
Reflections on the Making of a Tenuous Peace⁽¹⁾

by

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The late Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs

Recently a true miracle took place on the White House lawn. That famous handshake following Prime Minister Rabin's powerful announcement that we had seen enough of blood and pain stirred the imagination of a whole world. The drama of human history was there for all to see. Yet it seemed almost unreal, beyond belief. How did it come about? I cannot provide all the answers but I shall try to share what I perceive to be some key elements.

Geopolitical Transformation of the Middle East Conflict

Let me start by delineating the geopolitical changes which had occurred and which altered the parameters of the Middle East conflict. What I have to observe here is neither original nor penetrating, but we shall fail to understand complexity unless we take into account the obvious. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union removed a principal actor in the Middle East drama. Some Middle East clients had lost their primary patron, and some clients could no longer exact concessions from their superpower patrons with refer-

ence to the bipolar struggle for position and influence. Moscow was much more interested in obtaining American assistance and support than in challenging American interests in an area of major attention and concern.

At the same time, the passing of the bipolar world opened new opportunities and provided new incentives for direct diplomatic action. Close alignment with great power patrons was no longer required for purposes of containing or overcoming countervailing alignments by adversaries. However, the new flexibility of the international arena was threatened by uncertainty and turmoil, particularly in the East. The rise of aggressive ethnically based nationalism, as well as religiously based fundamentalism in the Caucasus and Central Asia, threatened to link post-Soviet instability and conflict with the turbulence of the Middle East. Time compressed into windows of opportunity.

The Gulf War had changed the texture and atmosphere of the Middle East. The impotence of armed aggression, the unmasking of apparent might, the management of Israeli restraint, and the demonstration of American preponderance shattered many of the myths which sustained the old order. At the same time, it became clear that the reality behind the appearances could transform victory into upheaval, that the tension between the bazaars and the seats of government had grown, and that fundamentalist rejection was nurtured by the shame of defeat. The PLO was in some sense closer to reality than established governments. But in the wake of "Desert Storm" it found itself in an isolated position and caught in a deep financial crisis. Palestinians were made the culprits, evicted and abandoned, when those more fortunate returned to Kuwait. Many Palestinians must have concluded that they had to take direct charge of their own affairs—and not entrust their future and fate to the unpredictable intervention of others.

The Madrid process had created a new framework for the prosecution of the peace process. The juxtaposition of the

bilateral tracks and the multilateral working groups focusing on functional cooperation across the political lines of conflict projected a novel perspective of transforming, rather than for merely managing the Middle East conflict. At the same time the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian delegations in Washington demonstrated the limits of indirect negotiation. Increasingly, the key actors in the Israeli leadership came to the conclusion that they would be better off dealing with the PLO up front than confronting them as back seat drivers. I think it went beyond mere consideration of convenience and effectiveness. In international relations you seldom get to choose your enemy, and it is with your enemy that you make peace. Furthermore, it was no longer true that the Israeli interest lay in weakening the PLO, since a weakened PLO could promote the rise of more fundamentalist and rejectionist forces which would broaden and deepen the conflict. Hence, it became wise to strengthen the PLO by creating the framework for a commitment to cooperative endeavor, precisely when the PLO was facing problems and challenges.

It is difficult to know from the outside. But in the many conversations we had at the margins of the secret negotiations which led to agreement on the Declaration of Principles, we explored such perspectives. What may have started off as tenuous ideas matured and crystallized through the process of negotiation. And we asked questions: could it be that the Israelis and the Palestinians could become partners in forging a coalition of the moderate, secular, and modernizing forces of the Middle East, providing a bulwark against fundamentalism and fanaticism; that they could become partners in development rather than opponents in dismemberment; that they could harness their unique human talents for the humane purpose of regional construction? Idealistic, perhaps, and fraught with the dangers of collision with enduring conflict and strife. But nevertheless, the kind of perspective which provides purpose and coherence to complex negotiations. Sitting down to sort out the naughty details of cohabitation can give rise to the flight of

imagination and vision, and it is only when the conflictual issues of the moment are linked with the promise of a more harmonious future that they become amenable to resolution. Negotiations are not predicated on mutual trust, but they must create such trust to succeed.

The next factor I want to emphasize is the election of a Labor government in Israel with a mandate to seek peace. Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres came into office unencumbered by the stalemate which had developed through the dynamic of Likud policies, and Arab reactions thereto.

