



Oslo at 25: A Personal View

By **Douglas Feith** September 13, 2018



Former Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, photo by Scott Davis, U.S. Army via Wikipedia

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 946, September 13, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Perhaps the most important misperception about Oslo is that it is – or was – a peace process, a two-sided affair, a matter of give-and-take in which each side’s promises depended on fulfillment of the other’s promises. My view, as a witness to some of the relevant history, is that it was a kind of unilateral Israeli withdrawal.

Oslo pretended to be a peace process. Israeli officials knew that Oslo lacked mutuality, but they misled the public about the relationship of withdrawal to peace.

The Rabin government’s top officials knew their priorities. Peace was important, and trading land for peace might be useful. But most important of all was reducing the burdens of the occupation. Even if Israel didn’t have the power to win peace from the Palestinians, it had the power to quit the territories on its own.

The idea of unilateral withdrawal had some appeal in Israel long before the first Oslo agreement. Years later, support in Israel for unilateral withdrawal had grown, even though (or maybe because) Oslo had been widely discredited by the terrorism that the Palestinian Authority incited and often perpetrated.

Unlike the Oslo redeployments, Israel's 2005 departure from Gaza was nakedly unilateral; it made no pretense of being a land-for-peace deal.

I served as a low-ranking Middle East specialist at the White House in the Reagan administration and much later as a senior Defense Department official in the George W. Bush administration. I will share a few Oslo-related stories from both of those periods.

Early on I saw that Oslo was more about Israeli withdrawal than peace. I was attuned to this point because of something that happened long before the famous September 1993 Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House south lawn.

Twelve years before, during the first year of the Reagan administration, I was a National Security Council staff member. Yossi Beilin – at the time an aide to Shimon Peres, who was Opposition leader – came to Washington as the guest of the US Information Agency as part of a program to cultivate friendly relations with promising young foreign leaders. Beilin's itinerary included a meeting at the White House and I was assigned to talk with him.

Mr. Peres had recently published an article in *Foreign Affairs* that Beilin was generally assumed to have written, so I asked him about it. The article made the well-known argument that, if Israel continued to hold the territories, the state could not survive as both Jewish and democratic. But, the article said, Israel should withdraw from the territories only if it received reliable Arab peace pledges.

I commented that there was an inconsistency here. Mr. Peres said it would be suicidal for Israel to hold the territories, but Israel shouldn't give them up without peace. If your Arab neighbors refuse to give you peace, I asked, does Peres believe Israel should commit suicide by continuing to hold the territories?

Beilin broke out into a beaming smile and said he was "always amazed" that so few people notice that inconsistency. The reasoning makes no sense, he said, and that's why, he declared, "I'm in favor of unilateral withdrawal." I remember his words precisely, to this day.

Twelve years later, in around June 1993, Beilin had risen in the world. He was still working for Shimon Peres, but now as deputy foreign minister. He came to Washington and, in a public setting, we played that question and answer once again.

First, let's recall the context. Yitzhak Rabin had campaigned for prime minister in 1992 by promising he would rapidly make a land-for-peace deal with the Palestinians. He said he could close the deal within nine months *without* negotiating with the terrorist PLO and *without* agreeing to create what

he called a Palestinian “mini-state.” His idea was to make peace with the Palestinian representatives to the Madrid peace talks, who were not PLO members.

Rabin won the election. Nine months went by, but he was unable to close a land-for-peace deal with the Palestinians. More months passed and still no deal. Officials in his government were embarrassed and frustrated.

After a year of fruitless diplomacy, Deputy Foreign Minister Beilin was now in 1993 giving a public talk in Washington. He spoke emotionally of how exasperating it was that Israel hadn’t yet made a land-for-peace deal with the Palestinians. He said “everyone” knew what the terms of the deal would be, yet it remained out of reach.

I raised my hand and posed essentially the same question I had asked him a dozen years earlier: If, as you said, maintaining the occupation is suicidal, how can Israel insist it will hold the territories until its enemies agree to make peace promises? Beilin reacted as he had before, with a big smile. He complimented the question as the most important issue facing Israel. He said the contradiction I was highlighting was the reason that he supported – here he spoke slowly – unilateral “action.”

Now that he was a deputy minister, he changed his language from “unilateral withdrawal” to “unilateral action,” but he clearly hadn’t changed his main thought.

Around two months later, at the end of August 1993, the first Oslo agreement – known as the Declaration of Principles (DOP) – was published. There were a few vague words in the preamble about striving for peaceful coexistence, but in the operative sections there were no actual peace promises. The DOP said simply that Israel would withdraw from parts of the territories and transfer responsibilities to the Arab party. The Arab party, labeled “the Arab team representing the Palestinian people,” said only that it would take over whatever Israel relinquished.

The DOP was an exchange of land for nothing. But immediately after it became public, Yasser Arafat wanted Israel to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. Rabin said he would do that only if Arafat promised peace and renounced terrorism, commitments that were absent from the DOP.

The PLO and the Israeli government then spent a week and a half negotiating side letters on peace and recognition. During those days, journalists asked Israeli officials what would happen if there were no agreement on the side letters. The officials said the DOP would be implemented anyway. That was revealing. It showed that the Israeli government was determined to make territorial withdrawals whether or not Arafat made a commitment to peace.

