

# **The Rise and Fall of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process**

**Hamed Mousavi**

Assistant Professor of Regional Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran  
(hamedmousavi@ut.ac.ir)

(Received: Sep. 9, 2018 Accepted: Jan. 2, 2019)

## **Abstract**

This article examines the rise and fall of the Peace Process and questions the reason for which the United States of America was successful in bringing the two sides to the negotiating table during the 1990s. It investigates the reason for which the process ultimately failed, as well as the reason for which Washington was unsuccessful in restarting the peace process in the past decade. It is argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the Arab states' most important ally, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)'s decision to back Saddam Hussein during the First Persian Gulf War, and the rise of Islamic movements in the occupied territories were the main reasons for which the PLO decided to negotiate with Israel. The subsequent Peace Process was a major political, economic and public image success for Washington and Tel-Aviv, while it was damaging to the Palestinian cause. Not only did the PLO recognize Israel and the Zionist movement, but it also ceded most of the West Bank in the process. Finally, it is argued that after the collapse of the process during the early 2000s, Donald Trump has attempted to restart the negotiations, but has failed thus far due to the inexistence of strong leaders in both Palestinian and Israeli sides, the rise of Hamas as a resistance movement, and the disenchantment of the Palestinian people with the Peace Process.

**Keywords:** Israeli foreign policy, Middle East Peace Process, Palestinian Intifada, US Foreign Policy

## 1. Introduction

In the early years of the 1990s, a US sponsored peace process was projected between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Although the Palestinian-Israeli conflict had been going on for over four decades, until that time, no real effort was made to bridge the gap between the two sides by the United States. During those four decades of conflict, various proposals were presented by different parties; however, neither proposal was materialized into settlements between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The urge for a peace settlement by the international community was intensified after the 1967 invasion of the West Bank and Gaza Strip by Israel. However, even then, no progress was made in resolving the conflict, mainly due to US-Israeli intransigence. The stalemate was further intensified throughout the Nixon administration, during which Henry Kissinger developed a strategy to keep the situation as is, based on the belief that any compromise by the United States and its ally Israel was in effect a Soviet victory in the region (Hadar, 2006).

During the early 90s, the United States sponsored the Madrid Conference, which served as a prelude to the Oslo Accords, which supposedly “resolved” the long conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Various questions arise concerning the US sponsored Peace Process. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict had been going on for several decades; why was the US successful in bringing the two sides to the negotiating table at this specific time? How did the peace process progress and why did it ultimately fail? Finally, why has the United States been unsuccessful in restarting the peace process in the past decade? These important and at the same time complicated questions can only be answered with a detailed analytical look at the US-sponsored peace process and the

way in which it progressed. This article attempts to outline this process during the course of which the above questions can be answered. It begins with a theoretical framework, then examines at the Oslo Process: how it came into existence, how it evolved, how it affected the Palestinian cause and how it was eventually demised. The article then outlines the US efforts to resuscitate the Peace Process, an endeavor that has failed thus far.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In the *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz creates his 'neorealist' theory of international relations by isolating structural variables and ignoring state level variables. By distinguishing structure and process, he is able to build a theory that is both parsimonious and powerful. His theory is based on the assumption that the position of units in the system is not the property of the units themselves, but rather the property of the system, and thus by studying the system one can find regularities in state behavior. Another logical conclusion to this assumption is that the structure only changes when the arrangement of its parts changes, and not through any change in process level variables. It is important not to misread Waltz: he does not claim that all unit level variables, such as culture, personality of leaders, ideology, etc. are unimportant; rather, he explains that these factors are irrelevant to a structural theory. As a result, by isolating the third image from the first and second images, Waltz attempts to explain the constraints imposed on the units by the structure. Therefore, the third image is influencing and affecting the first two images, not the other way round. A well-devised structural theory will explain the way in which states with vastly different unit-level variables will behave similarly due to the impositions of the structure (Waltz, 1979, pp. 79-101).

Under anarchy, states can never be certain of the intentions of other states and as a result, they must rely only on their own capabilities to ensure their survival. This is the reason for which cooperation is very limited in the international arena. Even in cases where cooperation brings absolute gains to the parties involved, it might be avoided because of concern for relative gains, meaning that states will look at their gains in comparison with others. The main issue then becomes who gains the most from cooperation, and since states do not necessarily know how the increased capability of other states might be used, they do not cooperate in the first place (Waltz, 1979, pp. 194-195).

According to Waltz's theory, dependence brings vulnerability; this is the reason for which great powers tend to rely on their internal resources for their needs and in order to increase their power. The result of this anarchic environment is the similar behavior of units and the balance of power politics. States will engage in balancing behavior regardless of their internal politics and ideologies, since anarchy as a structural constraint forces them to act in this manner. States will also imitate competitors and great powers in order to increase their own power and ensure their survival. In addition, Waltz asserts that interdependence creates closeness and contact, which subsequently raises the possibility of conflict. He claims that interdependence decreases as the number of great powers diminishes. Based on this proposition, he concludes that the bipolar order of the Cold War, with less interdependence, is more stable than the multipolar system that existed before the Cold War (Waltz, 1979, pp. 129-169).

