



# Fathom Journal

## Issue 21

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## TWENTY FIVE YEARS SINCE OSLO: AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT

JOEL SINGER

*Joel Singer was the Israeli delegation's legal adviser to the Oslo talks. A confidant of Prime Minister Rabin, he negotiated the Oslo Agreement and its implementing agreements with the PLO between 1993 and 1996. This is his candid insider's analysis of what went wrong and what went right. His scrupulous accounting of both the errors made by the Rabin-Peres Government, and those successes of Oslo that have survived every challenge in the last quarter century, suggests a line of march for those who would continue in the spirit of Oslo today.*

### INTRODUCTION

I first became involved in the Oslo Agreement negotiations in May 1993, when the then Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin and then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres invited me to Israel to review a draft of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (the 'DOP') that had been secretly negotiated in Oslo between Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) representatives and two Israeli academics, Professor Yair Hirschfeld and Dr Ron Pundak. In those days, representatives of Israel were negotiating in Washington with a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation that included non-PLO Palestinians under the auspices of the US State Department. That formula was devised in 1991 by then Secretary of State Jim Baker, in the context of the 1991 Madrid conference. When these negotiations ultimately relocated from Madrid to Washington, the same format was kept, except that the Israeli delegation commenced talking separately with the Palestinian team in the Joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation (with a few Jordanian delegation members sitting there passively) about uniquely Palestinian issues, and, primarily discussing ideas for Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza (the 'WBG'). But no real progress was achieved. While Israel knew well that the PLO, in fact, controlled the non-PLO members of the Palestinian team, it pretended that it was talking with non-PLO Palestinians.

Several months after the new left-wing government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres took office in July 1992, the PLO started signaling to the Israeli government through the secret back channel discussions in Oslo that it was prepared to be pragmatic and help in reaching an autonomy agreement in the WBG under conditions that would be acceptable to Israel. I was then practicing law in Washington, having retired as a colonel in the Israel Defense Forces

(IDF) some four years earlier, after serving for 18 years. The reason why Peres and Beilin asked me to review the draft DOP was that they knew I had been the Head of the International Law Department in the IDF and, as such, was responsible, among other things, for maintaining the rule of law in the WBG. I approved every military order published by the military commanders in these areas and every major security measure taken; I spent a significant part of my time defending petitions brought by Palestinians against the Israeli government I before the Israeli Supreme Court; and I drafted resolutions of the Israeli cabinet relating to the WBG. Importantly, I was the representative of the IDF in the Israeli delegation that negotiated an autonomy agreement for the WBG with Egypt and the US following the 1978 Camp David Agreement and, in that role, I developed the detailed Israeli autonomy plan of the right-wing Menachem Begin government. In sum, I was familiar with all the minutiae related to the WBG. And, no less important, I was known as a confidant of Prime Minister Rabin as a result of working with him closely for five years in the 1980s when he was the minister of defence during the Likud-Labour coalition government.

After reviewing the draft, I shared my negative opinion about it with Peres and Beilin. Peres then took me to meet Prime Minister Rabin. I explained what I thought were the main deficiencies in the draft and Rabin agreed completely with me. Yet, instead of concluding that the DOP should be discarded and the Oslo back channel closed, Rabin asked me whether I could fix the draft. When I said 'yes,' Rabin instructed me to do so and then sent me to Oslo, where I spent the next four months working with the PLO on fixing the draft, under Rabin's close supervision, until full agreement was reached and the DOP was initialed in Oslo on 20 August 1993 and then officially signed in Washington on 13 September 1993. Throughout that period, I worked for Rabin and Peres as a volunteer. Once the DOP was signed, however, I accepted Peres's offer to become Legal Advisor to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, left my law firm in Washington, and returned to Israel, where I spent the next three years negotiating all the Oslo implementing agreements, including the Gaza-Jericho Agreement and the Interim Agreement that extended the Gaza autonomy arrangements to the West Bank. Several months after Rabin's assassination in November 1995, I returned to the US and re-joined the law firm I had left three years earlier.

