closest to Peres, Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Uri Savir, was sent on an exploratory tour. Savir’s presence would have an immediate and dramatic impact on the talks in Norway.\footnote{Same references as above.}
Jericho

Why was not Jericho or another West Bank city included in the negotiating process from the very beginning? Why did the leaders of the PLO put forward the Gaza option as a solution, with no reference whatsoever to Jericho or the West Bank? This question puzzled and worried the Israeli participants. Chairman Arafat knew that a Gaza–Jericho offer had been put on the table by Peres a couple of months earlier.\(^\text{18}\)

Not least Peres himself was deeply surprised. Had the PLO now ‘given up on the idea, or were their envoys unaware that such an offer had been made, in which case they were not as senior as we had been led to believe’, the Israeli team asked themselves.\(^\text{19}\) However, the Gaza-first-and-only-situation did not last for very long. At the meeting in Oslo on 30 April 1993, Abu Ala threw the Jericho idea into the ring again. It was Arafat who had asked Abu Ala to put Jericho firmly on the agenda.\(^\text{20}\)

Both the Israelis and the Palestinians knew that Gaza was not the prize. That would have to be the offer of a West Bank town. The PLO would then gain a foothold on the far more important West Bank. The idea presented by Abu Ala was that Israel should withdraw from Gaza and Jericho at the same time. The Palestinians on the West Bank would not believe in any Israeli withdrawal from their territory if the withdrawal actually took place only in Gaza. To create confidence, there had to be a symbolic withdrawal from the West Bank too. Jericho was free from Jewish settlements, which usually complicated the issue. From the PLO’s point of view, the purpose was very clear: the West Bank would be included in the interim agreement. If developments were positive, other West Bank towns could be vacated by the Israeli army later. The obvious danger of Gaza first and only would also be avoided.\(^\text{21}\)

There was, however, one complicating factor linked to the Gaza-plus-Jericho proposal. In Oslo, Abu Ala had only mentioned Jericho. But Jericho had a wider significance, namely its proximity to the Jordan River, and consequently to Jordan itself. Peres had for years preferred a confederative arrangement between the Jordanians and the Palestinians. For him, such an arrangement might be the basis for a permanent solution to the Palestinian problem: ‘[Jericho’s] proximity to the Jordan River opened a preferred solution, in my eyes, for the future: a confederation between Jordanians and Palestinians.’\(^\text{22}\) Peres also believed that Rabin would agree to the Jericho idea because withdrawal from Jericho had long been envisaged in mainstream Labour Party thinking.\(^\text{23}\)


\(\text{Beilin 1999, p. 75.}


\(\text{Same references as above.}

\(\text{Peres 1993, p. 23.}

But Rabin was not willing to discuss any link with Jordan. On 14 April 1993, Egypt’s President Mubarak had a meeting with Rabin in Ismailiya. Prior to this meeting, Mubarak had been asked by Arafat to explore the possibility of adding Jericho to the Gaza autonomy package. Instead of raising this issue through the Oslo channel and answering the originator of the proposal – Peres – Arafat preferred to give his answer directly to Rabin. At the 14 April meeting, Mubarak showed Rabin a proposed map of a ‘Gaza and Jericho first’ scenario. But the proposal included control over the Allenby and Adam bridges that connected the West Bank to the Kingdom of Jordan. Rabin, who was reluctant even to add the city of Jericho to the Gaza proposal, was furious. He had only discussed with Peres the idea of transferring the city of Jericho to the Palestinians. He had no intention whatsoever of giving up Israeli control over anything as important as bridges connecting the West Bank to Jordan. Everything related to the security of Israel and the Occupied Territories had to remain in the hands of Israel.

Rabin flatly rejected Mubarak’s map and called in his foreign minister for a meeting to make his position crystal clear. According to Peres, who was obviously somewhat embarrassed, he had not mentioned the bridges. Peres now told Rabin that the bridges should be excluded from the plan in Oslo. However, he also presented an additional argument for the ‘plus’ proposal: in Oslo, the Israelis could insist that Jericho – and not Jerusalem – should become the administrative centre for the entire Palestinian government body that might be created. Jericho might divert Palestinian attention from Jerusalem, Peres mistakenly thought. But Rabin insisted on excluding Jericho from the negotiations in Oslo. Not before mid-July did he agree to include Jericho, probably then only after being convinced that without conceding them a foothold on the West Bank, he would reach no agreement with the PLO. The PLO had to drop its insistence on control of both the bridges and an extraterritorial road linking Gaza and Jericho. In May, however, Uri Savir was sent to Oslo with clear instructions regarding Jericho: he should preferably not even mention it, and under no circumstances commit Israel to adding Jericho to the Gaza package.

Israeli Governmental Negotiators Replace Academics

On 20 May 1993, a surprised Uri Savir was sent on his first trip to Oslo. The sending of a governmental representative of Savir’s rank was a watershed. Hirschfeld and Pundak had come as far as they could. They had explored the areas where a deal realistically could be made. They had opened a real dialogue and broken down barriers by changing the perceptions of the PLO people involved in the channel. But Hirschfeld and Pundak could never negotiate an agreement between the State of Israel and the

24 Makovsky 1996, p. 37 is alone in claiming that the Rafah crossing point, linking Gaza to Egypt, and an extraterritorial road across Israel’s Negev desert to link Gaza to the West Bank were parts of the proposed map Mubarak showed Rabin.


26 Same references as above.
PLO. They lacked the political authority to do so. In addition, they were too far to the left of mainstream Israeli political and public opinion. When Savir shook hands with Abu Ala, however, a new phase started – real negotiations between the two adversaries.27

Uri Savir, only 40 years old, with rather formal and reserved manners, had hardly had time to get into his Director General shoes, having taking over the position on 1 May 1993. Savir knew the United States well, as he had lived there for several years. He had also served in Canada and, being the son of a diplomat, had lived in Bonn, London and Helsinki. However, Savir had no direct experience of Middle East negotiations. He was not familiar in any detail with the issues under discussion. Nor had he been following the negotiations in Washington. But Savir was a person in whom both Beilin and Peres had great trust and confidence.28

The process of clarifying, hardening and withdrawing Israeli concessions from the Sarpsborg DoP – or, as Foreign Minister Peres chose to call it, negotiations to ‘revise our position on ... basic ideas’ – now began.29 The ‘standpoint of Israel became tougher’, Beilin admits.30 The Sarpsborg DoP was ‘not an agreement, basically a document’, adds Pundak.31

Savir arrived with several ‘clear instructions’ in his pocket, not only concerning Jericho. Above all, Savir had to get the Palestinians to agree that Jerusalem would not be included in any autonomy arrangement. As Peres spelled out very clearly, ‘Jerusalem, in Israel’s view – all of Jerusalem – is sovereign Israeli territory and the capital of our state. Throughout the Oslo process, we were determined not to make any political concessions on Jerusalem. Savir drove the point home during his very first meeting with Abu Ala. If the Palestinians insisted on dealing with Jerusalem in the declaration of principles, he warned, they would kill the whole negotiation’.32

At this first round of discussions between Savir and Abu Ala, considerable time was devoted to whether the question of Jerusalem should be included in the declaration of principles at all. In the Sarpsborg DoP, Jerusalem’s fate had been linked to the West Bank and Gaza. The Sarpsborg DoP had made it clear that the Palestinians would only accept an interim self-governing arrangement on the West Bank and in Gaza if Jerusalem was included. This had also been the firm position of the Palestinians negotiating in Washington. The Israeli side, both in Washington and now in Oslo, argued that Jerusalem should be excluded. If not, there would be no agreement. Abu Ala called the PLO’s Tunis headquarters to discuss the problem. Personally, he was against conceding the issue of Jerusalem, but Abu Mazen and Arafat were of a different opinion.33

28 Same references as above.
29 Peres 1995, p. 333.
30 Interview with Yossi Beilin, 23 October 2002.
32 Peres 1995, p. 332; see also the same references as above. As will be shown below, although the Palestinians did put a fight, they were ultimately forced to concede on this point.
They agreed to negotiate a declaration of principles on the interim period without the inclusion of Jerusalem. Abu Ala had to give in again, just as he had been forced to do on the ‘Gaza first’ issue. However, this move had a tremendously positive effect on Savir and the rest of the team back in Israel. The PLO had shown that it was prepared to make concessions and be flexible.33

Another of Savir’s instructions was on the question of how disputes ought to be solved in the interim period. As the Israeli team saw it, the Palestinians had to drop their traditional demand that all outstanding questions should be referred to binding international arbitration. Israel did not want to ‘introduce another Security Council mechanism. The point is to learn to solve our problems on our own’.34 The Israelis did not want any interference from outside. The Israelis and the Palestinians were going to live together, argued Savir and the Israeli negotiators. They therefore had to solve their differences through dialogue.35

The different positions clearly reflected the asymmetry between the two sides. Israel, being the stronger party with a deep dislike and distrust of the UN, wanted the parties to handle the problems themselves.36 But the Israelis had little to fear. The Palestinians, on the other hand, wanted backing and help from the international community in one way or another. Ultimately, however, the Palestinians in Oslo would also have to give in on this point.37

Savir was instructed to indicate that Israel was willing to create autonomy in Gaza first and to possibly move the PLO leadership there. However, Arafat pressed for the addition of Jericho in order to secure a foothold on the West Bank. Abu Ala suggested that a joint Israeli–Palestinian police force could patrol the Allenby Bridge, but that real control of the bridge should stay in the hands of Israel. It is unclear how Savir responded to the Jericho suggestion as such. However, in his report summarizing and analysing his impressions after this first visit to Oslo, he recognized the importance of the Jericho idea for the Palestinians. Finally, according to his instructions, Savir was to seek to change, but not negotiate, the drafted statement of principles and to stress the issues of security and economic cooperation.38

33 Beilin 1999, pp. 85–88; Peres 1995, pp. 331–333; Savir 1998, pp. 5–28; Makovsky 1996, pp. 46–49; Corbin 1994a, 84–86; Heikal 1996, p 443. According to Makovsky 1996, pp. 42–43, Abu Ala had already, during the weekend of 30 April–1 May, informed Hirschfeld that the PLO had agreed to exclude Jerusalem. This was obviously just a verbal promise to Hirschfeld, not something put down in writing. According to Makovsky, the PLO had also agreed to finesse the issue of whether Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem could both stand as candidates and vote in elections for the interim self-rule authority. The final declaration of principles stated ambiguously that Palestinians from Jerusalem could ‘have the right to participate in the election process, according to an agreement between the two parties’. Declaration of Principles, Annex I.


36 However, among other important questions on which Israel wanted to ‘revise [its] position on ... basic ideas’, the question of trusteeship, also in the Sarpsborg DoP, seems not to have been raised by Savir during this round. The trusteeship proposal was removed later.


38 Same references as above.
These were the questions presented to the PLO representatives in Oslo in May 1993. They represented major departures from the Sarpsborg DoP. Savir and the other Israelis probably realized that this was the case, but Savir was surprised that the leaders of the PLO gave such obliging and flexible responses. The discussions and the personal chemistry between Savir and Abu Ala developed remarkably well. According to Beilin, Savir and Abu Ala ‘addressed the statement of principles, deleted the appendix concerning electoral arrangements, made the issue of arbitration hypothetical, changed the proposal regarding elections in Jerusalem, added a codicil on security and drafted a clause facilitating the inclusion of Jericho’.

Uri Savir was surprised and impressed by Abu Ala’s emphasis on economic issues. Abu Ala underlined the desire for economic cooperation between the Palestinian self-government areas and the state of Israel. Such cooperation was not only seen as beneficial to the Palestinian economy, but also as a bridge to regional development. Such a stance was also favourable for Israel. Solving the conflict with the Palestinians could open up markets for Israel in the surrounding Arab world. Consequently, Savir too came to share the original Oslo actors’ emphasis on the economic aspects of peace. In economic prosperity lay the possibility of a peaceful future.

Savir returned to Israel in an enthusiastic mood. Not only was he convinced that the Israelis finally had found ‘someone to talk to’, but he also seemed confident that Israel could reach an agreement with the PLO. Savir was convinced that the Oslo Back Channel offered Israel an important opportunity to make peace with the Palestinians, and he thought that the disagreements and differences between the two sides could be bridged and solved. He believed that Arafat was directly behind Abu Ala, so that the latter spoke with sufficient authority. Furthermore, the emphasis on economic cooperation would provide Israel with leverage even after political concessions had been made. To the Israeli Oslo club, Savir presented a list of recommendations for furthering the talks. He stressed the importance of the ‘Gaza plus Jericho’ idea for the Palestinians. The PLO was willing to compromise, and Israel had an opportunity to ‘improve upon the Camp David and Madrid frameworks and reach a gradual settlement starting in Gaza – while ending PLO terror activities and forging economic cooperation even before a full autonomy agreement was concluded’. Savir suggested that security arrangements should be written into the proposed declaration, ‘also specifying that the settlements would remain in place’.

Foreign Minister Peres was now utterly devoted to the process in Norway. He viewed Oslo as a turning point. He wanted to alter the status quo in the region. The Oslo track was a strategic move to create a common interest with a new partner. Savir’s reports and impressions from Oslo further convinced Peres that the time was ripe for action. To the Israeli Oslo club, Peres proposed that autonomy in Gaza should

---

41 Savir 1998, p. 24; see also the references in previous footnote.
come first. At the same time, the PLO leadership should move there. Both Savir and Beilin wondered whether Arafat would be willing to accept personal responsibility for Gaza, with all its misery. They also had doubts as to how this idea would be received by the Israeli public. But Peres was determined. This was how he wanted to move.42

However, Peres had to convince Rabin. As will be seen later, the prime minister was still drawn towards the Syrian track, hoping to secure a breakthrough and peace with Syria before a deal was reached with the Palestinians. Rabin also preferred to work more closely with the United States. But Peres now passionately believed in the need for reconciliation with the PLO. This, he felt, was the only way to promote peace. Rabin did not share this conviction. He still wanted to test and challenge the Palestinians. However, Rabin too was determined to make progress and decided to continue with the Norway channel.33

Rabin and Peres realized that they needed a lawyer on the Israeli side. Yoel Singer was chosen. Singer was an Israeli lawyer working for a law firm in Washington, and had served in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) for more than 20 years. In the 1980s, he had been head of the international law section of the IDF. He was also a veteran when it came to peace negotiations. As legal adviser in the IDF, Singer had been involved in work on the Israeli–Egyptian disengagement agreement in 1974, the Camp David Accords and subsequent autonomy negotiations with Egypt in the early 1980s. He had been involved in writing many of the laws connected to Israel’s military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. In addition, and not least important, his work in the military had made him known to Rabin. Yoel Singer was a man of Rabin’s taste, an ally and a former soldier. In contrast with Peres and his visionary ‘blazers’, Singer could be expected to take an invariable stance on the question of Israel’s security. Rabin trusted Singer’s judgement and wanted his assessment on whether the Oslo channel was a path worth following. With Singer’s arrival, Rabin became more actively involved and guided the negotiations himself.44

The tall, dark, 40-year-old Singer was known for his directness and arrogant behaviour. As was partly expected by the other members of the Israeli negotiating team, his reactions to and criticism of the Sarpsborg DoP were severe and strong. Savir claimed that Singer was ‘blunt’, ‘biting’ and made an ‘arrogant first impression’.45 According to Beilin, they had expected that ‘he was going to tear us apart, and sure enough he didn’t spare us the lash of his criticism’.46 Basically, Singer believed that the Sarpsborg DoP was written by laymen who completely lacked legal precision. It was a lousy document, it was catastrophic, and it was not an agreement. It was a ‘blob of raw mush’.47 The verbal promises given by the PLO were not, according to Singer, re-

43 Same references as above; interviews with Shimon Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002.
46 Beilin 1999, p. 90.
47 Savir 1998, p. 27.
flected in the Sarpsborg DoP. On the contrary, what was put down on paper was unpromising. However, what obviously did intrigue Singer was the fact that the PLO had given verbal promises.48

Singer demanded a number of changes. Jerusalem should be outside the deal, not only as a verbal promise but also in writing. The trusteeship proposal for Gaza, an idea originally proposed by Hirschfeld, had to be removed, an initial reaction that he had in common with the rest of the Israeli participants. According to Singer, the trusteeship idea was not adequately defined, and the Israeli lawyer feared any kind of trusteeship arrangement in which the United Nations was involved alongside states like Egypt and Jordan. Like most Israelis, he had a deep distrust of any involvement with the United Nations, and he also feared that the proposal could create a bad precedent: if the Palestinians got some kind of UN trusteeship arrangement in Gaza, it was likely that this would lead to demands for the same arrangements on the West Bank. In addition, a UN trusteeship would be legally tantamount to the designation of a Palestinian state and equivalent to the process of decolonization, as in the case of Namibia.49

These objections had also been heavily emphasized by Shimon Peres. Trusteeships had traditionally been established as a phase in a decolonization process designed to lead to full independence. ‘Israel’s declared position was that it opposed the creation of an independent Palestinian state following the interim period of self-government. Certainly we were not prepared to commit ourselves at the outset of the interim period to accepting the Palestinians’ demand for eventual independence.’50 In contrast to Peres, Singer did not favour turning Gaza into part of a Jordanian–Palestinian confederation either. Such an arrangement might also imply the creation of a future Palestinian state in Gaza. Rabin also strongly opposed the idea of a confederation scheme.51

Singer’s alternative was full autonomy for the Gaza Strip and partial autonomy for the West Bank, meaning that on the West Bank there would be autonomy only with regard to a few spheres. To Singer, it was very important that the ‘formal authority for awarding autonomy should be in the hands of Israel, even if this was understood and not stated explicitly’.52 Rabin also put great emphasis on the need to ensure that the redeployment of the Israeli army should be clearly defined in the declaration of principles ‘as a matter for Israel’s sole discretion’. The prime minister believed that the declaration could include a requirement for ‘consultation’ with the Palestinians, but not for ‘agreement’. The ‘detailed deployment of Israeli troops for strategic defence or for the protection of Israeli settlements and Israeli civilians would not be conditional on the other party’s agreement’.53 There seemed to be little doubt that with Rabin and

49 Same references as above.
50 Peres 1995, p. 333.
52 Beilin 1999, p. 90.
Singer taking the lead, and the rest of the Israeli team agreeing, Israel’s goal in the negotiations was to retain Israeli control.54

Singer’s arrival brought many new points of departure for the next rounds in Norway. All of Singer’s demands meant a clarification and strengthening of the Israeli negotiating position. Understandably, the PLO felt that Israel was withdrawing most of the concessions it had already given. But Singer’s arrival also meant that an untouched and important issue was thrown into the ring: the status of the PLO. This sensitive issue had not previously been mentioned. According to Beilin, the Israelis were ‘conducting negotiations without admitting even to ourselves who we were talking to’.55

Taking the rest of the Israeli team by complete surprise, Singer suggested that Israel and the PLO should agree to mutual recognition. This was the only way both sides could be clear as to who was signing the agreement. Singer’s logic was clear: sooner or later the news of the negotiations would leak out. Without mutual recognition, it might seem that the PLO had promised Israel nothing more than an agreement on principles. With mutual recognition, the PLO could promise an end to the intifada, a stop to all kinds of terror, the disarming of other Palestinian groups, etc. ‘The PLO was an address while the Palestinian delegation in the Washington talks was only a delegation.’56

Singer had already put clear language into the negotiating process. But mutual recognition was far too much far too soon for Peres and Rabin. Peres was ‘utterly averse to mutual recognition with the PLO’.57 He believed that this was too precious an asset and preferred that the question be kept deliberately vague. For Peres, recognition was a trump card to be kept for a later stage. On the other hand, it seems rather unlikely that Rabin saw recognition of the PLO as a trump card. However, he agreed with Peres. He was absolutely set against such a move.58

The seventh round in Norway (13–15 June), held in Oslo, was Yoel Singer’s show. He travelled to Norway in order to explore for himself the positions of the PLO.59 The introduction of Singer was a rude awakening for the other members of the Oslo Back Channel. His presence disrupted the relaxed atmosphere that the Norwegians had strived so hard to obtain. According to the Israelis and the Palestinians present, Singer behaved like a prosecuting attorney conducting a cross-examination in court. According to Beilin, Singer had prepared 40 questions to be answered by Abu Ala. The Israelis present at the meeting recall between 100 and 200 questions being fired in quick

---

55 Beilin 1999, p. 92.
57 Beilin 1999, p. 91.
59 The meetings this time were held in the private flat of Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul, and at the Thomas Heftye villa in Oslo.
succession. The Palestinians recall 300, and for the Norwegians it seemed like 500. Singer’s style was provocative. He was totally uninterested in Terje Rød Larsen’s attempts to explain the Oslo atmosphere, the Oslo spirit or his sociological strategy that had convinced and impressed Savir. ‘Singer was not interested in pleasantries or in creating any special “atmosphere” around the meetings.” He behaved like a colonel in the IDF and like a prosecuting lawyer in court at the same time, thereby playing the part of the most extreme Palestinian ‘caricature of a Jew’. ‘His style, thought the Palestinians, was that of a military interrogator: rapid-fire demands, never content with the answers, always probing, demanding clarification on every single aspect. His aim in this prenegotiating session was to find out what the PLO was ready to offer the Israelis rather than whether it could deliver.’

Singer concentrated his interrogation on the real stumbling blocks at the Washington talks. The future of the Jewish settlements was among the top issues on his list. While the PLO people in Oslo were not prepared to give in on the important question of whether the IDF or the Palestinian police force would be in charge of the security of Jewish settlers, on this and other important questions Abu Ala’s answers implied flexibility. Singer, like the other Israeli participants, saw this flexibility as something completely new in comparison to the negotiating attitude shown by the Palestinian delegation in Washington. Abu Ala stayed calm, gave clear answers where he could and promised to come back with detailed answers on points where he could not, such as on health and education.

The Israeli lawyer was nailing the Palestinians down on every point he could in order to prepare for the hard bargaining to come. However, Singer’s confrontational style and his myriad questions brought analytic clarity to the talks. The Palestinians in Oslo were forced to clarify their positions. They were now also convinced that the negotiations were not merely a Peres enterprise. Israel’s prime minister was definitely behind the talks. Singer explained that it was Rabin who had instructed him to ask all of the DoP-related questions. However, Singer’s way of doing things and the impression he gave – firing questions at Abu Ala for 30 hours or so in order to test the thinking of the PLO – worried even the Israeli participants. Whereas the other members of the team had avoided potential diplomatic landmines, Singer headed directly for them in an attempt to solve them. With his attempts to find out whether the PLO had any fallback positions, Singer created shockwaves among the Oslo participants.

---

60 Corbin 1994a, p. 100.
61 Corbin 1994a, p. 102.
62 Corbin 1994a, p. 100; see also pp. 95–106; Beilin 1999, pp. 97–104; Savir 1998, pp. 27–35; Makovsky 1996, pp. 52–54; interview with Shlomo Gur, 21 October 2002. This analysis of Singer’s role in the Oslo Back Channel was confirmed in an interview with Marianne Heiberg, 13 May 2002.
64 Same references as above.
A frustrated Abu Ala reported to Mazen and Arafat: ‘The good news was that Rabin seemed to be on board, the bad news was that Singer was his messenger.’ Of course, Abu Ala had understood that the PLO would eventually have to clarify its position on all the details, but the seventh round had been both uncomfortable and humiliating. Arafat and Mazen, for their part, were very satisfied. The Oslo Back Channel was no longer a purely academic exercise. It represented real negotiations, and the PLO headquarters had to work hard on both the content and the details of an agreement.

Singer’s report to Peres and Rabin after his first meeting with the PLO in Oslo was positive: ‘If we don’t come to an agreement with these people, we are asses’, commented Singer to Peres, according to Savir. The same message was conveyed to Rabin, in more polished language. As Singer saw it, a new and corrected declaration should be drawn up. A secret memorandum of understanding should be signed separately, and should include a detailed commentary of the economic principles. The trusteeship proposal should be taken out completely. There would be no third party to replace the Israelis during the transitional period. Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho would take place at the same time. According to Singer, the Palestinians had realized that the withdrawal from Jericho would only be symbolic. Both withdrawals would take place before the election of the Palestinian self-governing authority. Overall, Singer had not discovered any great enthusiasm for elections among the PLO representatives. The Palestinians also realized that self-government would not apply to East Jerusalem, Jewish settlements and security locations. In five specific areas – education, health, tourism, welfare and taxation – authority would be transferred to the Palestinians. After the elections, a process of phased redeployment would begin, in parallel with discussions on a permanent settlement.

However, the Palestinians wanted their self-government to consist of the three classic branches of democratic rule: legislative, executive and judicial. The PLO representatives wanted the Palestinian council to be equivalent to a parliament, with the right and power to make laws, with a cabinet consisting of heads of departments running the day-to-day affairs of the self-government. Israel’s position, pointed out clearly by Peres, was to limit all of this. Peres and the other Israeli negotiators wanted to prevent the creation of a self-governing structure that could too easily lead to full sovereignty and a future Palestinian state. The Israelis’ concern was ‘to limit [the Palestinian self-government] so that the permanent status of the territories was not prejudiced by the terms of the interim agreement’. Consequently, the Israelis wanted only one body, an executive with very limited legislative powers.

There were a number of other disputes where the Palestinians wanted to include clauses and language that would point towards the establishment of a sovereign Palest-

---

65 Corbin 1994a, p. 104.
69 Peres 1995, p. 335; see also pp. 334–336.
tinian state and the Israelis wanted to prevent all such references. In these disputes, the 
Israelis won. The Palestinian negotiators, for instance, constantly emphasized the 
wording ‘mutual, legitimate, national and political rights’ in the negotiations of the 
various drafts. According to Peres, Israel reluctantly agreed to use the term ‘political’, 
but refused to accept ‘national’. Similarly, the Palestinians demanded that the Israeli 
civil administration and military government be ‘dissolved’ when the Palestinian self-
government was in place. Israel’s response was that while the civil administration 
would be ‘dissolved’, the military government would only be ‘withdrawn’, not ‘dis-
solved’. In legal terms, the military government would remain the source of authority 
in Gaza and the West Bank, Israel argued. According to Peres, the Palestinians agreed 
to this distinction.70

Singer recommended to both Peres and Rabin that the process in Norway should 
continue. But the negotiations should be made much more acceptable to Israel. Singer 
suggested writing a new Israeli version of the DoP agreement (and, together with it, a 
series of draft understandings). Rabin accepted Singer’s advice. The new declaration 
of principles would look very different from the Sarpsborg DoP.71

Before finalizing and presenting the new Israeli version of the declaration, Singer 
went on one more trip to Norway (25–27 June 1993). He wanted to present the main 
points of the new declaration orally, in order to prepare the Palestinians for what to 
expect in the next round. The Israeli team knew that ‘the Palestinians would have dif-

culty digesting it’.72 It was therefore important for Singer and the other Israelis to 
explain and prepare the ground for what they understood would cause strong reactions 
from the Palestinian side. Singer also wanted to convey the message that Rabin had 
been satisfied with his report of the meetings and was now involved in the details. To 
Oslo, Singer brought with him a list of comments from Rabin.73

Abu Ala had brought a list of remarks from Chairman Arafat, and he presented a se-
ries of questions in Arafat’s name. Some could be and were answered by Singer on the 
spot, others were not. However, Singer suggested that the Palestinians should draw up 

a number of amendments to the draft declaration of principles. These amendments 

should be accompanied by a signed and agreed protocol providing a more detailed 

commentary on every clause. With the signing of these two documents, it would be 
possible to begin the discussion of the final settlements, which were planned to be 
completed within five years of the signing. Both Singer and Abu Ala agreed that it 
was better to have a short and general agreement on principles reached within a lim-
ited time-frame than chewing and quarrelling over details, which would only delay the 
implementation of the interim agreement.74

70 Peres 1995, pp. 334–336, see in particular p. 335.
71 Interview with Shlomo Gur, 21 October 2002; interview with Ron Pundak, 23 October 2002; Cor-
72 Savir 1998, p. 35.
74 Same references as above.
However, the basic difficulties and differences remained unresolved. These issues were the legislative power of the elected assembly, references to Jerusalem in the interim settlement, the issues to be discussed during the permanent settlement negotiations, the status of Gaza and Jericho, the geographical limits of the Jericho region, regulation of crossing-points and entitlement to vote in elections to the Palestinian Council.75

**The Grefsheim DoP and the First Halvorsbøle Crisis**

The ninth negotiating round (4–6 July) took place at Grefsheim, a small and remote place approximately 100 kilometres north of Oslo. The new declaration of principles presented to the Palestinians was definitely not a joint approach. It was an Israeli version of what such a declaration should look like, presented in a formal written draft. The Israelis knew that this would be hard for the Palestinians to accept.76

The Grefsheim DoP, dated 3 July, with no official symbol of the State of Israel on the paper, differed from the Sarpsborg DoP on several areas. Israel formally agreed to withdraw from both Gaza and Jericho within three months of the signing of the declaration. (In the Sarpsborg DoP, Israel would only withdraw after two years.) The Jericho area was not defined and remained an area of conflict to be solved later. There was no mention of any kind of trusteeship. The Grefsheim DoP envisaged a three-stage process: First, autonomy would be established in Gaza and Jericho. Second, an interim agreement would be concluded, and autonomy would be extended within the rest of the West Bank. Third, negotiations would be held on a permanent settlement.77

The Palestinian response to the Grefsheim DoP was vehement. They felt that the Israeli concessions given in Sarpsborg had been withdrawn, and that they were now starting from scratch. This was not quite accurate, however. It was more or less clear with the Grefsheim DoP that both parties had accepted the principles of a staged process that could start with self-rule in Gaza and Jericho. In addition, the Palestinians maintained their insistence on full jurisdiction in Gaza and on the West Bank. However, they agreed that this jurisdiction should exclude settlers, settlements, Israeli visitors (to and from Gaza and the West Bank) and military locations. This last point was of particular importance to Rabin. In subsequent meetings, however, he tended to define the whole Jordan valley as a military location. This was an issue that would continue to be troublesome during the phase following the signing of the Oslo Accord.78

In addition, with the Grefsheim DoP, Israel not only limited the PLO’s control of Gaza and the undefined Jericho area, but also restricted the principle of gradualism to only five areas. The Palestinian self-governing authority would be given so-called

75 Same references as above.
77 Same references as above.
78 Same references as above.
‘early empowerment’ over areas of education, health, tourism, welfare and taxation. Palestinian administration of any other civilian functions in Gaza and the West Bank required mutual agreement. In effect, this gave Israel a veto. In addition, the PLO was to cede control both over Israelis travelling through Gaza and Jericho and over external security.79

Israel insisted on maintaining responsibility for internal security in the Palestinian self-governing areas. Indeed, the question of responsibility for internal security remained a key area of dispute throughout the whole negotiating process. Israel still wanted to have full control, or at least the possibility of taking full control, if necessary.80

Redeployment of the Israeli Defence Forces was another important issue. For Israel, the IDF was deployed in Gaza and the West Bank in order to protect the settlements in those areas. An Israeli commitment to redeploy Israeli forces from the Occupied Territories had already been given during the Camp David negotiations in 1978. However, at that time there were only around 5,000 Jewish settlers. The settlements were not spread all over the West Bank and Gaza, but were situated in clusters and thus rather easy to protect. By 1993, there were 120,000 Jewish settlers, still in enclaves, but with the most extreme ones deliberately establishing settlements in or near Palestinian centres of population.81

In contrast with the situation in 1978, this meant that it would be almost impossible to redeploy the IDF and still maintain the security of the most remote and isolated settlements. This raised the issue of closing down certain settlements. However, this was a question that was almost impossible to raise in Israel. Consequently, the question of settlements was, like all the other difficult questions, deferred to the final status negotiations. So, already at Grefsheim, ‘instead of negotiating a divorce from the Palestinians, the Rabin government found itself trying to arrange some form of cohabitation. Thus, instead of retaining full control of some of the land through a partition deal, Israel accepted partial control over most of the land’.82

The Grefsheim DoP was intentionally vague on the subject of redeployment. It proposed an initial redeployment by the Israeli army on the eve of the Palestinian elections, but did not specify withdrawal from all population centres. The redeployment was also linked to Palestinian performance on security. This link was incorporated in the final Oslo DoP. However, it is important to bear in mind that, throughout the negotiations in Norway, Peres, Rabin and the other senior Israeli negotiators (even, to a certain extent, Beilin) were never certain that the interim agreement would reach this second phase involving elections in the rest of the West Bank, and consequently a majority of the Palestinian people. Arafat was not regarded as a great believer in democracy. His anti-democratic tendencies would lead him to cancel the elections in the end, thought senior Israeli officials. For Israel, this could be an indirect way of cancelling

79 Same references as above.
80 Same references as above.
81 Same references as above.
82 Makovsky 1996, p. 56.
the second phase, because the DoP explicitly linked redeployment to the holding of elections.\(^{83}\)

The Grefsheim DoP contained no references to Jerusalem. There was no longer any mention of allowing Palestinians from East Jerusalem to be elected to the self-rule council. Nor was there any specific reference to whether Palestinians from East Jerusalem could vote at all. The Israeli negotiators also tried to block references to Jerusalem as one of the issues to be raised in the final status talks, but the Palestinians stood firm on this, and Jerusalem remained as a topic listed for the final status talks. Unlike the Sarpsborg DoP, the Grefsheim DoP did not explicitly commit Israel to negotiate on the settlements and on the fate of all of the Palestinian refugees from 1948. During the interim phase, the Grefsheim DoP required the creation of a committee (consisting of representatives of Israel, Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinians) to discuss the return of refugees from the war in 1967. This was a copy of the formula used in the Camp David Accords. But nothing was said about the question of arbitration. When the Israeli and the Palestinian negotiators left Grefsheim, they disagreed on numerous points of detail. The Grefsheim DoP was taken back to the Tunis and Jerusalem headquarters for further discussions.\(^{84}\)

When the two adversaries met again for the tenth and eleventh rounds (10–12 and 24–26 July), this time at Halvorsbøle, another isolated location a bit closer to Oslo, the negotiations reached crisis point. Whereas it was Israel that had hardened and withdrawn concessions when Singer had joined the team in June, the turn had now come for the Palestinians. The PLO representatives sought no less than 26 revisions and amendments to the Grefsheim DoP. As the Palestinians had done during Singer’s interrogations and demands in June, it was now the Israelis who felt that the other side was withdrawing concessions and backtracking on agreements previously made. The Israeli negotiators felt that they would have to start again from scratch. The Palestinian negotiators believed that adopting a tougher line in response to the Grefsheim DoP was a fair and equal response to what the Israelis had done when the officials had replaced the academics.\(^{85}\)

The Palestinian negotiators in Norway were acting on direct, concrete and tough orders from Arafat. The chairman of the PLO wanted the organization to be mentioned explicitly. In the declaration, he wanted the term Palestinians to be replaced by the term PLO.\(^{86}\) In addition, the Allenby Bridge and the extraterritorial road between Gaza

---

\(^{83}\) Makovsky 1996, pp. 52–58; Peres 1995, pp. 337–339. However, with regard to the question of elections, the Israeli negotiators were mistaken. Elections were held in January 1996, and the second phase started.

\(^{84}\) Same references as above.


\(^{86}\) Corbin 1994a, p. 116. This question was not resolved until minutes before the signing on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993, when all references to a Palestinian delegation or team or to a joint Jordanian–Palestinian delegation were crossed out with a pen and replaced with a reference to the PLO. Ashrawi 1995, pp. 264–272; Corbin 1994a, pp. 200–201; Beilin 1999, pp. 129–130; Peres 1993, pp. 31–32.
and Jericho should be included in the agreement. At Halvorsbøle, the PLO demanded a guarantee for secure road communication linking the two Palestinian areas. This could only be achieved, the PLO maintained, ‘if the area of Palestinian territory was extended to include a road running between Gaza and Jericho, 113 kilometres apart’. The crossing points for Gaza and Jericho should be ‘under the responsibility of the Palestinian authorities, with international supervision and in cooperation with Israel’. Again the importance of international guarantees and outside mediation were underlined.

In addition, Arafat’s negotiators also made it clear that the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem should be able to vote and stand as candidates in elections for a self-governing assembly. Elections had to be held in Jerusalem. Arafat did not accept that the East Jerusalemites should be ‘fobbed off’ with the assurance that their status would be debated in negotiations over the interim settlement. The Israelis thought that this issue had been settled by the statement that the residents of East Jerusalem could ‘participate’ in self-rule elections. Moreover, a way had to be found to give expression to the Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem, demanded Arafat. In addition, Jericho had to be a substantial region. The PLO would not accept being left with only a small, symbolic city.

To the Israeli negotiators, these demands were formidable and unacceptable. Hirschfeld described the first Halvorsbøle meeting as the ‘darkest hour’ of the Oslo Back Channel. Uri Savir was both disappointed and furious. He made it clear to Abu Ala that no one in the Israeli leadership would accept the Palestinians’ demands. The PLO, he said, was now ‘backtracking on [its] initial basic positions. We will not negotiate in such a way. You may convey that to the chairman immediately’.

Israel and the PLO were fighting over the future of Gaza and the West Bank. They had agreed that the best formula was a step-by-step process. The Israelis and the PLO had to a certain degree developed a joint strategy in which a partnership ‘based on mutual legitimation, reciprocal security, and economic prosperity’ was the primary focus. It was also perfectly clear to chief negotiator Uri Savir and the other Israeli participants that the PLO wanted as much influence as possible within the autonomous

---

89 See the section ‘Jericho’ (above); Beilin 1999, pp. 105–106; Makovsky 1996, pp. 59–60; Savir 1998, pp. 38–41; Heikal 1996, pp. 448–449. In essence, the demands on Gaza, Jericho, the Allenby Bridge and the extraterritorial road were the same demands presented to Rabin by President Mubarak on behalf of Arafat in April 1993 at Ismailiya. Then, Rabin had furiously turned them down, seeing such demands as completely out of the question.
90 Beilin 1999, p. 105.
93 Beilin 1999, p. 105.
95 Savir 1999, p. 39.
areas. In fact, the Palestinians demanded full control over them. The Israeli team ‘insisted on retaining certain powers that could affect the shape of the permanent settlement (such as control over water resources). Nothing was more vital to Israel ... than security’. Israel’s dilemma was how to combine withdrawal from the Occupied Territories with the security of the settlers. That was the reason why Rabin insisted that Israel ‘retain overall responsibility for the security of the Israelis, as well as for the external security of the future autonomous areas. It would leave in Israel’s hands the maximum leverage on security responsibility for present and future agreements’.96

Consequently, Israel had little or nothing to give when confronted with the Palestinians’ demands and reactions to the new Israeli version of the declaration of principles at Halvorsbøle. In short, the PLO wanted Israel to recognize the national rights of the Palestinian people. They wanted Israel to promise to implement UN Resolution 242, which in the Palestinians’ view meant full withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. They wanted a self-governing structure that could lead to a future Palestinian state. They wanted to discuss the future status of East Jerusalem. They wanted mechanisms for repatriating the Palestinian refugees. The Palestinians demanded shared control of the crossing between the West Bank and Jordan, the option of outside arbitration and an international presence to guarantee the implementation of the agreement. These demands were absolutely unacceptable to Israel.97

Throughout the entire weekend at Halvorsbøle, the Palestinians argued that they were only giving the Israelis ‘a taste of their own medicine’.98 ‘We had a document with Hirschfeld’, Abu Ala pointed out to the furious Israeli negotiators, ‘and then suddenly you came with a new proposal. We felt the same then as you are feeling now. We have the right to do to you what you did to us’.99 The Israeli team, however, led by Savir, refused to negotiate the proposal presented to them. The Palestinians argued that the Grefsheim DoP was an Israeli document. Now, they were presenting theirs. Savir argued that the draft initially presented at Grefsheim had started out as an Israeli document, but that both sides had negotiated over it during the entire weekend at Grefsheim, converting it into a joint proposal. As he saw it, there were only five points left that remained to be changed. Obviously, both the Israeli team and the Norwegians – who must have received their information from the Israeli participants – believed that they had been so close to an agreement at Grefsheim that a deal would be reached at Halvorsbøle. Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst had even been informed that he should be prepared to come to Halvorsbøle at short notice in order to witness a signing ceremony. Instead, frustrated negotiators once again went back to their headquarters in order to solve the crisis and find a way to proceed.100

96 Ibid.
98 Corbin 1994a, p. 118.
99 Corbin 1994a, p. 117.
The Norwegians – Helping on Israel's Premises?

When the Oslo process originally started in 1992–93, the Norwegians had proposed and accepted their limited role as facilitators. Over and over again, both then and later, the Norwegian participants stressed that they were not and would not be mediators. As Foreign Minister Holst pointed out in September 1993, ‘Norway’s principal role was that of facilitation’.101 The Norwegians, however, were drawn deeper into the process.

Terje Rød Larsen, devoting all his time and efforts to the secret project, was still the key person on the Norwegian side. Between sessions, when the parties left for their respective headquarters, Terje Rød Larsen was the one called upon – day and night – to sort out all sorts of problems. He was the middleman, the one carrying messages between the parties.102

Initially, Rød Larsen had tried to keep a certain distance from the talks in order not to become directly involved in the negotiations. But, increasingly, he was being used, and willingly so. Furthermore, he was fascinated by Abu Ala, who loved to manipulate, manoeuvre and play the game of negotiation. There was little doubt that Terje Rød Larsen and Abu Ala were close, and that they were growing closer. ‘But there was also something akin to hatred in their relationship. Larsen was becoming a punchbag for Abu Ala. The bullying streak in the tough banker found its target in the Norwegian, and Larsen chose to absorb it – at great personal cost.’103

However, the arrival of the Israelis’ chief negotiator Uri Savir set about ‘changing the equation. Savir and Larsen had an immediate rapport. They both came from itinerant families, as youngsters they had travelled widely, and they were still restless, always seeking new experiences. They were both idealists and they shared a similar sense of humour.’104 Both Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul quickly developed a close relationship to Savir. During his first stay in Oslo, Savir stayed at their private flat. They spoke continuously on the phone between sessions. From then on, every time the Rød Larsen–Juul couple visited Israel, they went out dining or drinking with Savir, if possible. An immediate and mutual sense of closeness and understanding developed. Savir was also intrigued by Rød Larsen’s sociological and amateur psychological approach to solving the conflict. Rød Larsen asked many questions, but rarely focused on former UN resolutions or crucial negotiation issues. Instead, he focused on the feel-

---


102 Interviews with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; interviews with Terje Rød Larsen, 16 June 1999 and 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 16 June 1999, 21 August and 22 October 2002; interview with Geir O. Pedersen, 18 October 2002; Corbin 1994a, pp. 86–88, 95–99. ‘Throughout the process, Norway stuck to the original conception of assisting the two sides with logistical arrangements and communication between the rounds since there were no direct telephone links possible between Israel and the PLO in Tunis’, Holst confirmed. UD 308.87, 4, lecture by Holst 28 September 1993, Columbia University; Holst 1993, pp. 31–32.

103 Corbin 1994a, p. 97; see also pp. 86–88, 95–99.

104 Corbin 1994a, p. 88.
The Active Mediator

ings and emotions coming to the surface in the meetings between the two enemies. This approach attracted and impressed Savir. These two Norwegian “peace fighters” had been cast into an odd limbo between their humanitarian vision and the wily tactics being used to attain it. With the Israeli upgrading, Rød Larsen, Abu Ala and Savir formed a close triangle, linked together by a feeling of common fate.

After the upgrading, it also became increasingly difficult for the Norwegians to find new and secret places to hide. In addition, the physical safety of the Palestinians and the Israelis was a worry. The Palestinians, in particular, realized that communicating with the enemy was in itself regarded by some Palestinian groups as treason and an act to be punished by death. Therefore, at the beginning of July, Foreign Minister Holst called a meeting with the anti-terrorist unit of the Norwegian police in order to arrange some protection for the participants. But, aside from these precautionary measures, the Norwegians continued to provide a relaxed atmosphere and good food, supplying whatever the parties needed, driving them to and from airports, taking long walks with key Israeli and Palestinian members, listening to frustrated negotiators, giving the Israelis and the Palestinians the same treatment and attention – basically, doing everything they could to smooth the path of negotiations.

The Norwegians continued to pay high-level political attention to the Oslo Back Channel. If he was not out of the country, State Secretary Jan Egeland always paid the negotiating parties a visit. And before leaving Norway, the Israelis and the Palestinians, if possible, met with Foreign Minister Holst, often privately at his home, in order to brief him personally on the latest events and progress – or lack of it. This was partly done out of courtesy, partly because Holst very much wanted to be informed and involved, and was also partly a way to maximize the Norwegian involvement at the highest level.

But gradually, from April to May 1993, the Norwegians took on a new role, triggered by the Israeli upgrading, Israel’s new demands and the change of foreign minister in Norway. From then on, Norway was no longer only a modest facilitator. It took on a new and active mediator role. Although Norway’s ‘principal role was that of facilitation’, even Holst admitted that there also existed another Norwegian role: ‘In some phases, you could quietly suggest compromise formulas and mediate between positions which diverged more than compromise could sustain.’

105 Interview with Uri Savir, 18 November 1999.
After Johan Jørgen Holst took over as foreign minister, he wanted both hands on the wheel. His enthusiastic and firm support was made very clear to Yossi Beilin during their first telephone conversation about Norway’s role in the peace process. According to Beilin, Holst told him that there was ‘no question over Norway’s continuing involvement’. Beilin, however, felt that Holst was overdoing the Norwegian role and that he was putting too much emphasis on what was going on. But Beilin was relieved to know that the Norwegians were still committed to being an active part of the process.\(^{111}\)

Holst was not slow in fulfilling his intentions of playing a key role himself. Already during the weekend of 8–9 May, Holst surprised the Israelis and the Palestinians not only through his presence, but also by participating directly in the negotiations between the two adversaries. Holst devoted most of his time to ensuring Israeli–Palestinian coordination in the working group for refugees. This working group was part of the multilateral track of the Madrid/Washington process, and its next meeting was to be held in Oslo only two days later. Norway was playing an active part in this group, and the results of Fafo’s living-conditions survey would also be presented at the Oslo meeting.\(^ {112}\)

The working group had not achieved much so far. This was no surprise, since the group was discussing the most sensitive issue of all: the fate of the Palestinian refugees. Holst, however, began his involvement in the Oslo Back Channel by diving into this most emotional and difficult question. The Israelis were definitely surprised, both by the presence and by the direct involvement of the Norwegian foreign minister. This was something very new. They were also surprised by the difficult topic he immediately addressed. Holst left an impression of being very willing and perhaps a bit too eager to lead the work himself. But his attendance seemed to be one reason for the upgrading of the Israeli participation. Israel could not continue to be represented by two academics when the Palestinians and the Norwegians were being represented by their leaders.\(^ {113}\)

The new Norwegian foreign minister also arranged a number of journeys to ensure that he was personally informed and updated on the proceedings. Since the very beginning of the events in September 1992, the Norwegians had been careful to ensure that crucial information was passed on to the USA. Jan Egeland had normally been the key informant, regularly approaching and briefing Daniel Kurtzer. Kurtzer, however, was neither enthusiastic nor supportive. Both he and US Secretary of State Warren Christopher kept a distance. The Norwegians continued the talks and continued to inform the Americans, but it became clear that the new Clinton administration neither took seriously nor followed up on the information it received on the negotiations and the progress made in Norway. Key members of the US peace team – including Warren Christopher, Dennis Ross and Dan Kurtzer – had also received copies of the Sarpsborg

\(^{111}\) Beilin 1999, p. 79.
\(^{112}\) UD 25.11/19s, 2, memorandum of 11 May 1993; memorandum of 12 May 1993, Rolf Einar Fife (Secretary); Beilin 1999, p. 84; Corbin 1994a, pp. 72–75.
\(^{113}\) Beilin 1999, p. 84.
DoP. For the Americans, the content of this document was another reason for not taking the process in Norway seriously. The Sarpsborg document was too far from what might have been considered acceptable not only for the mainstream, but also for the leftist side in Israel. The Sarpsborg DoP was ‘far from realities’.  

Furthermore, as the Oslo actors saw it, the Americans were not guarding the Norwegian secret closely enough. The Norwegians had assumed that only Christopher, Ross and Kurtzer were being informed on the US side. However, during the working group meeting in Oslo on 11–13 May 1993, the head of the US delegation, substituting for Kurtzer, openly asked Terje Rød Larsen, in a crowded room, how the secret talks were proceeding. The leak caused deep concern. The Israelis seriously thought of pulling out immediately, before the news of the talks became publicly known. The Norwegians became nervous and assumed that the leak had come from the US embassy in Oslo, which Egeland and Rød Larsen had been using to pass information through the secure telephone line to Washington. The Norwegian actors decided that there would be no more use of the US embassy in Oslo.  