Waltz holds on to a number of Realism's core principles and this is why his theory can be considered a subset of the Realist tradition. The theory's main assumption is that unlike domestic politics, the state of international affairs is one of anarchy. His

theory also takes states as the main actors of this arena, and assumes that they rely on self-help to ensure their survival. According to neorealism, balance of power is the main driving force of states' foreign policy. This article uses a neorealist theoretical framework to analyze how Israeli and American foreign policies were primarily based on balance of power considerations. Thus, while factors such as cultures, ideologies and identities of decision makers might have played a minor role, the main driver of Israeli policy toward the Peace Process was to maximize its interests and minimize the benefits that Palestinians received from the agreement.

### **3. The Peace Process**

#### **3.1. The Road to Oslo:**

On October 30, 1991, a peace conference was convened in Madrid, Spain, under the joint supervision of the US and the USSR, which was already in the process of being demised. The conference, which was architected by James Baker III, the foreign minister of the United States at the time, was based on previous US initiatives for "solving" the Arab-Israeli conflict, namely the two track approach, which separated the Palestinian and Arab issues, the self government concept and the transitional arrangements concept, which was derived by the Camp David Accords of 1978 (Aruri, 2003). In these negotiations, the Palestinians were not represented independently, but rather as part of a "Jordanian-Palestinian" negotiating team that was not to include any formal members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In reality, however the Palestinians consulted with the PLO in Tunis in every step throughout the way (Shlaim, 2014).

The plan set by Baker was a multinational conference with a

symbolic role, which would be followed by bilateral negotiations between the conflicting parties, which would constitute the real phase of the negotiations. In this scenario, Israel would deal with each of its Arab neighbors separately. Israel had long aspired for this, since it would allow the country to deal with each Arab state separately, compared to the long-held Arab position that wanted Israel to negotiate and resolve the issue with the Arab countries as a whole. This united approach would obviously put the Arab countries in a stronger position and thus leave Israel with less room for maneuver. In effect, the framework for negotiations set by the conference was a victory for the US and Israel (Aruri, 2003). The multiple rounds of negotiations led to insignificant results mostly due to Israeli intransigence; even Washington started to dislike the hardliner Yitzhak Shamir, head of the Likud Party and Israel's prime minister at the time (Shlaim, 2014). In fact, Shamir later revealed in a controversial interview with the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv*, that he had no intention to solve the issues through negotiations: "What is this talk about 'political settlements'? I would have carried on autonomy talks for ten years, and meanwhile we would have reached half a million people in Judea and Samaria" (Shamir, 1992, Jun. 26) (Israel calls the West Bank "Judea and Samaria" to emphasize its so-called "historic claim" to the land). Even the installment of the "dovish" Labor government led by Yitzhak Rabin in June 1992 did not truly help the statement in the bilateral negotiations, since Israel wanted peace and recognition without relinquishing any significant piece of land that it had illegally occupied since 1967.

After fifteen months and several rounds of Arab-Israeli bilateral negotiations, it seemed clear to Israel that it had to find a new approach to advance its maximalist objectives. Thus, Israel started unofficial and highly secretive negotiations with the PLO at Oslo

by the end of January 1993. In reality, the confidential Oslo negotiations were running parallel to formal negotiations in Washington under the 'Madrid Framework'. Fourteen sessions of negotiations were held through an eight-month period. These negotiations led to the signing of 'The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements', also known as 'The Oslo Accord' on September 13, 1993 on the South Lawn of the White House by Rabin and Arafat.

The Oslo Accord was a relatively short document describing the process to reach "peace", and contained insignificant information on the substance of the so-called peace. In effect, it was an agreement to reach an agreement. By signing the accord, the PLO formally recognized the state of Israel, giving away its most valued card in the negotiating table, without any recognition of the suffering brought upon the Palestinians by the Israelis since the establishment of the state of Israel. Ignoring the original suffering and injustice imposed on Palestinians during the past century by the Zionists, as well as the strong support and encouragement of Washington were the key basis of all American "peace initiatives" during this long and brutal conflict. The Oslo Peace Accord achieved this for the last time. As this paper will demonstrate, the Palestinians had clearly given in while receiving almost nothing in return. Under the agreement, the PLO agreed to a five-year "transitional period" without any clear and objective commitments by Israel concerning the details of the permanent settlement. This was in contrast to what the Palestinians were negotiating at Washington under the Madrid Framework, thus making the Oslo Accord a rather vague agreement that kept silent on most of the important issues such as refugees and illegal settlements (Aruri, 2003).

Another highly important aspect of the Oslo Accord was that it changed the status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip from

'Occupied Territory' into 'Disputed Territory'. After the occupation of the West Bank by Israel in 1967, the international community, including the United States, issued the Security Council Resolution 242, which declared the occupied territories as illegal and called on Israel to withdraw from the territories it had occupied during the war (Aruri, 2003). The United States however changed its position from 1971 with the rise of Henry Kissinger in the Nixon administration. Kissinger drafted a US policy that viewed Israeli withdrawal as a victory by the USSR even though until then, the US had insisted that Israel should withdraw from the territories. The international community, however, apart from the US and Israel, maintained that Israel should withdraw from the territories it had occupied by force during the 1967 war. With the signing of the Oslo Accord, the Palestinians and subsequently the entire international community had accepted the viewpoint that instead of full withdrawal, Israel could negotiate which parts of the territories it would surrender. Selling the US-Israeli viewpoint, which had been held in isolation for over two decades to the international community was a significant success (Chomsky, 1999).