In this article, I am providing my analysis, as a non-political professional who has been deeply involved in developing and negotiating the autonomy concepts of both right-wing (Likud-led) and left-wing (Labour-led) Israeli governments, of what I believe went wrong and what went right in the Oslo Agreement from a vantage point a quarter of a century later. Specifically, I review what I believe were the three main errors and three main successes of Oslo. I limit my review to the errors made by, and successes of, the Rabin-Peres government in the period when I was involved in the negotiations and most of the important decisions made. Also, I only discuss here the successes and failures from the Israeli, not the Palestinian perspective, even though I do not think that this is a zero-sum game; that is, an Israeli failure is not necessarily a Palestinian success and vice versa.

## **PART 1: THE THREE MAIN ERRORS MADE BY THE RABIN-PERES GOVERNMENT**

### *Error 1: Trusting Yasser Arafat to be a willing and capable negotiating partner*

When a leader of one country considers whether the time is ripe to commence peace negotiations with the leader of an enemy, there are two important questions that the leader must consider:

- (1) Is the other leader willing to make the sacrifices necessary to attain peace?
- (2) Is that leader strong enough to make those sacrifices and enforce the deal internally, that is, is he capable?

The answer to both of these questions must be 'yes'. A willing but incapable leader is as bad for reaching a peace treaty as a capable but unwilling leader. And now for a flashback. When Moshe Dayan was the Israeli Foreign Minister back in the late 1970s, he was once asked by an American diplomat: 'Why doesn't Israel agree to talk with Arafat?'

Dayan responded: 'Because he is a terrorist and Israel does not talk with terrorists.'

The American diplomat replied: 'Arafat is no longer a terrorist. There are some factions within the PLO that continue to engage in terrorism but Arafat does not control them.'

'If Arafat does not control his own people,' snapped Dayan, 'this is even a bigger reason for us not to talk with him'.

The main error of Rabin and Peres in deciding to enter into the Oslo Agreement with Arafat in the early 1990s was that they were misled to believe that Arafat had changed since Dayan disqualified him.

First, they concluded that Arafat was capable of making a deal with Israel. For years, they had witnessed Arafat's ability to obstruct any deal that Israel had tried to make with any non-PLO parties regarding the future of the WBG. He blocked the Jordanian option, a plan discussed by several Israeli governments with Jordanian King Hussein by which the West Bank would be returned to Jordan. He foiled the Israeli attempt to negotiate an autonomy plan for the WBG following the 1978 Camp David Framework Agreement, where Egypt agreed to represent the interests of the Palestinians. When, during the 1980s, Israel supported the building of local, non-PLO Palestinian political leadership in the West Bank, these organisations quickly melted away after PLO hatchet men either killed or threatened to kill anyone who dared to talk with Israel. And when, in the early 1990s, a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation was formed following the Madrid Conference to negotiate with Israel, with its Palestinian team composed of carefully selected non-PLO

members, it soon became clear that they too were controlled by Arafat whose rigid instructions to them precluded any real progress in Washington. This led Rabin and Peres to conclude that if Arafat was strong enough to prevent anyone else from making a deal with Israel, then he surely must be capable — perhaps the only one capable — of making a deal with Israel.

Second, the messages that Arafat sent to Israel in Oslo, through the PLO delegation, conveyed that he was prepared to make a historic deal with Israel. The positions the PLO presented in Oslo were clearly more moderate than those presented in Washington by the non-PLO Palestinian team. So much so that, when the Oslo Agreement became public, Arafat and the chief PLO negotiator in Oslo Ahmed Qurei (known as Abu Ala) were harshly criticised by some of the non-PLO Palestinian team members (who were kept in the dark about the Oslo back channel) for ‘giving away the store’ in the negotiations. Thus Rabin and Peres concluded that not only was Arafat capable of making a deal but that he was also willing to do so.

