Chapter 7

Conclusion
CONCLUSION

The Oslo Accords has proved to be a potential change in the traditional position between Israel and Palestinian within the context of a long-deferred mutual recognition and reconciliation. With the signing of the Declaration of Principals (DoP) on 13 September 1993 the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue rose to a higher level, from the original unofficial, marginal and intermittent encounters between anti-Zionist Israelis and Leftwing Palestinians. It set the stage for the official negotiation between a Zionist centre-left government and the PLO mainstream. It was Yitzhak Rabin's manoeuvring on the international scene that captured world attention. Originally guided by a long-established strategic perspective, the Prime Minister planned to resolve the protracted conflict with Palestinians. The main force behind the 1993 Israel-PLO accords was his rival-turned-partner Shimon Peres, who seemed to be pushing both Rabin and Arafat towards a peaceful solution.

Therefore, negotiations with the PLO on self-government in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was an initiative, pursued and carried out secretly and was presented to the Israeli public for endorsement. In other words, the government did not follow public opinion but led, shaped and departed from the long-standing opposition of the Labour party towards the PLO.

For the PLO, the negotiations at Oslo enabled the Palestinian to negotiate face-to-face with (initially unofficial, but later official) representative of the state of Israel. For the Israeli government, Oslo had the benefit of allowing Israel to conduct negotiation in secret with the PLO that had the advantage of denial in the initial stages because the interlocutors Yair Hirschfield and Ron Pundak were academics, not Israeli government functionaries. The Oslo talks meant that Israel would be forced to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians thus enabling the latter to position itself take the credit for the Palestinians gains and for the Israeli withdrawal at the expense of the Hamas who could only offer the Palestinians in the territories a continuation of the armed struggle.
Thus, the Rabin-Peres government had to persuade the Israeli public about the advantages of this course of action. The government were tempted to take the path of least resistance and claimed they gave little in the agreements with the adversary and received substantial gains in the form of Palestinian recognition of the historic achievements of Zionism.

The Labour government did not turn down to the level of misrepresentation, but nor did it do much to dispel misunderstanding about intrinsically complicated and problematic agreements. The governments did not clarify the distinction between the immediate reality and the future promise of the agreements, but the fact that in popular usage the declaration was often referred to as peace agreements rather than as an agreed process that will culminate in peace. It reflected the confused and unrealistic expectations that prevailed in the Israeli public.

The Israeli government, however, failed to convince and win over the sceptic public and the risk-averse Rabin determined and agreed to a first-stage transfer to the Palestinian National Authority of Gaza Strip and the city of Jericho. Then, in the second stage, which was initiated just before his assassination several other West Bank cities were transferred to Palestinian rule.

At Oslo, the Israeli side was unable and unwilling to discuss the nature of the final settlement with the Palestinians. This was not only because of the fears of the Rabin-Peres government over domestic pressure and backlash if the Israeli public knew that Oslo would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state, but also because the government itself was divided over the control of the territory.

It was no secret that Rabin and Peres had long been feuding over the leadership of the labour party, occasionally splitting the party into two camps. But during the Oslo negotiations the two old contenders had put their rivalry behind them, coordinating their efforts and concentrating on the peace process. At the same time, one group within the government headed by Rabin wanted to drag out negotiations with the PLO thus ensuring
Israeli control over the territories and a status quo situation for as long as possible. The other headed by Peres felt that withdrawal from most of the occupied territories and the creation of Palestinian state beside Israel would be inevitable and that the five-year transitional period should be used to develop a completely new type of relationship with the Palestinians.

The PLO had much to gain from Oslo (Israeli recognition and withdrawal from territory and eventual statehood) in return for agreeing to recognise Israel. The Israeli government, on the other hand, was taking a serious domestic political risk in moving from the stalled Madrid formula to Oslo since it entailed recognition of the PLO and by extension, recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination. As long as Israel shunned the PLO, it could allow itself to deny the very existence of a Palestinian people and deal with the inhabitants of the territories on a local level and recognizing certain individual rights, but not imbuing the Palestinian with collective rights as a nation. Even the Village Leagues promoted by Israeli military administration was primarily aimed at subverting Palestinian self-determination.

The Oslo Accords departed the emphasis of previous mainstream position over Palestinian 'autonomy' or 'self-rule' and the 'expanded autonomy' or 'autonomy-plus' to describe the concept of the final status. It ensured a transitional autonomy that provided the Palestinians not only with control of their everyday lives with respect to economics, social, educational and governmental affairs with other issues, but it also empowered Palestinian control over territories. The DoP and the May 1994 agreement on the Gaza-Jericho area are partial agreements that provided for the establishment of a different and in many ways semi-sovereign, political and security regime in Gaza Strip and Jericho. This process continued including remaining Palestinian towns on the West Bank except Hebron.

Those Israelis who opposed to the agreements because they felt that Oslo would result in a repartitioning of the land of Israel. Rabin must have understood that once he had affixed his signature to the DoP, he had begun a process of repartitioning historic Palestine. He
may have felt that a Jordan-Palestinian confederation would be the end result and thus he would not depart radically from the legacy of his former colleague, Yigal Allon. Considering the sparsely populated Jordan valley, along the Jordan River and the Israeli-Jordanian border was to be the eastern gateway of Israel and therefore of vital strategic importance. Denying Palestinian control over this area leaves Jordan less vulnerable to Palestinian attempt to interfere with its domestic affairs while preventing territorial contiguity between the Jordan and the future Palestinian state. Another strategic zone is the narrow strip along the border between Gaza Strip and Egypt, which is partly populated by the Israeli Qutif settlements. This zone formed an Israeli wedge between Palestine and Egypt. Without such a wedge, Egypt could interfere more easily in Palestinian affairs. Furthermore, in a worst-case scenario, during a severe international crisis, Egypt could violate the demilitarisation of the Sinai, and use Gaza Strip as a base for an attack on the capital of Israel.