Washington was also successful in pressuring the Palestinians to accept that all the serious matters of contestation, including sovereignty, the refugee issue, Jerusalem and the illegal settlement activities would not be negotiated in the interim phase, and would only be discussed in the permanent settlement, which was supposedly to come in several years, but in fact never came. In effect, the Oslo Accord was a clear victory for both Washington and Israel, and a defeat for the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Arafat who was enthusiastic during the signing ceremony in Washington, naively declared that the Palestinians had a new friend in the White House. If certain Palestinians had any doubts concerning the intentions of Washington and Tel-Aviv, they were completely



resolved with what took place during the interim phase of the “Peace Process”.

### **3.2. The Interim Phase and the Signing of Oslo II:**

After the signing of the Oslo Accords, two committees with joint Israeli-Palestinian participation were established to negotiate the implementation of the accords. These negotiations ultimately led to the signing of the Cairo Agreement in February of 1994 and the signing of the “Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip,” also known as Oslo II, in September of 1995. While on the surface, the terms of these agreements were “negotiated” by the two parties, in reality, Israel mostly had its own way, mainly due to the fact noted earlier that Arafat had already played all his cards and in effect, he could not be useful to Israelis anymore. On the other hand, Arafat, who had signed an accord that gave Israel the upper hand in almost every aspect, had no other choice but to play along.

According to the Oslo II agreement, the West Bank would be divided into three zones: areas A, B and C:

- Area A, comprising around 3% of the total area of the West Bank or about 1% of historic Palestine: In this area, the Palestinian Authority (PA) would be fully responsible for internal security, public order and civil affairs.
- Area B comprising around 27% of the total area of the West Bank or about 7% of historic Palestine: In this area, Israel would be in charge of “Security” while the PA would be responsible for civil affairs
- Area C comprising of around 70% of the total area of the West Bank: Israel would enjoy complete authority (security, public order, civil affairs, etc.) (Aruri, 2003).

Concerning the Gaza Strip, Israel has never been much interested in annexing it, since it is a small piece of land with a highly concentrated Palestinian population. If we take the agreements on the Gaza strip into consideration, the breakdown of the three zones is as follows (please refer to map number 1):

- Area A (Palestinian civil and military control): 17% of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, equivalent to around 4.5% of historic Palestine
- Area B (Palestinian civil control, Israeli military and security control): 24% of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, equivalent to around 6% of historic Palestine
- Area C (Absolute Israeli control): 59% of the total area of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Media Education Foundation, 2004).

Map number 1: Oslo II Agreement



Picture 1: Jhally & Ratzkoff (2004)

Thus, according to Oslo II, the PA was assigned only 4.5% of historic Palestine, mainly consisting of large towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which had frustrated Israeli attempts at “keeping the order in place”. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were giving considerable casualties suppressing the first Palestinian Intifada, which went on from 1987 to 1993. The Israeli government had come to the conclusion that it would be much more cost effective both financially and in terms of human lives to let the PA administer these troublesome areas. In the area B, which consisted mostly of Palestinian villages as well as Israeli settlements, the PA was merely responsible for civic duties while Israel held a firm military control. Area C, which consisted of most of the West Bank including all borders, strategic areas such as hilltops, and most of the settlements, were given entirely to Israel. Israel would also be responsible for all borders crossing in order to keep “external security”, or to put the Palestinians under siege whenever it deemed appropriate, which actually happened rather often.

Reading into the agreements reveals further injustice to the Palestinians. According to the Cairo Agreement of May 4, 1994, Israel was exempted from any legal responsibility for acts it had committed during the 27 years of its illegal and violent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip. The many Palestinian families, who were prosecuted, unlawfully confined, tortured, extradited and killed and all Palestinian landowners whose land was illegally confiscated by Israel were denied the right to redress any grievances towards Israel. According to the agreement, they could only address them to the PA, making the PA responsible for any financial liabilities.

Concerning the vital water resources, Oslo II specified, “both sides agree to coordinate the management of water and sewage

resources and systems in the West Bank during the interim period,” (Chomsky, 1999, p. 911). However in reality, Israel kept most of the water resources for the Jewish settlements and its own use, in effect destroying the agriculture sector of the Palestinians. In the Gaza strip, which was home to one million Palestinians and less than 5 thousand Jewish settlements. Israel retained one third of the land and most of the water resources (Shlaim, 2001, p. 530). In the West Bank, the London Financial Times reported,

Nothing symbolizes the inequality of water consumption more than the fresh green lawns, irrigated flower beds, blooming gardens and swimming pools of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, while nearby Palestinian villages are denied the right to drill wells and have running water one day every few weeks, polluted by sewage, so that men have to drive to towns to fill up containers with water (Ozanne & Gardner, 1995, p. 3).