For all of these reasons, Arafat was perceived by Rabin and Peres as the ideal negotiating partner, a hawkish leader who, when circumstances changed, would be prepared to rise to the occasion, take a risk and, like Charles de Gaulle in Algeria and Richard Nixon in China, betray his base of loyal followers and do the unthinkable by reversing his position. Moreover, they believed he possessed enough legitimacy to convince his people to follow him and enough strength to enforce his decisions against any opposition.

Indeed, during the first couple of years following the DOP, Arafat proved himself to be both willing and capable. Again and again, I observed him making hard decisions that demonstrated his resolve to push the peace process forward by making difficult concessions and, quite admirably, bringing along the bulk of the Palestinian people, PLO and non-PLO, religious and secular, Gazans and West Bankers. But, when Hamas and other terrorist organisations started killing Israelis, Arafat proved himself to be unable, and many Israelis said, unwilling to stop terrorism; and when the focus of the negotiations shifted from discussing the autonomy arrangements — which, per definition, addressed transitory, temporary issues — to discussing the post-autonomy, permanent status issues, Arafat’s positions hardened and he became entirely rigid.

It then became clear that Arafat was prepared to make bold choices only with regard to less important issues. When the parties reached the important issues, Arafat constantly sought internal Palestinian consensus. Such a consensus necessarily required that Arafat’s positions on permanent status agreement issues be acceptable to the PLO’s arch enemy Hamas, an organisation that rejected the Oslo Agreement and whose main objective continued to be the destruction of the State of Israel. In other words, rather than De Gaulle, Nixon or even Anwar Sadat, Arafat ultimately ultimately proved himself to be unwilling and incapable.

Arafat's heir, the non-charismatic Mahmoud Abbas (known as Abu Mazen), while perhaps a bit more willing, especially with regard to maintaining security cooperation with Israel, is even less capable of making the kind of historic decisions that are required to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. No wonder, therefore, that the Oslo-based peace process has all but come to a standstill.

*Error 2: Allowing the PLO to be responsible for internal security for Palestinians*

Security in the WBG after Israel occupied these areas in 1967 traditionally consisted of three main components: (1) defending against external threats; (2) maintaining public order relating to regular, non-security offenses of the Palestinian inhabitants; and (3) maintaining internal security; that is, defending against terrorism threats to Israel and Israelis.

When Israel, Egypt and the US negotiated the 1978 Camp David Agreement, they all agreed that, during the planned five-year autonomy period, Israel would continue to be responsible for defending against external threats and that a strong Palestinian Police force would be established to maintain public order. The Camp David Agreement did not address the most difficult question of who would be responsible for maintaining internal security. During the three years of negotiating a detailed, post-Camp David autonomy agreement, Egypt, representing the Palestinian interests, argued that internal security should be seen as part of public order and so the Palestinian Police should be responsible for it. I was then one of the two representatives of the IDF in the Israeli delegation and the position we developed was just the opposite. Internal security should remain the responsibility of Israel because Israel could not trust the fledgling Palestinian Police to protect Israel and Israelis from terrorist threats during the autonomy period. Because the three parties were unable to reach an agreement over a detailed autonomy agreement, this question was never resolved. After Peres and Beilin asked me to review the draft DOP, I realised that it simply copied the Camp David Agreement approach on security and was thus silent on who would be responsible for internal security. Accordingly, when Rabin asked me to fix the DOP, among many other changes I proposed was a clause regarding security during the five-year autonomy period. The clause stated clearly that, during the autonomy period, the Palestinians would only be responsible for public order whereas Israel would be responsible for both defending against external threats and for maintaining internal security. But when I presented the draft to Rabin for approval, Rabin instructed me to change this clause and write instead that the Palestinians would be responsible for public order and internal security of Palestinians and Israel would continue to be responsible for defending against external threats and for internal security of Israelis. In other words, Rabin envisioned a situation in which Israel and the PLO would share the responsibility for internal security, rather than Israel alone being responsible for it.

