

Oslo Peace Process

Welcome

Dear Delegates,

It is with great excitement that I take on the task of chairing the Oslo Peace Accords historical Committee at BUSUN 2010. During my time at Brown, I have taken a keen interest in furthering my own understanding of the extremely complex web of issues that continue to perpetuate the Arab-Israeli conflict through my academic studies, my extra-curricular involvement, and also my personal interactions with Israeli and Palestinian students. I have learned that the conflict possesses numerous layers: religious, ideological, historical, ethnic, and geopolitical. However, at the core of the conflict is the clash between the Jewish and Palestinian national movements and the denial of one another's right to self-determination in the land of Palestine. Over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, all of these factors came together, turning Israel and the Palestinian territories into a hotbed for violent wars and terrorist attacks.

However, on September 13, 1993, many were filled with hope that the decades of bloodshed were finally over. On this fateful day, the world bared witnessed to the unthinkable: Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, shaking hands with Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman, Yassir Arafat on the White House lawn after the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords. The Oslo Accords seemed to signify the dawn of a new era for Israel and Palestine: an era of peace. In hindsight, we all know that this is not where the story ends, and that the Israelis and Palestinians did not proceed to coexist peacefully, side-by-side. We can turn on the news any day, and hear coverage of yet another tragic incident of Arabs and Israelis caught in the crossfire. From the 2006 ceasefire dispute between Israel and Lebanon,

to the continuation of rocket fire from Gaza into Southern Israel leading up to the 2008 Gaza War, the prospects for peace seem more and more elusive every day.

However, this historical committee will allow us to go back in time to this critical juncture, and re-negotiate the Oslo Peace Accords. I encourage you to study the language of the actual Oslo Peace Accords, known as the Declaration of Principles. How would they be different, or how would they be the same if you could play a part in the negotiating process? What subjects did the agreement leave out that should have been covered? What would have been a better way to structure a nascent, independent Palestinian State? How could Israel have better transferred authority over to the Palestinians? Over the course of the conference, you will take on a historical persona and adopt their viewpoints, biases, interests, and allegiances. You will negotiate with these loyalties in mind. However, at the same time, I urge you to try and empathize with both sides, be open-minded, and embrace the concept that the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to live with dignity in peace and security. A friend of mine at Brown who served in the Israeli Defense Forces would always say, "An enemy is only someone whose story we have not yet heard." In other words, it is easy to vilify someone who we don't understand, but if we challenge ourselves to hear our opponents out, we will in turn see their humanity that is shared by all. Hopefully, by the end of the conference, we will have drawn up a Declaration of Principles that all parties can agree upon. I look forward to working with all of you and hearing the ideas you bring to the negotiating table. Also, if you have any questions about the subject, the committee, or even life at Brown, please do not hesitate to email me at oslo@busun.net.

Laura Fried,
Oslo Peace Accords Chair

Background

1. The Seeds of Conflict

In the aftermath of World War I, the Great Powers under the tutelage of the League of Nations divvied up the defeated Ottoman Empire among themselves. The British took control over Palestine and gained partial rule over Transjordan in 1922. The arrangement was referred to as the British Mandate. Even during the mandate period, hostilities began breaking out into violence between the resident Arab Palestinians and the Zionist Jews who had immigrated to Palestine. The violence between Arabs and Jews had been mostly sporadic up until the mid thirties. From 1936-39, the Great Arab Revolt took place. Palestinians destroyed Jewish farmlands and attacked and killed Jewish civilians, who were seen as outsiders conspiring with the British. The Jews formed underground militias to retaliate against the Palestinian militants and civilians alike. Almost 6,000 people perished and over 10,000 were wounded in the four-year clash. At this point, the British initially conceived the idea of partition and the creation of two states, believing that the Jewish and Palestinian people could never live together in harmony.

Almost a decade later, the British were completely overwhelmed by the Palestinian mandate, and chose to bring the issue to the attention of the newly formed United Nations. In 1947, the UN General Assembly passed General Assembly Resolution 181: Future Government of Palestine, which would terminate British control, separate Palestine into two independent states, one Arab and one Jewish, and create an internationally administered zone around Jerusalem. However, the partition plan was never implemented. While the Israelis were reluctant to accept the diminished territory and share Jerusalem, the Palestinians and the Arab League rejected the plan outright. Within twenty-four hours of Israel's proclamation of Independence on May

14, 1948, the Palestinians, with support of the regular armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq declared war on Israel. Despite the odds, Israel's 600,000 Jews had defeated the armies of 40 million Arabs.