The principal actors in the Middle East drama had passed the stage when they could look with equanimity at the prospect of continued conflict. If they were to hand over to the next generation a different reality than that which shaped the first four decades of Israel's existence, they had to act immediately. Hence, in addition to the geopolitical opening, there was a biological compulsion.

The Process of Direct and Quiet Negotiations

Having outlined the geopolitical parameters, let me turn to the nature of the negotiations which took place. Many myths and misunderstandings have arisen in the incomplete renditions of the media, particularly in view of their propensity to create human interest stories and focus on one or two of the people involved, rather than on the structure and process of the negotiations.

The negotiations were conducted by highly skilled and professional negotiators. They were very tough and complex negotiations conducted over a period of some eight months. We may distinguish between two phases of negotiations. The first phase—which could be denoted the exploratory phase—lasted from January through April 1993 and involved three rounds of talks. The Israeli team comprised academics with political access and confidence, and the talks were conducted under the rule of deniability if the story should leak or the talks end in failure. The second phase involved authorized negotia-

tions which went on from May through August through eleven rounds of negotiations.

The negotiations were conducted in secrecy in order to prevent opposition from blocking progress before the potential success had been demonstrated. Secrecy permitted the participants to perform as real negotiators rather than mere spokesmen for opposing interests.

The negotiations were informal in the sense that they did not involve all the paraphernalia of modern conference diplomacy. An attempt was made to provide a setting conducive to human contact, conviviality and solidarity of effort. Hence, they often took place in the countryside—in small resorts rather than city hotels—providing opportunities for walks, joint leisure, and meals.

The talks were conducted in English thereby dispensing with interpretation which takes time and creates distance between the parties.

Furthermore, the talks involved a small group of highly professional and skilled people who developed a degree of collegiality and common commitment to a common end, which enabled the participants to become friends and view the problems of either side as shared problems. Both sides recognized that they were engaged in two interacting levels of negotiations: the direct negotiations between the parties at the tables in Norway, and the negotiations between the parties and their respective masters at home. The interplay of the two levels sometimes caused frustration, irritation, and suspicion, but it also contributed to confidence building through a process of intense interaction and mutual understanding of a shared predicament.

The negotiations in the Norwegian channel constituted direct negotiations between the parties. Norway's principal role

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was that of facilitation. The results of direct negotiation of controversial issues are likely to command greater legitimacy and imply stronger commitment than those of negotiations which are brokered by a great power and carry the imprint of that power. In the event of controversy such brokered agreements may be viewed more as the result of the efforts of the broker than of the parties themselves, and they therefore imply greater possibilities and temptation for the parties to abandon agreements in the face of opposition.

As a partner in the negotiations, Norway had no special interests of her own to promote or defend. Great power mediation often injects third party interests into international negotiations. Throughout the process Norway stuck to the original concept of assisting the two sides, providing logistical arrangements, and communicating between the rounds, since there were no direct telephone links possible between Israel and the PLO in Tunis. In some phases we could quietly suggest compromise formulas and mediate between positions which diverged more than compromise could sustain. In the end game we were able to act as a go-between, in order to finalize the agreement. It should be emphasized that the agreement is first and foremost the responsibility and result of the parties themselves.

The Norwegian facilitation was essentially carried out by a team of four people with different, but complimentary functions, and assisted by a few staff members of FAFO—the organization of applied social science research of the Norwegian trade union movement. The key words here are teamwork and division of labor.

Why Norway?

We may ask at this point: Why did the parties choose Norway as a facilitator? I think the reasons are fourfold. First, Norway enjoyed the confidence of both sides. The Israeli Labor Party and the Norwegian Labor Party had a long history of close cooperation. At the same time, Norwegian Labor gov-

ernments had built up a relationship of trust with the PLO, ever since Norwegian troops were deployed to southern Lebanon as part of the UNIFIL operation in the late 1970's. The Norwegian Labor Party emphasized the need for balanced relations with the parties to the Middle East conflict. Second, Norwegians had established a network of personal contacts and relations at the political level through academic studies involving evaluation of Norwegian aid projects in Gaza and the West Bank, and subsequently, a broadly based quality of living study covering the same areas, which was completed in the spring of 1993. This provided an important data base for the multilateral working group on refugees, in the framework of the Madrid process.² Third, Norway was able to allocate a small group of dedicated and qualified people to the task without involving a large bureaucratic organization with the attendant risks of leaks and special pleading. Fourth, Norway in many ways constituted an unlikely and unexpected partner in a project to seek peace in the Middle East—although it has a long involvement in peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and development aid in the area. Hence, the prospect of maintaining secrecy may have appeared brighter than in many alternative cases.