Yet, after the side letters were exchanged and the DOP signed, Israeli officials changed their story.

For 25 years or so, Labor Party leaders had contended that the key to ending the war with the Arabs was a land-for-peace deal. They blamed Begin, Shamir, and Likud for their unwillingness to trade land for peace. Because of this history, the DOP's lack of mutuality was a potential embarrassment.

But now that they had Arafat's side letter, Israeli officials claimed that Oslo was the very land-for-peace deal that Labor had promised for years. When asked what would happen if Arafat failed to fulfill his peace promises, the officials said that Israel's withdrawals would not only stop, but be reversed. That was the opposite of what they had said a few days earlier, in the days after the DOP but before the side letter.

The talk of stopping the Israeli withdrawals, let alone reversing them, was intended to dress up a unilateral Israeli action and make it look to the Israeli public like a land-for-peace deal. It may have fooled some Israelis, but it didn't fool Arafat. He understood that the Israeli government simply wanted out – wanted to end the occupation – and was not going to hold him to his peace promises. In any event, he had no intention of terminating the conflict. He had no intention of agreeing that Israel had a right to exist permanently. He took what Israel was willing to give up, but he didn't make peace. He didn't preach peace. He didn't have Palestinian schools teach peace. He didn't enforce peace.

Let us now jump forward seven years to the year 2000. The hopes for Palestinian-Israeli peace were tested and disappointed at the Camp David peace talks, where the principal players were President Arafat, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and President Bill Clinton. Clinton blamed Arafat for wrecking the talks by insisting that Barak accept a Palestinian "right of return" that would effectively destroy Israel.

Soon afterward, in 2001, George W. Bush became president. Arafat had already launched the Second Intifada. Top officials of the new US administration disagreed on Middle East policy. Secretary of State Colin Powell promoted his department's standard thinking, which tended to blame Israel for the lack of peace. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney, and President Bush, on the other hand, questioned the conventional wisdom, trusted Arafat less, and gave more sympathy to Israel. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice initially positioned herself in the middle.

Powell persuaded the president to call, in late 2001, for creation of a Palestinian state. In the following months, Powell urged Bush over and over again to invite Arafat for a meeting.

The main reasons President Bush refused were 1) the 9/11 attack, which caused the president to launch the global war on terrorism; and 2) Israel's interception of the Palestinian ship known as the *Karine A*, which carried a load of Iranian weapons.

In National Security Council meetings, Powell made his case for why the president should meet with Arafat to revive the Oslo Process. The Vice President opposed Powell, arguing that 9/11 required the US government to take a principled position against terrorism. The Second Intifada was underway. Not only was Arafat failing to prevent terrorism against Israelis, but his security forces were themselves often the perpetrators.

Then, in January 2002, the Israeli navy captured the *Karine A* and briefed US officials on its cargo of Iranian arms. Israel's defense minister said the shipment violated Oslo. This was the very month when President Bush spoke about the special danger of countries that both support terrorism and pursue weapons of mass destruction. He called those countries the "axis of evil" and named Iran as one of them.

As Cheney and Rumsfeld saw it, the *Karine A* proved that even now – after 9/11 and the launch of America's global war on terrorism – Arafat remained in bed with America's enemies in Iran. That put the final nail in the coffin of Arafat's reputation as a statesman and peace partner.

When I discussed the matter with Secretary Rumsfeld, I told him the story of how the legendary Hollywood movie executive Samuel Goldwyn, famous for his broken English, once brushed aside a man he didn't like. Goldwyn said, "Don't pay any attention to him. Don't even ignore him." That, I said, should be US policy toward Arafat. Rumsfeld, who loved to laugh, did so loudly. When he wrote a memo to President Bush on policy towards the Palestinian Authority, he quoted the Goldwyn remark. President Bush adopted it as his position on Arafat.

As Iraq became the priority item on the administration's agenda in the spring of 2002, Secretary Powell tried again to persuade President Bush to make a personal effort to breathe new life into Oslo. He wanted Bush to show sympathy with the Palestinians. That, he argued, would allow America to win support on Iraq from Arab leaders.

The result of Powell's pressure was President Bush's decision to give a speech on June 24, 2002 on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Writing the speech took many weeks of work. Over thirty versions were produced. The White House sent successive drafts to Secretary Rumsfeld. He and I together then marked them up and offered comments in a series of memos to the president and to Condi Rice. We explained why Oslo was not a success and warned against investing the president's personal prestige in

diplomatic efforts that were not likely to bear fruit.

This was the only time I worked side by side with President Bush to compose a speech. The president wanted to deliver an important statement about the Arab-Israeli conflict. We sat together at the table in the Situation Room along with Colin Powell's deputy Richard Armitage and a few others.

Armitage said it was important for the president to list the Oslo "final status" issues. The president said no. Armitage pressed the point. Again, the president refused. Armitage warned that the failure to do so would endanger the progress on those issues made over the years.

