

How the Occupation of Palestine Was Dressed Up as Peace

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The “peace process” between Israel and the Palestinians that began with the signing of accords in Oslo, Norway, 20 years ago this month was widely celebrated at the time as an important step toward establishing a “viable Palestinian state.”

But in the two decades since, the Palestinian economy has been further decimated, Israel has expanded its Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank, and the other Occupied Territory of Gaza has been subjected to a suffocating siege and regular military strikes. In short, conditions for Palestinians have worsened, and Israel’s colonial domination has been enhanced. How did this happen?

Ali Abunimah, co-founder of [ElectronicIntifada.net](#) and author of [One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse](#), spoke with Eric Ruder, of [socialistworker.org](#) (where this interview first appeared), about the consequences of a “peace process” that has brought more ethnic cleansing, more apartheid and more war.

Eric Ruder (ER): Twenty years after the Oslo Accords were signed, it seems like we’re further than ever from seeing anything close to self-determination for Palestine. What happened during those 20 years that led in the opposite direction from Oslo’s supposed aim of creating a viable Palestinian state?

Ali Abunimah (AA): I think it’s  important to understand that the Oslo process was never intended to end in self-determination and liberation for the Palestinians. What it became was a structure of permanent Israeli control and domination under the fig leaf of the so-called “peace process.” But it’s very important to understand that was built into it from the start.

At the time, Israeli Prime Minister [Yitzhak Rabin](#) was very clear in telling his associates that he never intended this to end in a Palestinian state. At the same time, the Oslo Accords were accompanied by a series of economic agreements that transformed Israel’s domination of the Palestinian economy – the forced dependency that Palestinians were

made to live under by Israel – and turned it into a legitimate agreement.

So for the last 20 years, not only do you have Palestinians living under escalating Israeli colonization and settlements in the West Bank and under a horrifying blockade and siege in Gaza, but you have Israeli companies and a small Palestinian capitalist elite profiting from this arrangement and doing their best to perpetuate and prolong the situation.

That is really the legacy of Oslo. The Oslo process is never going to lead to anything different. If we really want to talk about self-determination and liberation for Palestinians, then it's going to come from outside Oslo. It's going to have to be against Oslo. [Ed. more on Oslo Accords by Adam Hanieh, [Bullet No. 832](#).]

ER: Would you say that there was a sort of diplomatic Machiavellianism on the part of Israeli officials from the beginning? To publicly hold out the promise of “a viable Palestinian state” while always intending to block such an outcome?

AA: I have to give the Israelis credit here, because they never said this would end in a Palestinian state. They never said they would remove settlements. They never said they would stop building settlements. So in a sense, the Israelis were the only ones who were clear about what they wouldn't do – and they were good to their word.

They kept building settlements, they kept taking land, and it was everyone else either deceiving themselves or trying to deceive others by suggesting that the “peace process” would bring “sovereignty” or “independence.” The Israelis were never saying that. And so there had to be a lot of self-deception and a lot of deception by others.

What the Israelis were intent on – and for them, this was the real benefit of Oslo – was that the political process took the pressure off them and placed it on the Palestinian side.

Let's go back to the beginning, namely the exchange of letters 20 years ago that started the whole process in motion and set the stage for the famous handshake on September 13, 1993, on the White House lawn between Yitzhak Rabin and [Yasser Arafat](#) of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), with Bill Clinton smiling behind them.

Arafat sent a detailed letter to Rabin saying that the PLO recognizes Israel's right to exist in peace and security, that Palestinians renounce all forms of “terrorism” and “violence,” and not only do they renounce what Arafat agreed to call “terrorism,” but Arafat promises to discipline Palestinians and prevent any from engaging in any kind of resistance to Israel. That was in his letter.

Rabin's letter in response was one single sentence: “In response to your letter of September 9, 1993, I wish to confirm to you that, in light of the PLO commitments included in your letter, the Government of Israel has decided to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process.”

That's all he agreed to. He didn't renounce violence. He didn't renounce settlements. He didn't recognize any Palestinian rights. He didn't recognize the right of Palestinians to exist in peace and security. So from the very beginning, the dynamic where Israel gives up nothing, and in fact continues to take, while Palestinians act as the enforcers of the occupation, the glove on the Israeli hand, was built in from the start.

The impact this had on the Palestinian struggle was devastating, because now, all of a sudden, it's Palestinians enforcing the occupation, cracking down on resistance. So the Israelis were very successful through Oslo in placing a buffer between themselves and their victims. That buffer was the Palestinian Authority.

That was clearly what Israel had wanted for many years: Palestinians could have some kind of formal "autonomy," some kind of "self-management," so that Israel didn't have to bear the cost or the trouble or the international diplomatic embarrassment of being an occupier. But nothing fundamental about the relationship was changed.

ER: In addition to outsourcing the policing of Palestinian resistance to the PLO, Israel won a further victory after the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. Hamas won those elections, and that became the reason for the division of the Palestinian national movement that persists to this day. Can you talk about how this unfolded?