In addition, Israel judges were given “veto powers over any Palestinian legislation “that could jeopardize major Israeli interests” (Chomsky, 1996, p. 619). All this, along with the frequent road and border closure brought economic despair as well as deep humiliation for the Palestinians.

According to the Oslo II Agreement, the PA would have to inform Israel in case of any planned large scale public events or “mass gatherings”. The PA was also required to inform the Israelis if any Palestinian was admitted to the hospital with wounds from any kind of weapons (Aruri, 2003:97). In fact, the PA’s security and intelligence forces were to assist Israel in suppressing and destroying the “Terrorist Infrastructure” (Mahle, 2005) or to destroy the resistance to Israel’s brutal and illegal occupation of

Palestinian territory. In reality, the PA was obligated to assist the neo-colonialist objectives of the Zionist entity. Whenever a Palestinian militant from Hamas or Islamic Jihad would attack Israel, Israel would hold the PA responsible for failing to “clamp down on the terrorists”.

The most important point of the Oslo II Agreements was the fact that it was impossible for the Palestinians to establish a state with even a small degree of independence and sovereignty. As illustrated in the map, the cities under PA jurisdiction were separated from each other, encircled by ‘Jewish Exclusive Roads’ and most importantly under the siege of the IDF. Plainly put, they were at the mercy of the Israelis. Each act of defiance by the Palestinians would result in sever Israeli punishment, devastating the Palestinian people and economy. US and Israeli motives in the peace process were well summarized by veteran Israeli journalist, Danny Rubinstein, who said at the onset of the Madrid Peace Conference that the U.S. and Israel sought “autonomy as in a POW camp, where the prisoners are ‘autonomous’ to cook their meals without interference and to organize cultural events” (Chomsky, 1996, p. 612).

### 3.3. A Major Success for US and Israel:

From the US-Israeli perspective, the ordeal was a significant success politically, economically, and concerning the US and Israel’s public image. In terms of Israel’s long-term strategic goals, the Oslo Accords were what Israel had sought since its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. From the onset of the occupation, Israel sought the annexation of the West Bank to Israel. This would not only increase Israel’s size, but would also substantially grow its strategic depth. The Israeli government

emphasized its “historic right” to the West Bank, which was called Judea and Samara by the Israeli government. The problem, however, lay in the fact that one million Palestinians lived there. If Israel would annex the West Bank entirely, it would have to introduce a million Palestinians as Israeli citizens. This would undermine one of the key ideologies behind the establishment of the state of Israel, which stresses Jewish majority. The idea of Zionism was to create a homeland for the Jewish people, not a homeland for the Jewish and the “gentiles”. This is why since the early days of the occupation, there were different ideas about incorporating certain parts of the West Bank as opposed to the entire West Bank into Israel. These plans mostly differed on the sections of the West Bank that were to be annexed to Israel. For example, the famous Allon Plan proposed by the Israeli Defense Minister Yigal Allon after the 1967 War wanted to keep the banks of the Jordan River for Israel due to its strategic importance, whereas Moshe Dayan’s plan intended to annex the mountain ridge that runs down the middle of the West Bank. According to the Allon Plan, which was presented to King Hussein of Jordan, Israel would keep 33% of the West Bank and would give the rest back to Jordan; however, the plan was rejected by King Hussein (Shlaim, 2001, p. 263).

There have never been serious plans for the annexation of the entire West Bank, primarily due to the “demographic problem” stated above. During different Israeli administrations, plans to annex various portions of the West Bank were proposed. In 1988, which was the peak of the U.S.-Israeli refusal to recognize any Palestinian rights or the PLO, Yizhak Rabin called for Israeli control of 40% of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, speaking for the Labor Party and reiterating its basic stand from 1968 with minor variations (Chomsky, 1999, p. 898). The Oslo Accords were in fact

better than all previous Israeli plans, Israel held Military control of 97% of the West Bank (with over 70% of exclusive control). Not only was this agreement better than what Israel had wished, but technically speaking, the PLO had given its consent to it.

The peace process was a significant success for the Israeli economy; it brought renewed investment since the country was now more secure and stable. It also opened many markets to Israeli companies that were closed before. By 1995, Israel had a GDP growth rate of 7.1% (one of the highest among Western economies at the time). The GDP per capita of Israel reached sixteen thousand dollars per year, almost the same as Great Britain. Since 1990, the economy had grown by 40% while export had grown by 54% (Aruri, 2003, p. 104). During the same period, the economy in the Palestinian territories was on the decline. This decline was mainly due to frequent blockades imposed by Israel. According to a report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1996, unemployment had nearly doubled in the territories since the implementation of the Oslo Accords, and per capita income had shrunk 20%, while investment had halved (Chomsky, 1999, p. 927). The UN Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO) reported that in the 1992-1996 period “real per capita GDP and per capita GNP have declined by 23.6 per cent and 38.8 per cent respectively” (UNSCO, 1996).