Another leak occurred in mid-June. The French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported on a secret back channel in Norway. Several Middle Eastern newspapers printed the story, and the Norwegian media pressed for comments. Egeland replied that talks were taking place only in connection with the multilateral meeting on refugees. The leak, however, terrified the Norwegians. All information from Norwegian actors to the USA was stopped.  

On 28 May 1993, Foreign Minister Holst personally briefed US Secretary of State Warren Christopher about the progress of the talks in Norway. However, before briefing the secretary of state, Holst consulted with the Israeli negotiators. An hour before the meeting with Christopher, Holst called Beilin from Washington to ask what he should say. Beilin suggested that Holst could tell Christopher that there was progress in Norway and that Israel had upgraded the talks; however, he should avoid revealing that Uri Savir was involved, unless pressed. The Israelis did not want the Americans to know precisely how high-level the talks in Norway were. At the meeting with Holst, Christopher was noncommittal and uninterested in details. As with all the former briefings, the US representatives paid scant attention to the information received. The peace process in Washington was what was on Christopher’s

---

114 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002; see also the section in Chapter 3 on ‘Norway and the USA: Two Close Allies’.  
mind, and he was anxious to make sure that the Norwegian process would not interfere with or upstage the work done by the Americans in any way.\footnote{118 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002. According to Ross, Christopher did not think that the Middle East was going to be a subject at the meeting. Christopher briefed Ross afterwards; see also UD 11.7/4, 29, Washington to Foreign Ministry, 28 May 1993 (this document does not disclose the secret back channel); Beilin 1999, p. 88; Makovsky 1996, p. 27; Corbin 1994a, pp. 95–96; Savir 1998, pp. 21, 41. Shimon Peres is alone among the Israeli and the Norwegian participants in presenting the US response to the Oslo Back Channel in a much more positive fashion. This is probably in order to justify his own role in the secret enterprise. Peres 1995, pp. 329–330.}

Holst assured Christopher that the Norwegian back channel would not interfere with or substitute for the peace negotiations in Washington. He also told the US secretary of state that there was now official participation on the Israeli side.\footnote{119 Corbin 1994a, p. 95; Makovsky 1996, p. 27.}

According to Dennis Ross, Holst told Christopher that there was a channel in Norway ‘connected to the Israeli government’. Christopher and Ross interpreted this as being a way of saying that Beilin was involved. For the Americans, there was no reason to take seriously a channel backed by Beilin and some academics.\footnote{120 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002. Ross was not present at the meeting, but was briefed afterwards.} Immediately after the meeting, Holst called Beilin once again. According to Beilin, a satisfied Norwegian foreign minister told him that Christopher ‘didn’t press me, and my impression is he thinks Oslo is just a talking-shop. He doesn’t know about Uri’.\footnote{121 Beilin 1999, p. 88; see also Corbin 1994a, pp. 95–96; Savir 1998, pp. 21, 41; Makovsky 1996, p. 28.}

The most important members of the US peace team – Edward Djerejian, Dennis Ross, Dan Kurtzer, Samuel Lewis and Aaron Miller – confirm, independently of each other, that they were not informed and did not know that Israel had upgraded the negotiations in Norway. They all claim that they were taken completely by surprise when they were informed following the breakthrough in August. They also add that they would have reacted immediately if they had heard that the work in the so-called academic channel was being led by Uri Savir. Such information, revealing that the Israeli foreign and prime ministers had to be involved, would have meant a huge and decisive difference. Such knowledge would have had an immediate effect on the completely stuck negotiations in Washington.\footnote{122 Interviews with Dennis Ross, 21 July 1999 and 6 June 2002; interviews with Edward Djerejian, 3 June 2002; interview with Dan Kurtzer, 22 October 2002; interview with Aaron Miller, 21 July 1999 and 5 June 2002; interview with Samuel Lewis, 28 July 1999 and 5 June 2002.}

In general, Norway was anxious not to do anything that could disturb its close relationship with the USA. It was important to have the Americans on board. Yet, on this occasion Norway allowed Israel to decide the kind of information that was going to be passed on to the Americans. The Israelis wanted the Americans to be deliberately kept in the dark about the official Israeli participation. They were ‘afraid of passing information to the Americans’. Shimon Peres asked Holst not to tell them anything.\footnote{123 Interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002: ‘Israel var redd for hva amerikanerne fikk vite’; interview with Ron Pundak, 23 October 2002.}
Peres had previously had a bad experience with bypassing the United States: In 1987, US Secretary of State George Shultz had not supported the secret London agreement that Peres had reached with King Hussein of Jordan. Peres had no high standing in Washington, and he absolutely refused to inform the Americans about the Oslo channel. Rabin also demanded total secrecy: he wanted to maintain confidentiality and deniability. Rabin believed that the Americans would leak information, and he wanted to keep them in the dark. For his part, Hirschfeld was ‘under clear orders from Peres not to report anything to the Americans’. 

It is difficult to see how informing the Americans of the top-level participation by the Israelis could have harmed Norwegian interests. The only thing the Norwegians might have feared was that the Americans would hijack the whole back channel project. According to Abu Ala, the Palestinians both wanted and preferred to keep the Americans fully informed. The Norwegian back channel project would not or could not succeed without the Americans on board.

It is easier to understand that informing the Americans could have had a negative influence on Israel’s interests in Washington. The USA’s approach to peace was very different from the one taken in Oslo. The Madrid framework had placed all the regional and bilateral questions on the negotiating table, and the international community was monitoring the process carefully. A strong Bush–Baker team had forced negotiations on partly unwilling adversaries. But the USA had also to a large extent taken Israeli views into account and had designed the process in cooperation with Israel. The peace process had been a top priority for two US administrations, and US efforts and prestige was involved. Yet Israel was negotiating peace directly with the PLO somewhere else, without the Americans being provided with crucial information. This was problematic for Israel.

Holst’s next trip was to Israel (12–14 June 1993), where he held talks with the key figures on the Israeli side. He wanted to explore the extent of the Israeli involvement in the Norwegian meetings. After meeting Shimon Peres, Holst had no doubts regarding the Israeli foreign minister’s commitment. That he had more or less known before leaving Oslo. The essential question, however, was the role of Prime Minister Rabin. To what extent was he involved? And to what extent was he committed? The Norwegians knew that Rabin was informed, but that was more or less all they knew. When Holst asked Peres whether he could discuss the Oslo Back Channel with Rabin in a

---

124 Interview with Yoel Singer, 4 June 2002.
125 Interview with Yair Hirschfeld, 22 October 2002. Hirschfeld claims that he reported to the Americans until May and then stopped doing so. At the first meeting between Holst and Savir on 20 May 1993, Holst even suggested that Norway and Israel should ‘coordinate our contacts with the Americans – so as not to prejudice Norwegian interests in Washington’. Savir 1998, p. 21; see also Beilin 1999, p. 88; Corbin 1994a, pp. 95–96; Savir 1998, p. 41; Makovsky 1996, p. 28.
126 Interview with Abu Ala, 21 October 2002.
subsequent meeting, Peres advised against this. And Holst took Peres’s advice. The Norwegian foreign minister left for Norway still in the dark about the role of the Israeli prime minister.\textsuperscript{128}

Tunisia was Holst’s third destination. This was also an official visit, where Holst was to meet Tunisia’s president and foreign minister. However, the official visit to Tunisia was also a perfect opportunity to meet Arafat personally. Had the Norwegian foreign minister arranged a special trip to see the chairman of the PLO, this would have caused immediate attention and press coverage, which could have jeopardized the secret back channel project. However, meeting Arafat while already in Tunisia caused no suspicion. Holst had also brought his family, combining the official visit with a holiday. Mona Juul accompanied him, and Terje Rød Larsen arrived after the abortive meeting at Halvorsbøle. On 13 July 1993, Holst, Juul and Rød Larsen met Arafat at his headquarters. The purpose of the visit, like the previous one in Israel, was to assess Arafat’s commitment, involvement and seriousness.\textsuperscript{129}

Before the meeting, Rød Larsen had updated and informed Holst about the current crisis at Halvorsbøle. On this occasion, too, the Israelis had used the opportunity to brief Holst in advance, both on the crisis and on the questions he should raise with Arafat. Beilin wanted to make sure that the ‘conversation was focused on certain issues raised by Abu Ala in Oslo’.\textsuperscript{130} According to Savir, ‘the Norwegian hosts’ at this stage in the process not only served ‘as “environmental architects” but advanced the process itself’.\textsuperscript{131} Despite the original intention of the Norwegians to serve only as facilitators, and not as mediators, the Norwegians were ‘equally unwilling to let the channel wither’.\textsuperscript{132}

At the meeting with the three Norwegians, Arafat was clearly upset and frustrated with the US-sponsored peace process in Washington. He claimed that the USA was too biased and saw the conflict only from the Israeli side. The PLO had to ‘negotiate against not one but two delegations, the Israelis with the Israeli accents and the Israelis with the American accent’.\textsuperscript{133} In addition, the chairman of the PLO found it difficult to ‘sell an American-brokered agreement to his people’.\textsuperscript{134} In order to have

\textsuperscript{128} UD 34.4/87, 6, memorandum of 15 June 1993, Hansen; 11.7/4, 30, minutes from meeting between Peres and Holst, 13 June 1993, Hansen, 16 June 1993; 25.11/19å, 2, memorandum of 17 June 1993, Juul; Corbin 1994a, pp. 95–96. Mona Juul was travelling with Holst. These documents do not disclose the secret back channel.


\textsuperscript{130} Beilin 1999, p. 106.

\textsuperscript{131} Savir 1998, p. 42.


\textsuperscript{133} Heikal 1996, p. 449.

\textsuperscript{134} Corbin 1994a, p. 120.
legitimacy for the Palestinians, an agreement had to be made directly between the PLO and Israel. The approach in Norway, on the other hand, was something different. Not only was that acceptable to Arafat, but he also had complete confidence in the way the Norwegians were handling the negotiations. The three Norwegians, for their part, wanted to find out how familiar Arafat was with the back channel. They were positively surprised: Arafat had a complete overview and was updated on details. It was clear that he attached strong importance to the Oslo track. He was, however, insecure as to whether Israel wanted a deal. The three Norwegians assured him that this was the case.

But Arafat also had other issues on his agenda that were of great concern to him. In particular, he was preoccupied with how Gaza and the West Bank could be linked together, divided as they were by Israeli territory. How could, for instance, he and the rest of the leadership in the PLO travel between the two areas? Arafat wanted ‘kissing points ... literally a point where the territory on both sides would briefly touch or “kiss”’. This demand was one of many presented by the PLO at Halvorsbøle, on direct orders from Arafat.

According to Beilin, in the conversation with Arafat Holst had ‘stressed the danger of the talks collapsing under the weight of the Palestinians’ new demands, addressing in particular the issue of the link between Gaza and the West Bank. It was his view that Israel would under no circumstances agree to an extra-territorial corridor, and after protracted discussion Arafat was persuaded to drop this demand and settle for “safe passage” – meaning the use of existing roads without hindrance on the part of Israeli security forces’. The introduction of the very vague term ‘safe passage’ seemed to have come from Holst, aware that Arafat’s suggestion was completely unacceptable to Israel. Holst got the impression that the ‘safe passage’ formula was acceptable to the chairman.

Holst also asked Arafat how he would get acceptance from all of the factions within the PLO to an agreement with Israel. Holst knew that Arafat would face heavy criticism. He was also well aware of the main worry on the Israeli side: that in the end there would be no deal because Arafat would be confronted with such strong opposition that he would pull out. This was a commonly held Israeli view. Arafat, and Palestinians in general, were mostly regarded as never keeping their word or promises. All agreements made with Arafat, orally or in writing, could be broken. This Israeli attitude

---

114 Same references as above.
115 Corbin 1994a, p. 121.
117 Beilin 1999, p. 106.
was generally shared by the Americans. The message from them was ‘not to trust the man – he was a liar, a deceiver and a traitor, impossible to do business with’.\footnote{Corbin 1994a, p. 123; see also Corbin 1994a, pp. 121–125.}

Probably after having been asked by the Israeli actors to do so, Holst pressed Arafat on this point. If a deal were made, would he stick to it? There would be hard decisions to make, consisting of substantial compromises. Would Arafat be able to handle that? Arafat defended himself and said that he had in the past always been able to deal with the different Palestinian groups and the opposition within the PLO. There was no reason to doubt that he would do so again if an agreement were reached.\footnote{Corbin 1994a, pp. 121–122.}

This was as far as the Norwegian foreign minister managed to come with Arafat at this stage. The three Norwegians were assured that Arafat was aboard the Oslo train, and Abu Ala was his trusted representative in the negotiations. Both Abu Ala and Abu Mazen had informed Arafat thoroughly and in detail, and Arafat definitely wanted to make progress on the Oslo track. This was all reassuring for the Norwegians. However, the Norwegians were also concerned by the ‘old, old problem that no one knew what Arafat really intended to do, or how committed he was to negotiations of any kind. The Norwegians believed that Arafat had accepted that there were certain “red lines”, as the Israelis called them, which Rabin and Peres would not cross, and that he would agree to return to the former proposal as a basis for negotiations’.\footnote{Corbin 1994a, p. 122; see also Corbin 1994a, pp. 119–125; Beilin 1999, pp. 106–110; Savir 1998, pp. 42–44; Makovsky 1996, pp. 60–61; Heikal 1996, pp. 447–449; Peres 1995, pp. 341–342.}

Like the Palestinians, the Israelis also wanted assurances and information from the Norwegians about the other side’s commitment to the Oslo Back Channel. The Israeli actors, and Uri Savir in particular, wanted the Norwegians to come to Israel in order to report to them in detail on the meeting with Arafat. Holst decided not to cancel his holiday, but to send the Rød Larsen–Juul couple to sort things out with Jerusalem. Holst sent a letter to Peres, in which he gave a full assessment of his meeting with Arafat. Holst pointed out that he had been ‘friendly but firm’ with Arafat. Holst had made it clear to the PLO chairman that the negotiators in Oslo had already exchanged five drafts and still there was no agreement. ‘On some of the disputed issues, moreover, the PLO was now “deviating from the substance of realistic proposals”. Holst urged Arafat that “the PLO can never achieve a better deal than now”. Arafat’s response, Holst recorded, was “firm and thoughtful”.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 342; see also same references as above. This letter is to be found neither at the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs nor among the private papers of the late foreign minister.}

In the letter, Holst told Peres that Arafat was just as anxious as Peres to push for a quick solution. Arafat had made an ‘impassioned reference to the deteriorating living conditions in Gaza.... He said that delay could mean both Israel and the PLO losing control’. Holst had suggested to Arafat that the two sides should try to finalize the declaration of principles at their next session in Oslo.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 342.}
In Israel, Rød Larsen and Juul had a series of meetings. Virtually every Israeli involved in the back channel was informed in detail by the Norwegian couple about the meeting with the PLO chairman. ‘It was endless: the questions, the analysis of every word Arafat had said, the dissection of his statements on the various issues, his attitude to Abu Ala. There was also the psychological assessment: the Israelis wanted to know about Arafat’s mental state.’ The Israelis needed assistance to overcome their psychological barriers. The role of Norway was to ‘ensure that Arafat was serious, that Arafat had control and could be trusted’. With the current crisis in the back channel, the two Norwegians seemed to have realized that their assessment of the meeting with Arafat would decide whether the Israelis would continue the Oslo track or not. The Israeli actors, on the other hand, were clearly pleased with the Norwegian contribution: ‘The Norwegians were honest brokers. They pushed forward to reach a deal.’ Johan Jørgen Holst was ‘very helpful’.

The overall aim of the Norwegians was to prevent the Oslo Back Channel from closing. Consequently, the Israelis were told not only impressions, but also solutions and detailed information. ‘Terje and Mona shared their own impression that Arafat was keen on reaching an agreement with us. They described him with a mixture of awe and irreverence that enhanced our understanding of the man behind the symbol – the PLO leader who made all the meaningful decisions’, Savir reveals. They told the Israelis about Arafat’s extended Jericho proposal and the extraterritorial road. Holst’s letter to Peres was ‘partly substance, noting that Arafat was no longer discussing extraterritoriality’, Mona Juul has explained. ‘But it was also psychological. Holst stressed his impression that Arafat was very much behind the Norway talks. He was involved in the details and dedicated to the talks’ success. This made an impression on the Israelis.’ Mona Juul also told Peres in an encouraging way: ‘Arafat seems reasonable; he is open to discussion on the issue of Jericho. He would, of course, like to have safe passage, and he wants it under Palestinian control in some way, but accepts there must be some joint way of handling the aspect of control.’ However, the Norwegian couple could not guarantee that Arafat would stand by what he had said, and they admitted that the term ‘safe passage’ was rather vague.

146 Corbin 1994a, p. 123.
147 Interview with Jan Egeland, 12 March 2002: ‘Den norske rollen gikk ut på å forsikre om at Arafat var seriøs, at Arafat hadde kontroll og var til å stole på.’
150 Savir 1998, p. 43.
152 Corbin 1994a, p. 124.
Holst had also emphasized to Peres that there was little doubt in his mind that Israel had to include the West Bank, meaning Jericho, in the offer. If not, Arafat would find it impossible to convince the Palestinians that ‘Gaza first’ was not ‘Gaza first and last’. He would be confronted ‘with an impossible sales problem’.

Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul were still not sure whether Prime Minister Rabin was involved. Peres pointed out to them that ‘if their interpretation of Arafat’s intentions was incorrect, and the Oslo Channel ended in disaster, Peres would be personally caught in the cross-fire, his political future on the line’. In order to make the Norwegian couple understand how much the Israelis depended on their judgements and how much really was at stake, the foreign minister underlined what was out of the question. First, there would be no concessions on any questions involving Jerusalem. This had been, and continued to be, Israel’s absolute demand throughout the whole Oslo process. If the PLO insisted on dealing with Jerusalem, there was no point in resuming the negotiations. Second, there would be no ‘ballooning the area of the Jericho enclave’. The PLO’s geographical definition of the Jericho district was that of the British Mandate, almost covering the entire distance from the Jordan River to Jerusalem. On this point, the Israelis understood that the Palestinians were “trying this on”, and would be prepared to settle for far less than the Mandatory dimensions of the ancient biblical city and its environs. Israel’s definition of Jericho “barely extended beyond the town centre”. Third, Peres pointed out that granting the Palestinians any form of extraterritorial passage between the West Bank and Gaza was out of the question. If this was not understood by Arafat, the negotiations would be killed immediately, and there would be no agreement. In addition, Arafat could not arrive in Gaza and Jericho as ‘President of Palestine’, which was the rank and title the PLO had given Arafat when the PLO had proclaimed the creation of the state of Palestine in 1988. Israel had already made this clear to the Palestinians in Oslo. However, Peres now ‘reiterated [the Israeli position] to the Norwegians, intending them to reflect [Israel’s] opinion in their conversations with Arafat’.

On a slightly brighter side, Peres explained that if an agreement with the Palestinians was to be made, the entire Middle East would enter into a new era. This was the visionary Peres speaking. He saw advantages in the winding up of the PLO headquarters in Tunis and the installation of Arafat and the PLO in Gaza. They would take over the daily running of the problematic strip, which would include dealing with Hamas and other Islamic fundamentalists. In order to achieve a takeover, Peres wanted to ‘wrap up’ the negotiations ‘fast’. He wanted to ‘inject a sense of urgency’ to prevent ‘the Oslo track become like chewing-gum’, which was the case with the negotiations in

155 Corbin 1994a, p. 124.
156 Savir 1998, p. 43.
Peres also feared that protracted negotiations would endanger the status of the PLO. When Peres perceived the disbelief around the table, with the Israeli team and the two Norwegians not believing their own ears, he added: ‘I’m not in love with them, but when I think of the alternative, i.e. Hamas – then I become a romantic’. A huge part of Peres’s visionary thinking was the economic packaging of the political agreement. This would also make a new opening for Israel in the Middle East. To Rød Larsen, Juul and the Israeli participants, Peres spoke at length on this aspect of peace. There would be massive economic aid to Gaza from international donors. As Peres saw it, Gaza would become the Singapore of the Middle East. Increasingly, Peres held up Singapore ‘as the paradigm of a rags-to-riches economic miracle which Gaza, at peace and with large-scale overseas investments, could try to emulate’. His Israeli colleagues, however, received this vision for the future of Gaza with ‘a mild sense of scepticism’.

When parting, Peres gave Rød Larsen and Juul a letter for Holst. In the letter, he thanked the Norwegian foreign minister for his efforts invested in the Oslo Back Channel and summarized the Israeli positions at this stage. Peres repeated the Israeli ‘red lines’ and asked Holst to try to speed up the talks.

The Norwegian couple left for Tunis, where Holst and his family were still on holiday. Peres wanted the Norwegian foreign minister to clarify Arafat’s intentions. The Norwegians would have ‘another meeting with Arafat, to see if they could satisfy the sceptical Israelis’. On 20 July 1993, Holst, Rød Larsen and Juul met with Arafat a second time. Holst tried to clarify Arafat’s position on the ‘safe passage’ question. However, it was impossible for Holst and the other Norwegians to get any precise clarification. Arafat continued to stress the importance of the passages between Gaza and Jericho and between Jericho and Jordan. He did not want to clarify details, though Holst showed him Peres’s letter asking him to do so. Rød Larsen and Juul left the meeting less confident in Arafat, perhaps ‘because the Israelis had aroused their suspicions’. Holst, on the other hand, seemed more optimistic and believed that Arafat was sincere and prepared to compromise. On their way back to Norway, the Norwegians stopped in Paris to

159 Peres 1995, p. 342.
165 Corbin 1994a, p. 124.
meet Ron Pundak, who had been sent from Jerusalem to be updated by the Norwegians on their latest meeting with Arafat. The Israelis had to make up their mind whether to continue the talks in Norway or not.166

In addition, Holst sent a second letter to Peres on 21 July. Holst had made it very clear to Arafat, he wrote to Peres, that ‘Norway was not a mediator, just the host. Norway had no direct interests in the Middle East conflict, nor in promoting any particular solution; it was motivated solely by the desire to advance the cause of peace everywhere in the world, and here there was a rare window of opportunity which should not be wasted’. Holst had told Arafat that the Israeli government was prepared to take ‘a bold step’ and that he ‘had a historic choice to make – whether to follow the road towards consensus or head in another direction’. For Israel, Holst had pointed out to Arafat, ‘security was the primary concern’. A continuation of the intifada or terrorist acts against Israel would immediately stop the chance of any agreement. The Palestinians now had a unique opportunity to obtain self-rule. This could be ‘converted at a later stage to full independence, as well as economic development’. ‘Holding up the process’, as Arafat and the PLO were now doing, according to Holst, ‘endangering it for the sake of arguing over a formula, was likely to be a fateful mistake’. Holst had appealed to Arafat to do his utmost to ensure that the next round in Norway, starting on 24 July 1993 at Halvorsbøle, would see signatures on a document.167

Judging not only from this letter, but also from the role played by all three Norwegians at this stage in the negotiations, there seems little doubt that they were in agreement that it was mainly Arafat and the PLO who were slowing down the Oslo negotiations and jeopardizing the whole project. This attitude mirrored the Israeli attitude. The Palestinians were the ones who were not sufficiently eager to achieve peace, in spite of the fact that it had been the very same Palestinians who had been begging the Norwegians to promote the peace process.168

On the other hand, when the Israeli negotiators had hardened and turned away from concessions given in the Sarpsborg DoP in favour of the completely new Israeli declaration presented at Grefsheim, incorporating Israel’s ‘red lines’, nothing similar was said or done by the Norwegian participants. That change in Israel’s approach might have caused internal concern for the Norwegians, but it did not move them to any kind of action. The Norwegians could have argued against the new Israeli demands, pointing out that Israel was backtracking on earlier agreements and concessions – just as they did at this later stage with Arafat and the PLO. Indeed, the Grefsheim DoP and


167 Beilin 1999, pp. 108–109. This letter is to be found neither at the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs nor among the private papers of the late foreign minister. Terje Rød Larsen in particular, now more sceptical, had not been confident that Pundak would present the whole picture to Peres. Pundak was passionately committed to the Oslo peace process, and he always took the most optimistic views in the discussions with his superiors. Corbin 1994a, p. 125.

168 Interview with Jan Egeland, 12 March 2002: ‘Den norske rollen gikk hele tiden ut på å overtale israelerne til å forhandle med palestinerne. Israel var minst villig til å forhandle, palestinerne var overivrig, [de] var på oss hele tiden.’
the changed Israeli negotiating style after the Israeli upgrading could just as easily have been seen as ‘holding up the process’, ‘endangering it for the sake of arguing over a formula’ or ‘a fateful mistake’. However, Israel’s demands were not seen in such a way. They were ‘red lines’, and ‘red lines’ had to be understood or accepted. If not, there would be no deal. No evidence has been found that indicates that the Norwegians argued in the same way towards the Israelis as they did towards the Palestinians. The two parties to the negotiations were not equal in any sense of the word. Only in a superficial way – such as when it came to food, cars or hotel rooms – were the Israelis and the Palestinians treated in a totally symmetrical manner, but this could not hide the asymmetrical reality in which Israel was the stronger and the Palestinians the weaker party. It was within this asymmetrical reality that the Norwegians had to work: this was the room for manoeuvre they were faced with.

The role played by the Norwegians, and in particular by the Norwegian foreign minister in this round, could hardly be described as the role of a host or facilitator. On the whole, ‘Norway was bending over backwards to provide anything the parties might need or want’. But Norway had at this stage in the process also started to play the role of a mediator. The tough position adopted by the Israelis had forced the Norwegians to take a stand. Norway was negotiating peace on Israel’s premises. The main reason for doing so was very simple: there existed no other options. Israel was the party that was going to concede land and power to the Palestinians. If the Norwegians wanted to be a part of and contribute to the peace negotiations, they had to realize that without the cooperation and goodwill of the strongest party, Israel, there would be no back channel and there would be no role for Norway. This was what the Norwegians had learned, and this was what the Palestinians had to understand. They were the weak party, with very little room for manoeuvre. ‘Norway wanted to solve the conflict. The Norwegians used their relationship to the Israelis. They replaced power with friendship’, Hassan Asfour reflects.

In his second letter to Peres, Holst had been optimistic about the prospect of success in the next round, which would start only three days later, and progress towards the signing of a deal. ‘Three months after his appointment’, Yossi Beilin observed, ‘the new Norwegian Foreign Minister obviously regarded the Oslo track as the leading item on his political agenda; as far as he was concerned, success in the talks would be his own success. Among ourselves we responded with a smile; surprised and gratified to find that “our” track had become such a family affair at the summit of Norwegian politics’.

---

169 Interview with Yoel Singer, 4 June 2002. For Johan Jørgen Holst, ‘nothing was too small’. He was ‘unbelievable’; he ‘never gave us up’, Shimon Peres confirms. Interview with Shimon Peres, 24 October 2002.
170 Interview with Hassan Asfour, 20 October 2002
171 Beilin 1999, p. 110.
Israel's Trump Card

Both the Israeli team and the Norwegian team believed that Holst had contributed significantly to clarifying the position of the PLO. His meetings with Arafat in particular and the subsequent meetings and letters exchanged with the Israelis represented promising groundwork for the 11th round of talks, again at Halvorsbøle (24–26 July 1993). Prime Minister Rabin had been persuaded to continue the talks in Norway, even though the previous abortive meeting had shown how far the Israelis and the Palestinians were from reaching an agreement. The Israeli negotiators ‘believed that their message had got through, and that the Palestinians now understood that the proposal they had presented at Halvorsbøle would be replaced with the version negotiated at Grefsheim earlier in the month’. Oslo had reached a ‘moment of truth’. The Israeli team arrived ‘expecting swifter progress and readiness for compromise’.

Seen from the outside, it is difficult to understand how the Israeli negotiators could have expected the PLO to simply surrender to their demands at this stage. However, when they arrived at Halvorsbøle for the second time, it is clear that the Israelis believed that this would be the case. With such a point of departure, it is easy to understand the forceful nature of the Israeli reactions when the Palestinians presented their position.

The Palestinian representatives presented their new draft of a declaration of principles, which ‘was a bitter disappointment to the Israelis, for it was more or less the same as the previous one’. The Palestinians ‘reiterated their positions, in full and in an entirely new document. Despite their promise to step up the process, they seemed to be retreating from the positions we thought we already had established. Their document ignored the one we had presented on July 4 (and to which their objections had been added)’.

The Israeli team at Halvorsbøle seemed to be sitting with the major misconception that their own Grefsheim DoP was the common point of departure for the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Israelis were coming to Halvorsbøle to negotiate a common understanding and to agree on a final declaration. They had known perfectly well, even before the Grefsheim DoP was presented, that the Palestinians would have ‘difficulty with digesting it’. Indeed, that was precisely the reason why Singer himself went on

172 Corbin 1994a, p. 125.
175 Corbin 1994a, p. 127.
176 Savir 1998, p. 44.
177 Savir 1998, p. 35.
an extra trip to Oslo to prepare the Palestinians and to prevent some of the strong reactions that the Israelis knew would come.\textsuperscript{178}

When the Grefsheim DoP had initially been presented, the Palestinian response had been strong. They had felt that the concessions given in the Sarpsborg DoP had been withdrawn and that months of work had gone down the drain. The outcome of the Grefsheim meeting was that the declaration of principles presented there was taken back to the parties’ respective headquarters for discussion. Coming back to the first meeting at Halvorsbøle on 11–12 July after consultations with Arafat, the Palestinians had required 26 revisions and amendments, causing the first Halvorsbøle crisis. So why did the Israeli negotiators now believe that this time the PLO would agree to the Grefsheim DoP?\textsuperscript{179}

There seem to be several reasons for this Israeli attitude. First, the Israeli team – and also the Norwegians – believed that the two negotiating teams had managed to work their way through their differences during the Grefsheim weekend. The two teams had gone through the Grefsheim DoP word by word, and had inserted in brackets the points on which the Palestinians disagreed, completing in the end a draft in which almost all of the objections of the Palestinians had been incorporated. Five significant points remained: the inclusion of UN Resolutions 242 and 338, the permanent status negotiations, the Gaza/Jericho-first approach, the elections to be held in Jerusalem and the fate of the Palestinians displaced in the 1967 war. The Israelis felt that progress had been made. However, this progress seemed mainly to have involved writing up the points on which the two parties disagreed, together with the additional five important points of substance mentioned above. This was something very different from reaching an agreement. The negotiations at Grefsheim also broke up at short notice, with the parties leaving abruptly without (it seems in retrospect) agreeing on whether or not they had drafted an agreement.\textsuperscript{180}

Second, both at Grefsheim and at the two subsequent rounds at Halvorsbøle, the Israeli team was on the whole too self-confident and self-secure. The Israelis genuinely believed that they could have things their way. Of course, Israel was the stronger party and therefore used to getting what it wanted. The Israeli attitude reflected realities in the Middle East: in discussions on Palestinian questions, either Israel got things the way it wanted or there was no deal. But to believe that the PLO would give in on the Grefsheim DoP immediately was to seriously misjudge Israel’s opponent, which, although not as experienced a negotiating partner, was unlikely to simply accept whatever Israel offered. The Israeli self-image explains to a large degree the strong reactions and disappointments at this stage. The Israelis believed they were being generous towards the Palestinians. ‘Israel should be on the giving side, not the receiving


\textsuperscript{179} See the section ‘The Grefsheim DoP and the First Halvorsbøle Crisis’ (above).

As they saw it, the negotiations were not conducted on Israel’s premises. According to Beilin, this was ‘no dictate of Israel; had it been up to Israel, only Gaza and not Jericho would have been included’.\textsuperscript{182}

In addition, the Norwegians had given the self-confident Israelis no serious warnings. On the contrary, Holst in particular had encouraged Peres and the Israeli team to believe that Arafat had ‘understood’ the message – either come up with what the Israelis defined as serious compromises or there would be no deal. The Oslo setting also delivered an environment that involved no international pressure on Israel. The Norwegians, regarded by the Israelis as their negotiating friends, had given them additional reasons for the increased expectations at Halvorsbøle. Because of all of these different factors, the Israeli disappointment with Abu Ala and the Palestinian response was huge and severe. Uri Savir made it clear to Terje Rød Larsen, ‘in his slightly mocking way, that [Rød Larsen] had been fooled by the Palestinians, sweet-talked into believing that they would make compromises’. Rød Larsen reacted strongly to Savir, who had ‘accused him of naivety and made it clear that he was questioning his judgement’.\textsuperscript{183} In fact, Rød Larsen had all along had his doubts about Arafat. Holst, on the other hand, had taken a more trusting and positive attitude. Holst had obviously managed to give the Israeli negotiators, and Peres in particular, increased expectations as to what could be obtained in the negotiating round at Halvorsbøle.\textsuperscript{184}

However, the Palestinians had made some changes in the draft that they presented at this meeting. The extraterritorial road was gone, and East Jerusalem was once again left out of the interim agreement. But, according to Savir, the Palestinians now demanded ‘ten thousand Palestinian policemen in Gaza and Jericho, Palestinian control of the border crossings, Israeli withdrawal from Gaza within three months, and that the scope of further redeployment be determined by negotiation’.\textsuperscript{185} To Savir and Singer, the demands in the new draft were way beyond consideration. If these demands were shown to Peres and Rabin, they pointed out, there would be an immediate end to the Oslo track.\textsuperscript{186}

The Palestinian negotiators openly admitted that they were afraid that Israel’s ‘sole intention was to defer as much as [it] could to the debate over permanent settlement, leaving them with a murky and emasculated interim settlement and giving no guarantee at this stage that the permanent settlement would ever be agreed’.\textsuperscript{187} However, sharing the fear that the chance of peace in Oslo might simply disappear after they had invested so much in it, the two delegations agreed to go through the Israeli and the

\textsuperscript{181} Interview with Shimon Peres, 24 October 2002.
\textsuperscript{182} Interview with Yossi Beilin, 23 October 2002.
\textsuperscript{183} Corbin 1994a, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{185} Savir 1998, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{187} Beilin 1999, p. 111.
Palestinians drafts clause by clause, in order to sort out what had been agreed and what had not. On this basis, they could decide whether there was enough common ground to continue.188 However, the Israeli participants were disappointed again. They found Abu Ala and Hassan Asfour ‘extremely resistant to any compromise’.189 Yet Savir and Singer had also raised two new topics, related to the powers of the Palestinian Council and to Israel’s security. These new demands also ‘soured the atmosphere of the talks’.190 Although trying, the two adversaries could not manage to bridge the gap between them. The ‘darkest day’ of the Oslo Back Channel had come. After an emotional fight, involving heavy accusations, the heads of the two delegations, Uri Savir and Abu Ala, split and ordered their subordinates to pack their belongings in order to leave at once. The Oslo Back Channel seemed doomed. ‘We had begun to believe that the PLO is our partner’, Uri Savir told Abu Ala. ‘But apparently it’s true that when the chips are down, the PLO always retreats from a clear decision.... Do you really believe any one of your followers, anyone living in a refugee camp, will condone the fact that because of a difference over a few words, you have postponed accepting responsibility for a large part of your people? Perhaps the PLO is more important to you than the Palestinian people. Perhaps those who say that you never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity are right!’191 Abu Ala, for his part, announced that he would resign, not only from the talks, but also as the head of the Palestinian delegation. It would be up to Arafat to appoint his successor.192

However, neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis were fully prepared to put the Oslo channel behind them. Though it remains somewhat unclear how deliberate its use was, Savir now played the Israeli trump card in response to the crisis: Could the offer of mutual recognition bring Abu Ala back to the negotiating table?193 Singer, the one favouring this step all along, had drafted a proposal on mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. Both Singer and Savir had been working on the document the previous night, probably foreseeing the crisis that was coming.194 They must have seen such an offer as a possible way out of the impasse. The mutual recognition proposal was cleared and supported by the Israeli participants involved, including Peres. However, Rabin’s role in this remains somewhat unclear. Even at this late stage, the Israeli prime minister was determined that ‘the question of mutual recognition would

189 Corbin 1994a, p. 131. According to Geir O. Pedersen, Abu Ala went as far as possible at Halvorsbøle in order to obtain as many concessions as possible from the Israeli negotiators. Abu Ala sought a ‘real crisis’. Interview with Geir O. Pedersen, 18 October 2002.
190 Beilin 1999, p. 111.
not be raised’. According to Peres, though, Rabin had allowed Savir to ‘mention recognition in passing during the July 11 session and then to offer specific terms for mutual recognition during the July 25–26 meeting, but only as an off-the-record personal initiative outside his role as an official representative of the Israeli government’. This is exactly what Savir did.

In a private meeting, Savir offered Abu Ala mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. Israel would recognize the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people on seven conditions: recognition of Israel’s right to exist in security and peace; acceptance of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338; resolution of the conflict by peaceful means; resolution of the differences through negotiations; renunciation of terrorism; a halt to the intifada and a rescinding of the clauses of the Palestinian Charter that called for the destruction of Israel or otherwise contradicted the peace process.

The Israeli negotiators of course knew that mutual recognition was something the PLO really wanted. But Savir was not only dangling a carrot, he also had a stick: mutual recognition would be dependent on an agreement on a declaration of principles. Abu Ala was offered a package – a ‘swap deal’ as Savir called it – in which mutual recognition could not be chosen selectively. It was all or nothing. At this stage in the negotiations, there were 16 outstanding issues. Savir grouped these and presented eight points on which Israel could not give in. The most important issue for Israel was security. The Israeli army would continue to protect the settlers and the borders, and Israeli troops would have freedom of movement in Gaza and Jericho. On these points, Israel would not compromise. The other eight points centred on the nature of the Gaza/Jericho deal. There were problems connected to the powers and responsibilities of the Palestinian Council, where it should be located, how authority should be handed over, and the passage between Gaza and Jericho. If Arafat agreed on the eight crucial points for Israel, Savir would ‘try to persuade our leaders to be flexible on the eight remaining points’.

The Israeli chief negotiator was exerting pressure. He was worried that there would be no agreement in Norway after all. He made it clear that the PLO had to say yes or no to all of the eight points in the declaration of principles that were crucial to Israel. It was an all-or-nothing situation. Savir gave Abu Ala no promises on the eight points where Israel might have to adjust its position. He also stressed – which seems not to have been entirely true – that he was doing this on his own initiative and that he had to receive approval from Peres and Rabin.

---

195 Beilin 1999, p. 112.
198 Same references as above.
199 Savir 1998, p. 50; see also references above.
200 Savir 1998, p. 50–51: ‘He knew I was exerting pressure but was taking a certain risk, as well, by giving him to understand that Israel was prepared to be flexible on the eight points I had not cited (recognition of Palestinian political rights, for example, and the transfer of the PLO leadership to the territories).’ See also references above.
The points of disagreement were now clearly defined. The package deal was Israel’s offer, and it was up to the Palestinians to take it or leave it. There was no further room for manoeuvre for the Palestinians, and there would be further opportunities to negotiate their future as formulated in the declaration of principles. The Israeli actors decided not to schedule another meeting, but to ‘wait for an announcement from the PLO, via the Norwegians, that the Palestinians were prepared to modify their positions’. It would now be left to the Norwegians to convey complicated messages about the ‘swap deal’ between Tunis and Jerusalem.

Foreign Minister Holst was frustrated and under pressure. He too was worried that there would be no agreement in Norway after all. The Israelis had left, but Abu Ala had stayed on, informing the Norwegian foreign minister of the recent developments. After the meetings in Tunis and Jerusalem, Holst had felt that ‘everything was going so well’. Now there was a crisis, a ‘deadlock and an air of dejection’. Holst contacted Beilin to air his worries and to report on his meeting with Abu Ala.

According to Beilin, Abu Ala had explained to Holst that the Palestinian demands were a response to the new Israeli demands that had been presented in the Grefsheim DoP. He had also said that lawyers were examining the documents on the Palestinian side. (This assertion is not confirmed by other sources. On the contrary, it has been a commonly held view that no legal experts were used on the Palestinian side.) In addition, Abu Ala told an astonished Holst that ‘the Israeli demands were backed not only by Rabin, but also by American elements determined to stiffen Israeli resolve’.

These accusations must have had some impact on Holst. In a new letter to Peres, dated 27 July 1993, the close relationship between the Americans and the Israelis was raised. The results of this negotiating round seemed ‘somewhat unclear’, wrote Holst. The Norwegian foreign minister had asked Abu Ala directly ‘whether the Palestinians were very concerned with being tricked, warning of the alleged danger of Israeli cleverness. He responded affirmatively ... and expressed the view that the Israelis did not seem to be acting independently, and that they appeared to reflect American interests. The implication was that the US remains irrevocably hostile to the PLO’.

Neither Beilin nor Peres took Abu Ala’s concerns seriously. Their reaction was that ‘[C]onspiracy theories were nothing new in the Middle East: we used to see Russians behind every tree, and the Arabs still saw Americans everywhere’. Apparently

---

201 Beilin 1999, p. 112.
206 Peres 1995, p. 342. This letter is found neither in the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs nor among the private papers of the late foreign minister.
207 Beilin 1999, p. 113.
without Holst’s knowledge, the Norwegians also had their own share of conspiratorial accusations: ‘The hapless Norwegians would be suspected of siding with the Israelis against the PLO. Larsen bore the brunt of this, and again at Halvorsbøle he was singled out as target for Abu Ala’s frustrations’. Rød Larsen was accused of being an ‘Israeli agent’. 

In response to Abu Ala’s concerns, Holst offered to ‘change roles, from host to mediator’, if the Israelis and the Palestinians agreed to this. However, it is clear that Norway had not simply been playing the role of a host or facilitator since Holst had taken over as foreign minister. According to Beilin, Abu Ala had informed Holst about the ‘package deal’ and had expressed the view that he hoped Arafat would agree to it. Without such acceptance, Israel would break off the negotiations and there would be no agreement in Norway. Therefore, as Holst pointed out to Abu Ala, the Palestinians had to make some tough and painful decisions at this stage of the negotiations. Holst had made it clear to the Palestinian negotiator that the responsibility to convince Arafat and persuade him to accept the ‘package deal’ lay upon Abu Ala’s shoulders.

The Israelis appreciated the efforts of the Norwegians, and of Holst in particular. ‘Your incisive and in-depth analysis’, wrote Peres to Holst, ‘is of great value to us – both to Prime Minister Rabin and to myself – in evaluating the very intricate dynamics of this unique channel and opportunity…. The limits of manoeuvrability have been tested. Now the time is ripe for decisions…. The biggest risk of all is the inability to take any risks’. Peres ‘intended’ his ‘Norwegian colleague and friend to convey the substance of my letter in his own parallel contacts with Arafat’. Peres was concerned that the Palestinians were trying to determine aspects of the permanent settlement now, and that these attempts might jeopardize the entire process: ‘I must share with you my honest concern that again they [the PLO] may opt to aspire for a too-perfect solution.’ Just as the Palestinians wanted to try to get as many elements of the permanent settlements linked to the interim agreement, the Israelis wanted exactly the opposite. They would not allow anything that might point towards future solutions.

The Israeli foreign minister was using the Norwegian foreign minister as an instrument in the negotiations, anticipating that the Norwegians would present the Israeli...
The role of the Norwegians was one of ‘softening the position of Arafat’, who was ‘terribly weak’. On the other hand, the Norwegian role seems only to a very minor degree to have been to persuade the Israeli actors to see the Palestinian point of view or to reveal to the PLO where the Palestinians could have their best negotiating chances by leaking information on Israeli positions. While the Norwegian role with regard to the Israelis was to persuade the latter to stay put and to continue the negotiations, the Norwegian role with regard to the Palestinians seems to have been to persuade them to accept what they were offered by the Israelis. The argument seemed every time to be that this would be in the best interest of the Palestinians; this would be the best offer that the Palestinians could get; they had little choice but to accept the Israeli position. The asymmetrical situation that existed between the Israelis and the Palestinians made such an approach the only durable way to reach a deal. If not, the talks would have collapsed. The Norwegians, and Holst in particular, did everything possible to prevent that from happening.

However, all along, and even prior to the opening of the Oslo Back Channel, it was the Palestinians who were pressing and urging the Norwegians to continue the negotiations. They were the most eager and the most interested in reaching a peace agreement. They were the ones who had the most to gain and the most to lose. The Israelis, on the other hand, did not have the same sense of urgency. They could afford to wait if no deal was made. They were also ‘on the giving side’: Israel was to give away land, while the Palestinians were the ones who were going to receive. So either the PLO accepted the Israeli offer or there would be no deal. The Norwegians accepted this as a premise and therefore pushed harder for Palestinian than for Israeli concessions.

However, the Norwegians did not support the Israeli position because they saw the conflict only from an Israeli perspective. The overall reason behind the Norwegians’ behaviour was that either the Palestinians accepted the Israeli terms or the secret Norwegian role in the peace process in the Middle East would come to an immediate end. It was within this framework that the Norwegians had to work. The Norwegians could not risk criticizing the Israeli positions. Such a stance would have made Norway unacceptable as a mediating partner. As facilitator or mediator, Norway had to be acceptable not to both parties, which is the commonly held view, but to one party in particular, Israel, the strongest party and the party laying down the premises for the negotiations in the Oslo Back Channel. Norway chose to side with Israel because the mediator role demanded such an allegiance: ‘Norway had to embrace the Israeli position. It would be no deal otherwise.’

---

214 Interview with Shimon Peres, 24 October 2002.
215 Interview with Jan Egeland, 12 March 2002.
216 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002.
The Final Game

In early August 1993, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and the US peace team, headed by Dennis Ross, visited the Middle East in an attempt to revive the deadlocked Washington process. The Clinton administration was fed up with the Palestinian delegation, which either would not or could not make decisions. In addition, ‘sitting down with the PLO was still hard to do for the USA’. The Americans also wanted to see progress on the Syrian track and had prepared plans for opening a dialogue between Israel and Syria. It was common knowledge that Rabin for a long time had been willing to come to an agreement with the Syrians, in coordination with the United States.

On 3 and 4 August 1993, an exchange of messages between Prime Minister Rabin and Syria’s President Hafez el-Assad, through the Americans, set the parameters for a possible agreement between the two arch-enemies. Israel was to withdraw fully from the Golan Heights. In return, Syria would agree to full normalization of relations, satisfactory security arrangements and an extended timetable for implementation.

There was a degree of competition between the Syrian and the Palestinian track. Rabin felt that he could not handle both at the same time. At this point in time, he appears to have preferred the Syrian. Christopher and Ross were travelling back and forth between Damascus and Jerusalem, which also gave the impression that it was the Syrian track that was promising. Both the PLO headquarters in Tunis and the local Palestinian leadership were concerned about the presumed progress on the Syrian front. Anxious Palestinian representatives wanted to know whether the USA was bypassing them.

The Israelis saw this anxiety as an opportunity to progress out of the stalemate in the back channel in Norway. The Israeli reasoning was that the PLO, fearing that the Palestinians might be excluded from a separate Israeli–Syrian deal, might be more willing to accept the Israeli terms in Norway. In his response to Holst, Peres pressed for a rapid decision within the Oslo framework. ‘The vacuum may be filled by opposing forces, or with other initiatives’, he wrote, ‘including the possibility of desired progress between Israel and Syria. Secretary Christopher is at this very moment visiting our region’.