To clarify, Rabin was not less concerned about security than I was. On the contrary, Rabin repeatedly told me that, if everything would go well with the autonomy, except for the security arrangements, the agreement would fail, whereas if other parts of the DOP would fail, but the security arrangements would work, the agreement would succeed. Instead, Rabin's decision to offer to share the responsibility for internal security with the PLO was based, as I learned later, on two considerations that guided Rabin's thinking.

First, without my knowledge, Rabin had accepted Peres's idea to invite Arafat and the PLO leadership to relocate from Tunisia, where the PLO was then headquartered, to the WBG and take control of the Palestinian Council, which was to be established there pursuant to the DOP. When I first met with Peres to discuss the draft DOP, he did tell me about his idea, but I did not take it seriously, thinking it was too fantastic for Rabin to accept. I was wrong. I assume that what prompted Rabin and Peres to adopt this idea was the same rationale that President Lyndon Johnson used when explaining why he didn't fire J. Edgar Hoover as the FBI Director: 'It's probably better to have him inside the tent pi\*\*ing out, than outside the tent pi\*\*ing in.'

Rabin understood that Arafat would not agree to accept this invitation if he knew he had to rely on Israeli protection, as he would be considered to be a Quisling. So, to make it easier for Arafat to accept Israel's invitation to relocate to the WBG, Rabin agreed he could arrive with an armed Palestinian security force. This didn't constitute a small unit of armed body guards but a large Palestinian military force (called 'Police' in the DOP jargon) that would take responsibility, side by side, with Israel for maintaining internal security for Palestinians. More than anything else in the Oslo Agreement, this DOP provision demonstrates that, unlike Prime Minister Begin, who 15 years earlier invented the autonomy idea as a permanent solution for the WBG, Rabin and Peres genuinely intended the Oslo version of autonomy to be a transitory arrangement that would ultimately lead to the creation of a separate Palestinian political entity.

Second, Rabin believed that Arafat and the PLO would be able to take care of the internal security in the areas under their control (that is, to defend against threats from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian opposition organisations) better than Israel. This belief was not solely based on promises given to Rabin and Peres by senior PLO operatives to effectively crush their opposition forces once they entered the WBG (the planned measures were of Middle Eastern, not European, style). Rabin really believed that the PLO could more effectively fight against Palestinian opposition than Israel. Indeed, in a televised speech given in March 1994, Rabin famously explained that the Palestinian Police would fight the Hamas 'without B'Tselem [an Israeli non-governmental human rights organisation] and without the [Israeli] Supreme Court,' meaning that, unlike the Israeli forces whose activity in the WBG has been closely monitored and

constrained by the Israeli legal system and human rights groups, the Palestinian Police would be able to act without any such checks. But, unfortunately, that conviction was based on the mistaken belief that Arafat was a willing and capable partner.

In fact, however, when the Palestinian opposition commenced launching terrorist attacks against Israelis and Israel, Arafat did nearly nothing to stop them, resulting in the murder of more than 1500 Israelis, as well as more than 7000 Palestinian dead. After the Palestinian violence spiraled into what became known as the Second Intifada (2000-2005), Israeli legitimate self-defence measures resulted ultimately in re-occupation by the IDF of the West Bank, a blow to the Oslo Agreement. To be clear, it was Israel rather than the PLO which suggested Arafat and the PLO leadership relocate to the WBG. Similarly, it was Israel rather than the PLO who proposed the Palestinians be given responsibility for internal security during the autonomy period.



(Joel Singer is seen in this photo in the September 1993 Oslo Agreement signing ceremony on the White House South Lawn, together with Prime Minister Rabin, Foreign Minister Peres, President Bill Clinton and Chairman Yasser Arafat. Courtesy of author.)