By the end of the war, the Jews were in possession of almost 80% of the former Palestinian mandate. The remaining 20% was under Arab auspices: Transjordan took control over the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Egypt retained the Gaza Strip. However, one of the most significant legacies of the 1948 War was the creation of nearly 750,000 Palestinian refugees. The question of why the Palestinians left their homes is an historical debate that will never be resolved. Some claim that the Jewish combatants destroyed Arab villages and homes, effectively and deliberately forcing Palestinians out of Jewish-controlled Palestine, while others claim that the Palestinians fled by their own free will or by the order of their own leadership. As a result, Palestinians ended up in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Transjordan, Egypt, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. Only about 150,000 Palestinians remained within the Jewish state. Even today, Palestinian refugees and their decedents in exile assert that they have the "right of return" to come back to Israel and reclaim their land and possessions lost in the war.

Nearly twenty years later, hostilities escalated once more when Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser began sending troops to the Sinai Peninsula and declared the Straits of Tiran closed to Israeli shipping, an act which Israel had voiced on prior occasions would be considered a provocation or justification for war. In 1967, Israel launched a surprise offensive, which lasted only six days. In less than a week, Israel had conquered the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the entirety of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan. The 1967 War enlarged Israel's territorial possessions by a factor of three. With the new

land acquisitions of Gaza and the West Bank came 1.3 million Palestinians that were now living in Israeli controlled territory. It is at this juncture that the present-day occupation over the “Palestinian territories” originally came into place.

Now that the Palestinians were no longer under the control of Jordan and Egypt but under the control of the Jews, their desire for self-determination as a unique and culturally distinct Arab people began to flourish. It is in this post-1967 climate, that Yassir Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s (PLO) nationalist movement came to the fore. The PLO drafted a covenant a year later that codified sentiments that denied Israel’s right to exist and advocated for the use of armed struggle to liberate Palestine. The PLO also became the umbrella organization for a number of Palestinian guerilla groups, which caused problems for both Israel and surrounding Arab states like Jordan and Lebanon. During the seventies and eighties, these guerilla groups launched numerous terrorist attacks inside and outside of Israel, the most notorious of which was the murder of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Unrest in the territories came to a head in 1987 with the start of the First Intifada, a coordinated uprising which involved wide spread acts of civil disobedience and mild forms of violent protest like rock-throwing at Israeli soldiers. The goal was to demonstrate as well as galvanize Palestinian solidarity, which Israel tried desperately to suppress via mandatory curfews, housing demolitions, and military crackdowns.

However, the victory and subsequent occupation had created an ideological split among the Jews of Israel: between Jews who wanted to maintain control indefinitely over the new territories and Jews who wanted to give it back in exchange for peace with the Palestinians. The first group consisted of right-wing extremists, secular ultra-nationalists, and most orthodox Jews. The religious Jews

perceived the 1967 victory as a messianic sign from God that Israel was destined to have all of Palestine for the Jewish homeland. These Jews believed it was their divine mission to move to the Palestinian territories and build “settlements” to maintain a Jewish presence and alter the demographics in the former Arab-controlled land. The other category of Jews saw the territorial acquisitions as nothing more than bargaining chips in a land-for-peace deal. This latter interpretation became the basis for UN Resolution 242. Condescendingly dubbed, “a masterpiece of diplomatic ambiguity,” Resolution 242 outlined a vague framework for the termination of hostilities and return of Palestinian territories, which never effectively came into force. These two camps within Israel failed to come to any kind of consensus regarding the territories, and the status quo of the West Bank/Gaza Strip occupation remained in place for decades.

2. The Peace Process and the Road to Oslo

During the 1970’s, the peace process was geared towards Israel and Egypt. In 1979, Israel signed its first effective peace agreement with an Arab state. Israel agreed to give back to Egypt the Sinai Peninsula, in exchange for a termination of hostilities. Peace talks with the Palestinians were stilted for many decades since Israeli law prohibited communication between Israeli officials and the PLO, which forced Israeli diplomats to negotiate with powerless intermediaries. It is for this reason that the multilateral and bilateral Madrid Talks in 1991 were so unsuccessful.