**Table 1:** The population of Israeli Settlers in the Occupied West Bank from 1989-2000. Source: Hareuveni, 2010.

Year	Settler Population in the West Bank
1989	69,800
1990	78,600
1991	90,300
1992	101,100
1993	111,600
1994	122,700
1995	133,200
1996	142,700
1997	154,400
1998	163,300
1999	177,411
2000	192,976
2019	622,670 *

\* Source for 2019: B'Tselem, 2019

After the signing of the Oslo Accords, not only did Israel not stop building illegal settlements, but it also intensified its settlement activities in the occupied territories. In 1992, there were nearly one hundred thousand illegal Jewish settlers in the occupied territories; by 2000, this number had nearly doubled, reaching one hundred ninety thousand. While the world was led to believe that the peace process was progressing, in fact Israel was following its old expansionist policies with more vigor. The initiation of new settlement projects increased by 40% from 1993 to 1995 (Chomsky, 1999, p. 903). The United States of America, aware of this policy, turned a blind eye toward it, sometimes even assisting



in the process. For example, it gave a ten billion dollar low interest loan to Israel in 1991 to “settle” the flow of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union into Israel, some of whom were illegally settled in the occupied territories. As illustrated in Table 1, Israel’s settlement activities made a mockery of the “peace process”. By 2017, there were over half a million Israeli settlers living in the West Bank.

The two Oslo Accords were a considerable public diplomacy success for the United States and Israel. Before these accords, the US’s protégé in the region was identified by many people around the world with war, destruction and the violation of human rights. Through the “Peace Process,” however, the US and Israel were able to project a peaceful image of a countries that are willing to make “painful compromises” for the sake of peace. The position of Israel in the US public substantially declined after the end of the Cold War. In fact, the American public came to see Israel more as a liability than an asset with each passing day. A *Wall Street Journal* – NBC public opinion poll in 1991 found that only 44 percent of Americans favored giving aid to Israel, while the same poll found that 58 percent of Americans favored giving aid to the Soviet Union (Aruri, 2003, p. 45).

Typical headlines in Western media after the signing of the Oslo Accord were the following: “Israel agrees to quit West Bank.”, “Israel Ends Jews’ Biblical Claim on the West Bank”, “Rabin’s historic trade with Arabs”, “A historic compromise” and “Israelis find a painful peace”. A *Reuters* chronology described September 28, 1995, the day of the signing of the Oslo II Accords, as the “Day of Awe”, the day in which “Israel and the PLO sign agreement extending Palestinian rule *to most* of West Bank” [emphasis added] (Chomsky, 1999, p. 915). In fact, Israel had kept most of the West

Bank for itself. The Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was made a larger than life figure “promoting peace” especially after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with Yasir Arafat and Shimon Peres in 1994. Before the signing and enactment of the peace process, Israel was constantly blamed for war mongering and violations of human rights, especially during the 1982 war on Lebanon and the first Palestinian Intifada. The Oslo Peace Process gave Israel a veil to continue the same policies albeit with a completely different image.

The strategic, political and economic benefits the Israelis were able to attain by engaging in the Peace Process are in line with the neorealist theory discussed earlier, which emphasizes that states seek to maximize their interests, particularly in terms of security and power, in their foreign policies. Based on such a framework, constructivist explanations for why Israel decided “to seek peace” can be rejected. For example, Jonathan Rynhold argues that a cultural shift towards post-materialism that led to the rise of a new generation of Israeli Left was the primary driving factor in the country’s decision to pursue a negotiated settlement. This rise resulted in the success of the Labor party in the 1992 elections, giving the new Left an opportunity to change the country’s foreign policy (Rynhold, 2007). Furthermore, Michael Barnett argues that Israel’s embrace of the Oslo Accords was due to the construction of a new Israeli liberal identity that was tied to the peace process, and that the fall of the process has been due to an “identity crisis in Israeli politics” (Barnett, 1999). The weakness of such approaches is that they completely disregard the substantive benefits in terms of security and power that the Israelis were able to achieve by signing the Oslo Accords. In contrast, neo-realism helps understand the way in which the Peace Process allowed the US and Israel to shift the balance of power in the region to their favor.

### **3.4. How did the US prevail and why did the PLO accept such terms?**

The first question that would arise after reviewing the Oslo Accords would be ‘Why would the PLO, as the legal representative of the Palestinian people, accept such terms?’ To find the answer to this question, we must use a neorealist framework and look at the balance of power in the time the Oslo Peace Accords were signed. Different underlying elements explain the reason for which the US was in a position to force the recognition and implementation of the US-Israeli demands on the PLO, the most important of which are listed below:

- 1- The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War: The demise of the Soviet Union marked the end of a bipolar world order and the start of a ‘New World Order’ as coined by President Bush the father, in which the United States of America was the sole undisputed superpower of the world. With the end of the reign of the USSR, the Arabs lost their traditional ally, making them more vulnerable to US pressure. In fact, various Arab states tried hard to improve their relations with the world’s only remaining superpower after the end of the Cold War. This gave Washington unprecedented leverage to forward its policies in the Middle East (Primakov, 2009; Kolander, 2016; Elbahtimy, 2019).
- 2- The Persian Gulf War of 1991: Saddam’s Hussein decision to invade Kuwait on August 2, 1990 had long-lasting consequences for the Middle East. The Arab states headed by Saudi Arabia were suddenly vulnerable and needed external assistance to cage the wolf they had helped raise. This gave Washington the green light to massively expand its influence in a strategic area of the world. Washington developed a massive army in the region that did not intend to leave the region. Within a short period,