Also to be clear, my proposal to Rabin to keep the entire responsibility for internal security in Israeli hands did not result from me being less enthusiastic about peace-making than Rabin. Rather, I thought that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to divide the responsibility for internal security of the same area between two forces, which had been sworn enemies for dozens of years prior to the Oslo Agreement. Moreover, I doubted the PLO could shoulder this responsibility at that time. Sometimes I think to myself that, had Rabin accepted my advice when Oslo was negotiated, the lives of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians would have been spared because Israel could clearly have fought Hamas and the other Palestinian terrorist organisations much better than the PLO did, and the fall of the Gaza Strip into the hands of Hamas in 2007 would have been prevented. If Israel had kept the responsibility for internal security in its hands,



it is very likely that the split of Gaza from the West Bank, and the 'bad blood' that seeped into Israeli and Palestinian societies because of all the Israeli and Palestinian deaths, would have been prevented. If so, Israel and the Palestinians would have had significantly fewer obstacles on their road to peace. Indeed, there is no good answer to the question that many Israelis are asking themselves: What will happen in the West Bank, should Israel withdraw from it as part of a permanent status agreement? Wouldn't Hamas capture it from the PLO within a few days and start attacking Israel's population centers as it did in Gaza in 2007? No wonder Israeli support for making peace with the PLO has all but disappeared.

Rabin was right to say that if security failed the Oslo Agreement would fail, but he was wrong in allowing the Palestinians to be responsible for internal security. And, unfortunately, given the Palestinian failure to maintain internal security during the interim period, I cannot now see how any permanent status agreement, if one is to be concluded, can avoid collapse if Israel does not retain a role in maintaining security in the West Bank as part of the agreement.

*Error 3: Failure to freeze settlement activity during the autonomy period*

Begin's objective in devising the original autonomy plan in 1978 was to perpetuate Israeli rule over the WBG without applying Israeli sovereignty to those areas and simultaneously allowing Jews to settle there freely. For Begin, autonomy was the permanent solution for the WBG. Rabin and Peres adopted Begin's autonomy plan in principle but modified it in a few important respects to fit their different vision of the future of the WBG. One of the main differences was that they viewed autonomy as a transitional arrangement that should lead to creating a separate Palestinian political entity in those areas at the end of the five-year interim period. Such an entity would be controlled by Palestinians and all Israeli settlers would have to be removed from any areas that would be transferred to Palestinian control. Given this vision, Rabin and Peres should have insisted on freezing settlement activity in the WBG during the transitional period.

But Rabin's and Peres's political calculations resulted in a diametrically opposed position. Rabin instructed me to object to the inclusion of any restrictions on settlement activity in the DOP during the five-year transitional period, an objection which the PLO accepted in Oslo. I assume that what motivated Rabin was a desire to secure public support for the DOP. He knew that including a settlement freeze provision in the DOP would infuriate the settlers. Knowing that the settlers lobby was, and still is, the most powerful lobby in Israel, Rabin preferred to fight with the settlers only once, that is, to defer the fight to the end of the five-year period, when the time would come to seek public approval of a permanent status agreement.

In addition, while neither Rabin nor Peres discussed their vision for the permanent status agree-

ment with me, I believe that Rabin did not intend to agree to a full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank at the end of the transitional period. Rather, he planned to demand that some West Bank areas would be incorporated into Israel, based primarily on security considerations. Because of this position, he wanted to continue to settle only those areas that he planned to annex to Israel, while unilaterally freezing settlement activity in all other areas. But he didn't want to reveal his plans in a precise manner in the Oslo Agreement because that would have started a premature fight, with both Palestinians and Israelis, over the ultimate location of the borders. When I presented Rabin's position on settlement activity to the PLO in Oslo, the Palestinian negotiators attempted to explore the inclusion of some restrictions on settlements but I stood firm and they gave up. I am confident that they accepted Rabin's position because they understood Rabin's internal difficulties with regard to a possible settlement freeze, concluded that if they insisted on a freeze there was a real danger that there would be no agreement and, most important, trusted Rabin with regard to his expected ultimate position on settlements and borders in the context of the permanent status agreement. But Rabin's plans and Arafat's gamble to go along with those plans proved shortsighted. Neither envisioned that Rabin would be assassinated two years later, that the Israeli Labour Party headed by Peres would subsequently lose the elections to a Likud Party that would re-introduce Begin's original objectives of using autonomy as a tool for perpetuating Israeli rule over the West Bank. Moreover, neither imagined that the five-year transitional autonomy arrangements would actually last 25 years, (and counting), and that due to the lack of any restrictions on settlement activity in the Oslo Agreement, the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank (excluding Jerusalem) would jump from only 110,000 in 1993 to more than 400,000, and growing, today.

