

## Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord

*By David Makovsky. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1996. 239 pp. with appendices.*

This is a timely and engaging book about the secret peace talks between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). It is a detailed case study of Israeli decision making that produced a sea change in Israeli policy in a period of serious challenges to Israel from Islamic militants within and outside Israeli-controlled areas. Makovsky underscores that a significant factor in Israel's dramatic shift toward the PLO was the latter's promise to control and repress Islamist militants, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The book gets its detailed and highly nuanced portrayal of the Israeli and PLO decisions from a number of interviews with Israeli and PLO officials, Israeli academician, and trained and critical observers of Israeli politics. The author presents a highly complex picture of the dynamics between Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres and the impact of the domestic environment on Rabin's calculations to enter into negotiations with the PLO and Arafat. The sections on Israeli domestic politics and the relationship between Rabin, Peres, and Yossi Beilin are essential for any comprehensive understanding of how Israel is likely to pursue future negotiations with Syria and the PLO in Rabin's absence.

The book starts with a quick survey of the historical background of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although significantly weakened by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the PLO was not destroyed and Israel failed to reduce its support in the occupied areas (p. 6). The intifada not only saved the PLO from political oblivion, it asserted the importance of the inside, nondiaspora Palestinians in the struggle against Israel, which Arafat is currently trying to undo. The American-sponsored Madrid peace talks allowed Arafat to get a foothold in the negotiations as part of the Jordanian delegation. The Shamir government argued that negotiations were limited to "personal autonomy" for the Palestinians, a position the Palestinian delegation flatly rejected.

The second chapter focuses on the background that got the Oslo process started. Initially, the PLO asked the Norwegians to get involved in order to start a dialogue between them (PLO) and Israel. International academic conferences

acted as cover for the meetings between Palestinian and Israeli security specialists such as Yazid Sayegh and Shlomo Gazit. This dialogue was encouraged by the dovish Yossi Beilin, while Peres used his control over the Labor Party apparatus to lift the ban on contacts with the PLO in spite of Rabin's objections. In order to encourage the PLO to continue its participation, Peres added Jericho to Gaza as the land to be ceded to Palestinian control. The choice of Jericho was partially intended to foster a Palestinian confederation with Jordan (p. 35). Rabin was convinced by Peres that the PLO was the only real negotiating partner due to the stalemate of the Washington talks and the unwillingness of the Palestinians in the territories to act independently from the Tunis leadership. Rabin stressed this point to US officials, citing the need to deal with the PLO but dismissing Arafat (p. 41). Arafat, to confirm his commitment to the Oslo channel and reassure Rabin, conceded to exclude Jerusalem from interim self-rule (p. 42).

The third chapter focuses on upgrading talks from discussions between academics to discussions between Israeli and PLO officials. In a meeting between Abu Alaa and Uri Savir to discuss the Sarpborg III Declaration of Principles (DOP), the relative power positions between Israel and the PLO became amply clear. Rabin, through Savir, stressed that Jerusalem was to be left out of interim talks, that international arbitration could be vetoed by Israel, and that Israel refused to give a commitment to recognize that the end of the road of negotiations would lead to a Palestinian state. The PLO's weak bargaining position became even more evident when Rabin took charge of the Oslo track himself. With advice from Joel Singer, an Israeli-American attorney, Rabin refused UN trusteeship over the territories, insisted that discussion over Jerusalem be left out in writing from the DOP, and focused on issues dealing with security—all priorities for Israel (pp. 52–53). Moreover, to reassure Israel, Abu Alaa emphasized that Arafat and the PLO “would be able to handle Hamas because it would not be hampered by civil liberties constraints.” (p. 53). Furthermore, the PLO conceded to Israel jurisdiction over settlements, Israeli visitors, and areas of military facilities, while Israel limited PLO functional control to areas of education, health, welfare, tourism, and taxation, but required that the PLO get Israeli agreement over other civilian functions in which Israel had veto power (p. 55). This part of the book is exceedingly interesting because it seems to highlight a set pattern of Palestinian concessions to Israeli demands while elevating Israeli concerns to the top of the agenda. Although most of these revelations about PLO concessions are common knowledge and are confirmed by Makovsky's thorough research, what is shocking is the manner in which the PLO made these concessions while failing to get something in return, given the sacrifices of the intifada that got the PLO to Oslo.