The Style of Negotiations

I have already observed that the negotiations were conducted in a highly professional manner. The two phases of negotiations for the Declaration of Principles, the DOP, involved a number of crises. The same applies to the third phase involving negotiations for the political bases for mutual recognition. Several of the crises were undoubtedly real, involving give-and-take over issues of vital interest to the parties involved. Sometimes the crises were tactically induced—part of a style of negotiations involving brinkmanship and theater designed to show resolve, demonstrate constraints, and induce the adversary to give way in order to reach agreement. This Middle Eastern style of bargaining which united the partners was alien,

and sometimes nerve-wrecking, to the level-headed and even-tempered Norwegian raised in a tradition of consensus oriented bargaining. However, the juxtaposition of different styles, traditions of bargaining behavior, and the attraction of opposites probably contributed to the cultural productivity of the chosen partnership.

A basic issue which hovered over the negotiations until the endgame was whether the parties were committed to cut consensus and make a choice in favor of agreement, and to deliver on such commitments in a credible and persuasive manner. Decades of reciprocal suspicion and antagonistic behavior added to the salience of the issue of mutual trust. From the point of view of both sides, the leadership of the other seemed to be composed of unlikely peacemakers, and both sides knew that they would have a hard time persuading skeptical publics that the role was for real. It was a matter of transforming images.

Clearly, the direct involvement of the parties in intensive negotiations for a prolonged period generated perceptions of commitment and historical opportunity. However, the masters in Jerusalem and Tunis seemed at times to want assurances that the intense and highly personalized negotiations did not cause the negotiators to confuse their own commitment to reach an agreement with a realistic assessment of the intentions of the adversary. The negotiators, on the other hand, seemed to be aware of such dangers and tended for that reason to seek reassurance in a manner which sometimes even may have generated mutual suspicion, and thereby increased the need for reassurance in a self-confirming spiral of reciprocal fear.

Here, we attempted as facilitators to break the spiral by communicating tempered and considered assessments in writing to both sides. The objective was not to persuade but to contribute a detached judgment based on direct contact with the leadership on both sides through meetings and telephone conversation. As Norwegian Foreign Minister, I paid official visits to Israel in June and to Tunisia in July of 1993, thus obtaining

opportunities for prolonged discussions with Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat. Two members of the Norwegian team, Mona Juul and Terje Rød Larsen, were dispatched to Jerusalem from Tunisia as we jointly extended the official visit in Tunisia to include a private vacation within reach of the PLO headquarters. Before the endgame phase, confidence building became essential. The parties were moving towards a historical breakthrough which involved breaking consensus and eliciting opposition but which at the same time involved opening up for the possibility of constructing a new and broader consensus with the former adversary -- of forming a new partnership.

The historical drama of the Middle East conflict had defied decades of attempts to move it towards resolution. History has not been ripe, but the format of negotiations and the interventionist propensities of third party mediators may also have contributed to past failures. Hence, we tried to design a format which would bring the conflict down to a human scale and create a human atmosphere. We paid careful attention to be at the parties' disposal, but never to impose our role on the parties. The venues for negotiation and the associated logistics were also chosen from this perspective. The negotiators were invited to my house for briefings, discussions, and consultations in connection with the different rounds of negotiations prior to and/or after the end of the negotiations - sometimes just for coffee or drinks, sometimes for a meal. The purpose was to project the harmony and warmth of a private home and to enhance our facilitation.

The negotiations took place in different venues in southern Norway. In the summer of 1993 a couple of informal meetings of the parties took place in my daughter's flat in Paris. The end game of the DOP negotiations was conducted from the official guest house of the Swedish government in Stockholm for some eight hours during the night of August 17th with Mr. Peres in an adjoining room (he was in Sweden for an official visit) and with Mr. Arafat and Mr. Abu Ala on the line from Tunis. I was asked to be the go-between on the

outstanding issues. The night of August 19th the DOP was initiated by the parties and witnessed by the undersigned in a secret ceremony in the official guest house of the Norwegian government in Oslo. We met again with Shimon Peres in the official guest house of the Finnish government on August 23rd, and later flew together with him to California for a meeting with Secretary of State Warren Christopher on August 27th in order to inform him of the results of the negotiations in the Norwegian Channel.