This third error is much worse than the first two because those were reversible. The internal security error was fixed when, after the Second Intifada, the IDF invaded the West Bank in 2002 and has stayed there ever since, working now collaboratively with the Palestinian Police against terrorists, with Israel carrying the overriding responsibility for security. As a result, the number of terrorism casualties have decreased dramatically and, unlike in Gaza, where Hamas still rules, the economic situation in the West Bank has improved significantly. As to the lack of a willing and capable Palestinian leader, Israel can simply wait until such a leader appears, which could enable the resumption of serious peace talks. But the third error, the expansion of the Israeli settlements, appears to be incurable and it is particularly unfortunate because, effectively, it could prevent a Palestinian-Israeli permanent status agreement deal that is based on a two-state solution.

It is difficult now to imagine how any Israeli prime minister, even the most willing, would be politically capable of evacuating 400,000 Jewish settlers from the West Bank. In sum, I often have a feeling of *mea culpa*; if only I had been less successful in Oslo and allowed the Palestinian side

to score a victory on the settlement freeze issue, I could have saved Israel from the default, one-state solution. I certainly have a sense of impending doom in this regard.

## **PART 2: THE THREE MAIN SUCCESSES OF OSLO**

Notwithstanding the fact that Oslo failed to lead to a permanent status agreement to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, contrary to conventional wisdom, it is far from dead. In fact, Oslo has brought about some important successes that appear to have survived all the many challenges and setbacks it has faced.

### *Success 1: Mutual Recognition*

When I first heard about the secret discussions that had been conducted in Oslo with the PLO during my first meeting with Peres back in early 1993, I asked him: 'Should the DOP be finalised in Oslo, what will you do with it? Who will sign it?' Peres responded: 'We will give it to our delegation in Washington and instruct them to sign it and the PLO will give it to the Palestinian delegation in Washington and instruct them to sign it.' 'It won't work,' I said. 'The Israeli delegation in Washington is not a puppet on a string. They will ask: "Where did this agreement come from?" What will you respond? The fact that Israel has been negotiating with the PLO would quickly leak out to the press and how will the Israeli government explain why it agreed to talk with a terrorist organisation?' 'Instead,' I suggested to Peres, 'before completing the DOP, Israel should first negotiate a preliminary agreement with the PLO, under which the PLO will give Israel certain commitments, such as a commitment to stop the Intifada (the First Intifada that erupted in 1987 and was still going on in 1993), a commitment to stop terrorist attacks against Israel, a commitment to recognise Israel, and a commitment to abolish the Palestinian Charter that called for the destruction of Israel'. 'In other words,' I explained, 'the PLO should demonstrate to Israel that it is no longer a terrorist organisation, and, in return, Israel will recognise the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and agree to negotiate with it. Then, and only then, Israel can negotiate the DOP with the PLO without the need to hide it'. Peres did not like my idea. He was concerned that the additional demands from the PLO that I proposed would make it more difficult for Arafat to accept the Oslo Agreement.