Since Israel was the strongest party, Rabin could dictate the terms in such a way so as to minimise the political risks and hence the process of interim stages was viewed as attractive by the Israeli side. As Shimon Peres later remarked while the proposal lacked the clarity of map, it provides the commitments of a calendar. When the time came to determine from where Israel would withdraw from first, the Gaza Strip—with poverty, refugee camps and population density, was the obvious choice. It was universally viewed in Israel as a burden whose continued control provided questionable security benefits, adjoin as it does a demilitarized Sinai.

When the Palestinian side demanded that they also receive some territory on the West Bank, so that Israel might not be tempted to make Arafat merely "sheriff of Gaza", the City of Jericho was added. Jericho was viewed as the best option for transfer to Palestinian control since there were few Israeli settlements nearby and it was close to Jordan—with which Israel hoped that the infant PNA would set up a confederation. With its administrative headquarters in Jericho, Israel hoped that pressure could be taken off nearby Jerusalem as a potential Palestinian capital. As things turned out, Arafat did not
oblige Israel instead choose set up his headquarter in Gaza city. This was the first step toward an independent homeland.

While both sides agreed to postpone most contentious issues until the final status talks, the initial agreements also dealt with issues and set precedents that have very profound repercussion for the final settlement. While Israel conceded in all the agreements that the basis for a settlement with the Palestinians was UN Security Council 242, which calls for withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967, it did not renounce any claims to controlling parts or all of the occupied territories. Israel also did not undertake to promise any further withdrawal.

The final status negotiations were to resolve the most difficult and critical issues such as Jerusalem questions, right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, water, border and settlements. These issues would be difficult and perhaps impossible to negotiate even if all sides had the will to do so. Therefore both sides assumed that confidence building exercise through settling minor issues would generate enough goodwill and to enable both sides to resolve more difficult problems.

The issues normally cited first and most in Israel often relates to security. Lying behind the concern for security is the assumption that a political settlement is not equivalent to perpetual peace because some old Palestinian grievances could never be fully redressed by a settlement and new ones would inevitably arise in the post-settlement environment. A political settlement then does not preclude the possibility that force might be contemplated or used at some future point. These covered terrorism, security, water.

These essentially contradictory positions allowed Israel to accede to Palestinian demands that Oslo create the conditions for the building of a Palestinian state in the most of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (as well as East Jerusalem) while at the same time, keep its options open for the final settlement. It never openly parted with the concept of a United Eretz Israel or at least overall security control over the territories. Hence, the Oslo accords gave Israel exclusive control over external, defence and foreign relations of the
PNA areas as well as providing Israeli with, in most cases, extraterritorial rights in the areas under nominal control of the PNA. In this way, the Rabin-Peres government was able to portray the Oslo accords in terms of “redeployment” “interim phases” and “Palestinian self-rule” rather than in terms of permanent Israeli withdrawals and the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

The fundamental flaws and ambiguities of Oslo agreements exhibited a different attitude towards the negotiation process of the texts that emerge. It not only because the parties were not yet ready to deal with the most critical issues at stake, but also because Israel not prepared to concede that the Oslo process would eventually lead to a Palestinian state just as the significant segment of the Palestinian side was also reluctant to relinquish its ideological commitments and dream of regaining control of all of historic Palestine. Ambiguity was also useful for the PLO because it could claim that its concessions to Israel were temporary even while establishing political, military, economic and administrative infrastructure of the future Palestinian state. However, the PLO was much clearer as to the only possible and logical outcome of the process: the creation of an independent Palestine. While the unclear nature of the Oslo process unquestionably served very important domestic political goals on both sides, it ensured that both sides would enjoy a high degree of freedom in interpreting the agreement in different ways. However, Oslo and its aftermath has taught all parties that there were no gains from ‘constructive ambiguities’, because the desire to satisfy everyone by wording texts which were subsequently interpreted by the parties collapses on the day of reckoning of the whole peace process.

The Rabin-Peres government and the Palestinian National Authority were on the right direction to resolve all the contentious issues steadily despite some disagreement over certain issues. But the victory of Benjamin Netanyahu in Knesset elections in May 1996 reversed all the principles and guidelines for future negotiations and moved Israel towards a ‘peace-for-peace’ rather than ‘land-for-peace’ formula. This gap between the positions of the Israeli government under Netanyahu and the aspirations of the PLO for statehood proved to be contradictory and even unbridgeable.
The DoP signalled the willingness of Israel and the Palestinian leadership towards an historic recognition and a willingness to seek a negotiated political settlement. This was largely facilitated by their desire to defer complex issues to the final status negotiations when both sides would have made significant gains and developed mutual trust and confidence. However, domestic opposition to the peace process prevented both the leadership from accelerating the process. Frequent bout of terrorism faced by Israeli public and prolongation of the occupation and its negative consequences for the Palestinians significantly eroded popular support for the peace process. The sudden death of Rabin and the subsequent electoral victory of Netanyahu, proved to be fatal blows to the Oslo process from which it never seriously recovered.