However, the tides began to turn with the 1992 Israeli elections, which brought the left-wing Labor party into power as well as peace-prone, Yitzhak Rabin as Prime Minister. In January of 1993, the Israeli Parliament finally repealed the ban on direct negotiation with the PLO. However, long before the formal lift of the ban, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister, Yossi Beilini, had contemplated the idea of engaging

directly with the PLO. Israeli Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, and PLO treasurer Ahmad Qurei, better known as Abu Ala, were on board too. Around the same time that the ban was lifted, a delegation of Israeli diplomats and academics made arrangements with Norwegian foreign affairs minister Johan Joergen Holst and social scientist Terge Rød Larsen to open up a back channel of direct talks with the PLO in Oslo, Norway. The talks were completed under a thick veil of secrecy, and ran concurrent to the mainstream channel that was taking place in Washington. There were fourteen meetings in total from January to August that took place in Oslo that led to the creation of the Declaration of Principles (DOP). The DOP was revolutionary because it proposed a solution that was more involved than merely partition and withdrawal of Israeli occupation. The Americans at the State Department were rather caught of guard when they received word that there had been a breakthrough in the peace process that came about without their knowledge or input. For many years, America has seen itself as an essential and powerful mediator between the Arabs and the Israelis; therefore, many U.S. officials were surprised to hear that the seemingly neutral and disinterested Norwegians had managed to coordinate a back channel that yielded better results than the formal talks taking place in Washington.

3. Key Issues at Oslo

While there were many parts of the actual DOP, for the sake of this committee, we will section our negotiations into three distinct categories: mutual recognition, troop withdrawal and land transfer, and the allocation of powers and responsibilities to the nascent Palestinian government, known as the Palestinian Authority.

Recognition

As fundamental as it may seem, one of the core issues at Oslo was mutual recognition.

Throughout the twentieth century, the prevailing theme of the conflict was mutual denial and the inability to accept the self-determination of both peoples in one land. Recognition would be seen as the deviation from the status quo and would be a dramatic and risky political move for both leaders that could result in virulent political opposition that could destroy their careers. For Yassir Arafat, recognition of Israel would necessitate publicly renouncing the use of terrorism and formally revoking numerous portions of the Palestinian National Covenant, also known as the PLO Charter, which were antithetical to recognition of Israel as well as the notion of peace. For example Article 9 states that

Armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine and is therefore a strategy and not tactics. The Palestinian Arab people affirms its absolute resolution and abiding determination to pursue the armed struggle...and to exercise its right of self-determination and sovereignty over [Palestine.]

Article 15 states that, “The liberation of Palestine, from an Arab viewpoint, is a national duty to repulse the Zionist, Imperialist from the great Arab homeland and to purge the Zionist presence from Palestine.” Article 17 states that, “The partitioning of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of Israel is fundamentally null and void.” Lastly, Article 22 asserts that

Zionism is a political movement organically related to world Imperialism and hostile to all movements of liberation and progress in the world. It is a racist and fanatical movement in its formation; aggressive, expansionist, and colonialist in its aims; and fascist and Nazi in its means.

In order to reject all of these tenets, Arafat and his Palestinian negotiators could risk being accused of betrayal and selling-out. Recognizing Israel would garner extreme opposition from groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and

Hamas. He could even lose his control over the PLO.

Yitzhak Rabin and the Israeli delegation also have a lot on the line. If they recognize the PLO, they would risk an outcry from right-wing Likud critics who would insist that recognition of the PLO would legitimize the objectives of the PLO Charter. Likud Opposition leader, Benjamin Netanyahu has publicly stated that recognizing the PLO would be, “the start of the destruction of Israel in line with the PLO plan.” These critics will also point out that the Israelis cannot trust Arafat, even if he swears to revoke parts of the charter, since he has been notorious in the past for making empty promises. The Israeli diplomats also would risk losing the support of the religious Jews living in the settlements in Gaza and the West Bank, who tenaciously believe that the Palestinians do not have the right to self-determination in the Promised Land, which has been given by God to the Jewish people.

Troops and Land

Another major subject is how much of the 1967 territories will be transferred over to the Palestinians, and what role the IDF should play in the territories to ensure that Israel remains secure. As stated earlier, the framework for the transferring of land back to the Palestinians was embodied by UN Security Council Resolution 242, which clearly states that

The fulfillment of [UN] Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the application of both the following principles: Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the [1967] conflict; [and] Termination of all claims or states of belligerency.