But I didn't give up. After Rabin asked me to fix the draft DOP, I explained my idea regarding the need to reach a preliminary mutual recognition agreement with the PLO. Rabin did not reject this idea out of hand. Instead, his response was: 'It's too early.' I understood that his concern was that the idea of an Israeli recognition of the PLO as a negotiating partner was too much for the Israeli public to swallow at that time. Again, I didn't give up. I asked Rabin: 'Can I raise this idea with the PLO as my own personal idea?' Rabin said: 'If you present it as your personal idea, then

it's OK.' I then flew to Oslo and indeed raised my mutual recognition idea with the PLO representatives, emphasising that it was not approved by Peres and Rabin. In the next meeting, Abu Ala, the chief PLO negotiator, informed me that he had briefed Arafat on the mutual recognition idea but Arafat had rejected it. Apparently, Arafat did not like the many obligations that my proposal sought to impose on the PLO. Once more, I did not give up. Ultimately, both Rabin and Arafat accepted my mutual recognition idea but Peres continued to oppose it. After the DOP was completed and initialed in Oslo Peres and I, accompanied by the two Norwegians who hosted the secret Oslo negotiations, Terje Larsen and his wife Mona Yuul, as well as Johan Holst, the Norwegian Foreign Minister, flew together to the US to present the DOP to the then-US Secretary of State, Warren Christopher. He was stunned but very happy to learn about the DOP. By that time, Peres came up with a new idea on how to explain the origin of the DOP while obviating the need for a mutual recognition agreement. Peres thus asked Christopher whether the US would agree to present the Oslo Agreement as a US proposal to the two parties and then host the signing ceremony in Washington. After consulting with President Bill Clinton on the phone, Christopher responded that the US would be happy to host the signing ceremony but that it cannot present the DOP as a US proposal.

Peres was left with no other choice but to allow me to negotiate my personal idea of mutual recognition with the PLO, this time as a formal Israeli proposal. So I flew directly from the US to Oslo, together with Holst, Larsen and Yuul, and meanwhile the PLO representatives and my Israeli colleagues also came to Oslo. We had only a few days remaining to negotiate the mutual recognition agreement before the date set for the signing ceremony in Washington, and we managed to complete the negotiations before it was time to get on the plane and fly to Washington to formally sign the DOP.

Unlike the Oslo Agreement that was intended to be a transitory arrangement and has been more honoured in the breach than in the observance, the mutual recognition agreement was intended to be permanent and it still stands, 25 years later, as an accomplishment that transcends the original purpose for which I conceived it. It represents the beginning of reconciliation between the two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, that share the same geographic location and, even as they are trying to divide the land between them, their close proximity requires that they learn to live together side-by-side. For a hundred years prior to the mutual recognition agreement, the two parties refused to talk with one another. Many Palestinians believed that there is no such thing as a Jewish people, and that Judaism is only a religion; many Palestinians also refused to accept the existence of the State of Israel and referred to it disparagingly as the 'Zionist entity.' Many Israelis, likewise, believed that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people, and considered the Palestinians as Arabs who happened to live in the WBG. Thus, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir was quoted as saying in 1969 that 'there were no such thing as Palestinians'. In the

same vein, the official position of Israel for many years was that the future status of the WBG must be determined through discussions with Jordan and Egypt, the former occupiers of these areas, rather than with Palestinian representatives, let alone the PLO, which Israel considered to be a terrorist organisation, (despite the majority of the Palestinians accepting the PLO as their legitimate representatives).

Similar voices are still heard from time to time on both sides (including in a statement made by Abu Mazen himself to the Palestinian National Council in Ramallah in May 2018 that the Jews are not a people and Judaism is only a religion). Clearly, the mutual recognition agreement, even though it is now a formal part of the Oslo Agreement, needs much more time to override long-held policies and beliefs. But the mutual recognition agreement still stands, notwithstanding Oslo's shortcomings.