217 Interview with James Baker III, 9 September 1999.
219 Same references as above.
220 Same references as above. According to Holst, the visit of the US secretary of state in August changed the climate around the Oslo talks. Aftenposten, 31 August and 6 September 1993.
221 Peres 1995, p. 343; see also references above. This letter is found neither in the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs nor among the private papers of the late foreign minister.
Peres knew that Holst would help the Israelis by passing the message of urgency on to Arafat. The chairman of the PLO had no problem perceiving the situation. With progress on the US-led Syrian track and a crisis in the Oslo Back Channel, the PLO was in a dilemma and had to deliver something. If not, the PLO might be left out of everything.222

The Americans, on the other hand, did not see the complete picture and were also deliberately misled. Throughout the Oslo process, Peres confirms, Israel had no official contact with the Americans about the secret back channel. Nor had the Americans initiated any contacts with Israel. However, both Peres and Arafat knew that the Norwegians had informed the USA at an earlier stage. Peres and the Israeli team also knew that Holst had partially briefed Christopher in person in May. Peres was also aware of the fragmentary information given by Hirschfeld and Beilin to Dan Kurtzer.223

However, the key to understanding the incomplete assessment by the Americans is to a large degree the role played by Rabin. As pointed out earlier, the US officials who had been informed about it considered the Oslo Back Channel to be just another Peres enterprise lacking the backing of Rabin. Various Americans asked Rabin about the Oslo Back Channel. However, as Dennis Ross puts it, ‘every time we saw him, he was dismissive. He concentrated on the Syrian track and did clearly signal that the Oslo talks were not something that was worthwhile paying attention to’.224 For this reason – along with several others – there was no point in paying any attention to what was going on in Norway for the Americans.225

At the same time, Secretary of State Warren Christopher must have received some information that at least made him curious. Both Dan Kurtzer and Dennis Ross claim that they received a briefing from Beilin about what was going on in Norway in August. Kurtzer informed Christopher. At a meeting with Rabin on 3 August 1993, Christopher asked the Israeli prime minister how the talks in Oslo were going. Rabin ‘fobbed him off with one of his famous hand gestures, his substitute for a remark such as “It’s not worth talking about”’.226 Because of Rabin’s open scepticism, Christopher put no emphasis on the Oslo track. It could ‘not help with only Beilin and Peres being

223 Same references as above; interview with Dan Kurtzer, 22 October 2002; interview with Edward Djerejian, 3 June 2002; interviews with Dennis Ross, 21 July 1999 and 6 June 2002; interviews with Aaron Miller, 21 July 1999 and 5 June 2002; interviews with Samuel Lewis, 28 July 1999 and 5 June 2002; see also the sections ‘The Norwegians – Helping on Israel’s Premises?’ (above) and ‘Informing the United States’ (below).
224 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002.
optimistic as long as Rabin did not go along’. Whether intentionally or not, Rabin confirmed the Americans’ thinking throughout: There was no reason to bother about the Norway channel; after all, it was going nowhere. In addition, the Americans were by this stage so preoccupied with the Syrian track that information on the Norwegian back channel ‘would not have made any difference’. By then, making peace between Israel and the Palestinians had ‘secondary status’.

Thus, there were many factors that contributed to breaking the stalemate in Norway: the crisis at Halvorsbøle; the unwillingness of both parties to let the Oslo Back Channel come to nothing; the subsequent proposal for mutual recognition; fear of progress on the Syrian front, which gave the negotiations in Norway a sense of urgency not only for Arafat and the PLO, but also for the Israelis and Norwegians involved; and, not least, the final turn of Prime Minister Rabin.

Probably by the beginning of August, Rabin acknowledged that the Washington process would never be the road to peace in the Middle East. Rabin also realized that the local Palestinian leaders were more intractable and less willing to give in than the arch-enemy, the PLO. In addition, the local Palestinian leaders, Rabin had discovered, had no power. Arafat and the PLO were the only ones that could deliver anything. The only road to peace went through Arafat and via Oslo.

When the Israeli team returned from Halvorsbøle, Rabin had been ‘furious at what he saw as the PLO intransigence’. He still did not believe that the Norway channel could deliver. He did not trust Peres and his group, and he definitely did not trust Arafat and the PLO. The second meeting at Halvorsbøle had confirmed every prejudice that the prime minister had.

However, with the growing list of PLO concessions after Halvorsbøle, Rabin started to believe that the Oslo road to peace was perhaps the most direct one after all. The PLO had given concessions on four areas on which Rabin had doubted that the PLO would agree. First, all of Jerusalem would be under Israeli control and outside the jurisdiction of the Palestinians for the entire interim period. Second, all of the Jewish settlements would remain. Third, Israel would have responsibility for the security of

---

227 Interview with Dennis Ross, 21 July 1999.
228 Interview with Dan Kurtzer, 22 October 2002; interview with Dennis Ross, 21 July 1999; Christopher 1998, pp. 76–77; Corbin 1994a, pp. 143–147; Beilin 1999, pp. 114–116; Savir 1998, pp. 50–53; Peres 1995, pp. 343–346; Makovsky 1996, pp. 64–70. Yoel Singer has claimed that Rabin ‘deliberately downplayed the viability of the Palestinian track when talking to Christopher because he did not want Washington to become involved in Oslo in case it failed’. Rabin also gave Christopher a letter for Clinton asking for more US involvement in the process with Syria. Rabin himself has claimed that the reason for the signals given to the Americans was that he was not convinced that the Oslo process would lead anywhere. He first began to believe in the Norway track in the beginning of August, when he was surprised by the growing list of PLO concessions (see below). Makovsky 1996, p. 66.
230 Corbin 1994a, p. 143.
all Israelis and for external security. Finally, all options were kept open as to negotiations on the permanent solution. These concessions took Rabin by surprise. He had not believed that these were things the PLO would agree to. Now they had. Thus, at the beginning of August, not before, Rabin finally made up his mind. He decided to send the Israeli participants back to Norway.232

Since the parties had left Halvorsbøle, complicated messages had been sent via the Norwegians. The Israelis demanded that the Palestinians should accept or reject the package deal. Arafat and the Palestinian team neither approved nor entirely accepted this way of bargaining. In addition, the ‘code language’ that had been developed, which was used all the time when speaking on the telephone, was not particularly useful to enable this sort of negotiations. Terje Rød Larsen became the target for an intensive round of calls. ‘Hi, it’s me, Larsen the terrorist’ was his ritual way of opening a conversation on the phone. And then he might, for instance, continue: ‘Number One called ... and said that Grandfather and the Holy Ghost accept the seven points in principle and are prepared to discuss the eight’.233 On the Palestinian side, Number One was Abu Ala, Grandfather was Arafat, and the Holy Ghost was Abu Mazen. On the Israeli side, it was Rabin who was Grandfather, Peres was the Father, Beilin the Son and Uri Savir Number One.234

By the beginning of August, this way of communicating had become too difficult. An informal meeting was set up in Paris by Rød Larsen and Juul. Abu Ala met with Yair Hirschfeld and sorted out where the parties stood on the 16 points related to the declaration of principles. They managed to redefine the language and settle the details on the Gaza plan.235

On 13 August 1993, the two teams arrived in Norway for the 12th and final round of negotiations on the declaration of principles. This time they returned to Borregaard in Sarpsborg. Again, the Israeli negotiators believed that this would be the last round, and again this was not to be the case. The Israelis were encouraged to discover that the Palestinians had changed their minds on some of the eight points. Some of their demands had been transferred to the detailed negotiations over the Gaza–Jericho arrangements and the interim settlement. These included the size of the Jericho enclave and the questions of the crossing-points between Gaza and Egypt and between Jericho and Jordan.236

However, the transfer of power from the Israeli military government to the Palestinians in Gaza and Jericho was still not solved. Neither was the location of the proposed Palestinian Council. Israel wanted to make sure that the Palestinians had their offices limited to Gaza and Jericho. On the other hand, the Palestinians did not persist in arguing that

---


234 Same references as above. For further information on the code language, see Savir 1998, p. 21.


Palestinians living in Jerusalem should be able to run for seats in the Palestinian Council. Israel was determined to exclude every possible way of integrating Jerusalem into the declaration of principles and the interim framework. Other points of disagreement were whether the Israeli army should retain responsibility for the security of the settlers in Gaza and the Jericho area after its withdrawal. There were also disagreements over the timetable for withdrawal, although the Israelis, according to Savir, had agreed to speed up and recognize the Palestinians’ political (but not national) rights.237

On the issue of mutual recognition, the Palestinians had agreed to the seven conditions put forward by Israel. However, they demanded that the mutual recognition agreement should have a certain symmetry by making parallel demands. If the PLO was to recognize Israel and renounce violence and terror, Israel should do the same. To the Israeli negotiators, this was totally unacceptable. They probably felt that renouncing terror and violence was tantamount to admitting that they themselves had used such methods. The Israeli negotiators suggested completing the declaration of principles first and postponing the question of recognition until later. The Israeli team ‘hoped that the incentive they had dangled before the Palestinians would spur them on to agree to the DoP’.238

Completing the declaration of principles was now the most important task. Several months earlier and without any connection to the negotiations in Oslo, an official visit to Sweden and Norway by Peres had been scheduled for 17–20 August. The Israeli team wanted to use this visit to finalize the negotiations. Before Peres’s departure, Rabin and Peres agreed that the Israeli foreign minister should try to resolve the outstanding questions. He should aim at getting an agreement signed in Oslo. According to Singer, Peres had decided that ‘he would clinch the final deal himself’. He had a ‘politician’s ego’ and had had ‘enough of Singer and Savir’. His attitude was almost a kind of ‘Let Daddy show you. Father knows best’. However, according to Singer, such behaviour is often the case with negotiations, because ‘when 99% of the work is done, the parties hesitate to take the final step.’239

The three Norwegians – Holst, Rød Larsen and Juul – were asked by Peres to join the Israelis secretly in Stockholm in order to help and ‘expedite matters’.240 After negotiating for months, the final outstanding questions were solved during the night between 17 and 18 August, which was characterized by eight hours of phone calls between Stockholm and Tunis. From Sweden, Holst talked to Arafat at the PLO headquarters. Peres did not want to talk to Arafat himself. He needed Holst, someone on his level, to do the talking. Yoel Singer and Avi Gil were doing the negotiations – through Holst – from the Israeli side. Singer basically told Holst, ‘this is how far we can go, this is our red lines’. Holst was ‘very instrumental’.241 Shimon Peres was

---

237 Same references as above.
238 Corbin 1994a, p. 149; see also same references as above.
241 Interview with Yoel Singer, 4 June 2002.
asleep, but was woken up whenever decisions had to be taken. In Tunis, the entire negotiating team was gathered around Arafat: Abu Ala, Abu Mazen and Hassan Asfour.\footnote{Also present were Yasser Abed-Rabbo, an adviser to Arafat who increasingly acted as his spokesman, and Muhsen Ibrahim, a Lebanese politician. Corbin 1994a, p. 155.} Terje Rød Larsen had told Peres that the Palestinians ‘love drama’, and he therefore ‘proposed to telephone them in Tunis to tell them that Shimon Peres was right there with him – ready to negotiate the final points’.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 345.} ‘I could hear on the phone the excitement on the Palestinian side’, confirms Peres.\footnote{Interview with Shimon Peres, 24 October 2002; see also Corbin 1994a, pp. 153–160; Beilin 1999, pp. 117–118; Savir 1998, pp. 55–57; Peres 1995, pp. 345–346; Makovsky 1996, pp. 70–73.}

Holst informed Arafat that the Israelis and the Norwegians wanted to settle all the outstanding issues with the chairman on the telephone. Arafat was not too happy about conducting detailed, legalistic discussions on the phone in his rather broken English – discussions involving the future of the Palestinian people. However, the negotiations were set up the way Israel wanted them. Holst conveyed the proposals. Abu Ala conferred with Arafat and communicated the Palestinian response back. On the Israeli side, Singer carried out the negotiations, clearing the bigger issues with the intermittently sleeping Peres.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 346; see also Corbin 1994a, pp. 153–160; Beilin 1999, pp. 117–118; Savir 1998, pp. 55–57; Peres 1995, pp. 345–346; Makovsky 1996, pp. 70–73.}

Peres was determined to clinch a deal and not to let the Palestinians chew over any more details. Peres was tough and used whatever means he found appropriate. ‘At a particularly sticky moment he exploited Arafat’s worst fear. “Tell them we’ll go with Syria”, he said, and went back to bed.’\footnote{Corbin 1994a, p. 156.} Using tactical measures to secure a fast agreement, he deliberately wanted to use his power and put pressure on the Palestinians. He suggested that Rød Larsen should ‘hint to the Palestinians that Israel might yet go for a quick deal with Syria instead of concluding the accord with PLO. Damascus, I said – and this was quite true – had been putting out markedly favourable signals of late. Israel would not want to leap forward on both tracks simultaneously; it would have to choose one or the other. Holst remarked that the Palestinians believed Israel was supersophisticated and that they therefore looked for traps between every line of the draft articles’.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 346.}

If the Norwegian actors privately had objections to the way in which the negotiations were carried out, they neither expressed their worries nor interfered in the process set up by the Israelis. The Norwegians continued to play the game on Israel’s terms. They came when the Israelis wanted them to come. The final Stockholm setting was totally asymmetrical. The Israelis had asked the Norwegians to join them secretly, which the Norwegians did. The Norwegians then passed on to the Palestinians what the Israeli negotiators wanted them to pass on. They knew perfectly well that this was the only way to achieve an agreement. The Israelis and the Norwegians wanted to make the
deal there and then. For their part, the Palestinians were practically confronted with a fait accompli. They were sitting in Tunis, with limited skills both in English and in international law, carrying out the final negotiations over the phone. They had no expertise themselves, and they had no access to outside expertise. They could equally have benefited from the presence of a Norwegian mediator in the PLO headquarters. But the Palestinians had no one there to help them. They were pressured to accept a package deal – to take it or leave it.248

The Norwegians, however, had a risky and difficult role to play. Holst was the messenger. He delivered the messages from the Israelis to the Palestinians and vice versa. He conveyed the proposals. He helped formulate the words used. He assisted and put forward various options. Holst had enormous strength and skills when it came to precise language. Here, he played the role of formulator. Whether this role was distinctively different from the previous Norwegian roles of facilitator and mediator is impossible to judge, since precise documentation from the Stockholm round does not exist. Who, for instance, gained most from the wordings and formulations created by Holst in this last round? Were these formulations once again based on Israel’s premises? Did the PLO leaders have little choice but to agree to these formulations, or were they also acceptable to them? Did Holst only set out the proposals of the various parties, or did he take an active part in the actual process of formulation? In all likelihood, Holst held all three of the Norwegian roles at the same time – facilitator, mediator and formulator.249

At this stage, Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul were no longer at the centre of what was happening. For months, Rød Larsen had been the main orchestrator and operator. It was he who had done the talking, persuading and pushing; he who had kept things running. The Oslo Back Channel had been his project and his life. In Stockholm, however, he and Mona Juul were parked on the sidelines. The Norwegian foreign minister moved to the centre stage. In Oslo, Jerusalem and Tunis, the top leaders had gradually and increasingly become more and more involved in the Oslo project for peace in the Middle East. By now, the ‘whole emphasis of the secret talks was changing, as the closer-knit team at the centre gave way to the politicians, who now had to accept public responsibility for what their teams had done’.250 It was the top level that took the final decisions. At this stage, the earlier negotiators were playing only minor roles. The handiwork had been formed by them, but the final decisions were left for the politicians.251

248 As Singer judged the situation, this was absolutely helpful for the PLO. This was ‘not on the premises of Israel. The PLO got the best deal in Oslo. The PLO was much stronger than Israel. Arafat, playing the poker game with Israel, was in the end sitting with all the cards’. Interview with Yoel Singer, 4 June 2002.
TheActiveMediator

Three major issues were up for negotiation during that long night in Stockholm. In Sarpsborg (13–15 August), it had been agreed that the question of the size of the Jericho area and the crossing-points should be transferred to the later negotiations. It had also been agreed that the protection of the settlers would be Israel’s responsibility. However, Israel also wanted the IDF to remain after the withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho, in order to protect the settlers. The new clause in the agreed minutes to the final declaration of principles could be interpreted in such a way: ‘The withdrawal of the military government will not prevent Israel from exercising the powers and responsibilities not transferred to the Council.’

The second major issue that was discussed in Stockholm concerned the details of the Gaza/Jericho arrangements. In Annex II of the declaration, the word ‘responsibilities’ was changed to ‘matters’. This was favourable to Israel because it gave ‘more room for legal manoeuvre in the paragraph dealing with the security, foreign affairs and settlements issues, which lay outside the control of the interim Palestinian council’.

The third major issue concerned the location of the Palestinian Council. The PLO wanted offices in ‘Gaza, the Jericho area and other places on the West Bank’. As the Israeli negotiators saw it, this phrase was unacceptable because it left the way open to bringing Jerusalem back into the discussion prior to the final status negotiations. For the Israelis, it was ‘very important to stress that the effective capital would be Jericho, while the Palestinians insisted on the right to hold debates in any location of their choosing’. The compromise reached involved adding the phrase ‘pending the inauguration of the Council’. This meant that the Palestinian institutions could only operate in the sectors ceded to the council authority, meaning that Jerusalem was effectively excluded. With this issue solved, the negotiations over the declaration of principles were finalized over the phone, with the Palestinians in Tunis and the Israelis and Norwegians in Stockholm, in the early hours of 18 August 1993.

The Declaration of Principles

The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements was followed by four annexes and agreed minutes. Taken together, these constituted a step-by-step approach to peace in the Middle East. The first part was a plan for Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho, and contained a timetable for the handover, which was to be achieved within four months of the signing of the declaration of principles.

---

252 Declaration of Principles, Agreed Minutes, B, Article VII, 5; see also Corbin 1994a, pp. 157–158.
253 Corbin 1994a, p. 157; see also Declaration of Principles, Annex II, 3b.
257 Same references as above; see also Abbas 1995, pp. 175–176.
Palestinian Self-Government Authority was to gradually replace the Israeli civilian administration in the West Bank and Gaza in the fields of ‘education and culture, health, social welfare, direct taxation and tourism’ for the duration of a five-year transitional period.\(^{259}\) In many ways, though, the Palestinians were already in control of their own social services, hospitals and schools throughout the West Bank and Gaza, but the declaration now extended these areas of self-rule to include tourism and taxation. The five-year transitional period would begin as soon as the Israelis had withdrawn from the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area.\(^{260}\)

Arrangements would be made ‘for the assumption of internal security and public order by the Palestinian police consisting of police officers recruited locally and from abroad’.\(^{261}\) Israeli withdrawal would begin in the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area immediately after the signing of the declaration, and would be completed within four months.\(^{262}\) Indeed, ‘not later than the eve of the elections for the Council a redeployment of Israeli military forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will take place ... guided by the principle that its military forces should be redeployed outside populated areas.’\(^{263}\) Further transfer of territory would be dependent upon Palestinian performance on security: ‘Further [Israeli] redeployments to specified locations will be gradually implemented commensurate with the assumption of responsibility for public order and internal security by the Palestinian police.’\(^{264}\) The term ‘withdrawal’ was only used in the context of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho. Future withdrawals were termed ‘redeployment’ so as not to prejudice future negotiations on the final status of the Occupied Territories.

Elections to a Self-Government Council were to be held as soon as possible under ‘agreed supervision and international observation, while the Palestinian police [would] ensure public order.’\(^{265}\) These elections were to be held after the Israeli redeployment, and the goal was to hold elections no later than nine months after the entry into force of the declaration of principles. The elections would constitute a ‘significant interim preparatory step toward the realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements’.\(^{266}\) However, nothing was said about what these rights were.

The jurisdiction of the Council was to cover the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which both parties viewed as a ‘single territorial unit’ whose integrity would be preserved during the interim period.\(^{267}\) After the inauguration of the Council, the Israeli civil administration would be ‘dissolved’ and the Israeli military govern-

\(^{259}\) Declaration of Principles, Article VI, 2.
\(^{260}\) Declaration of Principles, Article V, 1; Heikal 1996, p. 453.
\(^{261}\) Declaration of Principles, Annex II.3.c.
\(^{262}\) Declaration of Principles, Article XIV; Annex II, 2.
\(^{263}\) Declaration of Principles, Article XIII, 1 and XIII, 2.
\(^{264}\) Declaration of Principles, Article XIII, 3.
\(^{265}\) Declaration of Principles, Article III, 1.
\(^{266}\) Declaration of Principles, Article III.
\(^{267}\) Declaration of Principles, Article IV.
ment would be ‘withdrawn’. However, the Council’s jurisdiction would not cover occupied East Jerusalem, the numerous Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, external security, Israeli citizens and foreign relations. The defence of Israeli settlements, use of roads, water resources, etc. would remain in the hands of Israel throughout the interim period. Negotiations on the final status of the West Bank and Gaza would start no later than at the beginning of the third year after the start of the interim period and would deal with final security arrangements, borders, the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees and the future of the Israeli settlements. The outcome of these negotiations ‘should not be prejudiced by or preempted by agreements reached for the interim period’.

Palestinian bodies under the Council’s control were to be created to manage the electricity and water supplies, ports, the environment, banking, development and land. The Council would also create an effective Palestinian police force, which would be expanded so that it could take over responsibility for the Palestinians in the whole of the West Bank and Gaza. The declaration of principles also established a number of joint committees and cooperative structures for the purpose of mutual security, economic cooperation and regional development programmes, including “multilateral working groups as an appropriate instrument for promoting a “Marshall Plan” ... including special programmes for the West Bank and Gaza Strip”.

The Declaration of Principles was not an ordinary peace agreement. Basically, it was a timetable, a point of departure with many vaguely formulated intentions. The PLO leader Yasser Arafat’s willingness to accept the Oslo Agreement with all its shortcomings and compromises was undoubtedly a result of his fear of being permanently marginalized. The declaration of principles offered him an opportunity to regain the initiative: ‘Peres gave Arafat a stick which he grasped because he was drowning.’ However, given the enormous imbalance in power between the Palestinians and Israel, it was widely acknowledged that the PLO could hardly have expected a better deal. The Palestinians had ‘little to give since Israel, as the occupying power, [held] most of the cards’.

Consequently, from a position of having nothing and being in exile in Tunis, the PLO could now move back to the soil of Palestine. It had obtained self-rule in Gaza and the small city of Jericho. The Israeli Defence Forces would relocate from within these two Palestinian population areas, while still surrounding them in order to protect Jewish settlers, who were spread all over the West Bank and Gaza in a way that made the Occupied Territories look like a slice of salami. Israel would maintain the possibility of immediate reoccupation, if necessary. In reality, though, Israel had full control

---

268 Declaration of Principles, Article VII, 5.
269 Declaration of Principles, Article V.
270 Declaration of Principles, Article XVI; see also Article VII, VIII and XI and Annex II, 3e.
over both internal and external security. The self-rule – or ‘early empowerment’, as it was called – was strictly defined in terms of control over five internal matters (of which only two in reality were new). The Palestinians would also get a council and a police force.

Could this be characterized as a major breakthrough? Yossi Beilin was very clear as to what he saw as the breakthrough in Oslo. He emphasized the separation between the interim and the permanent settlement: ‘For years the Palestinians had been saying ... that they would only agree to an interim period before the permanent settlement only if the terms of the permanent settlement were guaranteed to them from the start.’ Since 1978, Israel had insisted that any ‘interim period should be fixed without either side having any preconditions as to the form of the permanent settlement; the interim period would in itself influence the content of the permanent settlement, as well as providing the two sides with useful experience of collaboration. In Washington the Palestinians had rejected this concept; in Oslo they accepted it’. The Palestinians had also agreed that ‘Jerusalem, the settlements and Israel’s military security zones would be left out of the scope of autonomy’ (as was the question of the Palestinian refugees, which Beilin did not mention).\footnote{Beilin 1999, pp. 133–134; the italics are mine.}

There was nothing in the declaration of principles that pointed towards a future Palestinian state, and no acceptance of the national rights of the Palestinian people. UN Resolutions 242 and 338 were included, but they were so ambiguous and vaguely formulated that they would have to be subject to major negotiations themselves. The most problematic and conflictual issues were postponed to the final status negotiations, though they were mentioned in the declaration, which in itself was seen by Israel seen as a huge concession. During the negotiations, the Palestinians had given in on many of their initial demands. There would be no international trusteeship, because Israel regarded that as a step towards a future Palestinian state. There would be no permanent international presence and no international arbitration. All references to Jerusalem were removed. The extraterritorial road was gone. Only a vague reference to ‘arrangements for a safe passage’ between Gaza and Jericho remained. Gone also was Palestinian control over the Gaza–Egypt and Jericho–Jordan passages: in the declaration of principles, these were referred to as ‘arrangements for coordination between both parties’.\footnote{Declaration of Principles, Annex II, 3g and 4.} What was left was a timetable in which all of the difficulties had been put off for the future. This was the ingenious principle guiding the whole agreement.

In the meantime, the Norwegians, Palestinians and Israelis would hope and pray that trust could be established so that it would be possible to discuss and solve the core of the conflict. The timetable laid down in the declaration of principles had to be built on mutual faith and trust. In the end, progress would depend on how Israel proceeded – Israel being the one giving away military control and transferring power and self-rule to the Palestinians. ‘It’s clear that the ones who initialed this agreement have not lived under occupation. You postpone the settlement issue and Jerusalem without even get-
The Active Mediator

The declaration of principles was definitely peace on Israel’s premises. But this was also the only way of achieving any peace or agreement at all. Norwegian State Secretary Jan Egeland argued that it was better to have an imperfect peace than a perfect war: ‘Some thought the agreement was ingenious, others thought it was a ticking bomb that sooner or later would explode. The latter were unfortunately proved right’, admitted Egeland in January 2001, while commenting on the Oslo process in hindsight.276

However, the declaration of principles from Oslo transferred a small amount of the territory of the old Palestine to the PLO. The Palestinians gained a start and a territorial base, Gaza and the city of Jericho, from which they could begin to organize their dream, a future Palestinian state. The territory ‘was entirely surrounded by Israelis, was minute in size, and was teeming with economically distressed Palestinians’.277

But, if the agreement was viewed in an optimistic light, Israel would continue the process of withdrawal, the Palestinian economy would benefit from huge amounts of international aid, no new settlements would be established, and negotiations over a permanent settlement would begin after two years. Unfortunately, though, everyone knew that this would be extremely difficult to achieve.278

During the night between 19 and 20 August 1993, these future problems were not on the minds of the Oslo club. Instead, its members were celebrating a major victory for peace in the Middle East. After the secret mission to Stockholm, Holst, Rød Larsen and Juul had flown back to Oslo in order to receive Foreign Minister Peres on his official visit to Norway. The real purpose of Peres’s visit was still a secret. Uri Savir, Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak had taken the first flight to Oslo, as had Abu Ala, Hassan Asfour and Mohammed Abu Koush. This time, the Palestinians had also brought a lawyer, Taher el-Shash, an Egyptian ambassador and legal adviser to the PLO who

---

276 Aftenposten, 10 January 2001: ‘Noen mente det var genialt, andre mente at det var en tidsinnstilt bombe. De som mente at det var en tidsinnstilt bombe, fikk dessverre rett’. This comment was made by Jan Egeland at the launch of the report ‘Norwegians? Who Needs Norwegians?’ (Waage 2000a), PRIO, Oslo, 9 January 2001.
278 Ibid.
would study the declaration of principles before they signed. According to Beilin, Shash found the document ‘legally satisfactory from a Palestinian point of view’. Egyptian journalist Mohammed Heikal claims that Shash had only minor corrections to the legal language. The problem, however, was not legal: it was the political content. ‘This is Camp David only even worse’, he told Arafat on the phone from Oslo. ‘But I don’t think you could have got any more, and if you want to go ahead, I wish you God’s blessing.’

On 20 August 1993, in the middle of the night, the signing ceremony was held at the accommodation used by the Norwegian government to house official guests in Oslo, where Shimon Peres was staying during his visit to Norway. An official dinner had been held for Peres that same evening, and the secret signing ceremony took place after everyone had left. Foreign Minister Holst had arranged for the signing to take place using the very same desk that former Norwegian prime minister Christian Michelsen had used when signing Norway’s secession from Sweden in 1905. Uri Savir and Yoel Singer signed for Israel, Abu Ala and Hassan Asfour for the PLO. Foreign Minister Holst signed as a witness. Peres and the rest of the Oslo club watched the ceremony. (Peres could not participate in the ceremony, because the Israeli government had neither been informed nor given its approval of these events.) All of the major participants – Foreign Minister Holst, Abu Ala, Uri Savir and Terje Rød Larsen – held moving speeches. ‘Today, indeed is the beginning of the future’, Savir claimed. ‘A future in which legitimate Palestinian desires to be in charge of their lives through self-government are compatible with the Israeli desire to be in charge of our fate, through security. It is the beginning of a transitional period, bridging the anarchy of past conflict with the order of future permanent coexistence.’ Savir also praised the Norwegian contribution: ‘Without Norway, this historical declaration would not have been reached here today. The Oslo spirit – this special harmony you convey to us, between man, nature and conduct – was contagious in creating a new Middle East spirit. You are peacemakers in the true sense of the word, facilitating peace for the sake of peace itself.’

---

279 Shash had been a member of the Egyptian team at Camp David in the late 1970s and had been assigned to the Palestinian delegation during the Madrid conference and the negotiations in Washington. According to Heikal, Shash’s ‘knowledge of the issues was second to none’. It was Arafat who had insisted on Shash going through the declaration of principles. He had been woken up in the middle of the night and put on the first plane to Norway. Heikal 1996, p. 451.

280 Beilin 1999, p. 118.


283 Savir 1998, p. 58

Informing the United States

Prime Minister Rabin, when informed of the signing in Oslo, agreed with Peres that the most important and urgent matter for Israel was to inform the United States – before the whole Oslo enterprise became worldwide knowledge. Both Rabin and Peres were afraid of the reactions and consequences in Washington. Rabin also wanted to create a ‘window of escape’. He wanted to hear Christopher’s opinion before he took any final decisions. Since 1991, the USA had invested huge amounts of money, power and prestige in a peace process that had led nowhere. Now, the Americans were going to be told that Israel and the PLO, with help from little Norway, had been able to do business themselves, deliberately bypassing the superpower. However, all of the Oslo actors acknowledged that the reaction and attitude of the USA to the Oslo project would be crucial for future developments. They all needed public support and help from the Americans in the process ahead.

The Israeli government had never officially or systematically updated the US government on what had been going on. Nor had the USA initiated any direct contact with Israel regarding the Oslo process. Given the ‘intimacy’ of Israel’s relations with the United States, Peres admitted, this was strange. However, the main reason for this situation was his own refusal to inform them. The Americans also believed that had the process in Norway been serious, they would have been directly informed by Israel. But, not only were the Americans not informed, they were also deliberately misled and kept in the dark by both Israel and Norway. Only two weeks earlier, Prime Minister Rabin had shown nothing but scepticism when asked directly about Oslo by the US secretary of state himself. The lack of information given to the USA was – particularly after the signing in Oslo – a source of considerable concern for both Israel and Norway. After all, the world’s only remaining superpower was not a state that could just be ignored, and the United States was the best friend and ally of both countries. Rabin and Peres felt that Israel could ‘hardly proceed to negotiate a mutual recognition agreement with the PLO while Washington still maintained its strict diplomatic boycott of the Organisation’.

The Norwegians too felt a strong need to inform the USA before proceeding any further. They had never been quite comfortable with the feeling that they were going increasingly behind the Americans’ backs. On 27 August 1993, Holst, Juul and Rød Larsen, together with Peres, Gil and Singer, set off for the USA. ‘The Norwegians were excelling themselves’, Beilin thought. ‘Holst was devoting all his time to the

---

285 Interview with Shimon Peres, 23 October 2002.
286 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002.
289 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002.
implementation of the deal, travelling with Peres to California to present the fruits of our labours to the Secretary of State, and immediately thereafter playing a central role in the negotiations over mutual recognition with the PLO.291

It was the middle of the summer vacation in the USA. Both Secretary of State Warren Christopher and the head of the Middle East peace team Dennis Ross had to suddenly interrupt their holidays in order to meet the Israeli and Norwegian messengers of peace. After Peres informed them about the back channel and the signing of the declaration of principles, Holst wished to emphasize that Norway had in fact informed the USA about the Oslo channel. Holst felt a natural and understandable need to justify what he had done. He emphasized that former foreign minister Stoltenberg and State Secretary Egeland had submitted general briefings. In addition, both Stoltenberg and Holst had informed Christopher face to face about events, and the Sarpsborg DoP had been handed over to the Americans. But Holst knew, of course, that after he had taken over as foreign minister nothing had been done by Norway to provide the Americans with a complete picture. The US peace team, including Christopher, had been unaware of the developments in the talks after the Israeli upgrading in May. And Holst had also been directly asked by Beilin to hide the fact that it was the director general of the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs who was negotiating with the PLO. He had also been asked by Peres to reveal nothing about the high-level representation.292

As a result, the Norwegians had given the Americans no information since the start of real negotiations. Israel wanted to have things its way, and the Norwegian team did what the Israelis told them to do. For the Norwegians, it was of overall importance to proceed with the peace negotiations. They were afraid of doing anything that might upset the Israelis and harm the process. By that stage, negotiations were difficult enough and the prospect of succeeding seemed remote. In addition, the two leaks regarding the channel, probably by the Americans, contributed to this reserved position.293

For the Norwegians, protecting the Norwegian channel was the most important goal. This strategy involved a calculated risk on the part of Holst, who was willing to ‘make a gamble that things would work out’.294 If these considerations meant keeping the USA in the dark because Israel wanted it that way, the Norwegian foreign minister


293 During an interview on 11 March 1999, Jan Egeland strongly emphasized the two leaks as the main reason why the Norwegians stopped informing the United States. However, as Egeland also confirms, nothing was transmitted to the Americans by the Norwegians until the deal was completed in August 1993. Although still state secretary, Egeland himself played no crucial role in the negotiations from August 1993 to January 1994.

was willing to act accordingly. There is no other obvious reason why Norway should have misled instead of informing its closest ally. After all, the reactions of the Americans had not been particularly negative when information had been provided after the first rounds of talks. The US representatives had only taken a kind of ‘I hear what you say’ attitude, meaning that the USA would neither approve nor reject the back channel option. As long as the Norwegian track was only complementary to the one in Washington, there was no reason for US resentment.295

However, during the summer, when it gradually became clear to everyone involved that the Oslo track was no longer just a back channel, but rather the main road to peace in the Middle East, it was first and foremost Israel that wanted to keep the USA out of the details and main content. The question to ask, then, is why was the USA not taking a greater interest in what was going on in Norway? For one thing, the Americans were not given the opportunity to fully understand what was going on. As well as being only partly informed, they had also been partly misled. In addition, they were perhaps too self-confident to believe that anything important could be happening outside their control and involvement. The Oslo story seemed just too fantastic and unreal to have any chance of being a success story in the eyes of the Americans. The US peace team did ‘not take it seriously, they misjudged it badly’, former secretary of state James Baker claims.296 However, it was in the interests of Israel to keep the United States out of the Oslo process. Israel knew perfectly well how much the USA was devoted to the Washington track, and the Israelis were perfectly aware that it had been Israel that had insisted that direct negotiations with the PLO were out of the question. The Americans had accepted the Israeli demands and had agreed to negotiate with local Palestinian leaders. This, of course, also suited the Americans, since they had broken off their own contacts with the PLO in 1990 and would have found it awkward to resume contact with the organization.

In addition, the US peace team, together with Prime Minister Rabin, had been working hard and had been seemingly successful in promoting the idea of peace with Syria first. Then, like a bolt out of the blue, Peres and Holst turned up in California with a signed declaration of principles and a proposal for mutual recognition. It was understandable that both foreign ministers feared that the Americans would be ‘piqued at being left out’, and that they ‘would react coolly toward opportunity being laid at their doorstep. The Norwegians were concerned that the United States might be too proud to accept the declaration as it stood. In the simulation games that Terje [Rød Larsen] and Avi [Gil] played on the way to California, Avi (in the role of the Americans) joked: “Norwegians? Who needs Norwegians?”297


296 Interview with James Baker III 9 September 1999.

It was no wonder that the Israelis and the Norwegians were nervous at the thought of what they were about to present to the US secretary of state. They were also going to invite the USA to come on board their peace train. Because of Peres’s bad experience with the Americans six years earlier, the Israeli foreign minister ‘preferred to keep the Americans off balance’. Indeed, ‘Peres always held a distance to the Americans’. Peres therefore suggested to Holst that the Oslo DoP should be presented as a US-brokered document. ‘Peres in his usual fashion wanted to hide behind the US. Therefore, he wanted Christopher to take the agreement on as an American-sponsored agreement.’

The Norwegian foreign minister was not happy with Peres’s proposal. Nor were Rød Larsen and Juul when Peres raised the question with them. The Norwegians had invested a great deal in the secret Oslo project and were not prepared to let the USA take all the credit and glory. The Norwegians definitely wanted a place in the sun themselves. Holst, however, saw the realpolitik in the situation and recognized the need to have the Americans on board. Reluctantly, he accepted Peres’s proposal.

But Warren Christopher turned Peres’s suggestion down. The US secretary of state made it clear that he was not prepared to ‘adopt’ the Oslo Agreement as a US initiative. This was just not a credible option. The truth was bound to come to the surface, argued Christopher. This had been and was to be presented as a Norwegian project. ‘At the most, the Americans would thank the Norwegians for their contribution to the process and announce that negotiations would continue in the USA.’

However, the US peace team was deeply surprised. The Americans were also somewhat hurt and angry over having been kept in the dark by Norway and Israel. ‘We did not know. We were misled’, claims Dennis Ross. Comments like ‘Terje Rød Larsen tried to play Henry Kissinger’ or ‘Johan Jørgen Holst was symbolically elbowing himself onto the White House lawn ceremony’ are not simply expressions of enthusiasm and warm support. Furthermore, according to Christopher, the agreement was ‘very general’. Both Ross and Christopher immediately realized ‘how much it left to be done. It set goals for certain components of the peace, but it was silent on any specific steps to accomplish them’. All the same, Christopher had ‘hardly expected the dramatic news’ coming from the Israelis and the Norwegians.

---

300 Peres 1995, p. 354.
301 Interviews with Dennis Ross, 21 July 1999 and 6 June 2002.
302 Beilin 1999, p. 120.
303 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002.
304 Interview with Samuel Lewis, 5 June 2002.
The Active Mediator

At the meeting in California, it was very clear to both Ross and Christopher that Peres and Holst were ‘enormously nervous’. And Christopher’s behaviour only ‘added to their nervousness’. He listened to what they had to say, saying nothing of substance himself. All he said was ‘What do you think, Dennis?’, before sending the two foreign ministers out of the room so that he could have a separate meeting with Ross to discuss the news.

But Ross and the rest of the US peace team quickly gave the Oslo achievements and agreement warm approval. In many ways, the Americans were happy that it was to be Israel that would break the taboo surrounding dealing with the PLO. The Oslo DoP could also be seen as a present on a silver platter for President Bill Clinton, who badly needed a public success. Clinton had only been president for nine months, but there had already been failures over foreign policy issues in Bosnia and Somalia. Domestically, trade problems, healthcare reforms and the budget deficit loomed large and threatening. A breakthrough in the intractable conflict in the Middle East could be the foreign policy triumph Clinton needed. The muscle of the United States was definitely still needed to implement the agreement.

Everyone gathered around the US secretary of state in California accepted and understood that the USA was the only party that had the political power to sell the agreement in the Middle East. Peres and Holst told Christopher that an official signing ceremony in the USA would provide the necessary international credibility. This was also seen as an important way of getting the Americans really committed to the Oslo Agreement. However, all those present at the meeting in California agreed that a US-sponsored ceremony could only be arranged if Israel and the PLO recognized each other, particularly since the PLO was still refused entry to the USA by Congress. With the help of Norway, the question of mutual recognition had to be settled first.

Mutual Recognition

Before the Declaration of Principles could be signed on the White House lawn, Israel’s seven principles, formulated by Savir and Singer during the Halvorsbøle crisis, had to be transformed into language acceptable to both Israelis and Palestinians. Tough and vigorous negotiations were in progress. Here, Holst played a key role. He

---

306 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002; interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul, 16 June 1999.
308 Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002.
311 See the section ‘Israel’s Trump Card’ (above).
threw the ‘full weight of his energy and expertise into the issue of mutual recognition, and the phone lines to Tunis and Jerusalem were hot’.  

On 30 August 1993, secret negotiations resumed behind closed doors at Oslo Plaza Hotel. Once again, Abu Ala, Hassan Asfour and Mohammed Abu Koush met with Uri Savir, Yoel Singer, Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak at what turned out to be the last meeting in the back channel setting for the latter two. The Norwegian team arrived directly from their meeting with Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

Negotiations over the formulations in the mutual recognition text appealed to both Holst’s strongest skills and his personal way of approaching issues in international politics. The Norwegian foreign minister shuttled between the Israelis and the Palestinians at Oslo Plaza. Although Norway’s role as a mere facilitator had been left behind months ago, the Norwegian team had not previously been so directly involved inside the negotiating room. The Norwegians’ teamwork approach seemed to be replaced by a new approach in which Johan Jørgen Holst took over almost everything. This change had been coming for a while. The role and involvement of State Secretary Jan Egeland seems to have been minimalized progressively. From playing a key role, he almost vanished from the picture after the second Halvorsbøle meeting in July. Rød Larsen and Juul were needed to continue the contacts and for practical matters. They were therefore still a part of the negotiating process, but played a far lesser role than they were used to. Holst was the foreign minister, and he was in charge. Once the foreign minister had involved himself so actively, it was natural that the role of others would be reduced. In addition, skills in formulation were now needed, and that was one of Holst’s strongest capacities.

The Norwegians’ new negotiating role must also be seen in the light of the inflexible style adopted by the Israelis. Israel wanted the PLO to accept their seven principles — full stop. Once again, Savir and Singer had drafted the text as Israel wanted it. They demanded that the PLO adopt the text word for word. The Palestinians had already accepted that the letter from Rabin to Arafat would be a straightforward statement of recognition. Rabin would simply reply, confirming receipt of the document. Earlier, the PLO had demanded that Israel should also renounce terror and violence. For Israel, this was completely out of the question, and the PLO had already accepted this. The core of the problem was the letter from Arafat to Rabin. First, Israel demanded not only that the PLO should promise to end the intifada and stop all violence and terror, but also that it should do so on behalf of all the Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank, so that organizations like Hamas and Jihad were included. Second, Israel

---


313 *Dagbladet*, 1 September 1993; *VG*, 1 September 1993; see also same references as above.

demanded that Arafat should accept Israel’s right to exist in peace and security. And, third, the PLO was to amend its Charter, removing the clauses that denied Israel’s right to exist. These conditions had to be accepted if Israel were to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people (though not, however, as the leader of any future Palestinian state).315

The PLO was given little room for manoeuvre. The issues being discussed had formed the core of the PLO’s struggle against Israel for over 40 years. These were difficult decisions to take, and ultimately they had to be taken by Chairman Arafat himself. It was to this core of the conflict that he had devoted his life and the whole Palestinian movement. Little wonder that the representatives at Oslo Plaza Hotel were unable to reach agreement.316

Holst’s new way of doing things also caused frustration. His approach involved ‘spending time with each side alone and then sitting in with Savir and Abu Ala as they negotiated. Holst even gave a letter to the Palestinians suggesting that it was time to give way on certain points. This aroused anger and suspicion that Holst was siding with the Israelis’.317 Again, Holst wanted to protect the Norwegian peace project and the role of Norway. His personal prestige was now even more involved, because the Norway channel was no longer a secret. With so much at stake, Holst was anxious to get things moving. The United States wanted a signing ceremony within two weeks. Once again, for Holst, this meant playing the game according to the Israeli rules.318

On 3 and 4 September, Peres once more asked the Norwegians for help in order to conclude a deal. The Israeli foreign minister was in Paris briefing French President Francois Mitterrand. The plan was to have another marathon phone session like the one in Stockholm. Savir and Singer were there with Holst, talking to Abu Ala on the phone. ‘But unlike the session in Stockholm, this one did not go well. The Israelis were in no mood to come to any speedy conclusion, and Peres’s attitude was to let the Palestinians roast awhile.’319 The Norwegians – in particular, Holst – wanted to speed up the process. Along with the pressures of the upcoming signing ceremony in Washington, this was also happening at the height of a general election campaign in Norway. The Norwegian Labour Party could point to impressive domestic results under the firm leadership of Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, but a major foreign policy success would improve Holst’s personal standing among the Norwegian public in

316 Same references as above.
317 Corbin 1994a, p. 182. This letter is neither found in the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs nor among the private papers of the late foreign minister.
319 Corbin 1994a, p. 184.
general. According to Beilin and Singer, Holst’s strong efforts and speed in reaching a deal was not unrelated to these considerations.\textsuperscript{320}

However, in Paris, the Israelis and the Palestinians argued back and forth: ‘the Israelis seemed to be in no hurry to conclude the proceedings. Peres was playing hardball with the Palestinians.’\textsuperscript{321} Arafat had agreed to change the phrase ‘live in secure and recognized boundaries’ – which he preferred – to ‘exist in peace and security’ – the Israelis’ choice that confirmed, as the Israelis saw it, the legitimacy of the Israeli state. However, the mutual recognition text was still a long way from completion. The Israelis and the Norwegians went home with the job unfinished.\textsuperscript{322}

However, Holst was determined not to let the declaration of principles remain unsigned because the mutual recognition text had not been agreed. New rounds of phone calls were made. On 6 September, Arafat visited Egypt’s President Mubarak. From Egypt, he had long telephone conversations with Holst. Both the Egyptians and the Norwegians were convinced that without a meeting between the two Oslo teams, mutual recognition would not be completed before the signing ceremony, putting the whole agreement at stake.\textsuperscript{323}

On 9 September, the Israeli negotiators returned to Paris and asked the Norwegians to join them. Rød Larsen, Juul, Holst and Holst’s wife, Marianne Heiberg, arrived for what they all hoped would be the last round of negotiations. A reluctant Abu Ala showed up later, with Mohammed Abu Koush. Arafat was under great pressure, shuttling between Arab capitals in order to get support for both the declaration of principles and the mutual recognition. Within the ranks of the PLO and among Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank, critical voices were already being raised. Many Palestinians thought it would be political suicide of Arafat to declare the PLO Charter ‘non-valid’, as Israel had demanded. In this situation, Abu Ala felt no joy about having to conduct face-to-face meetings with his Israeli counterparts. He believed that this was a job for Arafat himself. However, Abu Ala had obviously been put under pressure in Tunis and had reluctantly joined the rest of the Oslo team at the Bristol Hotel in Paris. Abu Ala also ‘suspected that Holst was interfering. It took the Norwegian foreign minister an hour to calm him down and convince him that there was no bias towards the Israelis’.\textsuperscript{324}


\textsuperscript{321} Corbin 1994a, p. 185.


\textsuperscript{323} Same references as above. Savir (1998, p. 68) claims that Holst was in Cairo talking to Arafat and Mubarak. Corbin (1994a, pp. 185–186) claims he was in Oslo. An examination of Norwegian newspapers suggests that Corbin is right. Holst travelled from Paris to Oslo on 4 September; he was interviewed in Norway on 5 September; and he travelled from Oslo to Paris on 7 September. Thus, he would have had to go from Cairo to Paris via Oslo, which seems rather unlikely. Aftenposten, 5, 6 and 8 September 1993; Arbeiderbladet, 4 September 1993.

There were two major points of disagreement left to be solved. First, there was the wording of the changes to the PLO Charter. Second, there were the formulations connected to the rejection of violence and terror. Arafat was sitting in endless meetings with the Executive Committee of the PLO. Savir and Singer were constantly on the phone to Jerusalem. Holst was completely tense and utterly exhausted. Finally, at dawn on 10 September, the wording was in place. The PLO would ‘reject’ violence and terror, rather than ‘renounce’ them. And instead of declaring the relevant articles of the PLO Charter ‘non-operative and non-valid’, as the Israelis wanted, the agreed phrase would now state that the articles ‘are now inoperative and no longer valid’. (The PLO had initially wanted ‘not in effect’.) With these changes, the mutual recognition negotiations were concluded.325

Now there were four letters: one from Arafat to Rabin with the PLO’s recognition of the State of Israel; a second from Rabin to Arafat with Israel’s recognition of the PLO; and a third from Arafat to Holst rejecting violence and terrorism. Peres had agreed to write a fourth and secret letter after the signing ceremony, addressed to Holst, in which Peres would commit Israel to allowing Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem to remain open.326

Holst, Rød Larsen, Juul and Heiberg immediately left for Tunis, carrying with them the letters for Arafat to sign. The chairman of the PLO did so on 10 September. The Norwegian team then flew directly to Israel, where Prime Minister Rabin signed the letter recognizing the PLO on behalf of the government of Israel. On the same day, the United States announced the resumption of negotiations with the PLO.327

On 13 September 1993, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and PLO second-in-command Abu Mazen signed the Oslo Accord on behalf of Israel and the PLO, respectively. Then, US President Bill Clinton drew together two men that the world would never have expected to see shake hands. The former Palestinian guerrilla leader and chairman of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, and the former Israeli general and prime minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, shook each other’s hand, under pressure from the president of the USA. However, what they had signed was no peace treaty. The Oslo Agreement was nothing more and nothing less than an initial agreement on principles, which would only pave the way for an interim agreement. All of the thorny and sensitive issues had been postponed to the final status negotiations. All the same, the famous handshake had shaken the world, and expectations of future peace in the Middle East were running sky high. In fact, though, the Oslo DoP was nothing more than ‘just the beginning of the beginning’.328

325 Same references as above. The letters are printed as Appendix XI, XII, XIV and XIX in Makovsky 1996.
326 Same references as above. Johan Jørgen Holst’s private papers, kept by Marianne Heiberg, include copies of these four letters. The existence of the secret letter, dated 11 October 1993, was revealed by Arafat in a speech in Johannesburg in May 1994, causing huge embarrassment internally in Israel.
327 Same references as above.
Chapter 5

IMPLEMENTING PEACE

WITH THE SIGNING OF THE OSLO AGREEMENT, the political architecture of the Middle East seemed to have altered. The ‘criminal terrorist’ organization, the PLO, had become the legitimate counterpart of the ‘repressive occupier’, Israel. Rather than killing one another, the two parties were involved in peaceful negotiations. The road map had been drawn up, and peace in the Middle East seemed within reach. However, ‘the Declaration of Principle was a careful experiment in forward-looking constructive ambiguity’.1 As so often before, the devil was in the details. The agreement was to initiate a productive political process, but nothing was said about the final outcome. The crucial and difficult issues were postponed.