In short, the resolution advocates that Israel should give up land, in exchange for peace with the Palestinians. From the mainstream Palestinian perspective, Israel should comply with the resolution by

withdrawing from 100% of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip and transfer the land back to the Palestinian people, who will decide among themselves how to govern the territory on their own. Also, the mainstream perspective would demand that Israel allow complete freedom of movement between the West Bank and the Gaza strip, which are separated geographically by Israel proper. More extremist perspectives held by PFLP and Hamas would assert that the entire former Palestine mandate belongs to the Palestinians, and Israel has no legal, historical, or religious right to the land of Palestine. As a result, any negotiation that the PLO does with Israel over land will never meet the expectations of the more right-wing groups. Therefore, even if the PLO makes peace with Israel and in exchange receives 100% of the 1967 territories, Hamas and others will not be satisfied and will see the PLO as a traitor to the Palestinian cause. If the PLO makes peace with Israel and gets less than 100% of the land, even some moderates might be outraged. The only leverage the Palestinians have is their promise to terminate hostilities against Israel. Once this promise is made, they lose any ability to negotiate for more territory. If the PLO makes peace and renounces violence, and does not get what it wants, they could risk being upstaged by Hamas who has been discrediting the efficacy of the peace process all along.

The question of how much land to give up is an explosive debate among Israelis. As stated earlier, there is a significant portion of the population that believes that the 1967 territories should never be relinquished to the Palestinians. Secular hardliners believe that the land was acquired legitimately through military conquest; moreover, they say that giving it up would be a huge security liability for Israel. These hardliners argue that given the recent experience with the Intifada and the growing popularity of Hamas, there is no real way to assure that once the Palestinians are given land

to create their own state they won't try to destroy Israel and harm its citizens. Also, if Israel gives up so much as a square inch of land, the religious Jews will call the Israeli policymakers heathens for interfering with God's plan to unite Greater Israel for the Jewish people. In particular, handing the territory over to the Palestinians and withdrawing IDF forces might endanger the Jews who currently reside in Gaza and the West Bank. It also might necessitate that they move back to Israel proper, which would anger the settler communities.

However, the Labor party and leftist groups see the 1967 territories differently. By the 1990's, there were over 3 million Palestinians under Israeli control in the territories. The leftists look at the recent Intifada and say that having control over the territories has not made Israel proper any more secure. In fact, they argue that it has made Israel more endangered since the occupation serves no other purpose than to breed hostile and reactionary Palestinians, which Israel has to deal with. Among this camp, there were many Israelis who believed that occupation was wrong and understood the need to accept Palestinian national aspirations – so long as they did not threaten Israel's existence. They believed that helping the Palestinians prosper would be the best way to ensure Israel's security. However, even among the doves, hardly any informed officials think that a drastic transfer of all the territories and withdrawal of all IDF forces is advisable. It is simply too risky of a move. Rather, the peaceniks think a more gradual process that involves handing territory over slowly, only after the Palestinians have proven themselves capable for self-rule, is a safer alternative. Shimon Peres has hinted at the possibility of relinquishing the Gaza strip, home to a million Palestinians, as an initial concession in order to “test drive” Palestinian independence before turning over more territory. This could be met with approval by

the doves who are starting to see the continuation of the occupation as an unsustainable drain on Israeli military resources and manpower. Although, Arafat has expressed discontent that agreeing to the “Gaza-First” plan might eclipse the possibility of regaining the West Bank in addition to Gaza. As an alternative, Arafat has asserted that he wants to stake a claim in the West Bank by taking Jericho, one of the West Bank's metropolitan areas.

Power and Responsibilities

In addition to simply giving the Palestinians land, the negotiations at Oslo will also involve restructuring the Palestinian leadership and transferring some autonomous powers away from the military occupation to the new civil Palestinian government, known as the Palestinian Authority (PA). However setting up a new governments and reallocating power is a very delicate affair. What powers should Israel give up? Which ones should they retain? Should Israel and the PA share governance in the region? How should the PA be structured? Should it be democratic? Some of the tasks of government in general include providing education, healthcare, welfare, infrastructure, police protection, law enforcement, national security, raising taxes, holding elections, and conducting foreign affairs. The Palestinians want to take on as many powers and responsibilities away from Israel and the IDF as they possibly can. They also want to extend PA control over as much territory as possible. The Palestinians are most concerned with taking the responsibilities of providing their own police force, raising their own army, and conducting their own foreign policy in order to detach Israel's stronghold over them.