### *Success 2: Opening the Door to Better Relations between Israel and Many Arab Countries*

Another success of the Oslo Agreement is that it opened the door to establish or strengthen the relations between Israel and many Arab countries. Prior to the signing of the Oslo Agreement, Israel had managed to formally establish peaceful relations with only one Arab country – Egypt. Oslo brought a dramatic change to Israel's position in the Middle East. For instance, in 1994, just one year after the DOP was signed in Washington, Israel signed a Treaty of Peace with Jordan. The Oslo Agreement also strengthened the Israeli-Egyptian relations, which for many years had been very cold. In fact, almost all of the negotiations between Israel and the PLO over Oslo's implementing agreements took place in Egypt; the Gaza-Jericho Agreement was even signed in Cairo, with the Egyptian president hosting the event, and various Egyptian diplomats and military officers have been very instrumental in helping resolve disagreements between Israel and the PLO over the years. The Oslo Agreement also paved the way for Israel to establish formal relations with other Arab countries. On the way back from Washington to Israel immediately after the signing of the DOP in 1993, we stopped by in Morocco for a first open meeting with Moroccan King Hassan, which quickly led to the establishment of representation offices in both countries. Shortly thereafter, I also negotiated the opening of similar Israeli offices in Tunisia and in Oman. Other Arab countries followed suit in a less formal manner. Finally, in 2002, Saudi Arabia published a its peace initiative that called for an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict and normalisation of relations with Israel by all Arab countries in return for a full Israeli withdrawal from the areas occupied in 1967. The Saudi Initiative was endorsed by the Arab League in 2002 and then was re-endorsed at the 2007 Arab League summit and at the 2017 Arab League summit.

None of these developments could have happened without the Oslo Agreement. And these are just the main developments that are publicly known. Behind the scenes, cooperation between

Israel and many of its Arab neighbours runs deeper than one could have imagined before the Oslo Agreement was signed.

*Success 3: Creating a foundation for a future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement*

While the Oslo Agreement has not yet led to a full-fledged permanent status agreement for the WBG, it has laid a foundation for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement in the future. The progress of peace initiatives in the Middle East must never be monitored with a stopwatch but rather with a calendar which spans many years, perhaps decades. The Middle East peace process does not constantly develop in a linear manner; rather, it progresses by fits and starts where every sudden positive development is followed by a long period of stalemate in which the previous development is slowly digested, allowing time for various political and other forces to play out until new energy is accumulated, which may lead, when ripeness is achieved, to a new sudden positive development. One must recall that, after the 1973 Yom Kippur War ended, a Middle East Peace Conference was convened in Geneva that started the peace process between Israel and Egypt, Syria and Jordan. It took Egypt six years to enter into a peace treaty with Israel. It took Jordan 21 years to do the same, while 45 years have passed without a deal with Syria, although I believe one ultimately will be achieved. The fact that 25 years have already gone by since Oslo should not be a cause for despair. After all, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is much more complicated than the Israeli-Syrian one. Meanwhile, until the situation is ripe for a final Israeli-Palestinian deal, the focus must be on ensuring that the good foundation established in Oslo, which still exists, does not collapse.

The most important accomplishment of Oslo, therefore, is the existence of an autonomous Palestinian leadership in the West Bank that consists of both PLO leaders and local non-PLO leaders, which is handling most of the daily affairs of most of the Palestinians. The Palestinians are building their national infrastructure both from the top down and the bottom up. They are building, among other things, strong security forces that, at least in the West Bank, are cooperating quite successfully with Israeli forces. The basis for this reality was established in Oslo and in the absence of any subsequent permanent status agreement to replace the Oslo Agreement, the interim arrangements established by Oslo continue by default as a stop gap. The Oslo Agreement allows for additional, gradual transfer of authority from Israel to the Palestinians, away from the limelight, without public announcements and before any final agreement is signed. This modular mechanism is a key element of Oslo: it enables the two parties to keep building their relations toward a two-state solution even before they have resolved their most fundamental disagreements. Until the time is ripe for a final deal, the parties should not lose hope but continue to address and overcome the many challenges to the fragile Israeli-Palestinian co-existence. If that can be accomplished, peace will come, even if it takes much longer than expected.