President Bush clearly didn't like to be badgered. He answered Armitage sharply. I remember his words. I'm not going to climb back into the Oslo "rut," President Bush said and then added, with emphasis, "I want to change the way people *think* about the Arab-Israeli conflict." President Bush often poked fun at himself about not being an intellectual, but he knew the power of ideas. He was focusing on what he thought were the flaws in conventional thinking.

This was the heart of Bush's speech:

Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership,
so that a Palestinian state can be born.

I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders,
leaders not compromised by terror.

Bush also said,

...when the Palestinian people have new leaders, new
institutions and new security arrangements with their
neighbors, the United States of America will support the
creation of a Palestinian state whose borders and certain
aspects of its sovereignty will be provisional until
resolved as part of a final settlement in the Middle East.

This broke new ground. It moved beyond the fruitless question of whether peace produces security or security produces peace. Rather, it directed attention to the essential problem: the Palestinians need better leaders and new political institutions. Until they get them, President Bush understood, peace would remain unachievable.

This was not just a thought that some speechwriter put into Mr. Bush's mouth. It was an analysis the president developed personally, through extensive discussion with his advisers. He became intensely involved in drafting and redrafting these ideas. One consequence was that he resolved never to meet

Arafat, and he never did.

What happened after the June 24, 2002 speech is a cautionary tale about bureaucratic politics. It shows how hard it is for a US president to impose his will on the government. If foreign officials hope to operate effectively in Washington, they should understand this point.

Once he gave his June 24, 2002 speech, President Bush didn't want to devote much more personal time to Arab-Israeli matters, at least not until he had decided what to do about Saddam Hussein. The National Security Adviser said Secretary Powell should resume control over Arab-Israeli peace diplomacy.

The Powell-Armitage team had lost most of the major battles in the drafting of the June 24 speech. So what did they do? They ignored the speech. They gave new life to the Oslo Process by launching what they called the "Road Map." They were able to do this because Israeli officials never complained about Oslo's resurrection. The Israelis had likewise chosen to ignore President Bush's speech.

At the Pentagon and in Israel, I met with a series of senior Israeli officials. I drew their attention to President Bush's key point: that the United States and Israel shared an interest in cultivating new Palestinian political leadership. I asked the Israelis about their plans for responding to the president. Were they devising a strategy for working with the United States and others to influence Palestinian society and incentivize the rise of leaders who were actually interested in improving the lives of their people? Time and again, Israeli officials told me that, if Prime Minister Sharon had such a strategy, they were not aware of it.

Instead, Israeli officials plunged into the Road Map.

I met with a top official in the prime minister's office (who shall remain nameless) and noted for him the differences between the Road Map and the ideas that President Bush had spelled out in his June 24 speech. The Road Map was Oslo all over again, but the president's speech called for efforts to foster new Palestinian leaders "not compromised by terror." The Israeli official sounded confused and defensive. We deal with the State Department, he said, because State represents the United States.

That's true, of course, in a sense, but it's not an excuse for Israel to ignore the president's words. I thought it might be useful to cite recent Israeli history. A few years back, Yitzhak Shamir was prime minister and Shimon Peres was foreign minister. I asked, if an American wanted to work with the Israeli government, would it have made sense to operate on the assumption that Israel's only relevant voice was Peres? No, of course not, the Israeli official said, because "everyone" knew that Shamir and Peres didn't agree at all.

I said “everyone” knew that, presumably, because Israel is a superpower studied closely by government officials around the world. The United States, in contrast, is just a small provincial state and no one can be expected to realize that there are profound differences between State and White House officials. But I don’t think my sarcasm was effective.

In any case, Israel continued to invest energy in the Road Map, which was Oslo warmed over. The Sharon government never developed a strategy for working with the United States to influence the rise of better Palestinian leaders. It never even pretended to take President Bush’s views seriously.

Why that was the case is a question that remains to be fully explained.

Meanwhile, officials in the Trump administration seem to have thoroughly absorbed the key insights of the Bush June 24, 2002 speech. They are challenging the longstanding conventional wisdom about Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

This is clear in many ways. They moved the US embassy to Jerusalem. They denounce Hamas violence without equivocation. They supported the Taylor Force Act and punished the Palestinian Authority financially for giving salaries and benefits to imprisoned and “martyred” terrorists. They are cutting funds for the UN Relief and Works Agency, whose main purpose is not to aid refugees, but to perpetuate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And they are now reported to be exploring ways to increase the influence in Palestinian affairs of neighboring Arab states, such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

This time, America’s unconventional approach is well received by top Israeli officials. If it’s successful, the Palestinians may find themselves with a new political picture, new institutions and better leadership. That’s the optimistic view.

It may take many years to produce the needed changes, but if they occur, the Palestinians will be better off. Unlike during the Oslo Process, Israel might then have a Palestinian partner willing to make peace with it.

[View PDF](#)

This article was delivered as a lecture at the BESA Center’s conference on The Oslo Process – 25 Years On, which was convened on September 3, 2018.

Douglas J. Feith is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute and director of its Center for National Security Strategies. He is the author of War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism (Harper, 2008). From July 2001 to August 2005, he served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the
Greg Rosshandler Family