In September 1993, the international community wholeheartedly got on board the peace train, led by the USA. Norway continued to play an important role. However, implementing the Oslo Accord – an interim agreement for an interim period – was a difficult task indeed. Further negotiations were approaching, negotiations that would determine the fate of the agreement. The Norwegians continued to work tirelessly backstage to keep up the momentum and prevent the process from stagnating. So how did the Oslo process develop in these crucial years, from September 1993 until Benjamin Netanyahu took over as Israeli prime minister in June 1996? What was Norway’s role in this implementing phase? What did Norway do to help, both politically and economically? What room for manoeuvre was now provided for the Norwegians? And, finally, why did Norway tirelessly continue to work for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians?

The Reactions

In the aftermath of the signing of the Oslo Accord on the White House lawn, both the Israeli and the Palestinian leaders wanted to show their respective peoples that the agreement would be beneficial to them. To Rabin and the Israelis, this meant a clear reduction in the violence and terrorist attacks against Israel. To Arafat and the Palestinians, it meant an immediate and visible Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, followed by a huge and immediate improvement in living conditions for the Palestinians.

---

1 Brynen 2000, p. 55.
The Oslo Accords were supported by a majority on both sides. But opposition was also strong. The weaknesses of the Oslo Accords were pointed out. On the Palestinian side, the agreement was criticized for being favourable to Israel, which would still have full control in the Palestinian areas. The Palestinians had got only two tiny pieces of ancient Palestine without Israeli soldiers, and even in those cases the soldiers had been redeployed just outside. The Oslo team was accused of being overoptimistic and amateurish in its approach to peace.

Although many Palestinians supported and praised the agreement, astonished and angry reactions soon surfaced. A spokesman for Hamas called the agreement a ‘catastrophe for the Palestinian people and generations of Muslims’. It was thought that the agreement might provoke civil war among the Palestinians, and that Arafat risked assassination.²

More disturbing was the negative reaction from mainstream figures in the PLO, such as ‘foreign minister’ Farouk Kaddoumi and prominent intellectuals like Professor Edward Said and the poet Mahmoud Darwish (the latter resigned from the PLO Executive Committee in protest). ‘Clearly the PLO has transformed itself from a national liberation movement into a kind of small-town government’, wrote Said. The deal ‘smacks of the PLO leadership’s exhaustion and isolation, and of Israel’s shrewdness’. The agreement was ‘an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles’.³

The leader of the Palestinian delegation to Washington, Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi, was ‘outraged’ and refused to participate in the signing ceremony:⁴ ‘The minority are accepting it and the majority are rejecting it. The agreement falls short on the minimum we expected’, he argued.⁵ Saeb Erakat, another member of the Washington delegation, was also ‘outraged’ over the deal being signed and claimed that the Palestinian delegation was ‘shocked. We were the appetizers. The PLO is the main course’.⁶ Members of the PLO Executive Committee were astonished and angry, not least over the lack of consultation beforehand. But, after a heated internal battle, Arafat succeeded in mobilizing the necessary support. The majority of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, however lukewarmly, supported the agreement. What made them optimistic were, not least, the very clear promises immediately after the signing that the international community – both bilaterally and through the World Bank and UN system – would contribute large sums of money to build what they hoped would be a future Palestinian state.⁷

³ Said 1995, pp. 4, 7 (all of Peace and its Discontents consists of critical essays on the Oslo peace process); see also Said 2001.
⁴ Ashrawi 1995, p. 262.
⁵ Heikal 1996, p. 456; see also Abdel-Shafi 1993.
⁶ Ibid.
Reactions in Israel were also mixed, with strong and vociferous opposition from the hardliners. Prime Minister Rabin managed to get the Oslo Accord unanimously through the government with only two abstentions. This consensus was achieved mainly because the agreement could not be changed. A vote against the agreement would mean a vote of no confidence in the prime minister. The Chief of Staff, Ehud Barak, was far from enthusiastic and said that when it came to security – the protection of which had been Rabin’s most important goal – the Oslo Agreement was ‘riddled with holes’. The opposition in the Knesset was fierce and severe. The leader of the Likud Party, Binyamin Netanyahu, compared the Oslo Agreement to Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler and accused Shimon Peres of being even worse than Chamberlain: Neville Chamberlain had only ‘imperiled the safety of another people’. Peres was doing this to his own. The former chief of staff Rafael Eytan, who in 1993 was leader of the extreme right-wing Tsomet Party, claimed that the Rabin government had signed an agreement with ‘the greatest murderer of Jews since Hitler’.

Deputy Chief of Staff and Head of Military Intelligence Major-General Amnon Lipkin-Shahak told a Knesset committee that the ‘war against terrorism’ after the implementation of the agreement would be ‘extremely hard’. He later added that the situation before the agreement was a ‘comfortable situation for us’, but that would change when Palestinian self-rule began. In the Knesset, Rabin defended the Oslo Accord by pointing out its limitations: ‘Jerusalem remains under Israel’s sovereignty and is Israel’s unified capital. The settlements remain... Security in everything that relates not only to settlements but also to Israelis wherever they may be in the area is in Israel’s hands’.

An opinion poll in Israel immediately after the signing showed that 65% favoured the agreement, while 13% were ‘very much against’. In Norway, naturally, the situation was very different. The Oslo actors – ‘Team Holst’ – were glorified and praised for the great achievement, which was seen as ‘the greatest success in Norwegian foreign policy, at least in modern times’.

In Norway, naturally, the situation was very different. The Oslo actors – ‘Team Holst’ – were glorified and praised for the great achievement, which was seen as ‘the greatest success in Norwegian foreign policy, at least in modern times’. Indeed, Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland called the Oslo Agreement ‘the biggest triumph

---

10 Shlaim 2001, 521. Rafael Eytan had been one of Ariel Sharon’s closest supporters during the Lebanese War in 1982.
11 Heikal 1996, p. 457. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak was soon to be appointed head of delegation to the Gaza-Jericho negotiations.
14 Dagbladet, 11 September 1993 (editorial): ‘Dette er norsk utenriksledelses største seier, allfall i moderne tid.’ See also Aftenposten, 14 September 1993. The various press reactions referred to in the paragraphs below are only examples from a huge amount of media coverage in the Norwegian press during autumn 1993.
in the history of Norwegian foreign policy'. In the USA, President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Warren Christopher voiced warm approval of the important role that Norway – and in particular Holst – had played. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres ‘praised fulsomely the Norwegian contribution’ and believed that Norwegians were ‘born to be bridge-builders’. The PLO leader Yasser Arafat was ‘grateful from the depths of his heart’. Throughout the Norwegian media – in all of the major newspapers and on radio and television – the reports were nothing less than lyrical in their praise. Because of Norway, peace was finally to come to the Middle East.

There were a few isolated voices, however, that tried to point out the weaknesses in the Oslo Agreement and the obstacles ahead on the road to peace. One of the most critical comments cited in the Norwegian press came from a PLO leader in Lebanon. His verdict was crystal clear: ‘If you wish to play the part of mediator, you deserve no recognition if you take the side of the oppressor.... It is hypocritical to pretend that you have brought forward a compromise, when you know that you at the same time have created a mess for one of the parties to please the other.... If anyone deserves honour for the deal, it must be Arafat himself. He gave so many concessions that even the Israelis could not say no.’ But such isolated critical comments were completely drowned out by the chorus of praise. When asked critical questions, which seldom was the case, Holst completely dismissed them. When once asked whether the Oslo Agreement could be seen simply as a betrayal of the interests of the Palestinians, his answer was clear: ‘I despair when I hear things like that.’

---

15 Aftenposten, 10 and 11 September 1993: ‘Gro Harlem Brundtland mener den norske medvirkning til fredsavtalen mellom Israel og PLO er den største triumf i vår utenrikspolitiske historie’. 
18 Aftenposten, 14 September 1993: ‘Norge har gjort en stor innsats for fred og for det palestinske folk. Vi er takknemlige, fra dypt i vårt hjerte er vi takknemlige.’
19 See, for instance, Professor Øyvind Østerud in Aftenposten, 9 September 1993; Foreign Affairs Editor Jan Erik Smilden in Dagbladet, 11 and 19 September 1993; Dagbladet, 7 November 1993, feature article by Associate Professor Nils Butenschøn; Arbeiderbladet, 24 November 1993, feature article by Halle Jørn Hanssen, Head of the International Department of Norwegian People’s Aid.
20 Arbeiderbladet, 14 September 1993: ‘Hvis du vil spille en meglerrolle, fortjener du ingen anerkjennelse om du slutter deg til undertrykkeren.... Mens Holst under seremonien i Washington solte seg i glansen fra den internasjonale oppmerksomhet, hadde ikke PLO-veteranen annet enn malurt å helle i begeret. Det er hyklersk å late som om du har frambrakt et kompromiss, samtidig som du vet at du har skapt en røre for en av partene av hensyn til den andre.... Hvis noen fortjener “åren” for avtalen er det Arafat selv. Han ga så mange inntremmelser at selv ikke israelerne kunne si nei. Alle de grunnelggende spørsmåler utsatt. Det eneste Israel har forpliktet seg til, er å diskutere disse på et senere tidspunkt’. Arbeiderbladet also published a number of critical articles by freelance journalist Erik Paulsen in Lebanon; see, for instance, Arbeiderbladet, 13 December 1993.
21 Aftenposten, 6 September 1993: ‘Og Holst avviser at Osloavtalen innebærer et svik mot palestinerernes interesser: Jeg blir matt når jeg hører slikt.’
Johan Jørgen Holst and the Oslo actors were not only media stars in Norway. Internationally, the focus was also on the unexpected Norwegian breakthrough and achievement. The US media made sarcastic comments about how the powerful United States had been sidelined by little Norway in the decisive phase of the negotiations, without even realizing it themselves. A *New York Times* article claimed that the role of the USA was now reduced to ‘taking minutes’.\(^{22}\) Norway and Holst were celebrated as Olympic champions of diplomacy.\(^{23}\) And Foreign Minister Holst himself was shuttled between CNN, ABC, NBC, Fox and Britain’s BBC. The extraordinary Norwegian achievement was covered extensively. Holst was in the limelight, honoured and praised as the great leader of his team and as the Oslo actor who towered above the rest. Holst’s contribution was definitely seen as the crucial one.\(^{24}\)

On a personal level, all of Holst’s dreams had suddenly come true. First, he had been appointed foreign minister. Then, a couple of months later, he was not just foreign minister but also internationally famous. He was playing a major role on the international stage. He was even suggested as the new secretary general of NATO. He was a media star, both domestically and internationally. When he had been appointed foreign minister just a few months earlier, quite a few politicians and commentators had been sceptical. Few politicians, if any, were presumed to be able to fill the shoes of Thorvald Stoltenberg, and certainly not Johan Jørgen Holst. If anyone at that point had suggested that Holst – with ‘laurel wreaths around his neck and with palms in his hands’ – might become an apostle of peace or a master of diplomacy, or might bring about the greatest success of Norwegian foreign policy in modern times, they would most likely have been told that this was highly improbable.\(^{25}\)

However, when the Oslo Back Channel became publicly known, both Holst and the other Norwegian actors were ascribed roles that were different from those they had originally filled. The whole process was now presented as a fairytale or a story in a glossy magazine. The Oslo Back Channel was presented as a family enterprise, with the two married couples Holst–Heiberg and Juul–Rød Larsen in the leading roles. In several interviews, Holst focused on the very private character of the Oslo Back Channel. His wife, Marianne Heiberg, was given a prominent role. As a researcher, she had been working on topics related to the region. In 1990, before Terje Rød Larsen had started the Fafo living-conditions project, she had written two evaluation reports on humanitarian projects in the West Bank and Gaza.\(^{26}\) When she was commissioned


\(^{23}\) *Dagbladet*, 14 September 1993.

\(^{24}\) *Dagbladet*, 10, 11, 12, 14 and 18 September 1993; *Aftenposten*, 13 September 1993.


\(^{26}\) Heiberg 1990a; Heiberg 1990b; Rømming 2003, pp. 11–22.
to write the report on behalf of Fafo in 1992, she already had the knowledge, the experience and the contacts in the Middle East. Yet Heiberg had not been a part of the Norwegian team organizing and taking part in the secret negotiations.\(^{27}\)

There is little doubt about Foreign Minister Holst’s major contribution to the Oslo peace process through his active engagement, knowledge and formulation skills. But the achievement was not that of Johan Jørgen Holst alone. It had been a collective Norwegian enterprise, with several contributors. Former foreign minister Thorvald Stoltenberg, State Secretary Jan Egeland, Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul had got the peace train moving. Holst had used all his skills to reach the final destination, but he had also been completely dependent on having Rød Larsen and Juul on board. It was they, and no one else, who had all the contacts and ran the peace operation. He needed them, just as much as ‘special agent’ Terje Rød Larsen needed the strong backing of the foreign minister.

State Secretary Jan Egeland saw his role significantly reduced. With Holst firmly in charge, Egeland had not been needed to the same extent as before. In addition, Holst did not see the need to delegate tasks, just as he did not see the need for state secretaries in general. As a result, Egeland was left out in the cold. For his part, as UN mediator to former Yugoslavia, Thorvald Stoltenberg had more or less vanished from the picture. If he had wanted to play a role in creating peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, he had definitely chosen the wrong job at the wrong time. But this is nearly always the case in high-stakes politics: the person who holds the right position at the right moment will harvest all the fruits and the glory.\(^{28}\)

Norway wanted to continue playing an important role in the Middle East peace process. Its previous role as a secret facilitator and mediator was history the moment the Oslo Back Channel became publicly known. But the Norwegians continued to help the peace process move forward whenever the Israelis and the Palestinians wanted their involvement. The new role was much more one of economic benefactor and helper — literally that of the ‘Good Samaritan’. But Norway was eager to play an active role and not just to be a passive moneybag. Seen from the outside, Norway was the ‘rich social-democratic oil emirate with some of the highest taxes and some of the finest social services on earth’, with a recently re-elected Labour government and ‘filled with liberal do-gooders’.\(^{29}\) Norway’s foreign aid programme, over $1 billion a year, was the world’s largest in relative terms. It amounted to approximately 1% of Norway’s GNP and was about four times the average in the United States, Japan or most EU coun-

---

\(^{27}\) VG, 30 August and 1 September 1993; Dagbladet, 31 August and 1 September 1993; Aftenposten, 1, 4 and 11 September 1993; Arbeiderbladet, 31 August and 1 and 18 September 1993; Salvesen 1994, p. 350; Corbin 1994a, pp. 179–180.


\(^{29}\) Elon 1993, p. 83.
tries. The Oslo actors would now need every single available Norwegian krone to implement the Norwegian peace-in-the-Middle-East project.30

The Palestinian Legacy

Political futures are likely to be heavily shaped by the past, the Palestinian case being no exception. The legacies of past politics and the social, economic and political structures already established had major implications for the challenges facing both international donors and the Palestinians after 1993.31

‘How you start significantly determines how you finish.’ This has perhaps been the most important lesson learned from state-building enterprises during the last few decades.32 Patterns of political and institutional behaviour established in earlier periods are likely to be reproduced totally or partially after a new state is created. The ‘long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead’, British economist John Maynard Keynes once cynically observed. For a political leadership in ‘weak, unstable, formerly war-torn countries, those words may have a particular (and perhaps quite literal) resonance’.33

In 1991, approximately 2 million Palestinians lived in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The population was expanding by more than 4% a year, having one of the highest natural growth rates in the world. The pressure on land, water and natural resources was immense and growing. The population was young, with a rapidly growing labour force increasingly facing the threat of unemployment.34

Although the situation for the Palestinian populations in Gaza and on the West Bank is often discussed in the same breath, there were – and are – significant differences between the two areas. The Gaza Strip – often referred to as ‘the forgotten man of the Middle East’, ‘the stepchild of the West Bank’, ‘the black hole of the Arab world’ and ‘Israel’s collective punishment’ – was never incorporated into a sovereign state.35 Two-thirds of the inhabitants were refugees. Nearly half of the population were under 14 years of age. No one carried a passport. Almost everyone was stateless, and no one could leave Gaza without permission from Israel.36

The West Bank, on the other hand, used to be a part of Jordan, and is 15 times larger than Gaza. The West Bank was also much more exposed to external influence. Gaza’s borders were seldom crossed, except by Palestinian day-workers travelling to and from Israel. Gaza’s size and location made it much easier to control than the West

31 Brynen 2000, pp. 30–31. The present of this report provides only a superficial overview, in order to highlight some of the challenges confronting the peacemakers and donors.
33 Quoted after Brynen 2000, p. 31; see also Roy 2001, pp. 6–7.
35 Roy 1995, p. 3.
Bank. In contrast with the Gazans, the majority of the West Bankers were indigenous, and many of the refugees from 1948 later left, primarily for Jordan, or became absorbed in the towns and villages of the West Bank. Unlike the case of Jordan and the West Bank, Egypt regarded Gaza as distinctively Palestinian and made no attempt to incorporate or annex the territory.  

The Israeli occupation in 1967 had important consequences for the social, economic and political structures of the Palestinians. The established class of notables was undermined, although not eliminated. Traditional labour-intensive agriculture declined by one-third, and those who became unemployed as a result were incorporated as workers within Israel’s agriculture or construction sectors. The Palestinian middle class grew. During the oil boom in the 1970s, many highly educated Palestinians emigrated to the Gulf states and elsewhere. As many as 40% of Palestinian families on the West Bank and in Gaza had one or more family members living abroad, sending money home. When the Palestinians were expelled from the Gulf states in 1991, the economic consequences for many Palestinian families were severe – though, as always, they were much worse for the Gazans than for the West Bankers.

Prior to the Israeli occupation in 1967, the Palestinian areas were characterized by a predominant agricultural sector and a large service sector. The industrial sector was small. Compared with the Jordanian-ruled West Bank, this imbalance was even greater in Egyptian-administered Gaza. After 1967, however, the economies of the West Bank and Gaza grew substantially. Throughout the 1970s, the growth mainly came from earnings outside the Palestinian areas, either from Palestinians working in Israel or from Palestinians working abroad. In addition, parts of the agricultural sector were modernized. The service sector also grew. From the 1980s onwards, though, the economy stagnated. The Palestinian economy experienced substantial disruption as a result of the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987. An even larger proportion of the Palestinian labour force found work in Israel. In 1987, the wages of Palestinians working in Israel constituted 28% of the Palestinian GNP, and these jobs represented around one-third of all employment. At the same time, Palestinian trade had become heavily dependent on Israel for both import and export. The Palestinians had a very vulnerable and politically sensitive economy, completely dependent on Israel.

Israel never sought to integrate the Palestinian society with its own. Nor did Israel seek to educate, ‘enlighten’ or exploit the Palestinians for purely economic gains, as is often the case with a colonizing power. Israel was not primarily interested in immediate economic gains from the Palestinians. Instead, Israel wanted the land on which they lived. It wanted to incorporate the land and other economic resources into the Jewish state. Consequently, the Occupied Territories were not exploited in the usual sense.

---

39 The industrial sector showed little relative growth. The vast bulk of private-sector investment was in construction. Only 19% of private investment was in the productive sector of the economy.

settler fashion. Israel’s goal was political, not primarily economic. The consequences of this policy were, as researcher Sara Roy sees it, an economic process ‘specific to Israeli rule, a process that could be characterized as de-development’. De-development, Roy argues, is a ‘deliberate, systematic deconstruction of an indigenous economy by a dominant power’. It is qualitatively different from underdevelopment. ‘De-development is an economic policy designed to ensure that there will be no economic base, even one that is malformed, to support an independent indigenous existence’.

By the beginning of the 1990s, approximately 60% of the West Bank and Gaza had been seized by Israel. The land was either declared state land or expropriated for military purposes or settlement construction. By 1992, more than 144 settlements had been established, and approximately 120,000 Jewish settlers lived in these areas. East Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings were annexed by Israel in the wake of the 1967 war, though this process was not formally confirmed until 1980. The East Jerusalem area was the object of intensive Israeli settlement. In 1992, the area had between 160,000 and 170,000 Jewish inhabitants. While the Jewish population in East Jerusalem had been almost negligible in 1967, by 1993 Jewish settlers outnumbered the Palestinians.

Israeli land seizures and settlement activity put severe constraints on the use of natural resources, such as water supplies. The Israeli military government devoted few resources to public sector investment. Palestinian municipal water and electrical enterprises lacked the necessary funds for modernization and expansion. Approximately 40% of the road network was in great need of repair. The provision of health, education and welfare services was extremely fragmented. In these sectors, little modernization was undertaken. In addition, the financial services sector was weak, and the legal system was a complex mixture of Israeli military regulations, British Mandate regulations, and Jordanian and Ottoman law.

The West Bank and Gaza Strip were firmly controlled by the Israeli Defence Forces and the Israeli civil administration. This, naturally, contributed to a further weakening of the structures of local government, which were weak as a consequence of Jordanian and Egyptian rule. Municipal elections were suspended from the middle of the 1970s when it became clear that the results reflected widespread support for the PLO. Subsequent mayors were appointed by Israel. However, the Israeli civil administration employed

---

41 Roy 1995, p. 4.
43 Israel placed severe restrictions on Palestinian exploitation of local water supplies. Between 1967 and the early 1990s, Palestinian water consumption increased by only 10%, from around 200 million to 215–228 million cubic metres. In the same period, the Palestinian population doubled. Israel justified the water restrictions on conservation grounds. However, this did not prevent Jewish settlers from increasing their water usage from zero to 45 million cubic metres in the same time, three times Palestinian per capita consumption; Brynen 2000, p. 41.
44 Brynen 2000, pp. 39–44.
approximately 21,000 Palestinians as teachers, as healthcare and social service workers, and as low- and middle-ranking civil servants.\textsuperscript{45}

The Palestinian response to the Israeli occupation also affected the context for political, social and economic development. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Palestinians’ economic strategy was intended to increase the ability of Palestinian institutions and infrastructure to resist Israeli expansionist policies. It was ‘largely directed to maintaining, not transforming economic conditions’.\textsuperscript{46} The goal was to maintain a Palestinian presence on the land. This was seen as more important than restructuring Palestinian production and enterprise. As a result, no fundamental restructuring of the economy took place.\textsuperscript{47}

Another important aspect of the pre-Oslo period was the critical role played by the NGO sector. Approximately 1,200–1,500 Palestinian NGOs existed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, employing around 20,000–30,000 people. These organizations provided a substantial share of education, healthcare and other social services, and a large part of the growing Palestinian middle class worked in this sector. In the absence of a Palestinian state, and with the Israeli authorities reluctant to engage in public sector institution-building, the delivery of many key social services depended on Palestinian NGOs.\textsuperscript{48}

On the West Bank and in Gaza, the formal apparatus of the PLO was nonexistent. The PLO leadership was far away, in exile either in Beirut or in Tunis. Israel allowed no PLO activity. However, nationalist leadership was provided in other ways. During the 1970s, nationalist mayors and other well-known public figures were both highly visible and highly vulnerable to arrest, deportation and other countermeasures by Israel. In order to ensure effective continuation of leadership under such circumstances, Palestinian nationalist groups emphasized having a large number of groups, organizations and institutions. For many NGOs, political solidarity was more important than effective development. This resulted in weak systems for evaluation and a lack of transparency and quality control within many organizations. The same tendencies could be seen among religious charitable organizations, clinics, schools and social institutions. Many of these were linked to the various Islamist groups that began to emerge and grow from the late 1980s onwards – most notably Hamas, but also the much smaller Islamic Jihad.\textsuperscript{49}

Political factionalism shaped much of the associational life. The Palestinian political spectrum consisted of three main political groupings. First, there was Fatah, headed by Yasser Arafat. This was the largest Palestinian nationalist organization, dominating the PLO. Second, there was the Palestinian Left, which consisted of many smaller parties such as the PFLP, the DFLP, FIDA and the PPP and had a strong, but declining,\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45} Same references as above.
\textsuperscript{46} Roy 1995, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{48} Same references as above; see also Sullivan 1996, pp. 94–95. The channelling of Western and Arab donor support through NGOs was undoubtedly a major factor in their growth.
\textsuperscript{49} Brynen 2000, pp. 50–54; Robinson 1997, pp. 132–173.
influence both on the evolution of Palestinian politics and on the PLO. The Left had strong support among intellectuals and NGO organizers.50 Third, during the late 1980s, the Islamist movement emerged, initially with the support of Israel. This movement was the main opposition to Fatah and the nationalist mainstream, and was far stronger in Gaza than on the West Bank.51

Unlike the inhabitants of the West Bank under Jordan, the Gazans had been unable to develop their own political culture, leadership and institutions. Political activity had been forbidden. The repressive Egyptian legacy, combined with a large refugee population – rural, uneducated, poor and dependent – 'shaped a political culture that saw violence, not debate, as its primary form of mediation and political action'.52 This culture changed little when the Israeli occupation replaced the Egyptian one. On the West Bank, by contrast, Jordan allowed the growth of a differentiated political class structure. A variety of political, economic and social interests were represented. The traditional landed elite and a new class of urban merchants and traders wielded economic and political power. The political socialization of West Bank Palestinians diverged sharply from that of Gazans. They developed a range of political skills and institutional mechanisms that the Gazans never did.53

Within and between these various political groups, considerable factional competition, suspicion and discouragement took place. The result was a myriad of organizations, parties and movements – split from and linked to other political parties and in competition with each other. In addition, the flow of financial resources to allied NGOs served the purpose of consolidating party apparatus and ensuring political control. The PLO offered financial compensation to victims of the struggle against Israel, support for families of prisoners, student scholarships, projects in areas such as housing, agriculture and education, and substantial amounts of patronage money to nationalist institutions and personalities. In this process, corruption was not infrequent.54

The use of such neopatrimonial mechanisms of political management had a long history among the Palestinians. The Ottomans, the British, the Jordanians and the Israelis had all used patronage to consolidate their political position. Within the PLO, patronage had been used to cement both the organization as a whole and Fatah’s leading position within it. Fealty and loyalty were more important than competence. Corruption was overlooked in the interest of power. Arafat’s political style, using patronage as a ruling mechanism, grew out of this traditional Palestinian culture.55

50 The acronyms stand for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA) and the Palestinian People’s Party (PPP, formerly the Palestinian Communist party); see Brynen 2000, p. 52.
55 Same references as above.
The Palestinian legacy had significant consequences for the post-Oslo peacebuilding attempts on the West Bank and Gaza, and not least for the shaping of the Palestinian self-rule regime: ‘economic legacies weighed heavily, political realities were often restrictive, and Palestinian integration into and dependency on Israel continued to exert a powerful and entrenched logic.’

**The Long and Winding Road**

After the signing of the Oslo Agreement and in the expectation of huge amounts of donor assistance, the PLO had to plan how they were going to shape the future. The PLO leaders had no previous governmental experience and little democratic tradition to build on.

Instead of working systematically on the future structure and plans for assuming responsibilities in Gaza and Jericho, the top leaders of the PLO preferred to travel all over the world in order to present and sell the Oslo Agreement. ‘The Palestinian state is within our grasp’, claimed Arafat repeatedly. ‘Soon the Palestinian flag will fly on the walls, the minarets and the cathedrals of Jerusalem’.

Some Palestinian leaders, outside the internal ranks of the PLO, were worried about the future and the PLO leaders’ lack of focus. They felt that the PLO was not taking the new challenges seriously. The leader of the Palestinian delegation to Madrid and Washington, Haidar Abdel-Shafi, was anxious to build a new democratic regime, but the PLO leaders were not eager to listen. Together with a small group, Hanan Ashrawi proposed to Arafat that various negotiating committees should be set up, describing the qualifications and expertise required, but she was unsuccessful in these attempts: ‘Every time we tried to present our proposals and plans to the leadership, the talk would turn immediately to the names of the projected political authority.’

Ashrawi explained to Arafat and the other PLO leaders that the ‘way to go about it is to set up a comprehensive structure and work plan, then find the appropriate people to carry out the tasks. It’s not a question of finding posts for individual people’.

On 10 October 1993, the Central Council of the PLO met in Tunis in order to debate and approve the Declaration of Principles. The DoP was ratified with a 63% majority. The Council approved the setting up of a Palestinian Authority, headed by Arafat. Ashrawi had hoped that the plans worked out by her and her group would be implemented. ‘Instead, we discovered that even then, right before our eyes practically, the political bargaining had already begun, based on a system of quotas and paybacks. Factional favouritism intruded, and personal preferences began to shape the list being

---

56 Brynen 2000, p. 44, see also pp. 50–54.
passed among the inner circle. The Palestinians coming from the West Bank and Gaza – the ‘insiders’ – felt ‘increasingly discouraged by the discrepancy between verbal commitments and actual implementation’.

There were, however, hundreds of details to be settled. Very little had been done since the signing ceremony, except for the PLO leaders’ globetrotting. On the Israeli side, the responsibility for negotiating the details lay with Foreign Minister Peres. Prime Minister Rabin was increasingly nervous about the lack of progress. He also resented Arafat’s overblown rhetoric, aimed at reducing Palestinian and Arab objections to the Oslo Agreement. On 6 October 1993, Rabin and Arafat met in Cairo, their first face-to-face meeting.

The meeting between the two did not go well. Rabin came to discuss facts and timetables, Arafat to talk in broad political terms. ‘Rabin wanted to firm up peace with an enemy, while Arafat sought to enlist Israel almost as a partner to overcome opposition within Arab ranks.’ Arafat wanted and needed help, while Rabin had no sympathy for Arafat’s internal problems or Arab sensitivities. The Israeli prime minister was frustrated and annoyed. He had discovered that there were ‘two different readings of the Oslo agreement’. He was faced with ‘conflicting interpretations of matters’ that he thought were ‘clear’. Rabin felt that both Arafat and his own foreign minister were dreamers. In his mind, the Oslo Agreement should protect Israel. But he had discovered was that there was a big gap between the Israeli and the Palestinian interpretations of the agreement.

Four committees were set up in order to implement the ‘lofty-sounding’ Oslo Agreement. The Liaison Committee, at ministerial level, was chaired by the two that had signed the Oslo Agreement, Shimon Peres and Abu Mazen. This committee was supposed to meet in Cairo every two or three week. The Gaza–Jericho Committee was to negotiate over the establishment of the self-governing structure. The meetings of this committee were to be held in Taba, on the Israeli–Egyptian border, for two or three days each week. The Interim Arrangements Committee was to meet in Washington and discuss the transfer of authority, while the fourth committee, to meet in Paris, was to discuss the important economic questions involved.

Of these four committees, it was the Gaza–Jericho Committee – the ‘nuts and bolts’ committee – that was the most important at this stage of the process. The work of this
committee would test the willingness of the parties to achieve peace. It would hammer out the concrete details in order to implement the vaguely formulated principles. On the Israeli side, the preparations were ‘intensive, almost frenetic’. As usual, the Israelis had done their homework thoroughly and were extremely well prepared. A whole new team was planning the upcoming negotiations. Deputy Chief of Staff and Head of IDF Military Intelligence General Amnon Lipkin-Shahak was appointed head of delegation. The general was ‘tall, silver haired, the very picture of aplomb – looking like a Hollywood version of a war hero’. His counterpart on the Palestinian side was Nabil Shaath, one of Arafat’s most senior advisers. Nabil Shaath was a person who always saw the most optimistic version of reality. He loved being in the spotlight and had an enormous working capacity, but was also seen as a ‘spider, lurking in the dark corner, spinning webs of intrigue, and not missing a move’. On the Palestinian side, ‘[s]ome hated him, others feared him, [but] most respected him’. In contrast to the Israelis, the Palestinian performance and strategy in the negotiations were neither well planned nor well structured. The day before Shaath left for Taba, the Palestinian chief negotiator was ‘still engaged in a frantic search for negotiators. A few hours before the plane took off the last of the delegation was hurriedly informed of their impending tasks, and they clambered on searching for copies of the agreement’. 

During the autumn of 1993, the negotiations in Taba proved tremendously difficult. There was no honeymoon in the Egyptian city, only a huge gap between the Israeli and Palestinian positions. Basically, the two sides had completely different perceptions of the agreement. The Israelis wanted a gradual and strictly limited transfer of power, and they wanted to maintain responsibility for security. They refused to compromise on one single issue, while Israel also sought to ‘repackage rather than end Israel’s military occupation’. Israel wanted to move its troops from the big cities to the rural areas, where resistance was more difficult to organize and clashes were less likely.

The Palestinians, on their side, wanted an early and extensive transfer of powers. They desired a process that would lead to an independent state. Arafat also desperately needed some concrete results to show to his people. The mood among ordinary Palestinians was becoming restive. Their misery continued while their leaders were apparently living a jet-set life. Disillusionment and violent clashes grew. Support for the Oslo Agreement dropped from 63% to 44% in less than four months. At the same time, support for Islamist groups increased. Arafat understood very well that the situa-

---

71 Ashrawi 1995, p. 98.
73 Shlaim 2001, p. 524.
75 Heikal 1996, p. 484.
tion would not improve unless the Oslo Agreement was implemented and international assistance reached the Palestinian areas. The PLO leaders were eager to be rid of the Israeli occupation and to see some positive improvements on the ground.\textsuperscript{76}

The Taba negotiations went from crisis to crisis and took considerably longer than expected. However, on 9 February 1994, the first Cairo Agreement was reached and signed by Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat. This agreement was presented as a compromise, but was rather – as in the past – an Israeli version of a compromise. The agreement sent ‘alarm bells ringing throughout the Occupied Territories and among the Palestinian exile communities and generated even greater political fragmentation, particularly on the issue of ceding control over crossing points to Israel’.\textsuperscript{77} The IDF, whose representatives heavily dominated the Israeli delegation, had ‘managed to impose its own conception of the interim period: specific steps to transfer limited powers to the Palestinians without giving up Israel’s overall responsibility for security’.\textsuperscript{78} Israel would maintain a military presence in and around the Palestinian self-government areas. The IDF would not withdraw, only redeploy its forces. The army was still to have full control over the Israeli settlements in Gaza and the four roads joining them to Israel proper. Through creative arrangements, Israel managed to retain full responsibility for external security and control of the land crossings to Egypt and Jordan – while feigning dual control.\textsuperscript{79}

Israeli negotiator Uri Savir admitted that the negotiating process leading up to the first Cairo Agreement had been ‘brutal’. Peres had been ‘totally fed up’ with the Palestinian ‘pigheadedness’. He was ‘bored with the bickering’ and decided to ‘intervene in almost every detail of the crossing procedure in order to find a creative solution’. He had lost his patience, was ‘infuriated’ and ‘continued to boil’, and had decided ‘simply to try to impose the terms of a compromise’. The Palestinians ‘finally grasped that Israel would not yield on its security concept, therefore they would have to accomplish

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Ashrawi 1995, p. 282.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Shlaim 2001, p. 524.
\end{itemize}
as much as they could within its limitations’. This was definitely Israel’s definition of a compromise: this was security as the Israelis defined it, for Israel.\textsuperscript{80}

However, the issue of security for Israel and insecurity for the Palestinians was most clearly illustrated by the Hebron massacre, which occurred only two weeks after the signing of the Cairo Agreement. On 25 February 1994, Dr Baruch Goldstein – a US-born Israeli settler and a member of the racist party Kach – opened fire on Palestinians praying at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Twenty-nine people were killed before Goldstein was himself beaten to death.\textsuperscript{81}

International condemnation was strong. The peace process was rudely shaken. The PLO angrily suspended its participation in the negotiations and demanded a removal of the militant settlers from Hebron. All settlers should be disarmed; international protection should be secured for the Palestinians; and the Palestinian police force – which was to be responsible for internal security in Gaza and Jericho – should be increased from 6,000 to 12,000, insisted Arafat. In addition, the whole settlement issue, which was only part of the final status negotiations, should be put at the top of the agenda in the talks with Israel. Hamas, with increased sympathy and support, swore revenge.\textsuperscript{82}

Arafat was facing a dilemma. He was ‘losing support where it counted most – with his own people’.\textsuperscript{83} Palestinian anger was not only directed against the Israeli settlers and army: the PLO leadership was also held responsible. Pictures of Arafat were burned in the streets. He was accused of having sold out to Israel. Massive reactions and demonstrations occurred throughout the West Bank and Gaza. To make matters even worse, the IDF decided to stop the rioting by imposing a curfew in Hebron and the rest of the West Bank. In the eyes of both the Palestinians and the rest of the world, it was the victims of violence that were being punished. Arafat was under tremendous pressure. He had to show Israel, the United States and the rest of the world that he was ‘a man of peace and a man of his word’.\textsuperscript{84} The Americans still regarded him as the ‘only leader capable of uniting the Palestinians’.\textsuperscript{85}

The Israeli government was also under pressure to take firm action against militant settlers. In the end, though, only token measures were taken.\textsuperscript{86} Although a majority of ministers in the Israeli government were prepared to remove the approximately 400 settlers from Hebron, Prime Minister Rabin had his doubts. The Oslo Agreement had

\textsuperscript{80}In chronological order, these quotations are from Savir 1998, pp. 114, 109, 110, 117, 112 and 118. On pp. 108–120, Savir extensively describes the negotiating process leading to the Cairo Agreement of 9 February 1994.


\textsuperscript{82}Same references as above.

\textsuperscript{83}Ashrawi 1995, p. 283.

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{86}Two racist groups – Kach and Kahane Chai – were banned; the arrest of five extremists was ordered (though three of these escaped before the order was implemented); firearms licences were removed from 18 people; and a commission of inquiry was set up.
transferred the whole settlement issue to the final status talks, he argued. But what worried Rabin the most was that an evacuation of the Hebron settlers would create an uproar in Israel. However, the Israeli government did accept the PLO’s demand for a temporary international presence in Hebron. It also promised to accelerate its – already overdue – withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho.  

Hamas had sworn revenge. On 6 April 1994, the first of five planned attacks came in the form of a car bomb inside Israel, killing eight and wounding 52. This was the seventh attack against Israeli targets by suicide bombers in one year, but the previous suicide bombers had killed no one but themselves. This latest incident, however, was to establish a regular pattern, consisting of killings, revenge, suicide bombs and the subsequent Israeli closure of borders, preventing approximately 100,000 Palestinians from reaching their regular work in Israel. Another regular part of this pattern was the conflicting pressure put on Arafat, turning his peacemaking operation into a ‘mission impossible’. Arafat knew perfectly well that the suicide bombings – seen as acts of revenge both for the Hebron massacre and for a huge number of incidents in the years to come – were regarded, both among the Palestinians and throughout the Arab world, as justified. He also knew that any condemnation on his part would be extremely unpopular.

Hamas was now taking the lead in the struggle against Israel. Despite strong pressure from Israel and the United States to condemn the suicide bombings, Arafat was hesitating. The mood in Gaza and on the West Bank had become just as hostile to the Oslo Agreement as in Israel, where Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu claimed that Rabin would ‘go down in history as the man who had created an army of Palestinian terrorists’. Arafat was criticized not only in the streets, but also by his colleagues in the PLO and all over the Arab world. He was to an increasing extent regarded as a traitor. The opponents of the Oslo peace process had seen their most pessimistic expectations confirmed. Even worse, its supporters felt that the whole process had gotten into a muddle and that they had fallen off track.

The Israelis and the Palestinians seemed to be caught up in an endless spiral of aggression and revenge. The Palestinians continued to demand the removal of the settlers in Hebron as an absolute condition for resuming negotiations. ‘Business as usual’

---


was not an acceptable option. But Arafat decided otherwise. He felt that he had no alternative but to continue the negotiations in order to reach a more satisfactory agreement with Israel, and he hoped that the new agreement would contain sufficient Israeli concessions to silence the critics. If Israel was more willing to give way on Palestinian symbols of statehood – such as the flag and passports instead of laissez-passers – Arafat would be more forthcoming on Israeli security. Arafat had shown himself to be a ‘true partner of the quest for peace and – once more – the man in the PLO capable of making difficult decisions’, thought Israeli negotiator Uri Savir.91

On 4 May 1994, Arafat and Rabin signed the second Cairo Agreement, often referred to as the Gaza–Jericho Agreement. This agreement established a framework both for Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho and for the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). It opened the way for the return of both Arafat and the PLO to Gaza. With this agreement, the clock also started ticking on the five-year interim period. Final status negotiations should start no later than May 1996. By May 1999, the interim period should be over – with a completed end result.92

The Gaza–Jericho Agreement stated that Israel was to redeploy its armed forces outside the Palestinian population centres. Once again, it was stated that responsibility for tourism, education, culture, health, social welfare and direct taxation was to be transferred from the Israeli to the Palestinian authorities. The Palestinians were free to levy municipal taxes (as opposed to general taxes, of which 70% would go to Israel and 30% to the PA). Israel was not prepared to bring forward or extend Palestinian jurisdiction. Several joint committees were set up, giving a superficial appearance of parity. But unless mutual agreement was reached, Israel retained the ability to block unwanted Palestinian legislation, meaning an Israeli veto. Israel retained full control over the areas surrounding the settlements in Gaza, plus security control over a number of additional areas, together with full control of the whole West Bank except for the city of Jericho. Israel had the right to approve the name of every single Palestinian policeman entering Gaza and Jericho. In addition, Israel maintained full control over external security, border passages, air rights over the autonomous areas, water, electricity and three east–west roads to the settlements in Gaza. In other words, the Gaza–Jericho Agreement gave the stronger party firm control over the new Palestinian authority structure. It gave the Palestinians a superficial semblance of self-rule and some symbols of statehood – such as the right to a flag, passports (though without citizenship of any state), a postage stamp and an international dialling code. ‘A perusal of hundreds of the Agreement’s pages can leave no doubt about who is the winner and the loser in this deal’, wrote the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz on 12 May 1994. ‘By seeing through all the lofty phraseology, all deliberate disinformation, hundreds of pettifogging sec-

---


Implementing Peace

tions, subsections, appendices and protocols, one can clearly recognize that Israeli victory was absolute and Palestinian defeat abject." 93

Leading Palestinian ‘insiders’ such as Faisal Husseini, Haidar Abdel-Shafi, Saeb Erekat and Hanan Ashrawi were ‘horrified’. They urged Arafat not to sign. The Gaza–Jericho Agreement was ‘cumbersome, extremely complicated and unwieldy, and out of step with the specific needs on the ground of the Palestinians. By creating numerous areas of ambiguity and friction, the agreement could backfire or implode at any time’. 94

A few days earlier, on 29 April, negotiations on economic questions had been completed in Paris by Abu Ala and Israeli Minister of Finance Avraham Shohat. As the Israeli negotiators saw it – with no opposition from Peres and Rabin – the economic partnership with the Palestinians ought to be created at a minimal cost to the Israeli economy. Thus, the Palestinian self-rule areas should remain in a single customs union with Israel. The Palestinian Authority was not allowed to establish its own currency, though it was authorized to set up a monetary authority in order to oversee the local banking system and foreign currency reserves. Trade with Jordan and the rest of the Arab world would be limited to a list of products determined in advance. In addition, it was required that Palestinian products should be of a quality that was in accordance with Israeli standards. However, it was important for Israel to reach agreement on the economic issues, since this would bring cheap Palestinian labour back to Israel and help Israel gain access to markets in the Arab world. ‘Above all, however, Israel wanted it understood that the free movement of Palestinian goods and citizens [should] be subject to security considerations. In short, the Palestinians would be wholly dependent on Israel’s economy and security – or, to be more precise, on Israel’s sense of security’, Uri Savir admits. 95

The Palestinian negotiators, for their part, were not happy with the negotiated result in Paris. They realized how completely dependent they were on Israel. The Paris Protocol also revealed how dependent they would be on help from the outside. The Palestinian Authority would be unable to cover its own expenditures: only 60% of these could be covered through taxation. Furthermore, the Palestinians wanted far broader trade, lower rates on customs and value-added taxes. But, most importantly, the Palestinians wanted free movement of Palestinian workers and goods. 96

The Paris Protocol continued to link the Palestinian economy closely with Israel’s. Developing an independent, self-sustained economic base would be impossible. The PA was not given full decisionmaking power over its own people, resources or goods.

93 Quoted after Said 1995, p. 102; same references as above.
96 Same references as above.
It was not given free and independent access to capital and markets. The Palestinian economy, like the political situation, would remain completely dependent on and vulnerable to Israel’s closure or recession.97

Perhaps Arafat understood all this. Perhaps he realized that he again had signed an agreement that many Palestinians would scorn because it allowed Israel to retain a decisive influence over their affairs. In any event, he had to show his people that he was fighting for their interests, and he had to show the Israelis that he was maintaining their rights and security as well. Consequently, Arafat was forced to ride two horses at the same time. In such cases, the rider will usually fall off both horses eventually, but Arafat had not – at this point in time. The hazardous and fatal riding continued.98

On 25 May 1994, the Israeli army withdrew from Gaza and the desert oasis of Jericho. A token force of 30 Palestinian policemen had already arrived in Gaza on 10 May to assume control of internal security. The Israeli withdrawal was greeted with great joy and jubilation among the Palestinians. The Israeli flag was replaced by the Palestinian one. On 1 July 1994, Yasser Arafat entered Gaza, and on 5 July he entered Jericho, returning to the land for the first time since 1967. In Gaza, a crowd of 100,000 Palestinians was waiting for him. Their leader, the principal symbol of the Palestinian cause, had come home to build a society, an economy and – in the mindset of most Palestinians – a Palestinian state. After centuries of rule by Turkey, Britain, Egypt, Jordan and Israel, the Palestinians were responsible for some part of the area in which they lived. At least so it seemed in the summer of 1994. But Rome was not built in a day. The political, economic and social challenges that confronted Arafat were enormous. In order to have been able to use the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho as a springboard for the shaping of a Palestinian state, Arafat would have to have been a performer of miracles – which, of course, he was not.99

**Establishing an Economic Framework**

From the beginning, the Israelis and the Palestinians realized that the success or failure of the Oslo Agreement would to a large degree depend on social and economic development within the Palestinian areas. Without increased prosperity for the Palestinians, there would be no security for the Israelis. During the negotiations in Oslo, Abu Ala had repeatedly pointed out that an agreement between Israel and the PLO could ‘only walk on two legs and with a clever head. One leg is security, the other is economic development’.100 This view had been shared by all of the Oslo participants. During the negotiations in Norway, economic cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian self-

---

99 Same references as above.
rule areas had been a prominent issue. But, as the process proceeded, this element had been increasingly overshadowed by security concerns and political considerations.\footnote{Savir 1998, pp. 56, 100–101; Peres 1993, pp. 30–31, 101–113, 138–140; Heikal 1996, p. 458.}

After the signing of the Declaration of Principles, economic aspects were once again put higher up on the agenda. Everyone acknowledged that unless the living conditions of the Palestinians in Gaza and on the West Bank were improved quickly, it would be impossible for Arafat to sell the Oslo deal to his people. If disillusionment set in and there were no visible ‘facts on the ground’, Arafat would not be able to prevent attacks on Israel by extremist parts of the Palestinian population. Without visible improvements, industry, roads, building enterprises, communications, water, schools, medical care, work and democratic institutions, there would be no peace.\footnote{Same references as above.}

This was, of course, just as clear to the Israelis. The Occupied Territories were something Israel wanted to keep, at least parts of them. But the Palestinian areas – and the Gaza Strip in particular – were a political and economic burden. If the Oslo Agreement could free Israel from some parts of that burden, while allowing it to continue to occupy parts of the area, so much the better. This was also an important reason why Shimon Peres took it upon himself to do a fundraising job – or, as Peres chose to call it, an ‘UJA job’ – for the Palestinians.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 353. UJA is an abbreviation for United Jewish Appeal, the main fundraising organization for Israel in the United States.} ‘The fate of Gaza can be that of Singapore’, Peres claimed – ‘[f]rom poverty to prosperity in one sustained leap’.\footnote{Peres 1995, p. 350.}

‘With the coming peace and plans for the future, Gaza will again blossom, and its people will live in prosperity, honor, and plenty. As a coastal city, Gaza can also be an important tourist center, and a marina built around the new port will attract even more visitors.... Once Gaza is a flourishing port, it can also be a terminus for road and rail systems, a regional fishing center, and a magnet for foreign investments.’\footnote{Peres 1993, p. 139.}

Consequently, like the Palestinians, Israel had a direct political as well as an economic interest in securing substantial international aid both to Gaza and the West Bank.\footnote{Peres 1993, pp. 30–31, 101–113, 138–140; Heikal 1996, p. 458.}

In order to obtain international assistance for the Palestinians, the Oslo actors needed a full commitment from the United States. Unlike Camp David, the Oslo Agreement was not a US-designed peace plan. After having hosted the signing in front of the White House, the United States – and President Bill Clinton in particular – was a bit bewildered as to what kind of role the USA could or should play. It was clear that the country would resume its suspended contacts with the PLO. The superpower would also help the next phase of the political negotiations if the Israelis and the Palestinians needed or wanted the Americans to be directly involved. However, what seemed to be the most obvious and conspicuous role was for the USA to use its weight as superpower to mobilize support from the international community.\footnote{Quandt 2001, p. 329.}
The United States quickly undertook the leading role of the peace process. It was not sufficient for the Clinton administration, as Secretary of State Warren Christopher pointed out, simply to ‘give peace a chance’. The United States wanted to ‘ensure’ that it would ‘not fail’. The international community should promote peacebuilding through development assistance. As a first step, the United States – together with Russia, and building on the Madrid framework – would invite foreign and finance ministers from, among others, the EU, Japan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Canada and the Nordic countries to a donor conference in Washington. In addition, the World Bank would be given a major role in coordinating and providing the international assistance.