The purpose of the Norwegian Channel was not to circumvent the Washington process, but rather to circumvent some of the political obstacles which prevented direct and open negotiations between Israel and the PLO with a view to injecting the results of the "back channel" into the "front channel." This was done in a splendid and electrifying manner in the ceremony arranged by President Clinton on the White House lawn on September 13th. We had kept the Americans informed about the establishment of the channel and about the transition to authorized negotiations in May 1990, and the two parties similarly informed the Egyptians. However, they were not in the know about the substantive progress in the negotiations. Both Egypt and the United States expressed strong support for the Norwegian Channel and Secretary Christopher was extremely supportive, appreciative, and generous when he was briefed on the results.

The endgame of the negotiations about mutual recognition leading to an exchange of letters between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman Yasser Arafat took place in hotels in Oslo and Paris. This led to my being dispatched with other members of the Norwegian team to Tunis, where we obtained the signature of Mr. Arafat on September 9th, and to Jerusalem, where Yitzhak Rabin committed his signature to paper in a public ceremony on September 10th. The negotiations were completed in a direct encounter between the parties and through subsequent negotiation and clarification on the telephone.

The tensions associated with the historical leap and the difficulties of logistics and communications, together with the impact of mutual and physical exhaustion, threatened the historical achievement until the very last moment. It is first and foremost due to the dedication and perseverance of the parties that the process succeeded. In many ways, paving the way for mutual recognition was the most difficult part of the journey because it involved removing so much of the emotional baggage accumulated during the prolonged conflict. Since the PLO had been the principal challenger of the status quo, changing its mode of operations to conform to the objectives set forth in the DOP, it had to specify its commitments in the most extensive manner. The PLO recognized the right of the state of Israel to exist in peace and security and accepted Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. It committed itself to the Middle East peace process and to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. It renounced terrorism and other acts of violence and committed itself to disciplining possible violators within its ranks. Furthermore, it affirmed that those articles and provisions of the Palestinian Covenant which deny Israel's right to exist, or are inconsistent with the commitments to refrain from violence, are now inoperative and no longer valid. Chairman Arafat has called upon the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to take part in the steps leading to the normalization of life: rejecting violence and terrorism, contributing to peace and stability, and participating actively in shaping reconstruction, economic development, and cooperation. Israel in return recognized "the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people" and decided to "commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process." A new chapter in the history of the Middle East had been opened.

Into the Future

The DOP is now public knowledge, and I shall not spend much time here elaborating on the provisions of the document. It projects the establishment of a Palestinian interim self gov-

ernment authority, an elected council for the Palestinian people on the West Bank and the Gaza strip for a transitional period not exceeding five years, leading to a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. Elections for the council are to be held not later than nine months after the implementation of the DOP. Not later than the eve of the elections for the Council, Israel will carry out a redeployment of military forces. By December 13th 1993, Israel and the PLO are to sign an agreement on the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip and the Jerico area. An accelerated and scheduled withdrawal from those areas will be completed no later than January 13th 1994. Israel will remain responsible for external security, settlements, Israelis, foreign relations and other mutually agreed matters. The DOP will come into force on October 13th 1993, resulting in an immediate transfer of authority to the Palestinians in the spheres of education and culture, health, social welfare, direct taxation, and tourism.

The agreement on withdrawal of Israeli forces will include, inter alia, a temporary international or foreign presence, a joint Palestinian-Israeli coordination and cooperation committee for mutual security purposes, arrangements for safe passage between the Gaza strip and the Jerico area, and an economic development and stabilization program.

The two sides are also to negotiate an Interim Agreement which specifies the structure and authority of the Council. Permanent status negotiations are to commence no later than the third year of the interim period.

The DOP did not arise from scratch, it was developed and shaped within the continuity of the Middle East peace process, drawing on the structure and content of the Camp David accords and the draft declaration of principles under negotiation in the front channel in Washington.

Certain salient features of the DOP project political perspectives of considerable importance to the resolution of the conflict. Some key issues have been deferred to the final status

negotiations, most notably Jerusalem, settlements, borders, refugees, security agreements, and relations with other neighbors. It was clear that those issues were not ripe for resolution in 1993. However, it would not do just to defer the issues. They had to institute a process which could so transform perceptions and outlooks as to make possible later constructions and solutions which are unattainable or unacceptable today.