AA: The division between Hamas and Fatah existed before the 2006 elections. It dated from the post-Oslo 1990s when Arafat and the Palestinian Authority engaged in brutal crackdowns against Hamas and others at the behest of Israel and the USA. This was always the condition: you don't get your aid, you don't get a little bit more territory to control, you don't get the tax money collected on your behalf by Israel, unless you go after these Palestinian organizations and dismantle the "infrastructure of terror," as it was called. So all that was built in from the start.

During the [1996 elections](#), the so-called international community helped to stack the vote so that Fatah would win. Huge amounts of money were poured in to shore up Fatah and so on. So when the 2006 elections came around, they wanted to play the same game. Hamas' surprise victory really threw a wrench into the whole thing, but Israel played it to their advantage by besieging Gaza, and that division has become a permanent feature.

Twenty years after Oslo, not only don't Palestinians have a state in the West Bank and Gaza, but they are actually physically divided – even though the Oslo Accords state that the West Bank and Gaza have to be treated as a single territorial unit.

If you read some of the [Electronic Intifada blog by Rana Baker](#), one of several young writers in Gaza, she has written some beautiful essays about her first visit to the West Bank – at 22 years old! For her, reaching the West Bank was like an unimaginable dream. That's the reality 20 years after Oslo. The Palestinians are more physically divided from each other than ever before, and that suits Israel just fine.

ER: How does Palestine fit into the wave of uprisings in the Arab world since 2011?

AA: If the uprisings that have happened so far are any guide, I hope they do not come to Palestine. Despite all the hopes and heroic sacrifices people have made, Egypt is back *behind* square one since the military coup, Tunisia is in trouble, Libya and Syria are collapsing or collapsed states, so it's not a very good result.

Of course, as people say, these are ongoing struggles. What we have learned from 2011 is that revolution is impossible or at least very difficult when you have the overwhelming power of the United States and its regional vassals determined to prevent any kind of democratic sovereignty in Arab countries. So all of these revolutions have had to reckon with really vicious and powerful counter-revolutions. "

But as far as Palestine is concerned, I would say the basic structure of the conflict there, which is Zionist settler colonialism and Palestinian resistance, really hasn't changed, and it's not going to change. In other words, the dynamics in Palestine are really pretty durable, and that's not going to change until there is an effective end to this kind of settler-colonialism.

But you know it is undoubtedly true that Israel is strengthened by a regional order in which the United States and client regimes are dominant. As long as that's the case, Israel does have an advantage. If that changes, then yes, it could change the balance in Palestine as well.

ER: U.S. officials talk constantly of "restarting," "returning to" or "resurrecting" the "peace process." But as you've explained, this has resulted in one setback after another for Palestinians. Does this leave you feeling a sense of despair, or are you hopeful that the movement can break out of the straitjacket of "peace process" diplomacy?

AA: I'm sober and I'm realistic about the scale of the catastrophes that have been visited on Palestinians, not just in the past 20 years since Oslo, but in the past 65 years. All of that is there – we can't ignore it – but I've never been in despair. I think you would be in despair if you believed in Oslo – if you believed that this was the way to salvation. I would be in despair if I believed in Bill Clinton's or Barak Obama's or George Bush's so-called "peace process." But I never did.

What gives me hope is that despite intense efforts to make the Palestinian struggle go away, to make Palestinians forget about their rights, to extract from Palestinian leaders by hook or by crook an agreement to surrender basic rights, none of that has worked.

The Palestinians have not won, but they have not been defeated, and that's really important. I do think that Oslo, in a sense, broke the Palestinian national movement, and what's left of it in Ramallah has no future. The question now for the new generation is what to do, how to replace it, and I think that there are new movements coming up, which is reflected in a [recent article by two women](#) in Palestine – Linah Alsaafin and Budour Youssef Hassan – that addresses the role of young people in Palestine and mobilizing at the grassroots. This work is not always glamorous, it's not always high-profile work in the media, but they're organizing themselves.

I think the global solidarity in which Palestinians in the diaspora are very involved, such as the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, is also an important part of it. Let's not forget that part of Oslo's damaging legacy was to redefine, in effect, the Palestinian people as the residents of the West Bank and Gaza – to reduce the Palestinian people to those living in the 1967 territories.

Those written out of the script of Oslo are the Palestinians in the diaspora living in refugee camps or elsewhere outside Palestine, and the Palestinians in the 1948 areas that became Israel. They were deleted from the equation of Oslo, and to a large extent, there was demoralization in these communities. I think what's happening now is that they're becoming remobilized – in particular, young Palestinians in the diaspora and young Palestinians in the 1948 areas.

So I have a lot of hope, and I think ideologically – and this is very important – the idea of Zionism has really been exposed. It can't be defended in democratic and liberal terms, and I think that that's a very powerful thing. Yes, Israel has military might, it has economic might,

it has the backing of the United States. But ideologically, Zionism is indefensible in the 21st century, and I think that gives us really unstoppable momentum. •

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