The purpose of the conference was to be to ‘mobilize resources needed to make the agreement work’. The international community had to ‘move immediately to see that the agreement produces tangible improvements in the security and daily lives of the Palestinians and the Israelis’, argued the US secretary of state. If peace was to be achieved, the agreement had to ‘be translated into results quickly and vividly’. According to Christopher, everyone agreed that immediate steps had to be taken. It was necessary to focus on ‘the high rate of unemployment that robs families of hope and fuels extremism’. Housing, roads, and other permanent improvements needed to be developed quickly. Finally, the international community had to ‘act now to provide assistance in public administration, tax collection, and social services’.

At the conference in Washington, on 1 October 1993, the participants pledged more than $600 million for the first year. Altogether, $2 billion of planned support was indicated for the coming five-year period. In September 1993, a six-volume World Bank study of the economic needs of the West Bank and Gaza estimated that $2.4 billion would be needed in the coming five-year period. This estimate included the costs of institution-building and recurrent costs. Given this estimate, the level of donor support promised at the conference in Washington was almost sufficient to meet the challenges facing the West Bank and Gaza. In comparison with the levels of international assistance given for other war-to-peace transitions, the aid mobilized for the Palestinians was extremely generous. The international community was clearly motivated to do whatever it could to ensure that peace in the Middle East would not fail.

Before the signing of the Oslo Agreement, external assistance to the West Bank and Gaza had also mainly come from Western and Arab donors. Most of the Western

---

108 Christopher 1998, p. 84.
109 Ibid.; UD 25.11/19t, 1, Clinton to Brundtland, 18 September 1993; memorandum of 22 September 1993, Hans Fredrik Lehne (Head of Division).
111 In fact, this target was exceeded considerably. At subsequent donor meetings, the total would rise to $4 billion by late 1998. Brynen 2000, pp. 73–74.
113 Because of the lack of coordination among donors and the absence of a sovereign Palestinian counterpart, little reliable and comparable data exist for the period prior to 1993. Brynen 2000, pp. 44–45.
Implementing Peace

Donor programmes had been established in the 1970s and were further expanded in the 1980s. With the Madrid process from 1991, aid from the European countries increased substantially. Altogether, the total aid to the West Bank and Gaza grew from $174 million in 1992 to $263 million in 1993. Education and health were the main areas supported by Western donors. Most of the assistance flowed through various organizations, either directly to Palestinian NGOs or through international NGOs based in the donor country. However, coordination among donors was relatively weak.\(^{114}\)

The United Nations was traditionally the main contributor and distributor of economic assistance to the Palestinians. In 1949, a separate UN organization, the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), had been established to take care of the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian refugees. Since then, UNRWA had provided education, health, relief and social services to four generations of Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza. Originally envisaged as a temporary organization, the agency gradually adjusted its programmes to meet the changing needs of the refugees. When the Oslo Agreement was signed in 1993, UNRWA was still the main provider of basic services to almost 4 million registered Palestinian refugees. However, the agency was faced with both a rapidly growing refugee population and frequent budgetary difficulties.\(^{115}\) Other UN agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), also provided invaluable aid to the Palestinians. However, the massive international assistance coming as a direct consequence of the Oslo Agreement needed a new coordinating structure. Even the European Union, initially opposed to the creation of a new structure, realized that this would be necessary to cope with the massive flow of money.\(^{116}\)

At the conference in Washington on 1 October 1993, a coordinating structure for assistance to the Palestinians was agreed. First, the conference established the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), which was to be a high-level political group of key donors that would maintain an overview of the international aid efforts. Focus should be on short-term needs and on the political aspects of assistance. The AHLC was composed of the USA, Russia, the EU, Japan, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Norway. The UN, Israel, the PLO, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia were associated members. Second, a secretariat unit was established within the World Bank. The World Bank was to coordinate long-term assistance, assess the economic conditions and suggest broad development priorities. Third, a Consultative Group (CG) was created in order

---

\(^{114}\) Much less information is available on Palestinian and other Arab assistance to the West Bank and Gaza. Support flowed from Jordan, the PLO, other Arab states and wealthy individuals. Estimates of the actual amounts vary widely, but this assistance had important effects. It funded projects in such areas as agriculture, infrastructure, municipal services, housing and education. Brynen 2000, pp. 44–48.

\(^{115}\) From 1993, the agency found itself with a dramatic shortfall in contributions to its regular budget. In 1992, UNRWA’s budget was $109 million; in 1993, $37 million.

to coordinate donor programmes and to secure support and funding for assistance programmes. The CG was to focus on long-term needs and more usual aid efforts.\textsuperscript{117}

Unfortunately, serious disagreements quickly surfaced between the United States and the European Union. Which of the two should assume the leading role in the aid coordination process? For the Americans, leadership was essential and almost taken for granted. The United States was the powerful superpower and felt that no other actor had the necessary leverage over the Israelis, the Palestinians and others. American muscles were needed. The USA dominated the political process. Furthermore, the special relationship between the United States and Israel made it important that the USA took the lead. In general, the United States found the Europeans too sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Also, there was no way Israel would accept a leading role for the EU. In the eyes of many Israelis, the EU had been far too critical for far too long and had advocated far too much of an interventionist style. The United States also found the EU’s complex decisionmaking processes problematic. In the case of the Middle East, the Americans found them so problematic that they from time to time avoided even consulting their European allies. Basically, the Americans wanted to lead the international assistance efforts themselves – and, if that could not be the case, to prevent the EU from taking the lead.\textsuperscript{118}

The Europeans, for their part, were just as unhappy with the USA in the leading role. The Europeans felt that the United States lacked understanding for the way the European Union worked. According to one official in the EU, the uneasy relationship between the two also emerged because the Americans acted as if they had invented the peace process in the Middle East. Reluctance on the part of the Americans to share information was another accusation.\textsuperscript{119} Compared to the USA, the EU favoured a more substantial Palestinian role in the aid process. The European countries believed that they conducted a much more balanced Middle East policy. They regarded the Americans as biased and too uncritical of Israel. The United States was Israel’s best friend, ally and supporter.

The EU also regarded an active involvement in the peace process in the Middle East as a test case for the new, integrated Europe. It was essential to mark a distinctive European path, independent of the USA. However, there were also differences between the various European countries. As always, Britain was sympathetic to the policies of the United States, eager to protect its special relationship to its Atlantic partner, while


\textsuperscript{118} Interview with Toni Verstanding, 6 June 2002; interview with Terje Rød Larsen, 21 October 2002; Brynen 2000, pp. 91–92. From November 1994 until January 2001, Verstanding served as deputy assistant secretary of Near Eastern affairs at the state department. In this capacity, she directed and coordinated the US bilateral relations and overall policy developments concerning Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority, as well as US economic and commercial policies in the Middle East. Verstanding worked directly with the secretary of state and the special middle east coordinator as a member of the peace team, where she participated in bilateral and multilateral Middle East peace negotiations.

\textsuperscript{119} UD 308.82, 3, memorandum of 22 October 1994, Hansen.
France was generally far more critical of anything coming out of Washington. Yet, all of the European countries felt that it was unfair that the USA should take the leading role while they themselves were the largest donors. European assistance, including bilateral programmes, represented almost half of the donor support. The contribution of the United States, on the other hand, was around 12%.\footnote{Brynen 2000, pp. 91–94.}

By October 1993, the United States and the European Union had agreed on some basic structures for the aid coordination. But they had not managed to agree on who was going to chair the AHLC. Both maintained that they wanted to be chair themselves and, if this was not the case, to prevent the other from chairing. To solve this conflict, Norway was suggested as a compromise. Norway was definitely acceptable to the United States. It was not a member of the European Union and was traditionally very close to the USA. Moreover, being the broker of the Oslo Agreement, the Norwegians had also shown that they were acceptable both to the Israelis and the Palestinians. But, being a small country, Norway would be a chair with marginal influence over donors: ‘[T]he Saudis aren’t going to provide aid because of a letter from the Norwegian Foreign Minister’, as one US State Department official observed.\footnote{Interview with Toni Verstanding, 6 June 2002.} Unlike US Special Envoy Dennis Ross or US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs Toni Verstanding, Norway could not simply take the minister of one of the Gulf states ‘into a corner and stay on him until he gave in and pledged the necessary money’.\footnote{UD 25.11/19t, 1, Washington to Foreign Ministry, 3 October 1993; Washington to Foreign Ministry, 5 October 1993, minutes from meeting between Christopher and Holst, 4 October 1993; Brynen 2000, pp. 91–94.} But, seen from a US perspective, Norway could be a useful bridge-builder. Norway’s relatively powerless position, in combination with its close relationship to the United States, could be favourable for keeping much of the control in the hands of the Americans.\footnote{UD 25.11/19t, 1, Washington to Foreign Ministry, 3 October 1993; Washington to Foreign Ministry, 5 October 1993, minutes from meeting between Christopher and Holst, 4 October 1993; Brynen 2000, pp. 91–94.}

By early October 1993, the United States and the European Union had agreed that Norway would take up the gavel at the first meeting of the AHLC, to be held in Paris in November 1993. An alternative compromise solution had been the idea of a rotating chair. Canada, for instance, had been asked by the United States to be prepared to take

\footnote{Brynen 2000, pp. 91–94. There were also strong disagreements between the USA and the EU over the role of both the UN and the World Bank in the AHLC. Israel and the United States were reluctant to grant the UN full membership. The UN pressed for an expanded role. The USA wanted a leading role for the World Bank. The EU tended to see the World Bank, with its headquarters in Washington, as a ‘US proxy’. In the end, the World Bank got the secretariat. After a lengthy debate and a Norwegian-brokered compromise, the UN was only admitted as an associate member. In practice, both the World Bank and the United Nations acted as full members. One positive outcome of this EU–US competition was that it contributed to an escalation of the aid pledges. As the conference in Washington approached, the USA doubled its contribution from $250 to $500 million, while the EU increased its pledge to $600.}
over the AHLC chair. However, the EU did not want a rotating chair. In the end, Norway held the position on a permanent, though ad hoc, basis.\(^\text{124}\)

It was no secret that tensions continued to haunt the work of the AHLC. The Norwegian ambassador to Jordan, Tove Sælø Kijewski, wrote that for a long time it had been ‘well known that the EU is annoyed and frustrated over the dominating approach of the USA, as well as the USA’s lack of sensitivity regarding the political complexity of the Middle East conflict’.\(^\text{125}\) Kjell Magne Bondevik, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party, stated in the Norwegian parliament that the rivalry between the USA and the EU was ‘distinct and sometimes even paralyzing’ for the work of the AHLC.\(^\text{126}\) According to Terje Rød Larsen, there was internal competition between the USA and the EU over visibility in the peace process. The relationship was functioning well on the local level, but at higher political levels was anything but good. The EU threatened to leave the AHLC if not given more influence, claimed Rød Larsen.\(^\text{127}\) This rivalry explains why Norway continued to hold the position of AHLC chair. Indeed, Norway was the perfect and only possible compromise, possessing the confidence of both the USA and the EU, and at the same time being close to the Israelis and Palestinians.

In practice, the United States assumed the leading role in the AHLC and prepared the diplomatic groundwork for each meeting, in consultation with other leading members.\(^\text{128}\) Norway, as chair of the AHLC, found that the way to ‘get the job done’ was via Washington. Indeed, most of the important initiatives and decisions within the AHLC framework were undertaken by the Americans and accepted by the Norwegians. The Norwegians, deliberately or unconsciously, played along with the American approach. Norway’s consultations in Washington were important and substantial, ending usually in either agreement with or acceptance of suggestions from State Department officials. After consultations in Washington, Norwegian diplomats would travel ‘to Paris, Brussels and Bonn in order to brief them about the consultations in

---

\(^{124}\) UD 25.11/19t, 1, Washington to Foreign Ministry, 3 and 5 October 1993; memorandum of 20 October 1993, Lehne; 25.11/19t, 2, Foreign Ministry to Tokyo, Washington, New York, 29 October 1993, non-paper attached; Foreign Ministry to Seoul and Washington, 1 November 1993; Tokyo to Foreign Ministry, 2 November 1993; UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 2 November 1993; 25.11/19t, 3, Foreign Ministry to Prime Minister’s office 15 November 1993; 25.11/19ø, 8, memorandum of 22 November 1993, Peter Ræder (Regional Adviser); Brynen 2000, pp. 91–94, see in particular endnote 13.

\(^{125}\) UD 308.80, 96/12679-347, Amman to Foreign Ministry, 8 October 1996: ‘Innen EU har det som kjent i lengre tid vært irritasjon og frustrasjon over USA’s dominerende linje og ikke alltid like heldige håndtering av den politiske kompleksiteten man har å gjøre med i Midt-Østen.’

\(^{126}\) S.tid., 1995–96, pp. 2240–2241: ‘Men under vår tur til Midtøsten nylig fikk vi bl.a. avklart at det i gaverlandsgruppen pågår en klar og til tider lammende rivalisering mellom EU og USA også når det gjelder det sosiale oppbyggingsarbeidet som nå foregår i Gaza.’

\(^{127}\) UD 308.80, 8, memorandum of 16 March 1995, Hansen.

\(^{128}\) Brynen 2000, p. 92.
Washington and get the EU to play along’. Norway was partly the partner of and partly a messenger for the USA. The Americans thought Norway was ‘such a good leader’, ‘firmly on the American side’. They were pleased with Norway’s performance and very satisfied with the degree of cooperation and close consultation between Norwegian and US officials prior to AHLC meetings. Complaints were heard from others that the Norwegians seemed ‘excessively willing to accept a U.S. lead’. And although the conflict over the leadership position faded somewhat, EU representatives continued to grumble over Norway’s role, with this issue resurfacing over and over again. The EU continued to feel – as did Japan – that there was a mismatch between its economic contributions and its lack of a coordinating role. Some senior EU diplomats even expressed ‘vocal discontent’ with Norway’s status as ‘permanent chair’ of the AHLC. Other EU countries, on the other hand, felt that since Norway had invested so much in the peace process in the Middle East, it should not be ‘sacrificed on the altar of European–American rivalries’.

Norway, for its part, was proud, willing and eager to take on the leading job. After all, relative to GNP, Norway was the most generous of the Western donors, while the United States was among the least generous. Already at the first donor meeting in

---


130 There are a number of examples that illustrate how closely the Norwegians worked with the USA. For example, a Norwegian report might state that ‘the message from discussions in the USA is clear’. Consultations between Norway and the USA usually resolved most issues, with the EU being briefed by the Norwegians afterwards. Prior to the donor conference in January 1996, there was disagreement between the USA and the EU over both organizational and policy matters. The USA was given a Norwegian proposal regarding the agenda, and the Norwegians ‘waited the USA’s comments’. In addition, dates for meetings, agendas, the character of the meetings and so on were usually decided by the USA. Fixed meetings were several times postponed owing to changes of plans by the Americans. UD 308.82, 4, Paris to Foreign Ministry, 24 November 1994; 308.82, 6, Trolle Andersen to members of the AHLC, 28 February 1995; 308.82, 95/01332-124, Washington to Foreign Ministry, 17 November 1995; 308.82, 95/01332-150-152, Foreign Ministry to Paris, Madrid and Washington, 24 November 1995; 308.82, 95/01332-119, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 14 November 1995, comment by Rolf Willy Hansen, 15 November 1995; interview with Tor Wennesland, 26 August 2002.

131 Interview with Toni Verstanding, 6 June 2002.

132 Brynen 2000, p. 92.

133 Brynen 2000, p. 93.

134 Brynen 2000, p. 94. Both the discussions regarding the chair and those related to the role of the World Bank revealed substantial difference of opinion, in particular between the USA and the EU. UD 25.11/19t, 2, UN-delegation to Foreign Ministry, 2 November 1993.

135 Norway devoted around 0.0359% of GNP annually to the Palestinian territories, the USA 0.0014%. Other more distant countries – such as Australia, Canada and Japan – showed less commitment than the European countries, especially when the EU contribution is taken into account. Among the European countries, the so-called like-minded donor countries (Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden) made strong contributions. Brynen 2000, p. 83.
October 1993, which raised approximately $2 billion for the Palestinians, Norway pledged $150 million. This was more than 20 times the average amount committed by the other rich countries at the conference.\textsuperscript{136} Such a level of generosity can partly be explained by Norway’s broad political and social support for foreign aid. However, there is little doubt that the most important reason for this huge contribution in particular was Norway’s key political role in the Oslo peace process. Being a leader of the AHLC expanded and cemented Norway’s crucial role. Giving money contributed to keeping the process alive. At least, so it was seen in Norway.\textsuperscript{137}

The Only One

Yasser Arafat’s task was to build a society and an economy from scratch. The building of a Palestinian ‘country’ or ‘state’ – whether it would be autonomous or independent – would require hard work. Arafat had to create a new administration. He had to fulfil the expectations of the Palestinians. At the same time, he had to cooperate with Israel and the international donor community – and fulfil their expectations as well. There was almost no structure in place that could receive the international assistance soon to flow into the Palestinian areas. After a quarter of a century of Israeli occupation, there was only an underdeveloped infrastructure, heavy economic dependence on Israel and a fragmented public sector. An enormous number of challenges needed to be solved. The obstacles seemed almost insurmountable.

The donors, for their part, demanded everything the Palestinians did not have: a system, transparency and accountability. These things would have to be established at short notice in order to meet Western standards for providing economic assistance. Initially, the Palestinians had high expectations and hoped that the recent developments signified the end of their political and economic misery. However, Arafat and his Palestinian Authority were not even in place in Gaza before Palestinian morale began to decline and economic hopes were dashed. The Palestinian economy did not improve. On the contrary, it continued to decline. Arafat realized that he needed cash in a hurry to succeed with his peacebuilding project. The moment Israel left Gaza and Jericho, the Palestinians would have to take over public sector functions. They needed governmental institutions as well as a police force in place.

Norway continued to work tirelessly for peace in the Middle East, apparently never willing to give up. Norway was the helpful fixer, the ever-present talking partner, the only acceptable compromise candidate for Israelis, Palestinians, Europeans and Americans alike – and consequently the only country that in the end was willing to take on the jobs no one else would or could. As chair of the AHLC, Norway was already in charge of international assistance to the Palestinians. As will be discussed later, Nor-

\textsuperscript{136} Elon 1993, p. 83.

way fielded and led two international missions in Hebron: the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) and a people-to-people (P2P) programme. Norway was the driving force behind establishing a Palestinian police force, which though seen by all actors as an extremely important task was definitely a job no one wanted. And Norway helped to establish a Palestinian institutional structure that would allow a fast and smooth flow of donor money into the Palestinian areas.

According to the Declaration of Principles, the Palestinians should have their own police force. The Palestinians, the Israelis and the international donors all considered the establishment of such a force as vital to the development of a Palestinian self-rule authority. The Israelis wanted a Palestinian police force that would keep peace and quiet among the Palestinians and prevent future Palestinian attacks on Israel. That force should replace Israeli military forces when they withdrew from Gaza and Jericho. However, during the autumn of 1993 this particular issue was left somewhat on the sidelines. None of the coordinating mechanisms established in the aftermath of the Washington conference dealt with assistance to the Palestinian police. In addition, the World Bank was reluctant to take on such a task. Furthermore, for some donors there were formal restrictions preventing such assistance, while for others, like the Americans, the issue was altogether too sensitive. Nevertheless, Israeli–Palestinian negotiations in the autumn of 1993 showed that both parties emphasized the importance of such a force.138

Once again Palestinians, Israelis and international donors needed Norwegian help. On 15 November 1993, Johan Jørgen Holst travelled to Tunis in order to talk things through with Arafat. The PLO chairman had many things on his mind, not just how to establish a police force. The international donor community had been asked to fund the establishment of a civil administration, including a new bureaucracy and a police force. Arafat had to establish all of this. He was faced with growing opposition from the Palestinian masses, who were demanding fast changes on the ground. The donors were worried about the performance of Arafat and the PLO.139

Allocating money to finance a foreign government was contrary to the aid policies of most donor states. Normally, donors supported concrete projects. In the case of the Palestinians, donors were being asked to support start-up and recurrent costs, which was something donors rarely did. Establishing a police force was even more extraordinary. No wonder the donors were concerned. They demanded mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency. But this was problematic – to say the least – in a situation in which there was no civil administration, no central bank and no ministry of finance.

Already at the first conference in Washington on 1 October 1993, the PLO had announced the establishment of an institution that was going to track donor assistance and channel it into specific projects – in short, be the Palestinian Authority’s interface

---

139 UD 25.11/19t, 2, memorandum of 9 November 1993, Ole K. Holthe (Deputy Director General).
with the donor community. Initially, the donors were pleased with the Palestine Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), as this Palestinian institution was in the end called. However, they quickly became uncomfortable with a number of aspects of its organization. They disliked the predominance of political rather than technical personnel at the top of the organization. In addition, few of the people appointed to the body came from the Occupied Territories. Also, PECDAR lacked clear lines of authority and responsibility, as well as solid auditing mechanisms.140

These concerns were raised at the first AHLC meeting in November 1993 and repeated frequently by donors thereafter. As a result of these objections, donor programmes were delayed, as was the conclusion of the agreement between the World Bank and the Palestinian Authority. The United States was critical. Indeed, the criticism from the Americans was so harsh that the EU noted that ‘one should consider whether an encouraging policy rather than a reprimanding one can be proved more productive as far as Palestinian institutions are concerned’.141

Once again, Norway was called upon to sort out problems and prevent further delays – this time with regard to the economic sphere. And, once again, Norway willingly and tirelessly took charge. At the meeting in Tunis on 15 November 1993, Holst made the donors’ concerns regarding PECDAR very clear to Arafat. Together, the two men worked out a common platform of understanding between the donors and the recipient. The functions of PECDAR should be to formulate economic policy, to coordinate the flow of external assistance, to manage and monitor the extensive activities financed through such assistance, and to organize competence-building within PECDAR’s key areas.142

Although there seemed to be consensus on the principles regulating the relationship between the donors and the recipient, the Palestinian side failed to establish a mechanism acceptable to most of the donors during the winter of 1994. The United States and Japan were still dissatisfied and made this very clear to the AHLC chair, Norway. As the Americans saw it, the PLO had not ‘followed through and there is no acceptable Palestinian mechanism in place’. The USA told the PLO that the ‘proliferation of structures redundant to [PECDAR] undermines its ability to function. Donors and the

140 UD 25.11/19t, 2, Norwegian Delegation to the AHLC meeting to Foreign Ministry, 5 November, Chairman’s concluding remarks; memorandum of 9 November 1993, Holthe; 25.11/19t, 3, World Bank to Foreign Ministry, 22 December 1993, summary of proceedings of the AHLC meeting, 5 November 1993; 25.11/19ø, 8, World Bank to Foreign Ministry, 12 November 1993; Brynen 2000, p. 134.

141 Brynen 2000, p. 256, endnote 56; see also p. 134; UD 25.11/19t, 2, Norwegian Delegation to the AHLC meeting to Foreign Ministry, 5 November 1993, Chairman’s concluding remarks; memorandum of 9 November 1993, Holthe; 25.11/19t, 3, World Bank to Foreign Ministry, 22 December 1993, summary of proceedings of the AHLC meeting, 5 November 1993; 25.11/19ø, 8, World Bank to Foreign Ministry, 12 November 1993.

142 UD 25.11/19t, 3, Holst to AHLC members, 17 November 1993, PECDAR memorandum attached; Holst to Christopher, 17 November 1993; 25.11/19z, 1, Christopher to Holst, 27 November 1993.
Implementing Peace

World Bank must have a single, transparent and accountable Palestinian body situated in the occupied territories empowered by you to make decisions.’

However, in April 1994, a grant agreement was signed between the World Bank and PECDAR. On 17 May 1994, Arafat, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority approved the revised bylaws. Achieving this had involved more than six months of hard diplomatic work. Norway had actively been following up on this issue; numerous bilateral talks had been conducted; the United States had sent Arafat a diplomatic demarche; and there had been negotiations with the World Bank. The Americans were finally pleased: ‘We are encouraged by the recent actions of the PLO in approving [PECDAR’s] by-laws and the negotiation of a number of programs with the World Bank. These are important strides toward the type of transparency and accountability needed for success.’

By May 1994, several parts of the puzzle were in place. The Gaza–Jericho Agreement had just been signed, and Israel would begin to transfer authority to the Palestinian Authority. From 1 June, the Palestinians had to pay their public salaries themselves. They desperately needed international assistance, and the demands from the international donors were crystal clear. In addition, American pressure obviously forced the Palestinians to realize that the situation was serious and that the mess they were in was not acceptable to the superpower. By the time of the second AHLC meeting in Paris in June 1994, Jan Egeland, as chairman of the AHLC, could express ‘appreciation for the efforts displayed by the PLO to make PECDAR operational’. According to Egeland, the World Bank had evaluated the PLO’s efforts and ‘found commendable progress with respect to addressing donors’ technical requirements for transparency, accountability and practicality’.

Norway had been helpful in sorting out the principles for the recipient structure, and everyone was pleased. But more Norwegian help was needed. In a way, it seemed that all of the problematic issues in the difficult peace process passed through Norway’s hands. This was also the case with security issues, which were particularly sensitive. From mid-November 1993, the establishment of a Palestinian police force became a huge Norwegian undertaking.

When Holst visited Tunis in the middle of November 1993, he realized that security issues overshadowed all other concerns for the chairman of the PLO. On this matter, there was a strong consensus between Holst and Arafat. Holst also regarded security arrangements and establishing a Palestinian police force as of the utmost importance. Much depended on Arafat’s performance in this sphere. Holst believed that unless security in the Palestinian areas was satisfactorily taken care of, Israel would simply terminate the peace process.

---

143 UD 25.11/19t, 4, US Demarche to the PLO on assistance to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, received 19 April 1994; memorandum of 25 April 1994, Ræder.
144 UD 308.82, 1, Christopher to Godal, 3 June 1994.
145 UD 308.82, 1, Paris to Foreign Ministry, 10 June 1994, opening statement by the Chairman.
146 Interview with Marianne Heiberg, 13 May 2002, in which Holst’s preoccupation with security issues was strongly underlined.
Arafat was convinced that it would be impossible to assume control over the Occupied Territories without a large police force. He feared the factions that were opposed to the Oslo Accord, and he felt that his own authority would dissipate if he were unable to establish a visible and effective presence following an Israeli withdrawal. In addition, he needed to socialize the fighters of the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) into new roles. Arafat gave Holst a ‘complete list of alleged requirements encompassing everything from uniforms to light armoured vehicles’. Holst emphasized that these were difficult and sensitive issues, but he was in no doubt that there were ‘serious and legitimate requirements ... which [were] not [being] dealt with in an adequate manner’. However, the Norwegian foreign minister anticipated practical problems, since most aid institutions had little or no experience with this type of assistance. He therefore urged US Secretary of State Warren Christopher ‘to consider the constitution of a consortium designed to assist the PLO in putting into place an appropriate security force’. US leadership was needed.

The Americans, however, rejected such a line of action. Christopher did not want to set up such a consortium. He emphasized that Arafat’s ‘conception of what is required is unrealistic’. From the USA’s point of view, what was needed was primarily an effective police force, which could be ‘far smaller than the one Arafat [was] talking about’. In the end, Christopher claimed, the donors needed ‘to know more about where the Israeli–Palestinian discussions [were] on the issue of the police force’. In effect, the Americans stalled the process by using the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations as an excuse.

Holst did not give up easily. In a further letter to Christopher, he again emphasized that Arafat remained ‘concerned about security and his ability to provide it following Israeli withdrawal’. Holst in many ways agreed with Arafat and believed that ‘we should be forthcoming in form if not so much in substance’. Although not entirely giving up on the Americans, Holst realized that Norway would not be able to get anyone else to take on responsibility for assisting with the setup of the police force, and so he took on the job himself. ‘We are willing to play a role here but we need to know where you stand’, he pointed out to the US secretary of state. He pointed out that Arafat trusted the Norwegians, who ‘could probably do something which others whose motives he might be more suspicious of would find it hard to achieve’.

However, Holst failed to persuade the Americans. As they saw it, the PLO was using the establishment of the police force to enforce financial aid into recurrent costs, and they stressed the need to ensure that the police force did not develop into a paramili-

---

147 The PLA was formed in 1964 as the military component of the PLO.
148 UD 25.11/19t, 3, Holst to Christopher, 17 November 1993; see also memorandum of 30 November 1993, Ræder; 25.11/19å, 6, Holst to Christopher, 12 December 1993; memorandum of 13 December 1993, Ræder, minutes of meeting between Holst and Arafat, 26 November 1993.
149 UD 25.11/19z, 1, Christopher to Holst, 27 November 1993; see also 25.11/19z, 1, memorandum of 1 December 1993, Ræder; 25.11/19t, 3, memorandum of 30 November 1993, Ræder.
150 UD 25.11/19å, 6, Holst to Christopher, 12 December 1993; see also 25.11/19å, 6, memorandum of 13 December 1993, Ræder, minutes of meeting between Holst and Arafat, 26 November 1993.
tary force. On the whole, the Americans pressed for more realistic Palestinian thinking and budgeting. Under no circumstances was the United States interested in taking a lead in this field. Making matters even more problematic for the Norwegians, even the EU and the World Bank were negative, although they had a more positive attitude when it came to providing money for material equipment.  

Norway continued to invest considerable energy into solving the security questions. Holst suggested to Christopher that Norway should send ‘a small team of Norwegian experts on peacekeeping in the Middle East to discuss the practicalities of security arrangements with Arafat and his people if you think that is a good idea’. ‘The purpose would be to sharpen [Arafat’s] views on requirements and to bring some operational realism into PLO planning for the post-withdrawal environment.’ Whether or not Christopher found this a good idea is unclear, but Holst continued to work on these issues and sent a group led by Norwegian General Martin Vadset to Tunis in order to discuss the police force’s size, composition and tasks.  

However, nothing else happened. There was still no mechanism for dealing with the police issue. Only Norway remained committed and refused to throw in the towel. On 20 December 1993, acting in the capacity of chair of the AHLC, Norway called a meeting in Oslo in order to find ways to establish and finance an effective Palestinian police force. There was still a broad consensus on the importance of the security issue. All parties, including Israel, emphasized this need. Nevertheless, few pledges were made. Only Norway and Japan committed themselves to providing financial aid. Some countries promised assistance with equipment and training, while others were still considering the issue. The careful nature of this approach was partly due to uncertainty regarding the lack of an international mechanism for dealing with the issue, partly due to the relevant legal framework in some of the countries, and partly due to the sensitivity of such assistance. Some donors had problems financing recurrent costs in general, and particularly recurrent costs for a police force. The United States, according to Terje Rød Larsen, wanted a fund within the framework of the World Bank to coordinate recurrent costs in general. If such a fund were to exist, donors would not have to specify their contributions, thus making possible financial contributions to the police force.  

---

151 UD 25.11/19z, 1, Foreign Ministry to Moscow, 3 December 1993; Paris to Foreign Ministry, 15 and 16 December 1993; 25.11/19æ, 1, memorandum of 3 December 1993, Bjørn Skogmo (Ambassador, Coordinator, peacekeeping operations).

152 UD 25.11/19å, 6, Holst to Christopher, 12 December 1993; see also 25.11/19t, 3, Holst to Arafat, 17 November 1993; 25.11/19t, 4, memorandum of 10 January 1994, Ræder. One concern of the group was to find a balance between the civil police force and the security forces. The group concluded that the Palestinian police force needed credibility from the very beginning, it needed an agency like PECDAR to cooperate with the donors in order to coordinate the various contributions, and it needed a multilateral coordinating mechanism to ensure transparency, effective coordination and an effective system for accountability.

153 UD 25.11/19z, 1, Holst to colleagues, 14 December 1993; Foreign Ministry to various embassies, 20 December 1993; 25.11/19t, 4, memorandum of 10 January 1994, Ræder; 25.11/19å, 6, memorandum of 13 January 1994, Ræder.
In late January 1994, the Johan Jørgen Holst Peace Fund was established within the World Bank to provide support with regard to start-up and recurrent costs for the Palestinian administration in the Occupied Territories, including the establishment of PEC DAR. In short, the Holst fund was to provide the PA with ongoing budgetary support. Between 1994 and 1998, the Holst fund provided $213 million for budgetary support and $39 million for emergency employment, and the fund represented a large share of the 1994–95 disbursements. In addition, the establishment of the fund made transactions from donors to the World Bank and from there to the PA much quicker, in fact cutting the transaction period down to a couple of weeks. Thus, while characterizing donor efforts as a ‘failure’ in 1994, Terje Rød Larsen noted in October 1995 that the donors were ‘moving speedily’. However, when it came to the police force, neither the United States nor the World Bank would permit the Holst Fund to be used to cover such costs.

By late March 1994, there were definite signs that the Palestinians and the Israelis were about to reach an agreement in Tab a on withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho. This made the police question all the more urgent. With 48 hours’ notice, Norway’s new foreign minister, Bjørn Tore Godal, invited the parties to an emergency meeting in Cairo on 24 March.

On 14 January 1994, Johan Jørgen Holst had died following a series of strokes. The new foreign minister, 49-year-old Bjørn Tore Godal, had been a member of the Labour Party since the 1960s, and had been leader of the Labour Party’s Youth Movement (AUF) in 1971–73. The 1970s were characterized by a general radicalization of many youth organizations in Western states, and under Godal’s leadership the AUF had adopted a resolution promoting the creation of a single democratic state in the entire area known as Palestine under the British Mandate. Godal had also been a member of the anti-EEC campaign prior to the Norwegian referendum in 1972, and had worked for the Labour Party for several years. In 1986, he became a member of the Norwegian parliament. In 1991, he was appointed minister of commerce, and he became a key person prior to the second Norwegian referendum on whether to join the European Community, which was held in the autumn of 1994. This time, however, Bjørn Tore Godal was a key figure for the ‘yes’ campaign.

Pledges concerning training and technical assistance to the Palestinian police were now progressing more smoothly. However, there remained a large gap between estimated costs and pledges for financial assistance. Donor money was generally arriving...
slowly. The security sector was the most complicated. Special Ambassador Terje Rød Larsen, who chaired the meeting in Cairo, complained that ‘potential donors have not followed up’, and as a consequence ‘the supply of assistance from the international community does not meet the urgent needs of the Palestinians’. Rød Larsen proposed that a joint Norwegian–Palestinian delegation should travel to different capitals in order to discuss the situation. In addition, he suggested that an ad hoc committee to coordinate international assistance to the police force be established. Such a committee would solve many of the political restrictions related to police assistance. The Coordinating Committee for the International Assistance to the Palestinian Police Force (COPP), set up at the Cairo meeting, wasted no time and held its first meeting the next day. To nobody’s surprise, Norway became chair. Cairo was the venue for the meeting, and the Norwegian embassy provided secretariat functions. COPP consisted of representatives from the USA, Russia, the EU, Japan, Egypt, Norway, Israel and the PLO. Finally, a forum for dialogue with regard to the establishment of a Palestinian police force was in place.\(^{161}\)

The first Palestinian police officers were on duty by the beginning of May 1994, and officers continued to be appointed in growing numbers. But pledges were still few, and there was still no coordinating mechanism for the transfer of assistance. The PA was forced to use emergency money from other sources in order to meet the immediate needs of the first security forces. By June 1994, the Norwegian embassy in Cairo, serving as COPP secretariat, was once more emphasizing the urgent need for donations. Approximately $10 million was disbursed by donors. Norway had granted $2 million, the US $5 million and the EU $3.45 million. These contributions were given bilaterally and as emergency aid. The United States, extremely reluctant to finance the police, had ‘worked out a mechanism with the PLO and Israel’ that provided full accountability.\(^{162}\)

\(^{159}\) Quoted after Brynen 2000, p. 172; see also UD 25.11/19z, Cairo to Foreign Ministry 6 April 1994: ‘Siden Oslo-møtet har det vært liten aktivitet fra giverlandenes side. Den internasjonale bistanden møter ikke behovene i forbindelse med opprettelsen av PPF.’

\(^{160}\) The Palestinian–Norwegian Joint High Level Mission consisted of two delegations, which travelled to different donors, begging for urgent financial assistance. One delegation consisted of Terje Rød Larsen and Yasser Abed Rabbo, and the other of Hans J. Biørn Lian and Faisal Husseini. The result was ‘fairly successful’, but many questions were left hanging in the air. In fact, not much concrete came of the process. In Washington, no financial pledges were made. For the Americans, it was out of the question to contribute to recurrent costs in connection with the police force, Dennis Ross pointed out. However, the Americans agreed to put pressure on the EU and the Gulf states. UD 25.11/19z, 1, memorandum of 21 April 1994, Ræder; see also Paris to Foreign Ministry 15 April 1994; London to Foreign Ministry 15 April 1994; EU delegation to Foreign Ministry 19 April 1994; Washington to Foreign Ministry 20 April 1994; UN delegation (Lian) to Foreign Ministry 24 April 1993.

\(^{161}\) UD 25.11/19z, 1, Godal to donor countries, 22 March 1994; Press release, 24 March 1994; Cairo to Foreign Ministry, 25 March 1994; Cairo to Foreign Ministry, 6 April 1994, minutes from the Cairo meeting, 24 March 1994.

\(^{162}\) UD 308.87, 1, Christopher to Godal, 3 June 1994; see also Cairo to Foreign Ministry, 19 June 1994; Brynen 2000, p. 113.
In Oslo, the Norwegian foreign ministry regretted ‘that it was not possible to establish a funds management system similar to the Holst Fund under the World Bank, which could facilitate an integrated management of ... the unified Palestinian budget’. The World Bank’s lack of willingness to take on secretariat functions meant that the Norwegian foreign ministry had to set up new administrative units for monitoring the disbursements. Norway’s involvement in the Middle East peace process was rapidly becoming rather overwhelming; the ministry was concerned that it would consume a lot of its administrative resources, while the World Bank would only have to manage one more account in a ‘system which is already established’.163

The World Bank tried to get Norway to manage the fund, while Norway tried to get the World Bank to take on the task. The United States wanted effective police assistance, but would not administrate a police fund. Getting a UN agency, for example the UNDP or UNRWA, to take on the job was considered as a possible solution. On 8 July 1994, new discussions took place between Norway, the World Bank and the United States in Washington. However, using a UN agency was acceptable to neither the USA nor Israel, and was therefore a ‘non-starter’. Since both the UN and the World Bank were out of the question, Norway was – said Dennis Ross frankly to the Norwegians – the only natural candidate for the task. Norway would give credibility to such a fund and be a guarantor for transparency and accountability.164

Norway was put under pressure from both the United States and the World Bank. Reluctantly, the Norwegians agreed to work out a solution. But the Norwegians still did not want to take on more political responsibility, and they wanted to minimize further administrative tasks. The foreign ministry suggested a compromise: Norway would accept that the administrative mechanism could be maintained, but suggested that ‘the fiduciary responsibility for a police fund should be shared by a “troika”, consisting of the Chair of the AHLC, the United States and the European Union.’165 According to State Secretary Jan Egeland, Norway would not be able to take on this responsibility alone.

Egeland could have spared himself the effort. The World Bank and the United States were nothing less than immovable. The state secretary saw only one possible ‘fall-back position’; to let a UN agency administer the police fund. In order to explore that possibility, Egeland tried to build an alliance with his colleague in Israel, Yossi Beilin. Egeland understood that if anyone could make the United States change its mind, it would have to be Israel.166

In the beginning of August, Beilin surprisingly accepted UN involvement. ‘We support your proposal that the United Nations, through one of its agencies, should be re-

164 UD 308.87, 1, memorandum of 10 July 1994, Tor Christian Hildan (Acting Director General).
165 UD 308.87, 1, Egeland to Ross, 12 July 1994; see also memorandum of 10 July 1994, Hildan; Foreign Ministry to Tom Vraalsen (Ambassador), 12 July 1994, Norwegian aide memoire, enclosed.
166 UD 308.87, 1, Foreign Ministry to Washington, 13 July 1994; Egeland to Beilin, 18 July; 308.80, 1, memorandum of 26 July 1994, Ræder
Implementing Peace

...responsible for administering a Police Fund’, he wrote to Egeland.\(^{167}\) Now, Norway could use the Israeli answer to obtain a similar one from the United States.\(^{168}\) Only Israeli denial could prevent the Americans from accepting a UN solution. However, the Americans were not convinced that Israel had really changed its mind. In general, Israel was always opposed to the idea of UN involvement, and the Americans questioned Beilin’s political backing. ‘Beilin is Beilin, and he is not prime minister’, commented Dennis Ross’s deputy, Aaron Miller.\(^{169}\) However, in this case, Beilin had sufficient high-level support. By the end of August, Israel and the USA accepted a UN role. UNRWA, in close cooperation with the newly established United Nations Special Coordinator in Gaza and the West Bank (UNSCO), which was headed by none other than Terje Rød Larsen, became the UN mechanism for administering the police funds.\(^{170}\)

In order to establish such a mechanism within the UN system, a resolution in the General Assembly was required. A UN resolution, prepared by Norway, was adopted by consensus on 2 December 1994.\(^{171}\) Donors could then make general contributions to UNRWA that were not earmarked for the Palestinian police force. This also solved a number of problems in many donors’ eyes. During 1994–95, some $30 million was disbursed through this mechanism, financed by contributions from the EU, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Britain, Japan and Saudi Arabia. Altogether, approximately $77 million was disbursed from donors to the Palestinian police. By 1996, police financing had passed from UNRWA to the Palestinian Authority. From then on, PA tax revenues were to pay for the police salaries.\(^{172}\)

The massive Norwegian involvement in establishing a donor mechanism for the Palestinian police force was clearly a demanding task – politically, financially and administratively. However, there was another worrisome issue. The Norwegian foreign ministry was receiving alarming information from a number of different sources about the

---

\(^{167}\) UD 308.87, 2, Beilin to Egeland, received 4 August 1994.


\(^{170}\) UD 308.87, 3, Press release, 15 September 1994; Asbjørn Mathisen (State Secretary) to Ilter Türkmen (Commissioner General, UNRWA), 21 September 1994; Godal to colleagues, 20 September 1994; UNSCO to Foreign Ministry, 26 September 1994.

\(^{171}\) UD 308.87, 5, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 2 December 1994; see also 308.87.3, Foreign Ministry to UN delegation, 11 October 1994; UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 12 October 1994; Foreign Ministry to UN delegation, 13 October 1994; 308.87, 4, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 31 October 1994; UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 3 and 8 November 1994; Foreign Ministry to UN delegation, 10 November 1994.

Palestinian police force and how broader security questions were being solved by the Palestinians. The number of police officers soon exceeded the 9,000 agreed in the Gaza–Jericho Agreement. And by 1996 the number of policemen had grown to 40,000, which was 10,000 more than had been agreed in the Interim Agreement. Israel made little fuss about this growth, partly turning a blind eye to the issue since it wanted strong security services and firm control by Arafat. The expansion was partly driven by internal and external threats facing the PA, a threat understood both by international donors and by Israel. However, it was also partly due to the use of the security services as a tool of political patronage. Many of the police officers were former PLA fighters, PLO cadres or ex-intifada activists from the West Bank and Gaza, all needing to be kept occupied or employed. Reports also suggested that a police force called Preventive Security had been established, reporting directly to Chairman Arafat. Furthermore, the unauthorized use of firearms was becoming more common, leading some observers to warn that a ‘gun culture’ was developing in the Palestinian areas.

In March 1995, Norwegian Major-General Arnstein Øverkil, who was not only police adviser to Arafat but also one of the two senior Norwegian police officers advising COPP, claimed that Preventive Security, together with Presidential Security and Force 17, had about 2,000 officers established in Gaza and Jericho. In addition, other parts of the Palestinian police force, like the Public Security and Intelligence Service, also reported directly to Arafat. Different security units had created counterbalancing and rival groups, which would prevent the emergence of any single internal challenge to Arafat’s authority.

All of this worried the Norwegians. There was little doubt that the police force was needed – and increasingly so. But to be the main country identified with the creation of a Palestinian police force that was out of control was not a very tempting prospect for Norway, which was preoccupied with protecting its peacemaker image. Consequently, a clear feeling developed in the foreign ministry that Norwegian involvement in the police force should be reduced.

In a meeting with Øverkil in mid-May 1995, Egeland expressed concern about Norway’s role as shepherd for the police working group. Twelve thematic Sectoral Working Groups (SWG) had been established, each with one or more PA ministries as gavel-holder, a donor as a shepherd, and a UN agency as a secretariat. In the police

---

173 UD 308.87, 3, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 22 September 1994; Cairo to Foreign Ministry, 4 October 1994; 308.87, 6, memorandum of 22 February 1995, Vidar Udjus (Candidate); 308.87, 7, Øverkil to Foreign Ministry, 21 March 1995.


175 Same references as above.

176 In June 1994, the AHLC had recognized that a local aid coordination structure was required. In November, the AHLC established the Local Aid Coordination Committee (LACC) in the West Bank and Gaza. The LACC was to be responsible for contacts between the major aid agencies and the PA. The LACC was co-chaired by Norway (as AHLC chair), the World Bank and UNSCO. Brynen 2000, pp. 87–89.
Implementing Peace

SWG, Norway was the shepherd and UNSCO was the secretariat. The Norwegian state secretary wanted to get out of this vulnerable position. Police brutality or critical reports regarding human rights in the Palestinian areas would be negative for Norway’s reputation and prestige. On the other hand, all of the important donors accepted the necessity of the Palestinian police force, owing to the difficult position in which Arafat found himself. Egeland wanted other actors with more resources to undertake the role as shepherd for the police working group. Norway should explore the possibilities of having UNSCO take over. Fundraising had come to an end, and the assistance provided at this stage would mainly focus on training and equipment. If UNSCO could not take on this role, Norway should try to persuade a more important donor. ‘These are elements for an exit strategy regarding our police engagement, which could turn out to be a liability in the longer term’, wrote Egeland to his foreign minister.

But nobody wanted to take over the job, and the Norwegians realized that they were ‘stuck’ with the police tasks. From the very beginning, assistance to the police force had fallen outside the coordinating structure of the AHLC. Norway had been the only country pursuing this subject through the winter of 1994. When the COPP was established in March 1994, Norway, not surprisingly, had been given the positions of chair and secretariat. After several negotiating rounds with the World Bank, the United States and Israel, Norway had finally succeeded in setting up a donor mechanism for the Palestinian police force within the UN system. It had used its ‘special relationship’ and good contacts with Israel in order to free itself from having sole responsibility for that task. The Americans, opposed to UN involvement because they assumed that Israel opposed any such involvement, were easily persuaded when Norway managed to get Israel on its side. Yet, while Norway had managed to shake off one demanding job and had managed to avoid coming into conflict with the United States and Israel on the matter, it was still unhappy about its heavy involvement with a problematic police force. But nobody else wanted to take over. Norway was the only acceptable candidate, and it would not run away from its obligations – even when these were clearly risky and unpleasant. Norway was committed to making peace in the Middle East.