Washington became the undisputed master of the region with most Arab states indebted to the American capital for the service it had provided them. The PLO did significant damage to the Palestinian cause by openly supporting Saddam Hussein. In the words of Anthony Lewis, a columnist for the *New York Times*, “Over many decades Palestinian nationalism has made crucial political mistake. This (supporting Saddam in the Persian Gulf War) may be the worst” [parenthesis added] (Lewis, 1991). This policy isolated the PLO from almost the entire international community, including most Arab countries. President George Bush correctly stated that the PLO had “backed the wrong horse”. After the end of the war, the PLO was in a much weaker position, so much that it would depart with many Palestinian rights in order to appease the United States (Aruri, 2003).

- 3- Arab world’s diminishing solidarity with Palestinians: The Persian Gulf War in effect shattered the Arab Unity, the PLO and Jordan had backed Iraq while most Arab countries were vehemently opposed to Saddam’s expansionist policies. This division helped marginalize the Palestinian issue among Arab nations and focus on the war that had begun between Arab states. Kuwait used the opportunity to expel several hundred thousand Palestinians from the country, while Saudi Arabia floated the idea of a Palestinian state in Jordan. Egypt and Syria backed away from their earlier position of the need for an international conference, instead agreeing to a “regional” conference, which was much more “welcomed” by Washington (Aruri, 2003, p. 73). These policies only led to the punishment of the Palestinian people, who subsequently lost most of their national rights during the course of the subsequent “negotiations.”

4- The rise of Islamic movements and the decline of the PLO's power in the territories: The first Palestinian Intifada was neither planned nor controlled by the PLO, even though the PLO took much credit for it. Once the Intifada had spread to most of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the PLO strived to bring it under its own control. However, an Islamic movement was rising, especially in the Gaza Strip. During the first Intifada, the PLO witnessed the emergence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad as resistance movements towards Israeli occupation; these two movements were able to win the hearts and minds of Palestinians. As much as this was a threat to US-Israeli interest, it was also a threat to the PLO, which, had been the "sole representative of the Palestinian people" for decades. The Oslo Process would give the PLO the chance to firmly establish its control before any of these new groups became too powerful.

To summarize, the PLO was in a rather weak position in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War and the demise of the Soviet Union. Having lost most of the support that it previously had from the Arab world, and with rising Palestinian competitors, it decided to salvage the interests of the organization at the cost of the Palestinian people. During the same period, the US was in a very powerful position in the world stage, particularly in the Middle East. The time was set for Washington to move in and use the window of opportunity to establish long-held US-Israeli plans before the strategic balance in the Middle East might change. Based on neorealism, these conditions allowed the United States to essentially change the balance of power in favor of itself and Israel, while the Palestinians, due to their weakness, were forced to make numerous concessions. According to Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, Rabin believed that the PLO was "on the ropes" and was therefore highly likely to drop a number of its main principles and demands

(Shlaim, 2001, p. 515). Edward Said, the late Palestinian professor at Columbia University correctly observed: “All secret deals between a very strong and a very weak partner necessarily involve concessions hidden in embarrassment by the latter” (Said, 1995).

#### **4. The Demise of the Peace Process**

##### **4.1. The Decline of the Peace Process:**

The start of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 marked the end of the “Peace Process”. The Palestinian people had lost all hope in the peace process while Israel failed to adhere to its very short list of obligations. In reality, Israel did not even pull back from the small pieces of scattered land that was assigned to the Palestinians (mainly in ‘Area B’) (Gelvin, 2005, pp. 238-239). Israel’s main excuses for not fulfilling its obligations were “terrorist attacks” by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, referring to suicide bombings by these organizations, which highly opposed Arafat’s concessions in the peace processes. Washington’s policy from 1995 to 2000 was to pressure and blackmail Arafat to clamp down on Islamic movements in the territories.

On October 23, 1998, the Wye River Memorandum was signed between Arafat and the new hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In return for a little increase to Areas A and B, specified in Oslo II (An increase of 12% to Area B and 1% to Area A of the West Bank or 3% and 0.22% of Historic Palestine), Arafat agreed to CIA “supervision” for the security of the territories. In return for small pieces of land, most of which were never actually handed over to the Palestinians, like other US-Israeli promises that were never materialized, Washington and Tel-Aviv assumed responsibility to control and crush any form of resistance

to US-Israeli aggressions. Not only had the Palestinians lost most of their rights during the several decades of occupation, but also any form of resistance to this occupation was illegal and subject to punishment under the watchful eyes of the CIA, which effectively took control of the territories (Aruri, 2003, pp. 117-124). The Palestinians could no longer tolerate Arafat's concessions; he was losing his support base in Palestine. By the time of the Camp David talks in 2000, which were organized to salvage the dying peace process, it seemed clear even to the PLO that they had been played like a pawn in US-Israeli plans. Thus, the talks failed; in the end, however the "even handed" US president and US media put all the blame on Arafat for "rejecting a generous Israeli peace offer".