By far the most intriguing chapter in terms of the relative bargaining leverage that each side had is chapter 4, aptly entitled “Brinkmanship.” Makovsky's analysis is lucid and comprehensive, and the information he provides will be valuable for bargaining theorists for years to come. The crisis came about when the PLO decided to take a tough line similar to what Israel had done when Singer joined the Israeli negotiating team. The Israelis balked at this behavior, stressing the fact that the PLO started from a centrist position and then moved to a hardline position. The Israelis perceived this as contrary to standard negotiating strategy. Hence, a stalemate ensued. Here, Israel used its card of recognizing the PLO in return for PLO concessions. Furthermore, the Israelis used the appearance of American shuttle diplomacy to suggest that an Israeli deal with

Syria could leave Arafat out (p. 65). Feeling the heat and in desperate need for recognition to assure his personal and institution's durability, Arafat conceded to a number of Israeli demands, such as "keeping Jerusalem under Israeli control and outside the jurisdiction of the Palestinians for the entire interim period," continued Israeli control over settlements, and "keeping all options open for the negotiations on a permanent solution" (p. 66). Insightfully, Makovsky points out the differences in priority between the leadership in Tunis and the leadership within the occupied territories. When Abu Mazen told Hanan Ashrawi that "[w]e got strategic political gains, particularly the fact that this agreement is with the PLO and not just a Palestinian delegation," Ashrawi responded that "[i]t's not who makes the agreement, but what's in it" (p. 77). Makovsky's evidence clearly illustrates the PLO's pattern of compromise to assure its survival while forsaking Palestinian rights gained in the intifada.

The next two chapters focus on Israeli domestic politics, and international and regional changes that precipitated the road to Oslo. These two chapters are better suited being placed prior to chapter 2 since they set the stage for the Oslo Accord. Discussing Israeli domestic politics, Makovsky does an excellent job illustrating Rabin's concern over the survival of his coalition government (given a scandal within his governing coalition) and the differences between Peres and Rabin. Rabin's other concerns were the Israeli public and security for individual Israelis in light of Hamas' attacks. While Rabin operated from a world view that perceived force as an instrument for diplomacy, Peres viewed security as an outgrowth of political agreements, enhanced through regional economic and political cooperation. Makovsky presents a nuanced discussion of how the gap between these two differing visions had to be narrowed for the Oslo talks to continue and for working out an agreement with the PLO. The discussion on Beilin—"a true believer" in the peace process—who perceived a role for academicians turned policy analysts, and who reflected the emergence of a younger generation of Israeli politicians who were redefining Zionism away from a total focus on security, is equally enlightening.

In the chapter dealing with international and regional changes, Makovsky notes a very revealing part of Rabin's thinking about the PLO, which he likened to the World Zionist Organization's diminishment in importance once a government was formed in Israel (p. 109). Rabin also believed that Israel had a window of opportunity as a result of the changes taking place after the defeat of Iraq and the new realignment in the Arab world. Rabin perceived "peace was more than an opportunity not to be missed—it was an imperative that Israel needed to seize to stave off threats down the road" (p. 111). Moreover, Rabin realized that the bankrupt PLO could not compete with Hamas. Rabin noted that "in any linear equation, when you compare the PLO to Hamas, Hamas wins. We have seen in the last two to three years, the group that is helping the [Palestinian] population is Hamas" (p. 113). With this realization in mind, Rabin sought to deal with the weakened PLO and play it off against Syria given the weakened and divided Arab negotiating position.

Chapter 7 focuses on Rabin's personal odyssey that led him to Oslo. The self-proclaimed "lone-wolf" would neither have initiated nor garnered the political support to get to Oslo. Rabin had Beilin and Peres nourish the Oslo back channel until he was fully convinced of the possibility of it bearing fruit. Rabin, the consummate strategic thinker, played off one Arab negotiating side against the other, allowing him to extract concessions and sell bilateral agreements to the skeptical Israeli public (p. 120). Furthermore, to assure the continued viability

of the Jordanian option, Rabin met with King Hussein after the Oslo talks became public to assure the Hashemite ruler that Israel was committed to Jordan and that any future Palestinian entity would be linked to Jordan. Although not surprising, Makovsky notes that Rabin knew he had a *carte blanche* in terms of support from the Clinton administration. Dennis Ross admitted that Israel alone could make the choice of negotiating with the PLO; Washington could never have forced it to do so (p. 127).

The last two chapters focus on the lessons of Oslo and provide a conclusion. One of the more interesting points that Makovsky makes is that symbolism will be central in future negotiations with Syria: The Syrians need to reassure Israel with "dramatic gestures" while the Israelis have to insist on a summit between Assad and Rabin [now Netanyahu]. Makovsky applies Arafat and Sadat's defeatist negotiating logic to a far more subtle and incremental negotiator like Assad. Assad is expected by Makovsky to engage in public diplomacy and a clear description of his vision of peace with Israel (pp. 134-135). Here, I believe, is where Makovsky is making the wrong conclusions about Assad. Despite Makovsky's beliefs about Assad, the latter still perceives himself as an Arab nationalist who has a constituency within the Ba'th Party, the Syrian military, and the Syrian public in general that is equally as apprehensive of peace with Israel as the Israeli public is apprehensive of peace with Syria. Although Assad is authoritarian, he does not fully believe he can force peace on his public as King Hussein is doing in Jordan.

This book is a valuable and lucidly written contribution to the study of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, in that it provides considerable information on the back channels and how the negotiations got started. The book's strength lies in the clear, forthright, and dispassionate fashion in which the information is presented. It will be a source of data for international relations theorists focusing on two-level bargaining games and those who study diplomacy. The book also benefits from having a good number of appendices regarding agreements, peace proposals, and the DOP principles. However, it has one shortcoming in that it lacks a subject index.

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