The Helpful Fixer

The Norwegians did not intend to let the 1993 Oslo Accord be their only diplomatic victory and achievement. On the contrary, the role of Norway was maintained, protected, seg-

mented and expanded. Norwegian involvement became massive and comprehensive. Norway – ‘the modest hero of the Oslo effort’ – continued to find and carry out both its old and new roles as the ever-available helper and fixer, always eager to help solve problems and keep the peace process alive.\textsuperscript{179}

Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul continued to be the main operators of the Norwegian peace team, but with 100% backing from eager and devoted politicians in the ministry of foreign affairs. Norwegian involvement in the peace process was basically managed by politicians, with all of the decisions and signals coming from the very top of the ministry, leaving the bureaucrats little room for influence and manoeuvre. State Secretary Jan Egeland had recovered from his setbacks under Holst, and was from January 1994 back in his old, active engagement role under Godal. Within the ministry itself, Egeland was the one who actually ran the Norwegian peace project in the Middle East. In addition, Foreign Minister Godal – and occasionally even Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland – was always ready to make an effort if someone in the Middle East called for this – which the parties in the Middle East did.

Naturally, the rifts between the Israelis and the Palestinians could not always be healed by the Oslo spirit, creative formulations and cosy settings. Hard facts and realities had to be sorted out and difficult problems solved – in Taba and in other places without particularly ‘cosy’ atmospheres. In principle, after the signing of the Oslo Agreement, the Israelis and the Palestinians could freely communicate directly with each other and do their negotiating themselves. Delegations from the two sides took care of the various items under discussion. But the Norwegians were still at hand, ready to help if the Israelis and Palestinians wanted them to. The Norwegians were constantly briefed by both parties about the progress – or, more often, lack of progress – in the process. Over and over again, the peace process ran into trouble. In particular, Terje Rød Larsen was still needed and called upon in order to ‘navigate through ... crisis’\textsuperscript{180}. He and the rest of the Norwegian peace team were always ready for new assignments.

The Norwegians used every opportunity to get things moving and to clear as many obstacles out of the way as possible, working tirelessly backstage. However, problems with the lack of political progress began to appear immediately. As early as the beginning of November 1993, the Palestinians were growing increasingly frustrated and impatient. The Norwegians – and Foreign Minister Holst in particular – were needed to sort things out. The Palestinians had many problems.

In mid-November, as discussed above, Holst travelled to Tunis in order to help Arafat sort out the principles for the recipient structure and to deal with the issue of a Palestinian police force, but these were not the only areas requiring Norwegian help. The leader of the Palestinian Gaza–Jericho delegation, Nabil Shaath, repeatedly called for Norwegian intervention in the political arena, the area the parties were supposed to handle themselves. The Gaza–Jericho negotiations were in a state of crisis, Shaath

\textsuperscript{179} Savir 1998, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{180} Savir 1998, p. 123.
pointed out, and the gap between Arafat and Rabin seemed unbridgeable. The Palestinians wanted the Norwegians to use their influence and friendship with Israel to get the process back on track. 181

The Norwegians were initially a bit reluctant to interfere. However, as the Palestinians continued to request Norwegian involvement, they felt obliged to do something. On 18 and 19 December 1993, the Israelis and the Palestinians once again met in Norway at Borregaard Manor in Sarpsborg. To a large degree, this was the ‘old’ Oslo club, with Peres, Savir, Abu Ala and Hassan Asfour present. However, the meeting was severely hampered by worries over Johan Jørgen Holst’s health. Yet the purpose of the gathering was the same as always: to clear away obstacles, sort out problems and move the peace process forward. 182

The Norwegians were needed to work backstage, and the Palestinians continued to ask for Norwegian support and assistance. Over and over again, they begged for help from Norway. Various Norwegian representatives – Terje Rød Larsen in particular – maintained close contact. The Palestinians insisted on keeping the Norwegian back channel option open for negotiations at all levels, but especially regarding the negotiations on the political questions. The telephone lines between Oslo, Jerusalem and Tunis remained busy. Within the Norwegian peace team, there was a firm belief that there was no alternative to the Oslo process. ‘The Israelis and Palestinians wanted a permanent Norwegian back channel’, claimed Terje Rød Larsen. 183 In this chaotic situation, Norway still had a role to play. According to Mona Juul, ‘We never worked so hard, we never travelled so much’. 184

Above all, the Norwegians wanted to maintain the dynamics of the process. They used considerable energy and effort to keep the Oslo process alive. This was clearly demonstrated in the aftermath of the Hebron massacre in February 1994, the most serious crisis of the Oslo process at that stage.

As a consequence of the Hebron massacre, Arafat suspended the negotiations. Israeli negotiators, the US peace team (headed by Dennis Ross) and Terje Rød Larsen tried to persuade Arafat to resume the talks. They discovered that he wanted to, but that he was under tremendous pressure from most Palestinians to take firm action. This time, ‘business as usual’ was no alternative. Therefore, ‘Egypt, the United States and Norway tried to “give” something to Arafat in order to get him back to the negotiating table’. 185

184 Interview with Mona Juul, 22 October 2002.
185 UD 25.11/19å, 7, memorandum of 5 March 1994, Ræder: ‘Egypt, USA og Norge jobber for å “gi” Arafat noe som fører til at PLO kan gjenoppta forhandlingene i Washington.’
With one exception, the various parties left Tunis without accomplishing their mission. ‘[D]etermined to salvage what he could’, Terje Rød Larsen – with his usual optimism – stayed put and continued to discuss ways out of the crisis.\footnote{Savir 1998, p. 128.} He worked with Abu Mazen; he stayed in touch with Uri Savir and the other Israelis; and he composed a working paper addressing the problems in Hebron. ‘Larsen 1’ – basically containing the demands of the Palestinians – suggested moving the Jewish settlers from Hebron to a nearby settlement, which was completely unfeasible for Israel. Arafat also demanded a large and armed observer force, representing as many participating countries as possible. ‘Larsen 2’ – the views of the Israelis – was more or less business as usual: no evacuation of the settlers, but with an opening for a limited international presence and an unarmed municipal Palestinian police force. To accept any kind of international presence in Hebron was seen as very controversial in Israel. However, when a ‘frazzled’ Terje Rød Larsen wanted to continue to mediate and to write up a compromise document entitled ‘Larsen 3’, Uri Savir intervened. Savir told him frankly that ‘[f]rom day one in Oslo, we had been firmly against any third-party intervention in the substantive side of the negotiations.... Thus Terje, who always honoured the wishes of the sides, abandoned his attempt to compose a “Larsen 3” document as a compromise’.\footnote{Savir 1998, p. 129; see also Lia 1998, pp. 52–54.}

However, on this occasion, Terje Rød Larsen was by no means acting in accordance with the wishes of both sides. He was honouring the wishes of Israel. The Palestinians wanted and needed help to solve the Hebron crisis.\footnote{UD 25.11/19å, 7, Foreign Ministry to various embassies, 7 March 1994.} But they did not get this help from Norway. Foreign Minister Bjørn Tore Godal agreed with Rød Larsen. Norway could only intervene if both parties wanted Norway to do so,\footnote{Ibid.} and Israel did not.\footnote{Savir 1998, pp. 128–129; see also Lia 1998, pp. 52–54.}

The Palestinian chief negotiator in Taba, Nabil Shaath, travelled to Washington, London and Oslo to drum up support. At a meeting with Godal on 6 March 1994, Shaath emphasized that an international presence was absolutely necessary. He wanted Norwegian support and encouraged Godal to bring the Israelis and the Palestinians together in an ‘unpublicized way’.\footnote{UD 25.11/19å, 7, Foreign Ministry to various embassies, 7 March 1994, main points from meeting between Godal and Shaath, 6 March 1994.}

The idea of a temporary international presence was not new. In fact, the Declaration of Principles had stated that such a presence could be established – if the Israelis and the Palestinians agreed on this.\footnote{Declarations of Principles, Annex II, 3d.} Already in November 1993, Foreign Minister Holst had called for Norwegian preparations for such an operation. He had assumed that Israel would accept no UN involvement, and that Norway might be requested to contribute at some stage. The PLO had no familiarity with this type of task. Norway could use its experience with peacekeeping operations to brief and consult with the PLO. However, the idea of a temporary international presence had by no means been a ‘hot
issue’ during the negotiations in the late autumn of 1993 and the beginning of winter 1994. Israel was opposed to such a presence, and for both parties there were other, far more pressing issues on the agenda. It was up to the Israelis and the Palestinians to agree and decide on this matter. Norway should be careful not to intrude, but should be prepared, concluded Holst.\footnote{UD 25.11/19æ, 1, memorandum of 16 November 1993, Holst to Political Department; memorandum of 3 December 1993, Skogmo.}

The Hebron massacre brutally reintroduced the issue. An international presence, as permitted under the Declaration of Principles, would be essential to achieve security for the population, argued the Palestinians. However, an international presence required a joint understanding between the parties, Godal reminded Shaath. Norway would respond positively if the parties agreed to such a presence, and it was also willing to participate. But, probably to the disappointment of the Palestinians, Norway would not put any pressure on the Israeli government. Godal insisted that the two parties had to reach an agreement themselves, essentially telling Shaath that nothing would or could be done unless the Israelis changed their minds. This was also how the United States judged the situation, he pointed out. Once again, Norway would do nothing against the wishes of Israel and the United States.\footnote{UD 25.11/19ø, 11, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 3 March 1994; 25.11/19å, 7, Foreign Ministry to various embassies, 7 March 1994; Aftenposten, 7 March 1994.}

Around the same time, a resolution on the Hebron massacre was being drafted in the UN headquarters in New York. On 18 March 1994, UN Resolution 904 was unanimously adopted by the Security Council, calling for ‘measures to be taken to guarantee the safety and protection of the Palestinian civilians throughout the occupied territory, including, \textit{inter alia}, a temporary international or foreign presence’.\footnote{UN Security Council Resolution 904 (1994).} Negotiations were resumed in the middle of March, and – after some start-up problems – the Hebron agreement was signed on 31 March.\footnote{Shlaim 2001, pp. 524–525; Heikal 1996, pp. 504–505; Ashrawi 1995, pp. 283–284; Savir 1998, pp. 121–143.}

Norway was asked to field the operation. Clearly, it was not only called upon to navigate through political crisis, but was also the trusted country, the one that could be given complicated and difficult tasks – such as being in charge of stabilizing the tense situation in Hebron. Such missions required trust from Israelis as well as Palestinians. Norway had been secretly informed before the joint Israeli–Palestinian approach was received and had immediately started preparations.\footnote{UD 25.11/19æ, 1, memorandum of 24 March 1994, Arne Gjermundsen (Higher Executive Officer); Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, 29 March 1994; memorandum of 29 March 1994, Ræder; Savir/Shaath to Rød Larsen 31 March 1994.}

But trust was not all that was required. In order to accomplish such an operation speedily, willingness and capability were just as important. There could be no delays and no slow-moving bureaucracies. Decisions had to be taken more or less on the spot, and money had to be provided instantly. There were few small, rich, eager, trusted and
non-bureaucratic countries in the world. For this particular context, Norway again seemed to be the only one suitable.\(^{198}\)

Norway approached Italy and Denmark, asking for 35 observers from each. Norway would contribute 90 observers, and would also be responsible for the coordination of the operation. The Norwegian government immediately allocated NOK 20 million to cover Norway’s contribution. On 8 May 1994, the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) was established on the ground.\(^{199}\)

Unfortunately, peacemaking activities are not always as successful as the goodwill behind them might merit. In the case of TIPH, the results were at best meagre. TIPH’s mandate was to monitor and report on the situation in Hebron. Its presence was meant to promote stability and to increase the security of the Palestinian population. The aim was to restore normal life in the city, including reopening the central part of the city, the wholesale market and the Ibrahim mosque, as well as dismantling obstacles and closures. The observers were unarmed and had no powers of arrest or prosecution.\(^{200}\)

This mandate was the product of tough negotiations. Israel had vetoed all but very limited powers for the observer force. As a consequence of TIPH’s vague and powerless mandate, there was considerable uncertainty over what the observers should actually do. On the Palestinian side, expectations were unrealistically high. It was therefore almost inevitable that both Palestinian and foreign analysts came to judge the TIPH operation as a farce: ‘TIPH was empowered, as one Palestinian put it, “to observe occupation”’.\(^{201}\)

After only one and a half months, halfway through the three-month engagement, the three TIPH countries agreed that TIPH’s mandate had not been fulfilled. The Israeli authorities and the IDF had shown little interest in normalizing the situation. Norway, Denmark and Italy were seriously concerned about the ‘significant restrictions on the freedom of movement for the Palestinian inhabitants’. In an approach to the Israeli government, they urged ‘Israel to take the necessary steps to normalize the situation in Hebron so that the TIPH can withdraw after “mission completed” rather than after “mission terminated, but not fulfilled”’.\(^{202}\)

\(^{198}\) UD 25. 11/19æ, 1, memorandum of 29 March 1994, Ræder.
\(^{199}\) UD 25.11/19æ, 1, Foreign Ministry to Cairo, Tel Aviv, Copenhagen and Rome, 1 April 1994; Rød Larsen (AHLC) to Savir/Shaath, 2 April 1994; memorandum of 28 April 1994, Lehne; 25.11/19æ, 2, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 9 May 1994; memorandum of 11 May 1994, Odd Wibe (Ambassador, TIPH coordinator); 25.11/19ø, 11, memorandum of 2 May 1994, Ræder; 308.882-1, 1, Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, 1 July 1994.
\(^{201}\) Lia 1998, p. 60; see also pp. 54–60.
\(^{202}\) UD 308.882-1, 1, Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, 1 July 1994.
Implementing Peace

Israeli judgement of TIPH was positive, although such international presence was of no interest to Israel’.203

After three months, the TIPH mission was over. Norway, Denmark and Italy were prepared to continue, but this would have required a new, joint request from the parties. Only the Palestinians made such a request.204 The Israelis – and the IDF in particular – were completely uninterested in the TIPH mission. They insisted on getting rid of the observer force. They hoped that the ‘uncomfortable precedent’ of having international observers keeping the peace in the Occupied Territories would be swiftly forgotten’.205 TIPH, for its part, felt undermined by the IDF and frustrated about its inability get the Israeli authorities to change their attitude. Israel had never asked for the TIPH mission and behaved accordingly. The IDF in Hebron displayed a complete lack of understanding and acknowledgement of the agreement that Israel had signed. All the same, one positive result of the TIPH mission was a partial improvement in the behaviour of IDF soldiers. Little violence occurred during the TIPH period. In fact, not one single Israeli or Palestinian had been killed inside TIPH’s area during May–August 1994. The TIPH observers ‘in their white coats and their notebooks have contributed to a calmer atmosphere’. The mission at least had had ‘an impact on “the feeling of security” among the Palestinians in Hebron city’.206 On the other hand, efforts at reconciliation had been unsuccessful. The main issues such as roadblocks and the closure and reopening of the central part of the city, the wholesale market and the Ibrahim mosque had not been solved.207

Within the Norwegian foreign ministry, however, the short TIPH operation was regarded as a success. The meagre results, which had cost NOK 12 million, could not properly justify such an assessment.208 But the TIPH mission had been a useful instrument. For the Palestinian leaders, the TIPH agreement had been a face-saving gesture that helped bring the mired peace process back on track. This was the result that mattered. The Israelis and the Palestinians had resumed their places at the negotiating table, and Norway had helped navigate a course out of the Hebron crisis. Once again, though, the TIPH operation had started and ended on Israel’s premises. Norway could not or would not put pressure on Israel.

203 UD 308.882-1, 1, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry 12 July 1994: ‘[Israel] vurderte TIPHs tilstedeværelse positivt, selv i lys av at man i utgangspunktet ikke var interessert i en slik tilstedeværelse.’
204 UD 308.882-1, 1, Mission of PLO in Norway to Foreign Ministry, 15 July 1994; see also 308.882-1, 2, Mission of PLO in Norway to Foreign Ministry, 17 August 1994.
205 Quoted after Lia 1998, p. 60.
206 Ibid.
207 UD 308.882-1, 2, memorandum of 24 August 1995, Hansen; see also 308.882-1, 2, memorandum of 9 August 1994, Ræder.
208 UD 308.80, 2, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 26 August 1994, minutes from meeting between Godal and Arafat, 19 August 1994; 308.882-1, 2, Press release, 8 August 1994; memorandum of 9 August 1994, Ræder; Aftenposten, 9 and 10 August 1994.
Twisting Arafat’s Arm

In the summer of 1994, as Arafat and his companions entered Gaza and Jericho, optimism among the Palestinians was at a peak. A majority of them felt that this time the peace process would lead to something positive and would improve their economic situation. Less than a year later, the majority believed that the light lay behind them. No practical benefits were visible in their lives. 209

Despite massive international assistance, the economic conditions for the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank deteriorated during this period. Between 1992 and 1996, real per capita GNP fell by approximately 36%. 210 Instead of seeing the significant improvements that everyone expected and knew were necessary for any substantial peace, the Palestinian economy continued to decline. 211

There were several reasons for this disastrous development. However, Israel’s policy of closing the borders after every attack by Palestinian suicide bombers was the single most important factor in this negative development. Closure – together with curfews, roadblocks and checkpoints, all limiting Palestinian mobility – was not something new invented during the Oslo process. However, the restrictions had become more frequent and severe. Until the beginning of the 1990s, it had been relatively easy for Palestinians to gain access to Jerusalem and to travel both between and within Gaza and the West Bank. But extended curfews began to be imposed during the Gulf War in 1991. After the first complete closure in March 1993, which lasted for more than a week, permits were required for Palestinians to enter Jerusalem and Israel, and permanent checkpoints were set up. All of these restrictions limited Palestinian access to the main commercial and cultural centre of East Jerusalem, and curtailed mobility between Gaza and the West Bank. Furthermore, they also disrupted transport and communications between the northern and southern parts of the West Bank. During some periods, the borders were closed altogether. The number of days with complete border closure increased from 17 in 1993 to 61 in 1994, 73 in 1995, and 82 in 1996. 212

The political and economic consequences were nothing less than disastrous – both for the Palestinian people and for the credibility of Arafat and his PA. During the first year of Palestinian self-rule, the situation became worse than ever before. The gap be-

---


between promises and reality increased and seemed impossible to bridge. Restrictions on mobility had never been so severe in the past as under the new PA regime. The ‘safe passage’ promised in the Oslo DoP was never established. Movement between Gaza and the West Bank became almost impossible. Trade between the two entities declined sharply. Before 1993, approximately 50% of the goods produced in Gaza were sent to the West Bank. By 1997, that figure had dropped to 2%. Palestinian exports fell by 23% between 1992 and 1996, and private investments by 75%. Unemployment grew to an average of 23.9% in 1996. And if severely underemployed and seasonal workers were included, unemployment figures had doubled. One-third of the Gazans and one-tenth of the West Bankers were living below the poverty line.  

Closure meant that Palestinians were unable to work in Israel. The results were devastating. Although there was significant growth in the construction and public service sectors as a consequence of international assistance, this could not compensate for lost daily income from Israel. At the beginning of the 1990s, approximately 100,000 Palestinians worked in Israel. By 1995, the average number had fallen to 32,000. In 1996, between 22,000 and 23,000 Palestinians still had a job in Israel.

However, unemployment as a result of closure was only one of several ingredients in this disastrous development. In addition, business declined by 30–40% during closures. In Gaza, fishermen were often prevented from sailing. The import of raw materials and consumer goods, including food, was halted or restricted. Prices increased massively. Export products did not reach their markets, which affected the economy of Gaza most. Cucumbers, tomatoes, citrus fruits, strawberries, peppers and cut flowers were Gaza’s main export products. Such products could not survive delays or extensive waiting in the sun for Israeli security inspections to be completed. Total Palestinian exports declined by 25%. In addition, closures gave Palestinian exporters a reputation as unreliable suppliers. With all trade declining, the Palestinians became even more dependent on imports from Israel. Private investment in the Palestinian areas tempted no one. The already ‘very political’ Palestinian economy became still more dependent on Israel in the era of the new Oslo process.

The consequences of these closures undermined the credibility of the PA, not just politically but also economically. Trade interruptions and declining domestic sales affected the PA’s fiscal revenues. Social needs increased as unemployment grew and more demands were made on social services. This increased and complicated the PA’s budgeting problems. From 1994 to 1996, ‘the costs of closure represent[ed] between 7

---


Arafat was caught in a vicious circle. Criticism was growing, and he was losing credibility everywhere. Every concession he made to Israel ruined his standing among the Palestinians. A steadily increasing number saw Hamas, not the PA, as their hope for the future. A civil war among the Palestinians was no longer pure fantasy. Attacks on Israel became deadlier and more frequent. The attacks resulted in increased Israeli pressure on the PLO chairman. Israeli public opinion, moving steadily to the right, demanded that Rabin force Arafat to stop the terrorist attacks and close the borders. Around 85% of the Israeli public wanted closures in response to Palestinian terrorism. Politicians could not ignore such an overwhelming sentiment, and Rabin answered every suicide attack by closing borders, thus stopping even more Palestinians from reaching their jobs in Israel. In addition, the Israeli authorities steadily replaced Palestinian workers with more reliable guest workers from abroad. More Palestinians became permanently unemployed, which led to increased support for Hamas and exacerbated the political and financial situation of the PA. ‘One mistake led to another’, chief negotiator Uri Savir admitted. ‘First Arafat failed to establish his authority by quashing the forces of violence. Then we, by our closure policy, punished not the terrorists but the Palestinians as a whole. Meanwhile, the Israeli public perceived closure as a blockade against terrorism even though our military did not necessarily agree that it was an effective means to that end.... More to the point, as the Palestinian standard of living suffered, the conditions of violence flourished.’

Arafat begged the international donor community for help over and over again. There was little doubt that Arafat and his PA were having great difficulty acceding to the donors’ demands for accountability and transparency. However, the donors, for their part, were slow to disburse funds. They justified their slowness by accusing Arafat of incompetence. Many regarded Arafat’s administration as sloppy and corrupt. The donors were not fully taking into account the difficulties of starting up a new administration without training and experience. And Arafat could not create a modern administration without funds.

However, the donors were by no means unwilling to help or entirely unable to acknowledge Arafat’s problems. In fact, both the United States and, not surprisingly, the AHLC chair Norway were disturbed by the lack of money coming through. Almost the entire world had promised to support the Palestinian peacebuilding project. But promises of money could not help the situation on the ground when the funds were not running smoothly through the system. ‘The international community must respond to the Palestinian request for support. We cannot allow the first days of Pales-

217 Brynen 2000, p. 68.
tinian self-rule and the hopes for peace to flounder because we conducted “business as usual” in allocating our assistance’, wrote US Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Godal and a number of other foreign ministers in the beginning of June 1994.220

The Palestinian budget deficit for 1994 was estimated at $77 million. In order to raise money, Norway suggested that all donors should agree on a ‘burden-sharing formula’ and thereby provide a larger share of the 1994 pledge for start-up and recurrent costs: ‘Burden-sharing on this scale by all donors would ensure that the unfunded gap [would be] covered.’ At the AHLC meeting in June 1994, donors were encouraged to direct at least 25% of their 1994 pledges toward start-up costs. In the end, some $42–45 million was pledged to cover the gap, leaving a shortfall of $35 million.221 ‘I do not want to hide from you’, wrote Arafat to Godal after the June meeting, ‘that every Palestinian citizen is asking about the projects and the support of which our people heard a lot following every meeting of the donors, and of which nothing has arrived yet to cover the economic and social needs, to create jobs for the unemployed ... and other huge recurrent expenses’.222

The lack of disbursements – and, in particular, the gap between pledges and disbursements – was a big problem for the development of the PA. However, it was also a problem for the AHLC. By September 1994, pledges that had been made as early as October 1993 had still not been disbursed. For the year 1994, a total of $760 million had been pledged, but only $260 million was disbursed.223 ‘I would urge you [to] join us in taking steps to ensure that contributions pledged almost one year ago are translated into visible changes on the ground now’, stressed Christopher in a new letter to Godal in August 1994.224 Godal shared Christopher’s concerns on the need to accelerate the implementation of pledges.225 In fact, the issue was now more urgent than ever. On 29 August 1994, the Early Empowerment Agreement was signed. Within weeks, the Palestinian Authority was to assume responsibility for education, culture, health, social welfare, tourism and taxation.226 This would be a costly enterprise for the Palestinians and would lead to new challenges for the international donor community. More money was needed in a hurry. The AHLC chair, Norway, stressed that ‘[t]ime is of the essence if we are to deal with the current budget shortfall of the Palestinian Authority. Failure to meet short-term needs might endanger the prospects of long-term economic development and political stability’.227

220 UD 308.82, 1, Christopher to Godal, 3 June 1994, letter to various foreign ministers enclosed.
221 UD 308.82, 1, P.M., 7 June 1994; see also Paris to Foreign Ministry, 10 June 1994; memorandum of 16 June 1994, Ræder; 308.82, 2, Godal to Arafat, 23 June 1994.
222 UD 308.82, 2, Arafat to Godal, 26 June 1994.
223 UD 308.82, 3, memorandum of 5 September 1994, Hansen.
224 UD 308.82, 3, Christopher to Godal, 8 August 1994.
225 UD 308.82, 3, Godal to Christopher, 31 August 1994.
227 UD 308.82, 3, Foreign Ministry to Cairo, 14 September 1994, Briefing on Informal Consultations in Oslo on 13 September; Lia 1998, pp. 94–95.
Norway led the fight for further pledges and disbursements from the donor countries. International assistance had to be intensified. The United States also put pressure on donors, especially the Gulf states, Japan and the EU. The Americans asked donors to disburse pledges, to redirect money from other funds to the Holst Fund and to make new pledges.\(^{228}\)

The winter of 1994–95 really proved to be one of the darkest periods of Palestinian discontent. Even the ever-optimistic Terje Rød Larsen was discouraged and pessimistic: ‘The donor effort is a failure; the strategy wrong; the priorities wrong and the timetable wrong’, he lamented in late November. He pointed to the huge gap between pledges and disbursements and the subsequent problems with making peace on the ground. In his view, ‘[d]onors needed to refocus aid on public works to generate employment in Gaza’.\(^{229}\) Basically, the assistance efforts and the peacemaking efforts were in deep trouble. Riots in Gaza in mid-November demonstrated the frustration of those living in the strip.\(^{230}\)

Consequently, when the odd trio of Arafat, Rabin and Peres collected their Nobel peace prizes in Oslo on 10 December 1994, the gap between hope and reality could hardly have been greater. Nothing seemed left of the hopes that had been so great a year earlier. An increasing number of Palestinians believed that the whole Oslo Agreement and the process that followed had been a tragic mistake. Israel would not move the process any further forward because the occupying power had already handed Arafat the ‘prison of Gaza’.\(^{231}\) Most Palestinians believed that the entire Oslo process had worked to the advantage of Israel. As always, Israel’s idea of peace meant Palestinian surrender. Jokes circulated in Jerusalem saying that Rabin and Peres had received the Nobel peace prize for ‘making peace with each other, not for peace with the Palestinians, which remained to be achieved’.\(^{232}\)

On the Israeli side, the advocates of peace were also experiencing trouble and declining support. During the 18 months since the signing of the Oslo Agreement, 95 Israelis had been killed, a figure that bore a resemblance to the numbers killed during the two worst years of the *intifada*. An opinion poll conducted in January 1995 showed that the number of Israelis supporting the peace process had dropped from 60% to 53%. Support for the ‘Gaza and Jericho first’ formula had decreased from 43% to 36%. Only 29% felt that the PLO could stop the terrorist attacks against Israel, as opposed to

\(^{228}\) UD 308.82, 3, Godal to colleagues, 20 September 1994; 308.82, 4, Godal to colleagues, 8 November 1994; Foreign Ministry to various embassies, 23 November 1994, Norwegian P.M. attached; US demarche, undated, received 21 November 1994; memorandum of 24 November 1994, Hansen.


\(^{230}\) Lia 1998, pp. 94–95.

\(^{231}\) Savir 1998, p. 158.

35% earlier. A majority believed that Israel should reinforce its military capabilities rather than pursuing peace. The room for manoeuvre was shrinking.\(^{233}\)

Israel was in ‘the grip of terror’. Never before had so many Israelis been killed in terrorist attacks in such a short period of time. The opposition blamed the Labour government for the loss of every Israeli life. During a demonstration on 22 October 1994, the Israeli crowd shouted ‘This peace is killing us!’ and ‘Rabin is a murderer!’ Binyamin Netanyahu, the leader of the Likud Party, Rafael Eytan, the leader of the extreme right party Tsomet, and Zevulun Hammer from the National Religious Party all participated in this demonstration.\(^{234}\)

In this dark, almost poisoned atmosphere, with extremists and uncompromising forces on both sides winning support, Israeli and Palestinian advocates of peace continued to try to move the peace process forward. In this, they had little choice. They had to show their respective peoples that their concept of peace and the principles of gradualism and confidence-building could work. Arafat’s and Rabin’s very different ideas of peace and of what the Oslo Agreement actually meant would again be tested.\(^{235}\)

On 28 September 1995, once again on the White House lawn, Rabin and Arafat signed the Interim Agreement, also called Oslo II. The negotiating process that led to this had been long, hard and complex. After the signing of the Gaza–Jericho Agreement in May 1994, Rabin had wanted to slow things down. He was in no hurry, and he wanted to test Arafat before making further concessions on the West Bank. In addition, the Israeli prime minister was facing a new election in 1996. If a new breakthrough were made during 1995, Rabin could face the election with an impressive record behind him.\(^{236}\)

However, moving the process forward and reaching a new agreement was easier said than done. Rabin and Peres met with Arafat several times during winter 1994–95. The aim of the meetings was always the same: the two Israelis wanted to make it clear to the Palestinian leader that unless security was improved, there would be no interim agreement. On the other hand, they knew that Arafat was the only one able to take final decisions on the Palestinian side. ‘You may try to force your approach on Arafat’, Abu Ala warned Uri Savir. ‘And if you use your strength to push him into a corner, he may have no choice but to accept your approach. But remember: if you do that, you will isolate him. A one-sided agreement will not stand. You must find a way to protect your security and balance the agreement – if security is indeed your only interest. On land, we will not yield’.\(^{237}\)

However, in spite of Abu Ala’s warning, a ‘one-sided agreement’ seemed to be exactly what the Israeli negotiators had in mind. They knew perfectly well that the Palestinians expected to get back far more territory than Israel would ever offer. As a result, the Israeli negotiators decided to keep things in the air. They would not show the Palestinians any maps until the end of the negotiations – and only after the security aspects had been


\(^{235}\) Shlaim 2001, p. 546.


\(^{237}\) Savir 1998, p. 186; see also pp. 159–192.
finalized. The Israeli negotiators believed that the Palestinians would yield more easily on security than on territory, while Israel would never give in on security. After dividing the West Bank into zones – Areas A, B and C – the Israelis demanded – and got – what they regarded as a compromise: ‘full security and civil powers’ in what would become Area C and ‘overriding responsibility for security for the purpose of protecting the Israelis and fighting terrorism’ in Area B, the key word being ‘overriding’. Only in Area A, constituting approximately 2.5% of the West Bank, would the Palestinian Authority have full security and civilian powers.

With agreement on the ‘concept of security’ achieved, what remained was a wide-ranging and intricate set of negotiations on how to transfer security and civilian powers from Israel to the Palestinians. The Israeli negotiators still refused to show the Palestinians their map for further redeployment and decided, as they had so many times before, to sort things out directly with Arafat, assuming that Arafat was an easier match than Abu Ala and his delegation.

The chemistry between Arafat and Rabin was never good. Peres was the one normally sent to sort out problems directly with the Palestinian leader. However, the foreign minister’s meetings with Arafat were not particularly pleasant. At the summit in Taba on 10 August 1995, Peres arrived in a ‘militant mood’. Abu Ala was furious because he felt that the Israeli negotiators went directly to Arafat whenever he and the rest of the Palestinian delegation refused to give in. Abu Ala disapproved of the negotiating tactics used by the Israelis both in Norway and again during the negotiations over the Interim Agreement in Taba. According to Savir, Abu Ala was not impressed by arguments about Israeli public opinion. Arafat, on the other hand, ‘showed more understanding’.

The Israelis suggested that security powers should be transferred to the Palestinians ‘every six months, over eighteen months, without defining the amount of territory involved in each of the three phases’. To the ‘amazement of the Palestinian delegation’, Arafat accepted this suggestion. He needed to satisfy Palestinian public opinion and wanted quick results. ‘Thus he ascribed less importance to guarantees about the future than to what could be accomplished in the present.’

---


239 The dividing of the West Bank into the three areas is discussed below.


241 Savir 1998, p. 201; see also pp. 193–244.

242 Savir 1998, p. 201. In return for this extraordinary flexibility, Arafat demanded that Israel agree to the presence of a Palestinian police station in Hebron. ‘It was a smart move to yield to Arafat on an issue of importance to Palestinian opinion in exchange for his concession on a matter that both sides considered far more important in strategic terms but that was obscure to those unfamiliar with the detailed talks’, thought Uri Savir. However, no decision on a Palestinian police station in Hebron was made. Peres decided to postpone the question because tensions were still running high between the Palestinian population and the Jewish settlers in the city. The Israelis and the Palestinians agreed to disagree on the matter. In the Interim Agreement, the disputed city was to be discussed in separate negotiations, to be concluded in January 1997. Savir 1998, p. 202; see also Savir 1998, pp. 201–204, 226–321; Brynen 2000, pp. 62–63.
According to Savir, the Palestinian delegation was ‘bristling with resentment toward us for having gone directly to Arafat’. They reacted strongly to how the Israelis had ‘twisted Arafat’s arm’ on the question of further redeployment. However, negotiations continued, and the struggle over what would be transferred to the Palestinians in the interim period was carried on day and night. During the final phase of the negotiations from 17 September 1995, once more in Taba, Foreign Minister Peres was ‘like a bear, growling, biting, and, as a result, not very popular with the Palestinian delegation. He threatened. He banged his fist on the table. Once he even stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving us all stunned’. Peres was desperate to secure an agreement. The planned signing ceremony was only one and a half weeks away. Peres had decided to conclude the agreement himself. Abu Ala, leaving the final phase of the negotiations to Arafat, ‘looked pale with rage at our arm-twisting negotiating style’.

The Interim Agreement of September 1995 was comprehensive and complex. Including its annexes, it amounted to no less than 410 pages and eight maps. The agreement expanded in detail both the territorial and the functional control of the Palestinian Authority. Israel agreed to withdraw from six Palestinian cities on the West Bank (except Hebron, which was later divided into Palestinian-controlled and Israeli-controlled areas). The cities of Ramallah, Bethlehem, Qalqilya, Jenin, Tulkarem and Nablus were to be handed over to the PA. These cities constituted Area A, approximately 2.7% of the West Bank, with around 36% of its population. Israel also agreed to redeploy from 465 villages. In these parts – designated Area B – the Palestinian police would be responsible for public order, while Israel would retain ‘overriding responsibility for security’. Area B represented approximately 25% of the West Bank, with around 60% of the Palestinian population. The remaining area – the largely undefined Area C, consisting of Jewish settlements, military locations and roads – remained under exclusive Israeli control.

There was little doubt that the Interim Agreement changed the situation on the ground to a significant degree and made the fruits of the peace process more concretely visible to Palestinians and Israelis alike. In particular, the hated Israeli Army would no longer be present inside several Palestinian cities, reducing the daily frictions between the population and the occupying forces.

Further Israeli redeployment from the West Bank and Gaza would occur over an 18-month period, implemented in three stages of six months each. However, this development was made contingent on ‘the assumption of responsibility for public order and

---

246 Savir 1998, p. 235; see also pp. 193–244.
248 Interim Agreement, Article XIII, 2a.
internal security by the Palestinian Police’. The Interim Agreement also opened the way for a much larger Palestinian police force. The maximum number was set at 30,000 – divided into 18,000 in Gaza and 12,000 on the West Bank. The next step of redeployment would enlarge Areas A and B, and would ultimately lead to a handover of all territory, except areas related to permanent status negotiations (such as Jewish settlements, roads, military locations and Jerusalem). The Israelis and the Palestinians also agreed that in order to ‘maintain the territorial integrity of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit, and to promote their economic growth and the demographic and geographical links between them’, the parties would protect the ‘normal and smooth movement of people, vehicles, and goods within the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza Strip’.

Free and democratic elections for an 88-member Palestinian legislative council and its executive authority – the PA – were to be held throughout the West Bank and Gaza, and were to include the direct election of a president. Elections would take place immediately after the initial redeployment of the IDF and were to be supervised by international observers. The president and the legislative council could hold office for up to five years, and special arrangements allowed the Palestinian inhabitants of Jerusalem to vote.

In addition, the Interim Agreement established an array of coordinating mechanisms and committed the PA to cooperation with Israel in fighting terrorism and other security challenges. The agreement reaffirmed that negotiations on a permanent settlement would begin no later than May 1996, and would broach such overwhelmingly difficult questions as settlements, Jerusalem, refugees and borders. By May 1999, those negotiations were to be concluded and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict was to have been solved.

Securing Norway’s Role

The road to peace was beset with twists and turns, setbacks and crises being more the rule than the exception. ‘Creative crises’, as Terje Rød Larsen used to call them, seemed necessary to bring the peace process forward. The political disagreements between the Israelis and the Palestinians did not vanish as a consequence of Norwegian willingness or a dash of ‘Oslo spirit’. But if the Oslo Agreement was to be implemented, the peace process had to continue, and the Norwegians wanted to carry it forward. This was not the time to rest on one’s laurels.

250 Interim Agreement, Article X, 2.
253 Quoted after Lia 1998, p. 27.
During 1995, the negotiations over the Interim Agreement ran into constant trouble. The Palestinians asked for Norwegian support and help. Both Yasser Arafat and Nabil Shaath emphasized on several occasions that it would be necessary for Norway to play a role if the negotiations were to be brought back on track. The Palestinians had various proposals and suggestions for how this could be achieved. Shaath emphasized that a serious intervention from a third party was necessary in order to make sure that the Israelis and Palestinians kept in continuous contact with each other. Norway should keep in close contact with both parties and act as a facilitator and an enthusiast. Both Arafat and Shaath suggested that Norway should pay visits to several key capitals, raising the profile of the peace process and urging support. Another possibility was to set up meetings in Norway at which the Israelis and Palestinians – over a period of days – could undertake a profound discussion of all aspects of the peace process. Nabil Shaath felt that the Norwegians, especially on a political level, could influence and arrange for further negotiations.

In a conversation with Godal in mid-February 1995, Shaath stressed that bringing the parties together in the first place left the Norwegians committed. What the Palestinians repeatedly wanted, but did not state explicitly, was for Norway to use its influence on Israel in order to soften the Israeli position. The Norwegians, for their part, gave their usual reply: Norway was willing to act as a facilitator, but this depended on a joint understanding. Norway would do nothing without Israel’s consent.

The Norwegians did not turn a completely deaf ear to the Palestinian requests for an outright intervention, but they first wanted to explore the Israeli point of view. Norwegian Minister for Development Cooperation Kari Nordheim-Larsen raised the question with Peres in late February 1995. Peres, however, did not encourage Norwegian participation. Nordheim-Larsen was told that Norway should stick to providing economic assistance in order to develop the Palestinian self-rule areas. Basically, Per-

---


255 UD 308.87, 6, minutes from meeting between Godal, Egeland and Shaath, 16 February 1995, Hansen, 19 February 1995.

256 UD 308.87, 6, memorandum of 7 February 1995, Hansen; minutes from meeting between Godal, Egeland and Shaath, 16 February 1995, Hansen, 19 February 1995; memorandum of 21 February 1995, Hansen; minutes from meeting between Brundtland and Shaath, 16 February 1995, Hansen, 19 February 1995. Mona Juul, who was appointed to the Norwegian embassy in Tel Aviv in 1994, believed that there was room for Norwegian involvement, but without publicity. Unlike Shaath, she thought a discreet role, at a high political level, was more appropriate. 308.87, 6, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 10 February 1995.

257 UD 308.87, 6, memorandum of 21 February 1995, Hansen.
es told the Norwegians to stay out of the political arena.\(^{258}\) Egeland received a similar response a week later. The message from Israel was crystal clear: Peres saw no reason for Norwegian involvement in the negotiations. Indeed, he rejected such involvement, stating ‘We are negotiating’.\(^{259}\) As so often before, once again it was the Palestinians who eagerly, almost desperately, urged for Norwegian assistance, and the Israelis who turned it down. Without Israeli approval, the Norwegians would or could do nothing.

However, Norway strengthened its local representation in the Middle East in order to improve its access both to Israelis and Palestinians. In February 1995, a representative office was established in Gaza, with two main tasks. First, this office was the Norwegian representation in relation to the Palestinian Authority. (Since the PA was not allowed to establish regular diplomatic representation, the representative office was attached to the Norwegian embassy in Tel Aviv.)\(^{260}\) Second, it would provide necessary coordination and supervision for the huge Norwegian assistance programme being provided to the Palestinians. The office was therefore supplied with two officers from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).\(^{261}\)

Relationships between Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul, who both moved to Israel during 1994, and the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continued to be close. Every Saturday, when possible, the Norwegian couple met with Uri Savir at Café Basel in Tel Aviv.\(^{262}\) They received first-hand information about developments in the negotiations.\(^{263}\) In many ways, they were the perfect facilitators, discreet, eager, willing and always providing what the negotiators needed. When the Israelis, in June 1995, asked the two Norwegians to find an appropriate place for negotiations, the home of the Norwegian political attaché was offered.\(^{264}\) When the negotiations were stuck again during the summer of 1995, Terje Rød Larsen travelled to Eilat together with representatives of the US peace team to try to get things moving. Rød Larsen wanted a summit at which Peres and Arafat could sort things out themselves. Whether he and the Americans shared Israel’s views of Arafat as an easier match than his Palestinian negotiators is unclear. However, taking the close relationship between the Americans, the Israelis and Rød Larsen into consideration, this seems likely. The summit was held, Arafat’s arm was twisted one more time, and the negotiations over an Interim Agreement moved towards finalization.\(^{265}\)

\(^{258}\) UD 308.80, 8, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 8 March 1995, minutes from meeting between Peres and Nordheim-Larsen, 23 February 1995; see also 308.87, 6, Washington to Foreign Ministry, 23 February 1995; 308.80, 8, memorandum of 14 March 1995, Hansen.

\(^{259}\) UD 308.87, 7, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 3 March 1995, minutes from meeting of Peres and Egeland, 2 March 1995: ‘Vi er i forhandlinger.’

\(^{260}\) Gaza/Herico Agreement, Article VI, 2a.

\(^{261}\) UD 308.80, 7, memorandum of 8 February 1995, Hansen.


\(^{263}\) UD 308.87, 9, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 5, 17, 19, 21, 25 and 30 July 1995; memorandum of 19 July 1995, Hansen; Gaza to Foreign Ministry, 4 July; Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 18, 20, 25 and 28 August 1995; memorandum of 11 and 25 August 1995, Hansen.


Norway did not play a substantial role during the interim negotiations. Basically, the Norwegian presence – in the form of Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul – functioned as talking partners, fixers and punching bags for frustration. Nevertheless, the Interim Agreement was still partly presented as another Norwegian achievement. The Norwegian press underlined once more the importance of the work done by Norway. State Secretary Jan Egeland fed this image when he claimed that the ‘Oslo II agreement ... is a triumph for the Oslo Channel. Norway has played and will also in the future play a key role in the work for peace in the Middle East’. This was definitely an exaggeration of Norway’s involvement in the negotiations. However, as a result of the Interim Agreement, Norway was assigned responsibility for a new ‘people-to-people’ (P2P) programme, and later for a new TIPH assignment.

According to the Interim Agreement, the P2P programme was to assist the parties to ‘cooperate in enhancing the dialogue and relations between their peoples in accordance with the concepts developed in cooperation with the Kingdom of Norway’. Just being mentioned by name in the agreement was in itself seen as an important victory by the Norwegians. Norway was given another opportunity to justify its role as an important, almost indispensable, actor in the Middle East peace drama.

However, the wording in the Interim Agreement regarding the P2P programme was less concrete and less ambitious than ideas and drafts that had been discussed at earlier stages. Almost a year before the signing of the agreement, Uri Savir had approached Jon Hanssen-Bauer of Fafo to discuss a number of ideas. Hanssen-Bauer had taken over as leader of Fafo when Terje Rød Larsen joined the Norwegian foreign ministry in autumn 1993. Gradually, Hanssen-Bauer became the foreign ministry’s anchor at Fafo, and he played a major part in Fafo’s various projects in the Middle East, all of which were developed and run in extraordinarily close cooperation with the foreign ministry.