On September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon made a highly provocative visit to al-Haram al-Sharif, accompanied by more than a 1,000 bodyguards and police officers. The Palestinian people had seen their houses being bulldozed to the ground, their lands confiscated by the Israelis, their children murdered by IDF troops and their human rights violated by Israelis and the PA's security apparatus (under the supervision of the CIA). Jewish settlements and roads had expanded on territories that the entire international community considered as Palestinian land. Furthermore, anyone who dared to resist US-Israeli plans would be deemed as terrorists and subsequently "punished". This was the situation of the Palestinians during a period when a so-called "Peace" was under "Process". The Palestinians, therefore, only needed a provocation to explode into a defiant mood unparalleled in Palestinian history. Sharon, who was well aware of this situation, started the second Intifada, which helped him secure the post of Prime Minister in February of 2001. Whenever Israelis fear Palestinian attacks, especially suicide bombings, they tend to vote more towards the political Right party, usually resulting in an increase in the seats of hawkish parties, such

as the Likud (Berrebi and Klor, 2006). Being appointed the prime minister of Israel, Sharon had a chance to solve the “Palestinian Problem” for the last time using his own strategy, which he had preached for nearly five decades.

#### **4.2. Change in Israeli Strategy:**

The election of Ariel Sharon to the post of Prime Minister marked a change in Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. To understand the mentality of Sharon, it is worth reviewing the way in which he came to prominence in the Israeli society when he was young. On the night of October 14, 1953, a commando unit named ‘Unit 101’ was ordered to launch an attack on a Jordanian village named Qibya. Israel alleged that several members of the village had crossed the Israeli border and killed an Israeli woman. Unit 101 was commanded by the young ambitious major Ariel (“Arik”) Sharon. The unit blew up 45 houses killing sixty-nine civilians, two thirds of them women and children. Sharon claimed that they were unaware that anyone was inside the houses. The UN observer who visited the site the day after the event told it differently: “One story was repeated time after time: the bullet splintered door, the body sprawled across the threshold, indicating that the inhabitants had been forced by heavy fire to stay inside until their homes were blown up over them” (Hutchinson, 1956). After the incident, Sharon was very happy with what he had done (Shlaim, 2001, pp. 91-92). Years later, he wrote in his autobiography that David Ben Gurion, the Israeli Prime minister at the time, congratulated him after the attacks, telling him: “It doesn’t make any real difference...what will be said about Kibbiya [Qibya] around the world. The important thing is how it will be looked at here in this region. This is going to give us the possibility of living here” (Shlaim, 2014, p. 97).



The event gives an encapsulated account on how Sharon, and later on Netanyahu, thought Israel should deal with the Arab people, especially the Palestinians. In their view, Israel needed an Iron fist to achieve its objectives. Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the leader of the Zionist Revisionist movement and the ideological father of Likud leaders, such as Sharon and Netanyahu, wrote in his highly important article titled the 'Iron Wall':

“I do not mean to assert that no agreement what so ever is possible with the Arabs of the Land of Israel. But a voluntary agreement is just not possible. As long as the Arabs preserve a gleam of hope that they will succeed in getting rid of us, nothing in the world can cause them to relinquish this hope, precisely because they are not a rabble but a living people. And a living people will be ready to yield on such fateful issues only when they have *given up all hope* of getting rid of the alien settlers” (emphasis added), (Jabotinsky, 1959).

The Iron Wall has been Israel's policy for its entire history regardless of which party was in power. Now that Likud was in power, however, this policy was to be pursued with more vigor. In the run up to the 2015 elections, for example, Netanyahu declared that if he were re-elected as Prime Minister, he would make sure there would be no Palestinian state (Ravid, 2015). Following this ideology, Netanyahu has given very little attention to diplomacy, international regulations or even Israel's public image abroad, as Sharon had quoted Ben Gurion in his autobiography, “It doesn't make any real difference...what will be said about Kibbiya [Qibya] around the world.” In the years following Likud's seize of power, the Palestinians were prosecuted and killed more than ever before.

## 5. The Trump Administrations' Policy

By the time Donald Trump took control of the White House, it was entirely clear that the new US-Israeli policy had failed, making their position weaker than when they had decided to change policies. At the same time, their opponents had gained strength mainly due to miscalculations by both Washington and Tel-Aviv. By now, Hamas and Hezbollah were both strengthened, while the PA had been severely weakened. It was under these new circumstances that Trump sought a new approach that was based on the Peace Process started by the Clinton Administration. The new US President appointed Jared Kushner, his son in law, to lead these efforts and declared in July 2018 that the "New Peace Plan" will be the "most detailed ever" and included a "robust" economic component (Tibon, 2018). A closer look at the Arab-Israeli conflict, however, makes such plans unrealistic. Several factors can be stated, which work against the new US sponsored peace initiative and will ultimately lead to its demise:

1- Lack of strong leaders on both sides: One of the reasons the Oslo Peace Process was "successful" for a few years before its demise was that the leaders of the Palestinians and Israelis were strong figures internally. The Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was a life-long veteran of politics and the military. The majority of the Israeli public did not view his negotiations and concessions as undermining Israeli security. Rabin was the IDF's Chief of Military Staff (the highest-ranking military official in Israel) at the time of the 1967 war and had spent many years in the army, during which he was considered a hawk by many. On the other side of the table was Arafat, a charismatic Palestinian leader whom Palestinians had identified with the Palestinian struggle for over twenty years. This is not true today.