However, these sensitive issues are precisely the matters that Israel wants to hold on to the most since they directly affect the security of Israel proper. Hardliners most likely

want to ensure an IDF presence in the territories to ensure that Palestinians do not become radicalized and to protect Jewish settlers living in Gaza and the West Bank. Also the Israelis will be reluctant to give up authority completely to the Palestinians without allowing for some sort of Israeli oversight. The Israelis are more likely to favor some power sharing agreement. Some of the Israeli delegation has proposed dividing the territory into three kinds of areas: Area A, which would be controlled entirely by the PA; Area B, which would be governed jointly by Israel and the PA; and Area C, which would remain under Israeli control.

Final Status Issues

However, it is important to note that the actual DOP made no effort to address “final status issues,” or issues that garnered so much controversy, the negotiators feared that, if discussed in the first round of talks, they would decelerate, or even derail, the nascent peace process. Instead, the DOP outlined a vague timetable to revisit these issues at a latter date, sometime within five years after the signing of the agreement. These issues included the status of Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees’ right of return, the building of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, and borders. No significant decision or compromise was ever made on any of these subjects. As a result, they continue to be central themes in the Arab-Israeli conflict today.

4. Other Incentives for Peace

Other than the actual issues involved in the peace process, both parties were influenced by contextual factors that played a role in accelerating negotiation. In 1992, Yassir Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization were on the verge of collapse. A large part of their disadvantaged position was attributed to the recent collapse of the Soviet Union, a close ally and large contributor to the PLO. Moreover, Arafat’s support for Saddam Hussein’s

occupation of Kuwait angered the Gulf States, Saudia Arabia, and Kuwait who had previously been donating \$200-250 million annually in the pre-Gulf War years to the PLO. In 1992, these countries reduced their support to \$40 million in foreign aid to Palestine. The significant cut in funds combined with unwise spending has resulted in a lack of financial means to support welfare and governmental subsidies. Simultaneously, the more radicalized political movement of Hamas is increasing in popularity and is receiving substantial funding from Iran. Hamas’ burgeoning following poses a threat to the PLO’s position as the sole political force representing Palestine. Arafat is losing his funding, power, and popular support. For the PLO, making some concessions, forging a peace with Israel, and showing a good face to the West might be the best way to turn the political and economic climate around.

On the other hand, Israel has other motivations as well. One major Israeli incentive for making peace with the Palestinians is to repair its global reputation as an occupying oppressor. Its draconian crackdown on the uprisings of the globally sensationalized First Intifada has done serious damage to Israel’s legitimacy. This was also an issue after their exertion of force in “Operation Accountability” in the summer of 1993. This attack constituted a full-scale bombing by Israel in response to a Hezbollah provocation. As a result, 130 Lebanese died, and over 500,000 were displaced. Both occasions received widespread condemnation from the international community. These instances have made the Palestinian cause much more sympathetic to global spectators, and have made Israel’s constant security concerns less credible. As a consequence, making peace with the Palestinians might be the best way to restore Israel’s image as well as solidify its special relationship with the United States.

Useful Resources

The best way to get started with your research is by reviewing a more in-depth overview of the history. However, the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict is very contested, so be mindful of the biases in the sources you use. However, I think some of the best objective accounts can be found in *A History of the Modern Middle East* by William E. Cleveland and Martin Bunton and *A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* by Ian Bickerton and Carla Klausner. The Later is extremely useful for its primary source documents. For a more insider perspective, I suggest skimming through *A Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* by Dennis Ross. Here are some good online sources to consider too:

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Israel-Palestinian%20Negotiations>

Middle East Web:

<http://www.mideastweb.org/history.htm>

Council On Foreign Relations:

http://www.cfr.org/publication/13850/crisis_guide.html (Video)

Dramatis Personae

Abu Ala (Ahmed Qeri), Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council/ Head of PLO Finance Dept.

Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas), Secretary-General of the PLO

Yasir Arafat, Chairman of the PLO

Hassan Asfour, Palestinian Negotiator

Hanan Ashrawi, Palestinian Spokeswoman

Yosi Beilini, Israeli Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs

Jan Egeland, Norwegian Diplomat

Dr. Yair Hirschfeld, Professor of Middle Eastern History at Haifa University

Johan Joergen Holst, Norwegian Foreign Affairs Minister

Terje Larson, Head of Institute for Applied Social Science in Oslo, Norway

Shimon Peres, Israeli Foreign Minister

Dr. Ron Pundik, Israeli Academic

Yitzhak Rabin, Israeli Prime Minister

Uri Savir, Director of the Foreign Ministry

Nabil Shaath, Senior Advisor to Yassir Arafat

Taher Shah, Legal Advisor to the PLO

Yoel Zinger, Legal Counsel for the Israeli Foreign Ministry