In July 1994, Savir had suggested that Fafo could play a key role in confidence-building measures in the Middle East. Fafo could conduct opinion polls and collect statistics as a way of improving support for the peace process. In November 1994, Savir developed his ideas further. Fafo should explore the prospect of a comprehensive Middle East project. The project should include Palestinian and Israeli leaders, researchers and various organizations. Consultations between Savir, Abu Ala, Egeland, Juul and Hanssen-Bauer seem to have led to some sort of joint understanding. On 24 November

---

267 Interim Agreement, Annex 6; see also Article VIII, 1.
268 UD 385.32/42, 2, memorandum of 25 August 1995, Tor Wennesland (Adviser); 308.87, 9, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 17 and 30 July 1995; Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 18, 20 and 28 August; Savir 1998, p. 219.
269 Romming 2003.
270 UD 308.80, 1, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 18 July 1994.
1994, Fafo applied for NOK 1 million from the foreign ministry in order to prepare for the project.\textsuperscript{271}

The people-to-people programme was discussed in detail during Jan Egeland’s visit to the Middle East at the beginning of March 1995. Both Savir and Abu Ala emphasized the importance of Norway’s role in such a project. The main emphasis should be on media and public opinion. Every project, according to Savir, should seek maximum media attention in order to strengthen support for the peace process.\textsuperscript{272}

Egeland’s visit triggered the Norwegian engagement. Fafo produced a first draft on 28 March 1995, and a number of other drafts were subsequently prepared – by Israelis, Palestinians and Norwegians alike.\textsuperscript{273} Long before the negotiations were completed, the people-to-people concept had been adjusted many times. It had also been discussed at the highest political levels – by Foreign Minister Godal in mid-June 1995; by Peres, who had also briefed the president of the Norwegian parliament; and, not least, by State Secretary Jan Egeland, who was enthusiastic about the idea. The people-to-people concept fitted well into his active engagement thinking. Egeland’s aim was the same as it had been since the beginning of the 1980s – to go out into the world and make peace.\textsuperscript{274}

By this time, the Norwegians were the most eager supporters of the people-to-people project. The Israelis and the Palestinians were preoccupied with the substantive and difficult political aspects of the interim negotiations. But Norway continued to remind the negotiators of the P2P programme. The Norwegians’ ambitions were huge. Egeland had initially proposed a budget of NOK 30 million for P2P. However, after some sobering up, the contribution was more realistically set at NOK 10 million.\textsuperscript{275}

The P2P programme was initiated to increase support for the peace process. While the signed agreements had established the framework at the political level, P2P was to increase support and interest for the peace process among people at the grass roots. ‘Peace is agreed among statesmen, but only built by the peoples’, argued Uri Savir, the initiator on the Israeli side.\textsuperscript{276} A broader understanding for the peace process and

\textsuperscript{271} UD 383.44/42, 4, Fafo to Foreign Ministry, 24 November 1994; Berg 2002, p. 43; Savir 1998, p. 219. However, no grant was given until 27 September 1995, the day before the signing of the Interim Agreement.
\textsuperscript{272} UD 308.80, 8, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 10 March 1995.
\textsuperscript{274} UD 467.2, 4, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 12 June 1995; 308.87, 8, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 27 June 1995; Jan Egeland’s private archive, memorandum of 15 June 1995, Egeland; Fafo (Hanssen-Bauer) to Foreign Ministry (Egeland), 3 July 1995; Hanssen-Bauer to Abu-Libdeh/Baruch, 15 June 1995.
\textsuperscript{275} UD 308.80, 96/00570-254, NORAD to Foreign Ministry, 6 May 1996; Berg 2002, pp. 1, 35; see also Jan Egeland’s private archive, Fafo to Foreign Ministry, 14 February 1996; memorandum of 20 February 1996, Wennesland.
\textsuperscript{276} Quoted after Berg 2002, p. 35.
its results should be established, and more media attention should be drawn towards the positive aspects of peacemaking. In times of crisis, the P2P programme should also serve as a ‘hotline’ between the parties. Hence, the P2P programme should increase contacts and cooperation at both the political and the popular levels.\textsuperscript{277}

A peacebuilding and reconciliation project like P2P was nothing new in Norway. During the 1990s, Norway had used development assistance as a political instrument in several conflicts, and such assistance had increasingly been linked to human rights, democratization and various peacebuilding activities.\textsuperscript{278} However, the political implications were much more obvious when it came to P2P. Basically, the programme was a political project aimed at providing direct support for the ongoing peace process. It was an initiative from the top, and Norway was committed to supporting it, both financially and politically.\textsuperscript{279}

The P2P programme was to promote direct contact and cooperation by arranging joint projects for Palestinians and Israelis. Themes such as dialogue, culture, youth exchange, education, environment and the media were highlighted. Target groups were NGOs, institutions and individuals willing to cooperate with people from the other side. In order to get a particular project funded under the programme, Israeli and Palestinian organizations had to develop a joint application and implement the project together. Media events – such as concerts or peace-related painting and book contests – were also seen as important. Generally, the P2P programme was to promote ‘extensive media coverage on the achievements of the peace process’.\textsuperscript{280} Two months prior to the signing of the Oslo II agreement, Egeland approached the Norwegian Broadcasting Cooperation (NRK) to ask if they would be interested in some kind of TV cooperation within the P2P programme. The foreign ministry received a positive but noncommittal answer. Norway’s Trade Union Federation was also informed about the programme, with which it wanted to be involved.\textsuperscript{281}

Some of the plans were nothing less than castles in the air. For instance, a huge outdoor concert, ‘Sounds of Peace’, was to take place on both sides at the same time. The concert was to be broadcast by international TV companies, and the artists were to be transported in helicopters between the two stages. Political developments, however, put an end to such ambitions.\textsuperscript{282}

Norway was to assist in the preparation and administration of the P2P programme. It was also to fund both its own and the Palestinian expenditures. A steering group was

\textsuperscript{279}Berg 2002, pp. 31–34, 40.
\textsuperscript{280}Jan Egeland’s private archive, memorandum of 15 June 1995, Egeland.
\textsuperscript{281}UD 385.32/42, 2, International Solidarity Committee of the Norwegian Labour movement to Foreign Ministry, 11 July 1995; Egeland to Norwegian Broadcasting Cooperation, 27 July 1995; Norwegian Broadcasting Cooperation to Egeland, 7 August 1995.
\textsuperscript{282}Berg 2002, pp. 35–39.
set up, consisting of Uri Savir, Abu Ala and Jan Egeland. In order to strengthen the programme and to increase its capacity for implementation, a joint secretariat was established in Jerusalem in 1996, headed by Fafo.\textsuperscript{283}

Norway was not the only operator in the peacebuilding market. After 1993, peace-building activities had mushroomed. A range of US organizations placed huge advertisements in Hebrew and Arabic newspapers, asking for peace- and confidence-building partners. Many European countries did the same. Money was poured into the Middle East in order to secure this big peace effort. The Palestinians understood that they could use the competitive element to secure as much donor money as possible. In a letter to Jan Egeland, Hanssen-Bauer stressed that Norway was put under ‘mild pressure from the parties who are constantly telling us that the Americans and others are ready to move in and that they plan to get rid of Norway by dollars’. Hanssen-Bauer believed that the P2P programme was important for securing Norway’s high profile in the peace process. In order to ‘preserve the territory’, Norway should go in with more money than the Americans and be an active third party in the planning and implementation of the programme, he recommended. That this was also the only way to secure Fafo’s interests is self-evident.\textsuperscript{284}

Negative political developments in the peace process did not favour the P2P concept. Even if the structure of the programme was in place and the main points had been agreed, the programme did not start up until late autumn 1996, and then on a much less ambitious scale. By then, the emphasis was on the NGO sector. The P2P programme had no chance of becoming a political ‘hotline’. Contrary to earlier thinking, the idea by then was that the entire P2P programme should be depoliticized and distanced from political developments. This was necessary if any projects were to be implemented at all. Interest in the programme was fading on the Palestinian side. Palestinian support of the programme had always been somewhat ambiguous and reluctant. The criticism from the Palestinian side was that the P2P programme was trying to normalize a basically asymmetric situation. As early as 1997, the Palestinian leaders made it clear that they were opposed to a relaunch of the programme. The P2P concept did not work as a Palestinian peace strategy.\textsuperscript{285}

However, nor did the P2P project work as an Israeli peace strategy. The election of Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu in May 1996 definitely produced a changed attitude


\textsuperscript{284} UD 385.32/42, 95/12028-9, Hanssen-Bauer to Egeland 4 January 1996: ‘Vi blir satt under et mildt press fra partene ved at de stadig forteller oss at amerikanerne og andre står klare til å rykke inn og at de planlegger å feie Norge av banen med dollar…. Jeg tror det vil være en fordel om Norge bestemmer seg for en pott øremerket til P2P, større enn den halve millionen dollar amerikanerne frister med, men ikke nødvendigvis stor…. Og Norge har et legitimt behov for involvering for å sikre sine egne investeringer og saksbehandling i forhold til finansiering, og for å “holde reviret”’.; see also Rømming 2003, p. 46–47; Waage 2000b.

Implementing Peace

in the Israeli government and foreign ministry, with the new prime minister refusing to implement substantial parts of the Interim Agreement. ‘It is by definition impossible to run P2P when the Israelis close the borders. The idea, more wholeheartedly supported by liberal Israelis than Palestinians, was to the largest extent sabotaged by Israel’, Jan Egeland explained. Norway repeatedly raised this paradox with Israel, but was unable to do much more. As so many times before, Norway, the facilitator, was left helpless in the face of political developments.286

Once again, Norway had chosen its own role with regard to P2P. Egeland, perhaps overenthusiastically, had seized upon the P2P idea and had worked hard for it. Norway had agreed to act as facilitator and financial benefactor even before the Interim Agreement had been signed. The P2P programme was a sign of Norway’s good intentions in a somewhat overoptimistic peace strategy. The aim had been to use P2P to change the ‘basic image of the other, in order [to] improve the [chances] for reaching an accord’, as Hanssen-Bauer put it.287 According to Egeland, it had become ‘increasingly clear that the understanding and trust reached between the political leaders and the negotiators [had] not filtered down to the ordinary man and woman. The people-to-people exercise [would] hopefully do away with some of the stereotyped ideas and fears that still [existed] as we move down the road to peace’.288

Norway’s TIPH engagement did not exactly turn out as expected either, although it definitely secured a role for the country. The Interim Agreement stated that there ‘will be a Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH)’. The details were not fully worked out, but both sides were to ‘agree on the modalities of the TIPH, including the number of its members and its area of operation’.289 This agreement, reached on 9 May 1996, asked ‘Norway to provide 50–60 persons, citizens of Norway, as TIPH personnel’. The modalities of the operation were to be ‘established by Norway with the agreement of the two sides’.290

The TIPH was to have no military or police functions. The mission should ‘assist in promoting stability and in monitoring and reporting the efforts to maintain normal life in the city of Hebron’, thereby ‘creating a feeling of security among Palestinians’. However, unlike the previous operation in 1994, the new TIPH mission was linked directly to the pending Israeli withdrawal from Hebron. According to the agreement, TIPH staff were to be drawn from Norway alone, and the agreement would remain in force only

287 Quoted after Berg 2002, p. 36.
288 Ibid.
289 Interim Agreement, Annex 1, Article VII.
until Israeli forces had redeployed from Hebron, ‘whereupon it will be superseded by a new agreement to be negotiated by the two sides and the TIPH [would] be replaced by a new TIPH to be established under the new agreement’. Consequently, the first task of the TIPH was to ‘act as an advance party for the new TIPH’.  

President Mubarak had initially suggested the idea of a new TIPH at a meeting between Arafat, Peres and himself on 19 July 1995. Not surprisingly, Peres had been sceptical. In principle, Israel did not favour any international presence. However, as with the first TIPH mission, it appears that there were other, overriding considerations for Israel’s acceptance. The PLO was about to convene the Palestine National Council (PNC) in order to repeal the clause in the PLO’s Charter abolishing the State of Israel. The existence of this clause had prevented progress in the peace negotiations. Israel wanted to ‘allow ... Chairman Arafat to present a tangible achievement’ to the members of the Council. The new TIPH suggestion was seen as a ‘symbolic gesture designed to enable Arafat to show the PNC members that Israel is already making preparations for a withdrawal from the city’.  

The ongoing negotiations in Taba regarding the Interim Agreement suggested that an agreement regarding a new TIPH was indeed a possibility. Within the Norwegian foreign ministry, it was agreed by late August 1995 that Norway would participate if such a request was received, and the ministry set in motion administrative and technical preparations in order to be ready for such a task. In a meeting with Arafat in connection with the signing ceremony in Washington, Godal again confirmed Norway’s willingness to take on this task.  

In the summer of 1995, however, the TIPH issue failed to move forward. Negotiations proceeded slowly. Discussions on the modalities of the TIPH were supposed to take place in late February, but the Israelis suspended all negotiations owing to a wave of terrorist attacks in February and March 1996. The Palestinians were frustrated, and Arafat informed Norway of the PA’s intention to unilaterally invite a group of countries to establish a TIPH operation. This was to consist of eight nations, mostly from Europe but also including Australia and Canada.  

In mid-April, the Israelis and the Palestinians got back to the negotiating table, and substantial negotiations took place. On 19 April, Norway was asked to assume responsibility as leader and coordinator of a new TIPH. The Norwegians agreed to this request. As early as 23 April, a Norwegian delegation arrived in the Middle East to pre-

---

291 Same references as above; see also Lia 1998, p. 63.  
292 Lia 1998, p. 63; see also UD 308.87, 9, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 21 July 1995; 308.882, 96/00265-30, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 20 April 1996.  
293 UD 308.87, 9, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 21 July 1995; memorandum of 11 August 1995, Hansen; Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 11, 12, 20, 25 and 28 August 1995; 308.882-1, 2, memorandum of 24 August 1995, Hansen; 308.881, 95/06781-4, memorandum of 20 October 1995, Hansen; 308.80, 95/00915-105, minutes from meeting between Godal and Arafat, 29 September 1995; see also 302.77/416-1, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 2 October 1995, minutes from meeting between Godal and Peres, 29 September 1995.  
294 UD 308.882, 96/00265-2, Gaza to Foreign Ministry, 4 March 1996.
pare for the TIPH operation. The Norwegians were also invited by the Palestinians to participate in the negotiations regarding the new TIPH’s mandate. Without a doubt, the Palestinians wanted Norway to be a key part of the TIPH operation. However, the Norwegians stressed that ‘Norway could not agree to remain alone in Hebron indefinitely without a redeployment of the Israeli forces.’

Negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians regarding a new TIPH began in late May, before the upcoming election in Israel, but quickly ran into trouble. The Palestinians – or at least Arafat – wanted a TIPH with an increased number of personnel and with representatives from more nations than Israel did. In addition, the Palestinians wanted to remove all references to limitations on TIPH’s freedom of movement.

The change of government in Israel further delayed redeployment from Hebron. Peres, naturally, had left the issue to his successor. Netanyahu’s government claimed that they would respect past commitments and agreements, but the extent to which they did so would depend on Israeli security concerns. With regard to Hebron, the new Likud government insisted on renegotiating the agreement with the PA. Nevertheless, the government claimed that redeployment would probably take place. The signals were contradictory, and contact between the parties was almost nonexistent. It was clear that no new TIPH would be in place in the near future.

Since no substantial negotiations took place between Israelis and Palestinians, Norway stayed in Hebron alone. The Hebron agreement of 9 May committed Norway ‘to function for a period of three months or until such earlier date on which this agreement is superseded by a new agreement.’ In late June, Middle East Coordinator Rolf Trolle Andersen visited the region in order to clarify Israeli positions regarding the TIPH. However, the new Likud government had just taken office, and little of substance came out of this visit.

During the summer of 1996, Norwegian authorities prepared for various scenarios. There were no negotiations pointing towards a new TIPH, and thus Norway was prepared to end the operation on 12 August 1996 when the original mandate expired. On


296 UD 308.882, 96/00265-34, Wibe to Foreign Ministry, 21 May 1996; 308.882, 96/00265-59, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 20 May 1996.

297 UD 307.30/416, 96/05664-20, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 2 June 1996; 307.30/416, 96/04405-8, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 15 June 1996; 96/04405-9, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 18 June 1996; 96/04405-11, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 19 June 1996.


299 UD 308.80, 96/12679-60, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 1 July 1996; 96/12679-96, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 29 July 1996; 95/08412-40, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 26 June 1996; 95/08412-41, Paris to Foreign Ministry, 5 July 1996.
the other hand, it was likely that the Palestinians and Israelis would put in a joint request for a one-month extension. The Norwegian foreign ministry would accept such a request, if it was received. The numbers of Norwegian TIPH personnel were reduced in the late summer, awaiting a clarification of the situation.\footnote{UD 308.881, 96/10179-69-71, Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, TIPH and the Norwegian Refugee Council, 23 July 1996.}

On 11 August 1996, a joint appeal was addressed to Egeland, signed by both parties, requesting ‘that the TIPH established by the Agreement continue to operate for an additional period of one month’. The two sides promised to ‘make every effort to conclude the agreement on the new TIPH at the earliest opportunity’. In addition, they asked Norway ‘to invite, on their behalf, the Governments of Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Australia and Turkey to join Norway in contributing personnel to the new TIPH’. Norway accepted an extension of one month and was pleased about the attempt to reach an agreement.\footnote{UD 308.882, 96/00265-131-133, Foreign Ministry to Damascus, Cairo and Amman, 13 August 1996, Bentsur/Erakat to Egeland, 11 August 1996, with the reply from Egeland to Bentsur/Erakat, 12 August 1996, enclosed.}

TIPH and Hebron were important issues during Egeland’s visit to the Middle East in mid-August 1996. The Israelis focused on security and the sensitivity of the issue, but emphasized that they would comply with the agreement as long as security concerns were resolved. How to deal with these two obviously contradictory principles was discussed internally. On the Israeli side, both the director general of the ministry of foreign affairs and the government secretary reported to Egeland that the internal discussion was soon to be finalized, and negotiations with the Palestinians regarding the Israeli redeployment away from Hebron could soon begin. Even Arafat, at this point very pessimistic regarding the peace process in general, seemed to believe that a new TIPH could be established.\footnote{UD 467.3, 96/15769-10, memorandum of 19 August 1996, Hansen.}

Egeland must have arrived back in Norway believing that the Israelis and the Palestinians would finally reach an agreement and that the TIPH would be supplied with more personnel.\footnote{UD 467.3, 96/15769-4, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 19 August 1996; 96/15769-5, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 21 August 1996; 96/15769-6, Gaza to Foreign Ministry, 22 August 1996; 96/15769-10, memorandum of 19 August 1996, Hansen.} However, this was not to be the case. Negotiations between the parties took place occasionally through the autumn of 1996, in close cooperation with the United States. Norway emphasized time and again that the ‘Norwegian TIPH’ was supposed to be an advance team, preparing for a multinational operation to be led by Norway. A continued ‘Norwegian TIPH’ was problematic with respect both to domestic support in Norway and the planning of the foreign ministry’s budget. In addition, a

\footnote{UD 467.3, 96/15769-10, memorandum of 19 August 1996, Hansen.}
solution to the Hebron redeployment was a decisive issue for the peace process as a whole.\textsuperscript{304}

The three weeks or so estimated in May 1996 finally came to an end in January 1997, when Israel and the PA finally signed the Hebron Protocol. According to the agreement, Hebron was divided into two types of areas – H1 and H2 – similar to Areas A and B in the Interim Agreement. Israel retained control over the approximately 400 Israeli settlers in the heart of the city, while some 15,000 Palestinians remained under Israeli security control. Nevertheless, the Hebron Protocol was seen as a major breakthrough in the peace process. In addition, a new and expanded TIPH mission was set up, including 120–140 observers from Italy, Switzerland, Turkey, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. These TIPH observers were to serve as a ‘low-profile conflict-moderator in one of the potentially most volatile places in the Occupied Territories’.\textsuperscript{305}

The establishment of the two TIPH missions had contributed to moving the difficult peace process forward.\textsuperscript{306}

By January 1997, the TIPH agreement of May 1996 had been extended five times. In the end, the extension letters were practically copied from one month to the next.\textsuperscript{307} Before it was even properly established, the TIPH operation had cost Norway approximately NOK 25 million. The 9 May agreement had stated clearly that the expenses of the TIPH would be borne by Norway.\textsuperscript{308} Once more, Norway showed its genuine commitment to keeping the peace process on track, no matter what. Few, if any ultimatums were given. No serious plans for withdrawing the TIPH observers were drawn up. The Palestinians and the Israelis knew that Norway would not let them down. Norway agreed to station TIPH personnel in Hebron and to bear all the expenses itself, while having no control over the situation. Of course, Norway could have withdrawn the observers, but such an option did not seem feasible – it would definitely ‘send the

\textsuperscript{304} UD 308.80, 96/12679-564, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 16 October 1996; 96/12679-569, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 21 October 1996; 96/12679-573, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 24 October 1996; 96/12679-579, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 28 October 1996; 96/12679-606, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 5 November 1996; 96/12679-621, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 8 November 1996; 96/12679-735, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 2 December 1996; 96/12679-737, Gaza to Foreign Ministry, 2 December 1996; 96/12679-738, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 3 December 1996; 96/12679-911, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 24 December 1996; 96/12679-992, memorandum of 17 December 1996, Hansen.

\textsuperscript{305} Lia 1998, p. 65.


\textsuperscript{307} See, for example, UD 308.882, 96/00265-131-133, Foreign Ministry to Damascus, Cairo and Amman 13, August 1996, Bentsur/Erakat to Egeland 11 August 1996, with reply from Egeland to Bentsur/Erakat, 12 August 1996, enclosed; 96/00265-137, Egeland to Erakat, 12 September 1996; 96/00265-164, Gaza to Foreign Ministry, 10 October 1996; 96/00265-178, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 11 November 1996.

wrong signals to the parties’. The state of affairs in 1996 – with closures, terrorist attacks, fighting in Lebanon, upcoming Israeli elections and the new Likud government that had won an election on an anti-Oslo platform – did not seem the best time to pull out, especially if there was to be any hope of peace in the Middle East. Although everything seemed to be on a slippery slope, Norway was not willing to give in.

The End of the Oslo Era

Serious problems and challenges continued to haunt the peace process. The Interim Agreement was heavily criticized by Palestinians and Israelis alike. Seen through Palestinian eyes, the agreement was a bitter disappointment. Many Palestinian felt that the Interim Agreement violated the Declaration of Principles, not least the clause stating that the ‘two sides view the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit, whose integrity will be preserved during the interim period’. They felt that the Interim Agreement was nothing less than a ‘bantustanization’ of the Occupied Territories and a separation of the land from the people. The division of Hebron, finalized in January 1997, had kept the hated Jewish settlements inside the city. More than 60% of the Palestinians in the West Bank were dissatisfied with the way in which the Hebron conflict had been resolved.

The Interim Agreement changed facts on the ground. The Palestinians quickly discovered that the situation in the post-Oslo period was, at best, ‘business as usual’. The spoilers on both sides did everything they could to undermine the agreement and to prevent the process from moving forward. And they succeeded. In February and March 1996, Palestinian terrorist attacks inside Israel reached their peak. More than 50 Israelis were killed. The borders to Gaza and the West Bank were sealed. Living conditions continued to deteriorate, creating together with the political conditions a growing number of Palestinian extremists more willing than ever to sacrifice their own lives in order to kill as many Israelis as possible and to spread fear of terror.

The building of Israeli settlements continued, violating if not the letter then at least the spirit of the Declaration of Principles. Nothing had been said about settlements, other than that the issue had been identified as one of several that were to be carried over to the final status negotiations. The two adversaries had agreed that nothing was to be done to change the situation on the ground in the interim period. Yet, both in Gaza and the West Bank, new settlements were set up and old settlements were expanded. In Jerusalem, the Jewish population was rapidly increasing. However, these were not defined as settlers by Israel, because Jerusalem was seen as already being effectively under Israeli sovereignty. In addition, a network of bypasses, separate roads

---

310 Declaration of Principles, Article IV; see also Lia 1998, p. 36.
for Jewish settlers only, were carving the West Bank and Gaza into bits and pieces, making the prospect of future Palestinian statehood more remote than ever.\footnote{Shlaim 2001, p. 530.}

The situation was no better on the Israeli side, where the most bitter and most poisonous criticism came from the Israeli right, the settler movement and the religious nationalist camp. All of their fears had been confirmed with the signing of the Interim Agreement. The whole Oslo process was a disaster in their eyes, leading to what they regarded as a Palestinization of Judea and Samaria. On 5 October 1995, Prime Minister Rabin presented the agreement and the thinking behind it to the Knesset. The Interim Agreement won the smallest possible majority: 61 members of the Knesset were in favour of it, while 59 voted against. The same day, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in Jerusalem to show their disgust and disapproval. The leader of the Likud Party, Binyamin Netanyahu, took part in this demonstration, calling the agreement an ‘act of surrender’ and a ‘danger to the existence of the State of Israel’.\footnote{Savir 1998, p. 248.} He argued that ‘[t]he Jewish majority of the State of Israel did not approve this agreement. We shall fight it and we shall bring down the government.... Rabin is causing a national humiliation by accepting the dictates of the terrorist Arafat’.\footnote{Shlaim 2001, p. 551.} Leaflets depicting Rabin in an SS uniform were distributed. ‘Rabin is a Nazi’, shouted the crowd. A number of Holocaust images were used, and Rabin was portrayed as a ‘traitor’, a ‘murderer’, a ‘Nazi’ and an ‘illegal prime minister’.\footnote{Savir 1998, p. 248.} To his advisers, Rabin made it clear that he would continue the peace enterprise he had started, despite the turmoil in the streets, the threats and the incitements. This determination was to cost him his life.\footnote{Same references as above.}

On 4 November 1995, Rabin attended a huge peace rally in Tel Aviv, with a crowd of some 150,000 people in attendance. It was the largest mass demonstration that Tel Aviv had witnessed since the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993. Yigal Amir, a fanatical 25-year-old law student from Bar-Ilan University, where numerous right-wing and religious extremists were enrolled as students, assassinated the prime minister. Despite the vicious criticism and the ominous warnings that had been voiced, no one had really imagined that the killing of Israel’s leader would or could actually be carried out. The passion and the hate of the extreme religious and nationalist right had clearly been underestimated. The Oslo process had lost one of its crucial players.\footnote{Shlaim 2001, pp. 546–551; Savir 1998, pp. 247–264; Quandt 2000, pp. 336–338.}

The murder revealed the deep divisions inside Israel in relation to peace with the Palestinians. While the Israeli left and the Labour Party wanted some sort of compromise with the Palestinians, the Israeli right – and in particular the extreme nationalist religious camp – saw the Jewish people as the rightful owners of the Promised Land, the Greater Israel that included all of the Occupied Territories. There was no possibility of compromise in their minds. The Labour Party supported the building of settlements because they wanted to increase the proportion of land held by Israelis. The parties on
the right, from Likud to the extreme religious nationalist parties, supported the building of settlements all over the West Bank and Gaza for religious and ideological reasons.319

The months following the murder of Rabin were quiet and free from the demonstrations, violence and incitement that predominated during Rabin’s last months in office. The right-wing side of Israeli politics was widely condemned, and even the settlers were quiet. The IDF withdrew, according to schedule, without any problems from settlers or Palestinians. By the beginning of 1996, the Israeli army was stationed by and large outside, rather than inside, the major Palestinian cities (with the exception of Hebron). On the Palestinian side, too, the extremists had taken a break from major violent actions. On 20 January 1996, Palestinian elections were held. Fatah and pro-Oslo forces won a majority. Arafat was elected president, giving him the legitimacy he needed to continue the peace process. In reality, there existed no other candidate: Arafat was regarded as the sole legitimate leader and still enjoyed massive support. The elections had basically proceeded with positive evaluation by the international observers.320 Soon after, the new Palestinian Authority voted in favour of removing the clauses in the PLO Charter challenging Israel’s right to exist. Again, optimism was a prevailing attitude. But, as so many times before, the apparently peaceful conditions were not to last for long.321

Israel’s new prime minister, Shimon Peres, was now going to implement his plans for the ‘New Middle East’. Throughout his adult life, Peres had held high-stakes political positions. Consequently, he had a wealth of political experience. However, he learned quickly that visions were one thing, while hard political realities were something else. At this point, when the peace process seemed very much to be on track and an optimistic attitude towards the future prevailed, Peres took what was probably the most fateful decision in his whole political career: he gave the go-ahead to assassinate Hamas extremist Yahya Ayyash, known as the ‘Engineer’, who was personally responsible for a number of suicide attacks inside Israel.322

Hamas swore revenge. Between 25 February and 3 March 1996, four suicide attacks killed more than 50 Israelis in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Israeli public was left terrified and paralysed by these spectacular attacks. Prime Minister Peres was unable to convince ordinary Israelis that peace was in their interest and the Palestinians their trusted friends and partners in peace. He closed the borders, suspended the talks with the Palestinians and declared war against terrorism. However, the only one who actually benefited from the Hamas bombs was Peres’s political opponent and the leader of

319 Same references as above.
320 There had been some irregularities, particularly in East Jerusalem. A few critical comments were made by the observers. The main concern, the observers thought, was the preparations for the elections, both regarding the electoral system, the time-frame and the elections of candidates. In addition, access to the media was difficult for many candidates. UD 308.80, 95/00621-39, Svein Sevje (Head of Office, Gaza) to Foreign Ministry 21 January 1996; 95/00621-52, memorandum of 22 January 1996, Hansen.
322 Same references as above; see also Nome 2002, pp. 38–65.
Implementing Peace, Binyamin Netanyahu. The right wing of the Israeli political spectrum had seriously lost credibility after the murder of Rabin. Now, the killing of Israelis led to Peres’s fall from power.\(^\text{323}\)

One mistake led to another. Peres tried to show the terrified Israelis that he could be just as tough as Rabin, perhaps even tougher, and more devoted to Israeli security than ‘Mr Security’ himself, Binyamin Netanyahu. Peres launched a massive attack on Lebanon on 11 April 1996, an operation that was intended to put an end to the Katyusha rockets fired by Hizbullah on the population in northern Israel once and for all. It was also hoped that the operation would help in increasing public opinion in favour of Peres and Labour.

The general election was to be held on 29 May 1996. In this election, the Israeli people were for the first time given two ballots, one for a party and one for a prime minister. Shimon Peres had enjoyed a huge lead on his opponent when the election date had been decided. For once, it had seemed reasonably clear that he would win an election. However, the suicide attacks of February and March had led to a steady downward curve in the opinion polls. When the IDF, by mistake, ended up killing more than a hundred Lebanese civilians in a UN refugee camp, Hizbullah was handed a moral victory. Israel – and Peres in particular – was widely condemned. Operation ‘Grapes of Wrath’ ended up as nothing less than a failure. ‘Suddenly, the much trumpeted New Middle East looked very much like the bad, old one, with arrogant Israel throwing its weight around in the name of security that trampled all before it’.\(^\text{324}\) Peres’s credibility was severely damaged both abroad and at home. The attacks by Hamas and Peres’s failed attempts at fighting terror resulted in victory for Binyamin Netanyahu. Shimon Peres, ever the loser in Israeli politics – or, as he describes himself, the ‘unpaid dreamer’ – had through his disastrous defeat abandoned the premiership to an opponent who had declared war against the peace process long before taking office.\(^\text{325}\) And once Netanyahu had taken office, that war commenced immediately. ‘If Peres was a dreamer, Binyamin Netanyahu was the destroyer of dreams!’\(^\text{326}\)

Netanyahu was just as uncompromising with regard to Palestinian statehood as his predecessors in Likud had been. From his first day in office, he worked systematically to undermine the Oslo Accords and began backtracking on a number of issues. Netanyahu focused the peace talks on Israeli security rather than on Labour’s concept of ‘land for peace’. He lowered Palestinian expectations and weakened Arafat and his PA. Netanyahu used the precautionary phrases in the accords to reassert Israel’s dominant position. There was no Israeli pullout from Hebron. No ‘safe passage’ was established between Gaza and the West Bank. There was no redeployment, and not even discussion of the redeployment that Israel had agreed to carry out gradually according to the Oslo II agreement. Instead, plans were approved and implemented for large ex-


\(^{\text{324}}\) Shlaim 2001, p. 561.


pansions of Jewish settlements. Indeed, during 1996 the settler population increased by 9%. As so many times before, changes were created on the ground. ‘Netanyahu’s bulldozers have destroyed any chance for peace’, claimed Abu Ala. The quality of life for the Palestinians deteriorated progressively.327

There was no one left to fight through all the hard decisions and compromises that were needed in order to achieve peace. Rabin could have done this, but he had been assassinated. Peres might have done it – though many had their doubts about that – but he was no longer in office. Netanyahu was seen as a hardliner and as devoted to the preservation of Israeli security. He had declared war against the Oslo process and a war against terror, and he refused to make any compromises when it came to giving away a millimetre of the Land of Israel. On the Palestinian side, the weak Arafat had more than enough to deal with: resettling into his own house, building up his standing and credibility, raising the living conditions of the Palestinian people and fighting the extremists on the Palestinian side who, like the hawks on the Israeli side, had declared war on the Oslo process. In Washington, President Clinton was preoccupied with the upcoming US elections. In order to be re-elected as president, he needed the pro-Israeli Jewish and Christian votes. In Norway, Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst was dead. And even Terje Rød Larsen, the optimistic, hard-working, ever-devoted peacebuilder, ready to use every opportunity that came his way to try to make peace in the Middle East, left the region in October 1996 to take up the post of minister of planning within the new Labour government in Norway. None of the central actors of the Oslo Back Channel and the Oslo process remained in a position to influence or implement the dream of peace in the Middle East. As time went by, the Palestinians lost more and more land and the Israelis lost more and more security. No peace was in sight.

327 Quoted after Shlaim 2001, p. 582; see also Shlaim 2002, pp. 564–595.
CONCLUSION

The signing of the Oslo Agreement on 13 September 1993 had shown an astonished world the extent to which the small state Norway had contributed to one of the most serious attempts at reaching peace in the Middle East since the creation of Israel in 1948. Indeed, ‘it might seem strange and disagreeable to say that the minnow was able to perform the miracles which the whale could not’.\(^1\) Since 1991, the United States had worked hard to achieve peace in the turbulent region. The Cold War was over. Russia was confronted with huge internal problems and did not have the capacity to continue the rivalry game in the Middle East. The United States remained the sole superpower. The first Gulf War had come to an end, but that war had profoundly altered the political landscape in the Middle East. The majority of the Arab states, together with Israel, had supported the US-led war against Iraq. But the PLO did not belong to this new coalition. Yasser Arafat’s support of Saddam Hussein was definitively one of the PLO leader’s greatest mistakes. After the war, the PLO was practically bankrupt and had few friends left. The Palestinian uprising that began in 1987 had also marginalized the exiled PLO leaders in Tunis. The intifada had shown that local Palestinians were capable of fighting the Israeli occupation themselves. They had found new leaders that were not so dependent on the PLO. Furthermore, support for fundamentalist organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad was growing rapidly among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

All of this was a source of increased concern, motivating the Americans to try to clean up the Middle East mess once and for all. But their traditional close ally Israel was also causing trouble. The Israeli Likud government, led by the virulently anti-Palestinian Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, was engaged in an ambitious settlement programme and had no intentions of contributing in any significant way to a peaceful solution that might require any kind of Israeli compromises. When Labour won the Israeli election on a peace platform in June 1992, the Americans saw a new window of opportunity for peace.

The United States set up a framework of its own, starting in October 1991 with a large conference in Madrid. These negotiations were later moved to Washington. A formal and direct diplomatic link was established between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Even the Palestinians were allowed to be present, which had never before been the case. The bilateral part of this process was supposed to deal with all the basic issues of the conflict. A multilateral one was to handle the regional questions. The Unit-

\(^1\) Abbas 1995, p. 103.
ed States was committed to ending the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. With such a degree of motivation on the part of the powerful and resourceful United States, which was willing to use both its material resources and its political power, there seemed little reason to doubt that the mighty USA would achieve its goal on this occasion. However, the ‘whale’ did not succeed.

Norway’s role in the peace negotiations in the Middle East did not derive from its power or size. On the contrary, Norway was a country with limited influence on world politics. True, Norway was keen to promote its image as an international peacemaker. Internationally, Norway also enjoyed a positive image and reputation, and it had no colonial past. Furthermore, in the 1990s, the Norwegian policy of engagement involved a new and far more active and conscious mediating role. But Norway was also a supportive and loyal member of NATO, with close ties to the United States. In addition, it was situated both geographically and politically on the outskirts of Europe, having rejected membership in the European Community in two separate referenda. The ‘Good Samaritan’ Norway was one of the most generous countries in the world when it came to granting economic assistance to developing countries. It had fish, oil and a budget surplus. And, despite being situated far away from the Middle East, Norway had a postwar history of involvement in the conflict-torn region. The ‘minnow’ was firmly devoted to making peace there.

The Political Past

Norway had for decades been one of Israel’s best friends. A very special relationship existed between the two countries long before the exciting days of the secret Norwegian back channel. After its founding in 1948, Israel became much more than just one of the many states with which Norway was on friendly terms. Norwegians developed an enormous admiration for Israel, almost akin to religious veneration. And this was not confined to Norway’s religious and conservative circles: it was within the Labour movement that this religious ‘conversion’ was most clearly seen. The Christian community and the socialists in the governing Labour Party both tended to view the state of Israel through the eyeglass of religion. For the more fervent Christians, Israel marked the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Bible. For the Labour movement, it was the dream of a socialist paradise come true. Both agreed that a ‘land of milk and honey’ was being created. On the whole, everything in Israel corresponded to how leading Labour Party politicians felt a model society should function. With the exception of the efforts of a few officials at the Norwegian foreign ministry, no attempt was made in the 1940s and 1950s to understand the complexities of the Middle East conflict or the existence of another party – the Palestinians – that also had long-established rights in the area. After the Six Day War in 1967, however, this changed slightly.

In the 1980s, Norway was still one of Israel’s best friends. But Norway was isolated both in Europe and in the United Nations in terms of its position on the conflict. A decreasing number of countries belonged to the group in which Norway found itself
when votes were cast on Middle East questions in the UN. When contacts began to be established with the PLO in the 1980s, Norway was among the last and most cautious of the Western countries to do so. Norway had one of the most restrictive policies towards the PLO in the entire world. Relations between the Norwegian and Israeli Labour parties were still close, although the special relationship had cooled somewhat.

Surprisingly enough, it might seem, it was Norway’s traditional position as Israel’s best friend that made the remote country suitable and attractive as a possible mediating partner. Even more surprisingly, at least at first glance, it was neither Norway nor Israel that first envisaged Norway in the role of mediator. It was PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat who took the initiative and brought Norway’s name forward. Already in 1979, Arafat considered Norway an important channel because of – not in spite of – its close relations with Israel. Arafat believed that Norway could be used in future negotiations, a serious and decent country that could not be accused of promoting its own national interests. In addition to the close ties to the enemy, Norway also had close links with the United States, something that was definitely required since, in one way or another, the USA would play a key role in any peace settlement in the Middle East.

The idea of Norway as a possible mediating partner and back channel option was considered on several occasions during the 1980s. The Norwegian Labour Party, whether in government or in opposition, was anxious to make a Norwegian contribution towards peace in the Middle East. The Labour Party – and Thorvald Stoltenberg in particular, whether serving as foreign minister or not – saw the building of a personal relationship with Yasser Arafat and the PLO as an important part of Norwegian peacebuilding efforts. However, Stoltenberg considered Norway’s close friendship with Israel as the main asset. The Labour Party’s network was the obvious one to use. With the help of Norway, thought Stoltenberg and the Labour Party, Israel could be persuaded to enter into negotiations with the PLO. But nothing much came out of the Norwegian efforts during the 1980s. Strong Israeli resistance was always the problem.

Towards the end of the decade, though, a formula for a future peace solution was even elaborated. At a meeting between Stoltenberg and Arafat in January 1989, the two men agreed on how to pursue peace. The peace plan discussed was not just very much in line with the approach taken in the Oslo Back Channel four years later, it was almost identical. The PLO was ready to enter into direct bilateral talks at whatever level the Israelis might choose. The Israelis and the Palestinians could meet secretly or publicly. Moreover, the PLO was willing to have contacts with Israel through a third party. Oslo might be an appropriate place to meet, and it might be useful if a Norwegian research institution could take the initiative to arrange seminars at which the parties could participate. In such a way, indirect contacts could be established. All of this was Arafat’s idea, and he saw this approach as a means of reaching a peaceful settlement. Norway could play an important role because of its close ties with Israel, the USA and the European Community. Arafat wanted Stoltenberg to forward this message to Israel, but Stoltenberg got nowhere with this. The Israelis dug their heels in and were not even willing to listen to the message from Tunis. A disappointed Stoltenberg was forced to shelve his mediation plans.
The Norwegians never managed to conduct a ‘bridge-building’ policy involving equally close contacts and similarly friendly terms with both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Yet, when Norway’s role in the Oslo peace process is discussed, the bridge-building policy and equal closeness to both parties are the most widespread and commonly used explanations given. Even the three main Norwegian players themselves – Jan Egeland, Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul – have emphasized these factors. While they correctly stress the special relationship with Israel, they have also claimed that ‘few Western countries established direct contacts so early with the PLO leadership as Norway. Few, if any, countries combined these contact networks to the same degree.’

Clearly, this was not the case. Norwegian contacts with the two adversaries exhibited considerable asymmetry. Norway had been one of Israel’s best friends for 40 years. The relationship with the PLO was much weaker and much more recent than the established friendship with Israel. The two relationships were in no way comparable.

Thus, the Norwegians did not stumble by coincidence into the peace process in the Middle East. The Oslo Back Channel was not something that primarily happened by accident, nor something that succeeded just because the right people showed up at the right place at the right time and with the right connections. Norway did not fly in out of the blue. The process resulted from contacts made over the course of many years. It was the result of long-term perspectives, hard work and a conscious policy that prioritized the Middle East conflict and aimed at giving it a new and active Norwegian content.

However, it is impossible to explain the proceedings in the final phase that led directly to the Oslo Back Channel without analysing the role of the ever-active and entrepreneurial director of Fafo, Terje Rød Larsen. In 1989, with little knowledge of the Middle East conflict, but considerable dedication, Rød Larsen embarked on his own private ‘peace in the Middle East’ project. He became convinced that he could contribute towards solving a conflict where other peacemakers had constantly failed. It was he who saw an opportunity and seized upon it. He was the one who pushed, pulled and dragged both Israelis and Palestinians into the Norwegian option. It was he who kept the window of opportunity open by staying in touch with the parties. And it was he who worked enthusiastically on the idea and followed it up at a time when Norwegian peace initiatives were on a slippery slope and none of them seemed to be succeeding. There had been and might still have been another Norwegian mediation role, but the precise timing and way in which the Oslo Back Channel was achieved was definitely a result of Terje Rød Larsen’s efforts and commitment.

Initially, Terje Rød Larsen was only acting in his personal capacity as leader of a research institute and had no official backing from the foreign ministry. Of course, the foreign ministry ‘knew’ of his activities via Mona Juul, his diplomat wife, who was...
working with Middle Eastern questions in the ministry. But, at this stage, in 1989–91, there was no definitive link between Rød Larsen’s activities and the political leadership at the Norwegian foreign ministry. It was not until September 1992 that Terje Rød Larsen’s private peace track was welded together with the various initiatives coming out of the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs. That month, State Secretary Jan Egeland travelled to Israel, on behalf of Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg, in order to explore whether the parties seriously wanted a back channel set up in Norway. The stalled peace process in Washington needed a push and an alternative track. Rød Larsen seems already to have been playing with the idea that Norway – and Fafo in particular – could provide a perfect venue for a secret Israeli–Palestinian meeting. But this back channel was by no means to replace the Washington process, only help it back on track.

It is tempting to place emphasis solely on Norway’s political past in the Middle East when explaining the Oslo peace process and its outcome. With such an approach, the conclusion almost inevitably reached is that the Norwegians achieved a result that accorded with Norway’s traditional pro-Israel stance. But the complexities of international relations and third-party interventions can rarely be reduced to simplistic causal chains or patterns based on facile generalizations. The evidence in this case conclusively shows that the apparently obvious conclusion is also the wrong one. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Norwegians were no longer faithful and loyal fans of Israel. The setting had shifted, and so had Norwegian attitudes and motives. Norway was not dragged into this process because it so desperately wanted to help Israel. Nevertheless, the outcome was the same as always: on Israel’s premises, bowing to Israel’s ‘red lines’ and security concerns. There was little under the sun that was new in the Middle East. But the explanations for the role of Norway in the Oslo peace process cannot be sought in Norway’s biased political past.

Leaving aside the two Norwegian foreign ministers – Thorvald Stoltenberg and Johan Jørgen Holst – the main Norwegian actors involved in the ‘peace in the Middle East’ enterprise – Terje Rød Larsen, Mona Juul and Jan Egeland – would never have identified themselves with the extremely pro-Israel tradition of the Norwegian Labour Party. They had never been among Israel’s friends. They belonged to a new generation. To them, the Labour Party’s traditional relationship was history. Perhaps they even looked upon it as ancient history, with little or no relevance to the work that they had set out to do in the turbulent region. However, they were of course familiar with the Labour Party’s former burning engagement with Israel and the work of the two former foreign ministers, Knut Frydenlund and Thorvald Stoltenberg, to open up channels to the PLO, and they were aware of the importance of this political past. Presumably, they also understood that without this political past, without this political will and commitment, without this door-opening, knowledge and experience, without all the political and economic resources already invested, even Terje Rød Larsen would have got nowhere when he started on his Middle East peace project. He could not simply have shown up in the Middle East and said ‘Hello. My name is Terje Rød Larsen. I am from Norway, and I want to make peace.’ He was able to do what he did
because the Norwegians had close contacts and had been pursuing a mediating role in the region for more than a decade. However, this only explains the beginnings and establishment of the Oslo Back Channel, not the process and its result.

So, the Norwegian peace project did not spring from a desire to help Israel. It was surely not the stronger party that the Norwegians set out to help. On the contrary, they were inclined to support the Palestinians. The three Norwegian actors all had a background somewhere on the left of the Norwegian political spectrum. While Jan Egeland had always been firmly established within the Labour Party, Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul had initially belonged to the Norwegian Socialist Left Party, but had gradually moved towards Labour. However, within both the labour and the socialist movements, difficult battles had been fought over the conflict in the Middle East, and over Norway’s relationship with Israel and the Palestinians in particular. In Norwegian political circles, the massive Israeli victory in the Six Day War in 1967 had triggered a re-evaluation of the military strength of each of the parties. Who was David? Who was Goliath? In the 1970s, the fate of the Palestinians became a new, hot issue for the political left. This was the political past for the main Norwegian peace apostles. When they visited the Middle East, the fate of the Palestinians was a familiar political issue. And when Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul travelled through Gaza during the summer of 1990, there is no reason to doubt that the misery they observed, as well as the harshness of the Israeli occupation, contributed decisively towards their attitudes to the conflict.3

But, regardless of whatever attitudes to the Israelis or the Palestinians they may have had, the Norwegians’ eagerness to promote peace was their strongest drive. Terje Rød Larsen and Jan Egeland were extremely achievement-oriented. They strongly believed in their ability to make a difference, even on the world stage. For years, both had been eager to go out in the world and make peace. Jan Egeland had written a thesis in political science about how small states could achieve results in international politics that were unattainable for the superpowers, and he had remained faithful to this thesis ever after. Neither Egeland nor Rød Larsen was inhibited by the thought that they were risking their necks. On the contrary, taking chances was necessary to achieve big results. Although they were aware of the limitations a small state faced, they were much more focused on the opportunities.

The Facilitator

In January 1993, the Norwegians started off with a small, modest and to a large degree unplanned role. There existed no grand design or master plan.

The PLO, in particular, had a lot to gain by participating in the secret Norwegian back channel setting. The PLO was in an extremely weak position and was not allowed to be present at the negotiating table in Washington. The Israeli government initially believed, with firm support from the Americans – and the Norwegians – that the

3 Corbin 1994a, pp. 10–14.
Palestinian ‘insiders’ would gradually be able to gain stature and independence. The arch-enemy Arafat and his terrorist organization were not needed. The key to peace, thought the Israeli government, was to block out Arafat and gradually build peace with local Palestinian leaders on the West Bank and in Gaza. But the PLO leaders in Tunis were desperate to get back to centre stage. Arafat would not allow the Palestinian delegation in Washington to make progress as long as the PLO was excluded from the process. The growing power and influence of the ‘insiders’ worried Arafat, as did the growing strength of the Islamist organizations in the Occupied Territories. For the PLO, there was no reason to believe that secret talks in Norway would be any more successful than previous attempts to reach agreements with Israel. But the PLO had nothing to lose, and a lot to gain. The Norwegian setting gave the weak and desperate Arafat complete control over the Palestinian side in the negotiations. In contrast to the situation in Washington, the negotiations in Norway recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

On the Israeli side, Arafat was gradually seen as an easier match than the ‘impossible’ Palestinians present in Washington. A precondition for the Oslo process was, according to Shimon Peres, ‘the weakness of Arafat and the danger that he would disappear’. In Peres’s opinion, Arafat’s disappearance was ‘a greater danger than his existence’. Every day, the Palestinians in Washington reminded the Israelis of issues such as UN resolutions, international law, settlements and illegal occupation. Israel was fed up with these insiders, whom they had come to see as being too clever by far. Moreover, Peres believed that the PLO was experiencing serious financial and political difficulties. This would therefore be the ideal time for Israel to clinch a deal with the organization. In Oslo, Israel could explore the views held by the PLO without any Israeli commitment.

Norway’s intention was to serve as a modest facilitator, not to mediate or interfere in the negotiations. And at this stage there were no plans to establish a back channel. Indeed, the long-term goal of Norwegian attempts at bridge-building had already been achieved: for the first time, the Israelis and the PLO were talking directly to one another in what could be called pre-negotiations on a peaceful settlement of the conflict. In January 1993, the aim was to develop informal political contacts just to see if anything could be done to help or improve the stalemate in Washington. Whatever new ideas or results that might come out of Norway were to be transferred back to the official negotiations in Washington.

However, in Norway – in stark contrast to the situation in the US capital – the Israelis and the Palestinians quickly managed to agree on the road to pursue. The aim of the talks in Norway was to agree on how to reach a peace accord, and the adversaries set out to work on a declaration of principles. Difficult questions were postponed for future negotiations: statehood, sovereignty, refugees, borders, settlements and the question of Jerusalem were not to be discussed. Only an interim agreement – for an interim period and as part of an interim arrangement – was on the agenda. This was the only

---

4 Peres 1998, p. 75.
approach that stood a chance of succeeding, so both the Israeli and the PLO repre-
sentatives agreed on it. However, this had also been the basic approach in Washington,
where it had led nowhere. But the will, the mandate and the flexibility shown in Nor-
way made the setting, the progress and the result very different from those of the
Washington process. In addition, the suggestions put forward by the PLO in Norway
differed from the demands put forward by the Palestinian delegation in Washington.
In Oslo, Arafat was in charge, and he was in a position to make whatever concessions
he found suitable.

The result of the first phase of the pre-negotiations in Norway (January–May 1993)
was a joint Declaration of Principles (DoP). The Sarpsborg DoP consisted of three ma-
jor elements. Many of its terms stood out as departures not only from the PLO’s exist-
ing policies, but also from those of Israel. First, Israel agreed to withdraw completely
from Gaza, which should be placed for a limited period of time either under an Egyp-
tian trusteeship or under a UN or multinational mandate. Meanwhile, negotiations
were to continue on an interim autonomy scheme for the West Bank. Second, a mini-
‘Marshall Plan’ was to be worked out for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Under
this, huge amounts of international assistance would flow into the Palestinian areas.
Third, economic cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian interim authorities
was to be developed.