Netanyahu and Likud are weak internally and perhaps more important, based on Revisionist Zionist ideology, they are fundamentally opposed to a two state solution. In addition, Mahmoud Abbas does not have the legitimacy or power to lead negotiations, especially considering the fact that the Palestinians have become increasingly frustrated with Fatah. This is the reason for which Abbas has so far resisted the pressures of the Trump administration in restarting negotiations. The Palestinian leader wants the PA and Fatah to keep the little credibility they have in the eyes of the Palestinian people.

- 2- The rise of Hamas: The unexpected victory of Hamas in January 2006 caused a rift in the Palestinian government, which had always been in the hands of Fatah loyalists. Frictions between Fatah and Hamas grew to a point that in the summer of 2007, the Gaza Strip was taken over by Hamas. In the new US-sponsored peace initiative under Trump, Hamas is not even invited to the talks. This means that the legal representative of the Palestinian people, as well the de facto ruler of the Gaza strip is totally excluded from the talks, therefore undermining the entire peace process.
- 3- Disillusioned Palestinians: after decades of long and unproductive peace processes, Palestinians, and the Arab world in general, are completely disenchanted with regards to Washington's objectives in the peace process. Many Palestinians have lost hope to achieve real peace using US initiatives. This was not true in the early years of the Oslo Peace Process, where a substantial population of Palestinians believed in the peace process. With the final collapse of the Oslo Accords, any initiative led by Washington was regarded with suspicion by the Palestinians. In reality, the Oslo Peace Process

tarnished Washington's image as an "Honest Broker." America's standing in the Middle East was also greatly damaged following its disastrous foreign policy after 9/11.

At the same time, the demise of the peace process has ushered in a new era in which certain Arab countries, particularly members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have begun covert and overt cooperation with Israel. These changes led Netanyahu to declare in 2017, "what is actually happening with [the Arab states] has never happened in our history, even when we signed agreements. Cooperation between Israel and Arab states exists in various ways and different levels, though it still isn't visible above the surface, there is much more than during any other period in the history of Israel. This is a tremendous change" (Ahren, 2017). In 2018, Israel-Saudi relations developed to a point where the Israelis sold 250 million dollars of "sophisticated spy systems" to the Saudis (Helmhold, 2018).

The warming of relations between members of the GCC and Israel has allowed them to better coordinate their efforts at pressuring Washington to adopt increasingly hawkish policies toward Iran. At the same time, these ties are empowering Washington and Tel-Aviv to announce the "deal of the century" which unilaterally, and without consultation or negotiations with the Palestinians, seeks to "solve" the crisis by adopting Israel's security, political and economic needs and completely rejecting the political rights of Palestinians. Washington's new strategy is essentially trying to use economic incentives, after years of economic pressure, to entice the Palestinians to forgo their aspirations to form a state of their own. However, the three factors cited above greatly reduce the chances for the success of such an initiative.

## 6. Conclusion

The Middle East Peace Process has to be analyzed and understood within the larger framework of Israel's expansionist policies based on Zionist ideologies. The stance of the United States has almost consistently been in support of Israeli interests in the region, even if in certain instances, this support has been a strategic liability for the US (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). This has been especially true after the Six Day War of 1967 when the relationship between the two countries gradually became a strategic partnership. As a result, the US foreign policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict has almost entirely been focused on advancing Israeli objectives.

The peace process, which was introduced in the early 1990s, was essentially a new method in the continuation of the policy of territorial expansion and domination over the Palestinian population. To achieve this policy, the US and Israel have used different tactics during different periods to reach the same goal. As noted earlier, the expansion of illegal settlements in Palestinian lands increased during the peace process. With the turn of the century, the policy of negotiating in order to reach "peace", which was starting to fail, was changed to a more overt and violent approach to the problem based on idealistic mentalities. However, the new policy made a bad situation worse, forcing Washington and Tel-Aviv to reconsider their policy and to adopt their old policy based on a façade of negotiations, the objective that the Trump administration is yearning for. A disenchanted and divided Palestinian population, as well as a right-wing hawkish Israeli government, however, have made a return to the old policy difficult for Washington. As a result, the Peace Process has effectively died. In fact, even Mahmoud Abbas, one of the architects of the Oslo Accords, told the UN General Assembly in September 2015 that

the Palestinians will “no longer continue to be bound” by the Oslo Accords (Beaumont, 2015). As the situation worsens in the occupied territories with each passing day, and with conservative Arab regimes secretly building relationships with Israel, the US under Trump will try to unilaterally “solve” the crisis by imposing a deal strongly favorable to Israel, an initiative that is bound to lead to further violence and instability.

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