Much discussion took place between the Norwegians and the parties concerning long term perspectives and transformation of the frames of reference. We emphasized the need to focus on shaping future history rather than negotiating agreement and judgment on past history. It was important to protect the future as much as possible against the return of history. Similarly, we invoked the experience of the European Community in transforming political relations by institutionalizing shared economic endeavors by exploiting interdependence. We referred to the European experience in the CSCE, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, in overcoming the consequences of political division and military confrontation by capitalizing on shared interests for the amelioration and constriction of the former. Projecting an ethos of economic and regional cooperation, through commitments to institutionalized and programmed activities presumably could help to overcome enmities and antagonisms in the Middle East as they had in Europe. In many ways the commitment spelled out in the appendices on economic and regional cooperation of the DOP are the most important from the point of view of future resolution.

Peace has not arrived yet in the Middle East, but it is now in the making. A new road has been opened. It is not a paved highway. Nor is it a road safe from robbers and spoilers.

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Complex negotiations are ahead of us concerning the interim agreement, military withdrawal, and economic development. They will probably require facilitation and cooperation from third parties at the request of the two parties. Some temporary international presence is envisaged.

The obstacles are formidable and the potential challenges many. Some fear that the separate Israel-PLO agreement will block or delay a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East. There are no provisions in the DOP with such intention or implication. In fact, the DOP is neutral with regard to such links. They can be created or denied by the acts of the parties involved, most notably Syria and Lebanon. Jordan already has made a choice in favor of positive linkage by agreeing on a negotiating agenda. Intensified engagement in the multilateral working groups of the Madrid process could further promote the bilateral tracks by adding substance and incentive to a cooperative regional perspective, to a possible conference on security and cooperation in the Middle East.

The future has not been won, but the prospects of victory now seem brighter than before the historical breakthrough. The international community at large carries major responsibilities, particularly in regard to mobilizing the economic resources which are needed for purposes of stabilizing the agreement and making the fruits of peace available to the ordinary child, woman, and man. And that effort cannot be confined to the present inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian camps and refugees in Lebanon and Jordan must receive support as well if we are to prevent the most deprived from turning against the agreement, from becoming the victims of despair and initiating rejectionist agitation. Furthermore, it is important to channel assistance both for immediate emergency purposes and for medium and long term economic development. It seems to me particularly important to provide immediate support to Palestinian educational and health institutions, to work with Palestinian institutions in general, in order to enable them to develop capacities for self-reliance and

dignity, to channel assistance both through the system of UN (UNRWA, UNDP, UNEP) and Bretton Woods (IBRD, IMF) institutions in order to maximize efficiency and optimize the total impact. The United States has taken an important first step by convening the Conference to Support the Middle East Peace in Washington on October 1st, building on the Madrid framework.

Perspective

I have attempted here to share my personal reflections on a unique process which brought remarkable results. I was privileged to be Norway's Foreign Minister and thereby acquire overall responsibility for the Norwegian channel. The task has been rewarding beyond comprehension. It has been extremely strenuous for all those involved. It has been a team effort. The Norwegian team was unique in its composition, talent and close friendship. Jan Egeland, who dared to dream impossible dreams and acted upon them. Terje Rød Larsen, the indefatigable entrepreneur who recognized no obstacles as barriers, whose organizational talents kept the process moving and preserved secrecy to the astonishment of the media and political leaders alike. Mona Juul, his wife, who provided sensitive and enlightened liaison between the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, the academics and the parties. Always present and always wise. And in addition, I want to mention my wife, Marianne Heiberg, who was in charge of the quality of living studies of Palestinian society and who was my best supporter and advisor as well as mentor on the political culture of the Middle East. ☺

¹Originally delivered as a lecture at Columbia University and reprinted here in his memory.

²The studies were conducted under the leadership of Dr. Marianne Heiberg of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and the FAFO institute of applied social science research.

³The group comprised Terje Rød Larsen who is the director of FAFO, Jan Egeland

who was State Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mona Juul who was a member of the cabinet of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. My own direct involvement dates from early April 1993 when I was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs after having served as Defense Minister for a number of years, and at a time when the talks were soon to become authorized negotiations opening up for direct involvement from the Norwegian Minister responsible for the "Norwegian Channel."