A major focus of the Sarpsborg DoP was economic aspects of peacemaking. This to
a large degree reflected the background and interest of the participants. They all b e-
lieved in economic development as an important means of achieving peace. However,
the most difficult questions – such as Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, a fu-
ture state and security – were not economic. These were basically political, military
and legal questions that could not be solved by an economic approach or through
grand plans for regional development of the Middle East. But these issues were not on
the agenda. Israel had conceded nothing with regard to final status issues. Furth er-
more, when it came to the interim agreements, every single one could be halted and
reversed. Unlike in the past, though, this was now enough to satisfy the PLO.

Israel and the PLO had different, but serious, motives for continuing to pursue the
Norwegian track. But their reasons for continuing the talks in Norway had little to do
with Norway or with the input provided by the Norwegians. In this first phase, the
Norwegians played only the role of a very modest facilitator. The Norwegian efforts
started off with being in charge of arrangements and practicalities, providing secrecy
and deniability, an informal and cozy atmosphere, shelter, food, drinks and outdoor
walks. This role seemed so modest that it could almost be described as playing no role
at all.

However, already at this stage a more important Norwegian role was evolving. The
Norwegians were not just ‘serving sherry’, as some critics have claimed. They provid-
ed continual encouragement to both sides. They managed early on to create a sense of
shared danger and excitement, of closeness, friendship and humour, of being bound
together in a common destiny. This was the famous ‘Oslo spirit’. The Norwegians –
and Terje Rød Larsen in particular – were largely responsible for keeping the Oslo
Conclusion

Back Channel open. Rød Larsen and the rest of the Norwegian team played the role of messenger, delivering information and providing reassurance at very difficult and uncertain phases of the talks.

Initially, the Norwegians had been very conscious of the limitations of the role a small state like Norway should play in such a scenario. That role could not be to mediate the dispute. Rather, Norway’s strength was to maintain a low profile and to facilitate communication between the two parties. The intention of the Norwegians was to bring the parties together and use their good offices to promote trust between them. If the meetings should develop into negotiations, the Norwegians would take no stand on the substance of the talks. Hence, there would be no Norwegian participation in the negotiations. Without the willingness of the parties, there would be no Norwegian role nor any Norwegian back channel at all.

The Mediator

The upgrading of the Israeli level of representation in May 1993 transformed the still-secret talks in Norway from an academic, exploratory discussion into genuine, official negotiations. It turned the Oslo Back Channel into the main channel for Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. In the past, there had never been formal negotiations between Israel and the PLO. From May 1993, the Israeli prime and foreign ministers gradually took charge of the operation in Norway. A high-ranking diplomat and a lawyer handled the detailed work. The original two Israeli academics, who were still attending the meetings, were from then on parked on the sidelines.

Israel’s Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was already convinced that the Oslo track would be fruitful, while Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin doubted that anything would come out of Oslo. The Madrid/Washington process had also failed to produce any results. Rabin had won the election in Israel in May 1992 on a peace platform. He had promised to complete negotiations on an interim agreement within six to nine months. A year had already passed, and Rabin had so far achieved nothing on the peace front. He needed results, or at least some progress, in order to show the Israeli public that he had tried. The Oslo Back Channel, a rather harmless enterprise, could be seen as a possibility. However, Rabin was still paying attention to the peace negotiations with Syria. He wanted to achieve a breakthrough and peace on the Syrian front before focusing on the Palestinians. Rabin also preferred to work more closely with the United States. All the same, he was still willing to give the talks in Norway a chance – or, more precisely, he did not want to stop them.

The Israeli upgrade meant the start of real negotiations. Israel started the process of clarifying, hardening and withdrawing concessions contained in the Sarpsborg DoP – or, as Foreign Minister Peres chose to put it, it began to ‘revise [its] position on ... basic ideas’.\(^5\) Jerusalem would be excluded from any autonomy arrangements: ‘Jerusalem, in Israel’s view – all of Jerusalem – is sovereign Israeli territory and the capital of our

---

\(^5\) Peres 1995, p. 333.
If the Palestinians insisted on discussing the future status of Jerusalem, there would be no negotiations.

The Palestinians also had to drop their demand that all outstanding questions should be referred to binding international arbitration. There would be no third party to replace the Israelis during the transitional period. Nor would there be any trusteeship proposal for Gaza. The trusteeship proposal – probably planned as a Namibia-style UN administration of Gaza to ensure gradual Israeli withdrawal and to prepare for the possible establishment of a Palestinian state – had provoked strong reactions. Israeli policymakers feared it would serve as a precedent for UN involvement in Israeli administration of the Occupied Territories. Israel wanted no interference from the outside. Ever since 1948, successive Israeli governments had consistently fought any kind of UN involvement in what they considered internal Israeli affairs. Moreover, in recent history, trusteeships had been established as a phase in a decolonization process designed to lead to full independence. ‘Israel’s declared position was that it opposed the creation of an independent Palestinian state following the interim period of self-government.’

Israel’s alternative was full autonomy for the Gaza Strip. Once this had been established, the PLO leadership was to settle there on the strict condition that Arafat would not arrive as the ‘President of Palestine’. Israel would grant partial autonomy to the West Bank, meaning that autonomy would only be applied in a few places and spheres, starting with Jericho. This autonomy would be limited to five specific areas: education, health, tourism, welfare and taxation. This would give Arafat the foothold he needed on the West Bank, while the formal authority for awarding autonomy would lie in the hands of Israel. The redeployment of the Israeli army should be ‘a matter for Israel’s sole discretion’. The declaration of principles could include a requirement for ‘consultation’ with the Palestinians, but not for ‘agreement’.

Israel’s goal in the negotiations with the Palestinians was to maintain as much control as possible, to give away as little land as possible, and to protect Israel’s security. Therefore, when the formal negotiations started, most of the concessions that had been made in the pre-negotiations and incorporated into the Sarpsborg DoP were withdrawn. A new version of the declaration of principles, more in line with Israel’s wishes, was drafted by the Israelis. But this was not a joint approach, and the Israelis knew that ‘the Palestinians would have difficulty digesting it’. All the same, they expected the Palestinians to accept their new version and were therefore surprised when they did not give in immediately.

Israel and the PLO were fighting over how to shape the future of Gaza and the West Bank. They had agreed that the best formula was a step-by-step process. The PLO wanted as much influence as possible within the autonomous areas. Confronted with

---

6 Peres 1995, p. 332.
7 Peres 1995, p. 333.
8 Peres 1995, p. 334.
9 Savir 1998, p. 35.
the Palestinian demands, Israel had little or nothing to give. The PLO wanted Israel to recognize the national rights of the Palestinian people. The Palestinians wanted Israel to promise to implement UN Resolution 242, which in their view meant full Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. They wanted a self-governing structure that could lead to a future Palestinian state. The Palestinians wanted their self-government to be established with a three-way division of power between legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. The council should be the equivalent of a parliament, with the right and power to make laws, and the cabinet should consist of heads of departments running the day-to-day affairs of the self-governing territories. Israel’s strategy was to restrict or prevent as much of this as it could. It aimed to block the creation of a self-government structure that could easily lead to full sovereignty and a state. The Israelis’ concern was ‘to limit [the Palestinian self-government] so that the permanent status of the territories was not prejudiced by the terms of the interim agreement’. Moreover, the Palestinians wanted to discuss the future status of East Jerusalem, and they wanted an agreement on procedures for repatriating Palestinian refugees. The Palestinians also demanded shared control of the crossing between the West Bank and Jordan, and a secure communication link between Gaza and the West Bank. In addition, they sought the option of outside arbitration and an international presence to guarantee the implementation of the agreement. All of these demands were completely inedible for Israel.

During this second phase, the assistance of a third party was often required, which changed the role of Norway. When the Oslo process started in 1992–93, the Norwegians had come in as low-key facilitators. They had had no intention of acting as mediators. But, gradually, the Norwegians moved into a new role, triggered by the Israeli upgrading, the arrival of new Israeli participants, revised Israeli demands and the appointment of a new Norwegian foreign minister. From this point, Norway was no longer a mere facilitator, but also an active mediator.

Norway’s new foreign minister from April 1993, Johan Jørgen Holst, wanted to play an active, personal role. He wanted to be the key person with complete political responsibility for the process. This decision reflected Holst’s personal style. He was ambitious, a perfectionist, a clever analyst and a brilliant formulator. But the change also reflected the development of the secret talks. When Holst took over as foreign minister, the exploratory rounds were over and an upgrading of the talks was being warmly pursued.

Holst wanted to explore for himself the commitment, involvement and seriousness of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. He was still in the dark about the role of Prime Minister Rabin, although he had a clear enough picture of the prevailing attitude of the rest of the Israeli team. However, the crucial person was Arafat. It was not clear either to Holst or to the others how committed Arafat was or what he really intended to do. Consequently, the man to investigate was Arafat. The party to reassure was Israel.

---

10 Peres 1995, p. 335.
At this stage, in July 1993, the Oslo Back Channel project was facing serious problems. The aim of the Norwegians was to prevent the process from collapsing. During July, Holst, Rød Larsen and Juul held a number of meetings with key players from both sides. To the Israelis, the Norwegians gave a full assessment of their meetings with Arafat, providing crucial information to Israel on where its opponent might be willing to concede. According to letters from Holst to Peres, Holst had told Arafat that he was ‘deviating from the substance of realistic proposals’. The PLO could ‘never achieve a better deal than now’.11 The Norwegians believed that Arafat would accept the vague term ‘safe passage’, which actually promised nothing, instead of a safe road linking Gaza and the West Bank, which was completely unacceptable to Israel. Holst did, however, point out to Peres that if Jericho were not added to the package, Arafat would be confronted with an ‘impossible sales problem’.12

Holst told Arafat that the Israeli government was prepared to take ‘a bold step’. Arafat ‘had a historic choice to make – whether to follow the road towards consensus or head in another direction’. For Israel, Holst pointed out to Arafat, ‘security was the primary concern’.13 Continuation of the intifada or terrorist acts against Israel would immediately kill any agreement. The Palestinians had a unique opportunity to obtain self-rule. This could be ‘converted at a later stage to full independence, as well as economic development’. However, ‘[h]olding up the process’ – as Arafat and the PLO were doing, according to the letter Holst sent to Peres – and ‘endangering it for the sake of arguing over a formula, was likely to be a fateful mistake’.14

There seems to be little doubt that the Norwegians agreed with Israel that it was Arafat and the PLO that were slowing down the negotiations and putting the whole enterprise at risk. The Palestinians were not sufficiently eager to achieve peace. Israel’s demands were ‘red lines’, and they had to be understood and accepted. If not, there would be no deal. No evidence has been found showing or suggesting that the Norwegians argued in the same way towards the Israelis as they did towards the Palestinians. The two parties were not equal in any sense of the word, and were not treated as equals by the Norwegians. Only in a superficial way – as when it came to food, cars or hotel rooms – were the parties treated in a symmetrical way. However, this could not hide the asymmetrical reality, where Israel was the stronger and the Palestinians the weaker party.

The role played by the Norwegians at this stage, and in particular by the Norwegian foreign minister, can hardly be described as the role of a host or facilitator. Norway had started to play the role of a mediator. The inflexible nature of the position adopted by the Israelis forced the Norwegians to take a stand. If the Norwegians were to keep the process alive, it had to be on Israel’s premises. No other options existed. Israel was the party that was going to give away land and power to the Palestinians. If the Nor-

12 Peres 1995, p. 332.
wegians wanted to be a part of and contribute to the peace process, they had to realize that without the cooperation and goodwill of Israel, there would be no Oslo Back Channel and no role for Norway. This was what both the Norwegians and the Palestinians had to understand. As for the latter, they were the weaker party and had little room for manoeuvre. The PLO had to accept that any agreement would be negotiated on Israel’s premises. Otherwise, the PLO would have no role to play.

Seemingly, it had not occurred to the Israeli negotiators that the Palestinians would not accept Israel’s revised version of the declaration of principles as a basis for a final version. They seem to have mistakenly believed that their very own declaration was the common point of departure, and they expected acceptance and surrender from the PLO. This Israeli attitude reflected the reality in the Middle East. Israel enjoyed immense superiority – militarily, politically, economically, in every area and in every aspect. Nevertheless, to believe that the PLO would give in to the revised Israeli demands voluntarily was to seriously misjudge Israel’s opponent. Although weak and not as accomplished a negotiating partner as the Israelis, the PLO was not likely to simply go along with whatever Israel demanded. But the Norwegians had given the self-assured Israelis no serious warnings of the opposition they would face. On the contrary, they had led Peres and the Israeli team to believe that Arafat had ‘understood’ the message – either come up with what the Israelis defined as serious compromises or there would be no deal. But, still, both the Israelis and the Norwegians found the PLO far too resistant to any compromise.

However, neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis were fully prepared to abandon the Oslo Back Channel. Israel still had a trump card left: mutual recognition. The Israeli negotiators knew very well that mutual recognition was something the PLO craved. But the Israeli negotiators were not only proffering a carrot, they also had a stick. The mutual recognition would depend on agreement on a declaration of principles. The PLO was offered a package – a ‘swap deal’, as the Israelis called it – in which mutual recognition could not be chosen selectively. It was all or nothing. The PLO had to say yes to the formulations in the declaration of principles that were crucial to Israel, while no promises would be made on the issues on which the Palestinians demanded that Israel should adjust its position. There was no more room for manoeuvre for the Palestinians, and no further chances to negotiate their future as formulated in the Israeli-drafted declaration of principles. The Israelis did not schedule another negotiating meeting with the PLO, leaving it to the Norwegians to sort out the rest.

By this end stage of the negotiating process, the Norwegians saw the situation very much through the eyes of the Israelis. The Palestinians were blamed for the lack of progress and compromise. Holst made it clear to the Palestinian negotiator, Abu Ala, that the responsibility lay upon his shoulders to convince and persuade Arafat to accept the package. The Israelis appreciated the efforts of the Norwegians, and in particular those of Holst. The Israeli foreign minister used the Norwegian foreign minister as an instrument in the negotiations, assuming with good reason that the Norwegians would present the Israeli point of view to Arafat. While the Palestinians wanted to see as many elements of the permanent settlement linked to the interim agreement, the Is-
raelis wanted just the opposite. They would allow nothing that might prejudice a future solution, and the Norwegian foreign minister was prepared to do anything in his power to prevent the talks from collapsing.

There appears to have been a striking lack of even-handedness on the part of the Norwegians with respect to attempts to persuade the Israeli actors to see the Palestinian point of view or revealing to the PLO where the Palestinians might have their best negotiating chances. The Norwegian role with regard to the Palestinians seems to have been to persuade them to accept what they were offered by Israel. The argument of both the Israelis and the Norwegians seems every time to have been that this was absolutely the best offer that the Palestinians could get. To accept what Israel was putting forward was therefore in the best interests of the Palestinians, argued the Norwegians. From the very beginning of the Oslo Back Channel, it had been the PLO that had pressed and urged the Norwegians to move forward with the peace enterprise. The PLO was the most eager party and had the most to gain from a peace agreement. The Israelis were in a much less desperate position than the Palestinians. If no deal were made, they could afford to wait for another opportunity. They were strong in every sense of the word. Either the Palestinians gave in, or there would be no deal. The Norwegians accepted this as a premise and therefore pushed harder for concessions on the Palestinian side rather than on the Israeli side.

Although Israel did not feel the same sense of urgency as the PLO, the Israeli negotiators pushed in August 1993 for a rapid decision within the Oslo framework. Completing the declaration of principles was seen as the most important task. Israel insisted that the declaration be finalized first and the question of mutual recognition postponed till later. Israeli Foreign Minister Peres asked the Norwegians to join the Israelis secretly in Sweden in order to help and ‘expedite matters’. After months of negotiations, the final questions were solved during eight hours of phone calls between Stockholm and Tunis. Holst explained to Arafat that the Israelis and the Norwegians wanted to settle all of the outstanding issues with him over the telephone. Arafat was not particularly happy about conducting detailed political and legalistic discussions in his rather broken English over the phone — discussions involving the future of the Palestinian people. However, the negotiations were set up in the way Israel wanted. Holst did the talking and conveyed the proposals.

If the Norwegian actors privately had objections about the way in which the negotiations were completed, they neither expressed their worries nor interfered in the process set up by Israel. In fact, the Norwegians were once again left with no choice if they wished to continue to be a part of the project. The Norwegians continued to play the game according to Israeli rules. They let themselves be used. They came when the Israelis wanted them to come; they passed on to the Palestinians what the Israeli negotiators wanted them to pass on; and they knew perfectly well that this was the only way in which an agreement could be achieved. The Palestinians were confronted with a fait accompli. They had little negotiation expertise themselves, and they had no access to

---

15 Peres 1995, p. 345.
outside expertise. While they might have benefited from the presence of a Norwegian mediator at the PLO headquarters in Tunis, no such mediator was there assisting them. The PLO could either accept the package they were offered or sign no deal at all.

In the final stages of the Oslo Back Channel, the Norwegian foreign minister directed and controlled much of the Norwegian involvement himself. Naturally, as is always the case in high-stakes politics, the final decisions were left for the politicians. However, on the Norwegian side there was more to the matter. Holst eagerly wanted to be in charge. The Norwegians’ previous teamwork-style approach gave way to one in which Johan Jørgen Holst played the lead role. This was especially true when the final outstanding questions were being solved.

The adoption of a negotiator role by the Norwegian foreign minister, however, must be seen in the light of the inflexible style adopted by the Israelis. Israel wanted the PLO to accept the various texts that Israel presented to them. When it came to the question of mutual recognition, Israel demanded that the PLO adopt the Israeli-drafted text word for word. The PLO was given very little room for manoeuvre. The issues being discussed had formed the core of the PLO’s struggle against Israel for over 40 years. Consequently, the PLO would not and could not simply concede without putting up some degree of resistance. Once again, though, Holst asked the Palestinians to relinquish their claims. Holst wanted to secure a deal and to protect the Norwegian peace project and the role of Norway. More than ever, his personal prestige was now involved because the Norway channel was no longer a secret. Much was at stake, and Holst was anxious to get things moving. The United States wanted a signing ceremony within two weeks, and Holst was determined not to let the Oslo Declaration of Principles go unsigned simply because the mutual recognition text was not agreed. Again, this meant playing the game on Israeli terms. The PLO gave in, and the negotiations over mutual recognition were concluded.

The Declaration of Principles was not an ordinary peace agreement. Basically, it was a timetable, a point of departure with many vaguely formulated intentions. PLO leader Yasser Arafat’s willingness to accept the Oslo Accord with all its shortcomings and compromises was clearly a result of his fear of being permanently marginalized. The Oslo Accord offered him a golden opportunity to regain the initiative. In addition, given the enormous imbalance of power between the Palestinians and Israel, the PLO could hardly have expected a better deal. Israel, the occupying power, quite simply held most of the cards. The PLO understood and accepted the Israeli premises. As Arafat saw it, the Oslo Accord was the best agreement possible in the worst of circumstances.

Consequently, from having nothing and being in exile in Tunis, the PLO could move back to Palestinian soil. It had obtained a territorial base, along with self-rule in Gaza and the small city of Jericho. Israeli Defence Forces would be relocated outside the Palestinian-populated areas, though surrounding them in order to protect the Jewish settlers who were spread all over the West Bank and Gaza, making the Occupied Territories look like a slice of salami. Israel would maintain the possibility for immediate reoccupation, if necessary. In reality, Israel retained full control over both internal and
external security. Self-rule was strictly limited to five internal areas: education, health, social welfare, taxation and tourism. The Palestinians would also get a Council and a police force.

Nevertheless, seen in an optimistic light – which was the way in which the Norwegians viewed the agreement – there were a number of positive outcomes. Israel would continue the process of withdrawal. The Palestinian economy would benefit from a huge infusion of international aid. No new settlements would be established in the interim period. And negotiations over a permanent settlement would begin two years later. An imperfect peace was better than a perfect war, as State Secretary Jan Egeland argued.

Nothing in the Declaration of Principles pointed towards a future Palestinian state. There was no acceptance of the national rights of the Palestinians. UN Resolutions 242 and 338 were mentioned, but the references were so ambiguous and vaguely formulated that they would have to be subject to major negotiations themselves. All of the most problematic and conflictual issues had been postponed for the final status negotiations. Nevertheless, such issues were mentioned, which for Israel was regarded as a significant concession in itself. On their road to an agreement, the Palestinians had given up many of their initial demands. Israel, on the other hand, had withdrawn many of the concessions it had made in the first rounds. There would be no international trusteeship, because Israel regarded such an arrangement as a step towards creating a future Palestinian state, and there would be no international arbitration. All references to Jerusalem were taken out from the final document. The extraterritorial road was gone, and only a vague reference to ‘arrangements for a safe passage’ between Gaza and Jericho remained. Formulations regarding Palestinian control of the Gaza–Egypt and Jericho–Jordan passages were also removed. What was left was a timetable in which difficult matters were postponed and moved into the future. The timetable in the Declaration of Principles definitely required that mutual faith and trust between the two parties be built. In the end, future developments would depend on how Israel proceeded, since Israel was the one that was to give away military control and transfer power and self-rule to the Palestinians.

The Relationship with the United States

Why had this result, at best meagre and favourable to Israel, been so unattainable for the United States? Why was the minnow Norway needed to achieve a result that seemingly could have been brought about by the whale itself? For 50 years, the United States had undertaken most of the mediation initiatives in the Middle East, and from 1991 the United States had invested huge amounts of dollars, power and prestige into a peace process that led nowhere.

Originally, the aim of the Norwegians was not to let the Oslo talks become the main forum for negotiations. The Oslo Back Channel was established as a supportive and complementary secret tool for the public and official negotiations in Washington. The
aim was to build confidence and to find solutions that could be transferred back to the official Washington track.

The Norwegians had always been concerned about being on close and friendly terms with the United States. Therefore, the back channel project left them worried and nervous. One of the most important Norwegian interests to protect in this peace game was, of course, Norway’s own relationship with the USA. The Norwegians also knew that there was no road to peace in the Middle East that did not pass directly through the USA. Norway did not want to be accused of going behind the back of its own ally and protector. On the contrary, US backing was important and had to be secured. Therefore, from the very beginning the Norwegian peace team made sure to keep the Americans informed.

However, the Americans did not take the information they received from Norway seriously, nor did they follow it up. Initially, US representatives had not been entirely negative. They adopted a kind of ‘I hear what you say’ attitude, implying that the Americans would neither approve nor reject the back channel option. In addition, as long as the Norwegian track was only complementary to the one in Washington, there existed no reason for US resentment. There was no reason to believe that the talks in Norway were any more serious than any of the other talks and tracks going on at the same time, and consequently there was no reason to investigate the matter further. The Norway channel was only one of several academic exercises in progress, and was more like an informal dialogue/chatting club. It was an enterprise that originated from Beilin and Peres. As long as Prime Minister Rabin was not actively involved, there was nothing to attach any importance to. Rabin was the indispensable Israeli decisionmaker on peace. The Oslo story did not have any of the elements of a success story, thought the Americans, who were also too self-confident to believe that something really important could happen outside their control and involvement.

However, the United States was not given an opportunity to understand that something really serious was going on in Norway. The Americans were only partly informed and were also partly misled by their close ally Norway. The main reason for this was to protect the Oslo Back Channel, the ongoing negotiations and the role of Norway. Israel demanded that the Norwegians limit the information going to the USA, and the Norwegians were left with little choice but to follow the Israeli rules.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst met US Secretary of State Warren Christopher on 28 May 1993. Christopher was anxious to make sure that the Norwegian process would neither interfere with nor upstage the US efforts. Until this moment, the Americans had been fully informed about developments by their Norwegian friends. However, Holst’s visit to the US capital coincided with the Israeli upgrading of the talks, and Israel did not want the Americans to know the precise level of the talks in Norway. Prior to this meeting, Holst was also directly asked by Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin to hide the fact that it was the director general of the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs, Uri Savir, who was negotiating with the PLO. Shimon Peres had also pushed Holst not to inform the Americans. Holst assured Christopher that the Norwegian back channel would neither interfere with nor replace
the peace negotiations in Washington. He also informed the US secretary of state that there was now official participation on the Israeli side. However, Christopher and Dennis Ross interpreted this information as a way of telling them what they already knew, namely, that Beilin was involved. Immediately after the meeting, Beilin claims that it was a satisfied Norwegian foreign minister who informed him that Christopher ‘didn’t press me, and my impression is he thinks Oslo is just a talking-shop. He doesn’t know about Uri’. After the Israelis upgraded the talks in May, the US peace team knew nothing, were told nothing, understood nothing and were taken completely by surprise when they were finally informed about the breakthrough in Norway.

In general, Norway is very anxious to do nothing that might disturb its close relationship with the USA. After all, the United States is Norway’s most important ally. In addition, the world’s only remaining superpower is not a state that can be ignored. For more than 50 years, a guiding principle for Norwegian foreign policy has been to secure US support. On this occasion, however, Norway allowed Israel to decide the kind of information that was to be passed on to the Americans. Israel deliberately wanted the USA to be kept in the dark on the issue of the participation of Israeli officials. From the moment the Oslo Back Channel became a serious enterprise, the Americans were deliberately misled by both Norway and Israel. The Israelis avoided briefing the Americans and asked the Norwegians to do the same, to which the Norwegians agreed. For the Norwegians, the most important goal was to protect the Norway channel. If this meant keeping the USA in the dark because Israel wanted things that way, the Norwegian foreign minister was willing to act accordingly. There is no other obvious reason that might explain why Norway refrained from informing and deliberately misled the United States.

It is difficult to see how informing the Americans of the top-level Israeli participation could have harmed Norwegian interests, though the Norwegian actors might have feared that the Americans would hijack their back channel project. On the other hand, the Norwegian foreign minister was taking a calculated risk by not informing the Americans. Yet, after Holst took over as foreign minister, no effort was made by Norway to present the Americans with a complete picture of what was happening. Presumably, Holst’s motives were to protect the Oslo Back Channel and Norway’s role, but it is easier to understand and explain the Israeli point of view. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres personally had no high standing in Washington. In contrast with Prime Minister Rabin, all of Peres’s close contacts and fellow partisans were in Europe. Peres had previously had a bad experience with bypassing the United States: In 1987, the Americans had been opposed to the secret London agreement that he had reached with King Hussein of Jordan. The Oslo Back Channel was another Peres enterprise. In addition, the Israelis, in general, had a rather ambiguous relationship with their big protector. Ever since the days of Prime Minister Golda Meir, Israel had been much more interested in US dollars and arms than US mediation: ‘Our American friends offer us money, arms and advice. We take the money, we take the arms, and

---

we decline the advice’, as Israel’s famous defence minister Moshe Dayan once remarked.\footnote{Quoted after Shlaim 2001, p. 316; see also pp. 401–402.}

The Israelis always strove to stake out their own independent position. In 1991, the United States had to a large degree initiated a peace process in cooperation with Israel. Israel had insisted that direct negotiations with the PLO were out of the question. The USA had accepted this and had agreed to negotiate with local Palestinian leaders instead. This, of course, suited the USA perfectly well, since it had broken off its own contact with the PLO in 1990 and might have found it awkward to reopen up direct contacts with the organization. In addition to the peace negotiations in Washington, the US peace team, together with Prime Minister Rabin, was working hard on and seemed to be enjoying some degree of success in promoting peace with Syria. But, naturally, Israel did not have full control over the USA, and it did not get everything its own way. The peace negotiations in Washington had been a top priority for two US state secretaries. US efforts and prestige were involved. It was not difficult to imagine that the Americans, who were struggling with their own mired process in Washington, would react negatively when informed about the Oslo Back Channel. After all, Israel had negotiated peace with the PLO somewhere else, without the Americans even being informed.

However, the Israelis’ main motive for not informing the Americans and for wanting to explore the Oslo track further was most probably that in Norway Israel had found an easier counterpart than in Washington. In Norway, there was no international pressure on Israel. Moreover, the PLO and a weakened Arafat were a much easier match for the Israelis than the international law-oriented, highly educated and stubborn Palestinian representatives in Washington. Compared with the superpower, Norway was also a much more willing instrument and was far more ready to go along with Israeli conditions. Israel thus chose the weak PLO and little Norway in order to obtain more for itself, to protect Israeli self-interests and, hence, to get things its own way.

The lack of information given to the USA had been a source of worry for both Israel and Norway. Like a bolt from the blue, on 27 August 1993, the two nervous foreign ministers – Peres and Holst – turned up in the USA with a signed declaration of principles and a proposal for mutual recognition. Something that seemingly had been impossible for the negotiators in Washington to achieve was suddenly presented as a fait accompli by the visiting ministers, and the United States was asked to join their peace train. The US peace team was deeply surprised. But the American policymakers were also somewhat hurt and angry because they had been kept in the dark. Nevertheless, they immediately gave the agreement their warm approval. In many ways, the Oslo Declaration of Principles was a possible blessing for US President Bill Clinton, who badly needed a public success. There had already been blunders over foreign policy issues in Bosnia and Somalia. On the domestic front, trade problems, healthcare reforms and the budget deficit loomed large and threatening. A breakthrough in the intractable conflict in the Middle East could be the foreign policy triumph that Clinton needed. An official signing ceremony in the USA would provide the necessary international
credibility and would get the Americans committed to the agreement. The muscles of the United States would still be needed to implement the agreement.

The Implementer

With the signing of the Oslo Accord on 13 September 1993, Norway enjoyed its moment in the sun as the broker of the agreement. The breakthrough brought Norway fame and glory, and the country was catapulted to the top division of international peacemakers. Norway found itself with easier access to important decisionmakers in both Washington and the EU countries. This was a major achievement for a small country. However, Norway did not rest on its newly won laurels. It did not intend to allow the Oslo Accord of 1993 to become its only diplomatic victory and achievement. It continued to work tirelessly for peace in the Middle East, apparently never willing to give up. Norway became the helpful fixer, the navigator through crises, the ever-present talking partner, the preferred compromise candidate for Israelis, Palestinians, Europeans and Americans alike, and the only country that in the end was willing to take on the jobs no one else would or could.

The United States quickly took on a leading role in the peace process. However, serious disagreements soon surfaced between the United States and the European Union. Which of these two should assume the leading role in the aid coordination process? For the USA, US leadership was essential and almost taken for granted. The United States found the Europeans too sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and the EU decisionmaking process too complex and problematic. The Europeans felt that the United States lacked understanding for the way in which the European Union worked. Compared to the USA, the EU favoured a more substantial Palestinian role in the aid process. The European countries believed that they conducted a much more balanced Middle East policy. They regarded the Americans as biased and too uncritical of Israel. The Americans and the Europeans could not agree on who was to chair the new donor organization, the AHLC. Each side maintained that it wanted the position of chair for itself, and that if this were not to be the case, the other side should also be prevented from taking the chair.

In this conflicting situation, Norway emerged not just as the perfect but also as the only compromise candidate. Norway was definitely acceptable to the United States. It was not a member of the European Union and was traditionally very close to the USA. Moreover, being the brokers of the Oslo Agreement, the Norwegians had shown that they were acceptable to the Israelis as well as to the Palestinians. As a small country, Norway would be a chair with marginal influence over donors. But, seen from a US perspective, this could be useful. Norway’s relatively powerless position, in combination with its close relationship to the United States, would allow the Americans to stay in charge. The Norwegians, deliberately or unconsciously, played along with this US approach. The United States ran the business, and Norway was its partner and messenger. Norway was proud, willing and eager to take on such a high-profile job.
Chairing the AHLC expanded and cemented Norway’s position. Furthermore, Norway was the most generous among the donors in relative terms, while the United States was among the least generous. To some extent, Norway’s general political and social support for development aid explains the level of its generosity. However, there is little doubt that the most important reason for the major contribution was Norway’s key political role in the Oslo peace process.

In the peace process in the Middle East, many threads seemed to pass through the hands of Norway. In addition to being AHLC chair, Norway helped to establish a Palestinian recipient structure that would permit a fast and smooth flow of donor money into the Palestinian areas. Norway was also the driving force behind the establishment of a Palestinian police force, which was seen by all actors as a very important task but was a job no one wanted to take on. The massive Norwegian involvement in establishing a donor mechanism for the Palestinian police force was clearly a demanding task, politically, financially and administratively. Furthermore, alarming information was soon received about the Palestinian police and how security questions were being resolved by them. To be the main country identified with the creation of a poorly controlled Palestinian police force was not a very tempting prospect for Norway, especially in view of its peacemaker image. Reports of police brutality or human rights violations in the Palestinian areas were and would be damaging for Norway’s reputation and prestige. Consequently, the Norwegians wanted to get out of or at least reduce the country’s police engagement as soon as possible. But nobody wanted to take over. Norway was stuck as the only acceptable candidate, and it did not run away from its obligations, not even when these were clearly regarded as risky and unpleasant. Norway was deeply committed to building peace in the Middle East.

The Norwegian involvement in the Middle East became huge and comprehensive, almost overwhelming. In principle, after the signing of the Oslo Agreement the Israelis and the Palestinians could freely communicate directly with each other and carry out negotiations themselves. However, the peace negotiations constantly ran into trouble. The Norwegians were still lurking in the corners, ready to offer assistance. And they were constantly briefed by both parties about the progress or the lack of progress in the negotiations. The Norwegians used every available opportunity to get things moving and to remove as many obstacles as possible. They put a lot of energy and effort into keeping the Oslo process alive. Not surprisingly, the Palestinians wanted the Norwegians to use their influence and friendship with Israel to get the negotiations back on track. They constantly begged for Norwegian support and assistance. The Palestinians both wanted and needed help to solve the Hebron crisis in February–March 1994. Initially, they did not get the help they wanted from Norway because the latter would only intervene if both parties agreed. Israel, with the support of the United States, would not permit any Norwegian interference.

However, when Israel accepted a small international presence in Hebron, in order to get the peace process back on track, Norway was called upon once again, this time to lead the operation. Norway was the trusted country, the one that could be given com-
complicated and difficult tasks. Missions such as the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), set up during the spring of 1994, required trust on the part of both Israelis and Palestinians. But trust was not all that was required. In order to accomplish such an operation within a short time-frame, willingness and capability were as also very important. There could be no delays or slow-moving bureaucracies. Decisions had to be taken more or less on the spot, and money had to be provided instantly. There were few small, rich, eager, trusted and willing countries in the world. In this Middle East context, Norway again seemed to be the only one that fitted the bill.

The results of all this peacemaking activity were not always as positive as the good intentions behind it. In the case of the first Hebron operation, the results were at best meagre. The international presence fulfilled few, if any, of the goals set up for the operation. After three months, Israel insisted on the removal of the observer force. Nevertheless, the short and abrupt TIPH operation was regarded as a success within the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs. The meagre results it produced could hardly be the reason for this assessment. Rather, the TIPH mission had been a useful instrument. For the Palestinian leaders, it had been a face-saving gesture, one that contributed to bringing a stagnated peace process back on track. This was the result that mattered. The Israelis and the Palestinians had resumed their places at the negotiating table, and Norway had helped to navigate the peace process out of the Hebron crisis.

The road to peace was beset with twists and turns, setbacks and crises being more the rule than the exception. During 1995, the negotiations over the Interim Agreement ran constantly into trouble. Again, the Palestinians asked for Norwegian help and support; once more, they wanted Norway to use its influence in order to soften the Israeli position. The Norwegians, for their part, replied with their usual answer: Norway was willing to act as a facilitator, but this would depend on a joint understanding. Norway would or could do nothing without Israel’s consent. The message from Israel was crystal clear: The Israelis saw no reason for Norwegian involvement in the negotiations. They were twisting Arafat’s arm themselves.18

Basically, the Norwegians played no substantial role in the interim negotiations, though they were available as talking partners, fixers and punching bags for frustration. However, as a direct consequence of the Interim Agreement signed in September 1995, Norway received two new assignments: a people-to-people (P2P) programme and, later, a new TIPH mission. Norway was given new opportunities to justify its position as an important, almost indispensable, actor in the Middle East peace drama.

A peacebuilding and reconciliation project like the P2P programme was nothing new for Norway. During the 1990s, Norway had used development assistance as a political instrument in a number of conflicts. Such assistance had increasingly been linked to human rights, democratization and various peacebuilding activities. The P2P programme fitted well into this active Norwegian engagement thinking – to go out in the world and make peace. However, the P2P programme was a much more political project than previous Norwegian activities, with clear political goals and implications. It

Conclusion

was intended to support the ongoing peace process directly. Not entirely unexpectedly, given this background, the Norwegians were the most eager supporters of the people-to-people project. During the interim negotiations, the Israelis and the Palestinians were occupied with the substantive and difficult political aspects of the peace negotiations. But Norway strove to preserve its territory. After the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993, money poured into the Middle East, not only in order to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians, but also to secure the peace effort. Norway was not the only operator on the peace market.

The election of Binyamin Netanyahu as Israeli prime minister in May 1996 definitely led to a changed attitude in many areas, as Netanyahu declared war against the Oslo peace process. Negative political developments in the peace process did not favour the P2P concept. In the end, the programme was started up on a much less ambitious scale than originally intended. In contrast to the initial planning, the emphasis was now on the NGO sector. The P2P had no chance of becoming a political ‘hotline’. Furthermore, in a move away from previous plans, it was decided that the whole P2P programme would be depoliticized and distanced from political developments. This was necessary if any projects at all were to be implemented. The Norwegians had seized upon the idea of P2P and had worked hard for it. Norway had agreed to act as facilitator and financial benefactor even before the Interim Agreement had been signed. The P2P project exemplified Norway’s good intentions within the framework of a peace strategy that was overly optimistic.

The new Norwegian TIPH assignment, which began in May 1996, did not turn out as expected either, although it did secure a role for Norway. Unlike the previous operation in 1994, the new TIPH mission was linked directly to the pending Israeli withdrawal from Hebron. However, since no substantial negotiations took place between Israelis and Palestinians, Norway stayed in Hebron – alone – waiting for the Israelis and the Palestinians to agree. The three weeks or so that had been estimated in May 1996 finally came to an end in January 1997, when Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) signed the Hebron Protocol. By then, the TIPH agreement of May 1996 had been extended five times.

Once again, Norway revealed its genuine commitment to keeping the peace process on track. Norway agreed to place TIPH personnel in Hebron and to bear all of the expenses for this programme itself, while having no control over the situation. Of course, Norway could have withdrawn its observers, but this did not seem to be a feasible option and would have ‘sent[t] the wrong signals to the parties’. The state of affairs in 1996 – with closures, terrorist attacks, fighting in Lebanon, upcoming Israeli elections and a new Likud government – was not the best time to pull out, especially if there was to be any hope of peace in the Middle East. Everything seemed to be on a slippery slope, but Norway was not willing to give in.

Severe problems continued to haunt the peace process. The spoilers on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides did everything they could to undermine the peace pro-

---

cess and prevent it from moving forward. In 1996, there was no one left in Israel to fight through all the hard decisions and compromises needed in order to achieve peace. Rabin could have done this, but he had been assassinated. Peres might have done it (although many had their doubts about that), but he was no longer in office. Netanyahu declared war against the Oslo process – or, as he and the Likud Party saw it, war against terror. He refused to make any compromises when it came to giving away a millimetre of the Land of Israel. On the Palestinian side, a weakened Arafat was preoccupied with settling back into his own house, building up his standing and credibility, improving the living conditions of his people and fighting the extremists on the Palestinian side. They, like the hawks on the Israeli side, had also declared war on the Oslo process. Even Terje Rød Larsen – the optimistic, hard-working, ever-devoted peacebuilder, who was ready to use every opportunity that came his way to try to bring peace to the Middle East – left the region in October 1996 to take up the position of minister of planning in the new Labour government in Norway. None of the key actors who had been part of the Oslo Back Channel and the Oslo process remained in a position to influence or implement the dream of peace in the Middle East. As time went by, the Palestinians lost more and more land and the Israelis lost more and more security.

The Room for Manoeuvre

Norway could not alter the power asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians. Norway was no superpower, and it could not force solutions on unwilling parties. Israel was the stronger party, with a clear national security agenda, and it was not willing to concede much. The PLO was the weaker party, willing to accept little in order to avoid further marginalization.

The Norwegians had a biased past. But the Norway’s traditional pro-Israeli stance only explains how the process all began. It does not explain the actual role of Norway in the Oslo peace process. The Norwegians did not act the way they did simply because they agreed with the various Israeli positions put forward. The main reason for the Norwegians’ position was that the secret Norwegian role in the Middle East peace process would yield no results if the Palestinians refused to accept Israeli terms. And then there would be no role for Norway. The Norwegians could not risk criticizing the Israeli positions. Such a stance would make Norway unacceptable as a facilitator or mediator. Norway had to be acceptable not to both parties equally, but primarily to the strongest party, Israel. Its role necessitated such a loyalty.

Norway had no muscles. Norway’s weak position together with the secret and basically facilitative approach taken gave Norway no alternative other than to accept what the stronger party – Israel – presented. Not even when Norway took on the role of mediator could anything be done to change this. The situation between the two adversaries remained just as asymmetrical as it always had been, and Norway was just as
small and powerless as ever. The Norwegians strove to ensure process symmetry, but this could never change or hide the facts on the ground.

The role Norway played was the only role Norway could play in this setting, taking the asymmetry of power into consideration. Israel decided the conditions and the rules of the game. Norway could like this or not, but there was nothing it could do about it. This was Norway’s room for manoeuvre. Either Norway did the best it could within such a setting – or it put the entire process behind it. These were the options. Norway chose to stay put and make the best out of the situation. Basically, this meant persuading the PLO to give up positions Israel found unacceptable, on the one hand, and persuading the PLO to accept the positions put forward by Israel, on the other.

Norway had neither carrots nor sticks that it could use in relation to Israel. With regard to the Palestinians, though, Norway could employ both means. It could use sticks by arguing that the Palestinians would ruin all chances for peace if they failed to clinch a deal with Israel within the Oslo setting. And it could tempt the PLO with carrots such as getting a foothold in Palestine or being recognized by Israel. But, which was probably even more important, Norway could also offer economic assistance – not just from rich Norway but also from the rest of the international community – if the PLO would accept the proposals put forward by Israel. Then, the Norwegians argued, the dynamics that had been set in motion would gradually move the peace process forward, which would be in the interests of the PLO.

But if Norway was negotiating peace on Israel’s premises, so was the PLO. The weak PLO had few options. Either it accepted and tried to make the best out of an extremely difficult situation or it abandoned the peace process having achieved nothing, at least within this framework. But the PLO did not leave, nor did the Norwegians. The PLO, the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, preferred the Oslo Back Channel to the alternatives. Both the PLO and Israel wanted the negotiations to produce an outcome.

After three years of Norwegian peacebuilding in the Middle East, a road map had been drawn up and a number of agreements had been signed. But no peace had been reached, and none was in sight. Making peace in the region began increasingly to look like an impossible mission. In order to accomplish such a mission, strong muscles were needed. Norway had none. The Norwegians could achieve no more than the strongest party would allow them to achieve.

The Norwegians wanted to achieve results through dialogue and a basically facilitative approach to conflict resolution. They believed in the principle of gradualism, that trust could be built up and that positive developments might eventually lead towards a lasting peace in the Middle East. And they believed that an irreversible peace dynamic would push the process forward. This peace strategy was perhaps overoptimistic, but the Norwegians displayed a strong will and made considerable efforts to achieve their goals. Their ambitions were to create peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians and a new international role for Norway. In part, they did manage to create a new Norwegian role: Oslo became known as the ‘Capital of Peace’. Norwegian access to important decisionmakers on the world stage was improved. And Norwegians were
asked to contribute to solving conflicts all over the world, which the little minnow in the big sea did.\textsuperscript{20} Norway become involved in peace processes in places such as Guatemala, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Colombia and former Yugoslavia, to mention just a few. Everyone seemed to need Norwegians. But creating peace is hard and complicated work. Indeed, it is ‘risky business’.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Time Magazine (European edition), ‘Little Fish in a Big Pound’, 8 July 2002.
\textsuperscript{21} Stedman 1991, p. 231
SOURCES

Archives

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, archives, Oslo, Norway
Riksarkivet [National Archives], Oslo, Norway
Arbeiderbevegelsens arkiv [Labour Movement Archives], Oslo, Norway
Nobelinstituttet [Norwegian Nobel Institute], Oslo, Norway
National Archives, Washington, DC, USA
Public Record Office, Kew, UK
Socialist International, records, 1946–83, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Interviews

Haidar Abdel-Shafi, 17 November 1999
Bassam Abu-Sharif, 23 March 1999
Abu Ala, 21 October 2002
Sten Andersson, 23 June 1999
Moshe Arens, 16 November 1999
Hassan Asfour, 24 March 1999 and 20 October 2002
Hanan Ashrawi, 23 March 1999 and 19 October 2002
James Baker III, 9 September 1999
Yossi Beilin, 23 March 1999 and 23 October 2002
Bernt Bull, 21 June 1999
Kjell Bygstad, 15 January 1998
Jane Corbin, 16 July 2001
Edward Djerejian, 3 June 2002
Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002
Israel Gatt, 25 March 1999
Avi Gil, 21 March 1999
Bjørn Tore Godal, 3 December 2002
Shlomo Gur, 21 October 2002
Rolf Willy Hansen, 29 April 2002
Rita Hauser, 5 August 1999
Marianne Heiberg, 7 June 2001 and 13 May 2002
Yair Hirschfeld, 7 May 1998, 22 March 1999 and 22 October 2002
Trond Johansen, 16 February 2000
Mona Juul, 16 June 1999, 21 August and 22 October 2002
Ghassan Khatib, 19 October 2002
Dan Kurtzer, 22 October 2002
Terje Rød Larsen, 16 June 1999 and 21 October 2002
Samuel Lewis, 28 July 1999 and 5 June 2002
Haakon Lie, 4 July 1991
Hans Wilhelm Longva, 24 February 1999 and 30 June 2000
Aaron Miller, 21 July 1999 and 5 June 2002
Amr Moussa, 15 November 1999
Richard Murphy, 20 July 1999
Arnstein Øverkil, 18 October 2002
Geir O. Pedersen, 20 August and 18 October 2002
Robert Pelletreau, 16 July 1999
Shimon Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002
Ron Pundak, 21 March 1999 and 23 October 2002
William Quandt, 22 July 1999
Peter Ræder, 15 May 2002
Dennis Ross, 21 July 1999 and 6 June 2002
Uri Savir, 18 November 1999
Svein Sevje, 16 October 2002
Yitzhak Shamir, 21 March 1999
George Shultz, 14 September 1999
Yoel Singer, 4 June 2002
Thorvald Stoltenberg, 26 February and 9 March 1999
Wegger Strømmen, 5 September 2000
Ingolf Håkon Teigene, 6 May 2002
Toni Verstanding, 6 June 2002
Knut Vollebæk, 11 September 2000 and 4 June 2002
Tor Wennesland, 26 August 2002
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Kydd, Andrew, 2000. *Mediation, Preferences and Credibility*, unpublished manuscript, Department of Political Science, University of California.


Lie, Haakon, 1983. ... slik jeg ser det 2 [As I See It]. Oslo: Tiden.


**Publications on the World Wide Web**


‘Peacemaking Is a Risky Business’
Norway’s Role in the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1993–96

On 13 September 1993, a major turning point seemed to have been reached in Israeli – Palestinian relations. The world would witness an extraordinary breakthrough in the apparently insoluble Middle East conflict as the Oslo Agreement was signed at the White House in Washington, DC. Rarely had the Middle East known such a moment of hope.

Among the prominent international actors strolling in the sun on the White House lawn on that bright September day was Norway’s foreign minister, Johan Jørgen Holst. Norway had made a decisive contribution to this, one of the most serious attempts at making peace in the strife-torn Middle East region since the creation of the State of Israel in May 1948.

What had made Norway, of all countries, suitable for such an extraordinary task? And what kind of role had Norway played? Why did both Israelis and Palestinians find Norway, of all countries, acceptable as a mediating partner? And how can the outcome of the process be explained?

In order to provide a meaningful analysis of Norway’s role, it is necessary to examine the development of the peace process itself. The Oslo peace process reflected the fundamentally asymmetrical power situation that existed between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Israel was the stronger party; it possessed a clear national security agenda and was unwilling to make too many concessions. The PLO, on the other hand, despite its strong vision of a future Palestinian state, was willing to make significant concessions in order to avoid further marginalization of itself and the Palestinian cause. What room for manoeuvre did such a basic asymmetry of power provide for the Norwegians?

Hilde Henriksen Waage is a Senior Researcher and Deputy Director at PRIO. She holds a doctoral degree in history and has published extensively on Norway and the conflict in the Middle East.

PRIO
Fuglehaugt. 11
NO 0260 Oslo, Norway

www.prio.no

ISBN: 82-7288-219-1