

Eastern Exposure: Misrepresenting the Peace Process

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Norman Finkelstein's study of the image and reality of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the disparity between them, could hardly have been better timed. It appeared just as international attention was focused on this bitter conflict: first, with the signing of the Oslo II agreement on September 28, widely portrayed as a long step toward its resolution; and a few weeks later, the assassination of one of its architects, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, whose place was taken by the other leading figure in designing the accords, Shimon Peres.

Rabin and Peres have been hailed as "visionaries," whose achievement is all the more remarkable in an era plagued by ethnic conflict. The achievement is real and significant, to be sure, but the imagery in which it is portrayed, even the direct reporting, is radically at variance with the reality. Finkelstein's new book greatly illuminates the historical and cultural roots of both the achievement and the portrayal and makes intelligible what is happening, in both domains.

Oslo II divides the West Bank into four parts: zones A, B, and C, and Greater Jerusalem. Zone A is assigned to the Palestinian Authority, Zone C to Israel. Zone B has the ambiguous status of "autonomy," meaning local administration by Palestinians under Israeli "security control." Rabin had announced earlier that Jerusalem, with indefinite boundaries, will be the "eternal and indivisible" capital of Israel. Formally, the matter is still subject to negotiation; in reality, it has been resolved by those who set the rules. In tacit recognition of the fact, maps published in Israel and The New York Times assign Greater Jerusalem to Israel, excluding it from the West Bank.

Arafat's call for a "jihad" to gain Palestinian rights in Jerusalem aroused much outrage in the United States. Rabin's pronouncement that Israel's jihad was successfully completed elicited no comment; nor did the published maps ratifying it. Chalk up another illustration of Finkelstein's thesis.

Zone A consists of Palestinian urban concentrations, some 2 per cent of the West Bank. Israel's Zone C covers about 70 per cent of the territory. Zone B consists of about 100 sectors scattered through Zone C. Zones A and B contain 1.1 million Arabs, Zone C 140,000 Jewish settlers and a handful of Arabs. One town, Hebron, has a population of about 500 Jews and 100,000 Arabs; therefore Israel keeps substantial control. In the West Bank areas conquered by Israel in 1967, there are 300,000 Jewish settlers, more than half of them in Arab East Jerusalem, which was effectively annexed by Israel immediately after the 1967 war and has been since considerably

expanded and subjected to highly discriminatory regulations to establish a Jewish majority with special privilege. These actions, substantially funded by U.S. taxpayers, were undertaken over the rhetorical objection of the U.S. government prior to the Clinton administration, which has dropped any pretense on this and other crucial issues.

The Cairo accords of May 1994, a stepping stone toward Oslo II, stipulated that Palestinian legislation cannot “deal with a security issue that falls under Israel’s responsibility” and cannot “seriously threaten other significant Israeli interests protected by this agreement.” Israeli authorities retain exclusive authority in “legislation, adjudication, policy execution,” and “responsibility for the exercise of these powers in conformity with international law,” which the powerful interpret as they choose. The meaning, as the knowledgeable Israeli analyst Meron Benvenisti observed, is that “the entire intricate system of military ordinances...will retain its force, apart from ‘such legislative regulatory and other powers Israel may expressly grant’” to the Palestinians, while Israeli judges retain “veto powers over any Palestinian legislation ‘that might jeopardize major Israeli interests,’ (which have) ‘overriding power.’” This “agreement of surrender,” Benvenisti observes, resembles the extremist 1981 proposals of Ariel Sharon, universally rejected at the time.

Though full details are not yet available, it appears that Oslo II reaffirms these basic provisions. It adds further conditions, among them, that the elected Palestinian Council must recognize the “legal rights of Israelis related to Government and Absentee land located in areas under the territorial jurisdiction of the Council,” the Washington Report on Israeli Settlement notes. Palestinians must accept the legality of existing and future Jewish settlements and recognize effective Israeli sovereignty over unspecified areas of Zone B.

Oslo II thus rescinds the decision of virtually the entire world that Israel has no claim to the territories acquired by force in 1967 and that the settlements are illegitimate. It implants more firmly the major accomplishment of Oslo I (September 1993): UN Resolution 242 of November 1967, the basic framework of Middle East diplomacy, is dead and buried; UN 242, that is, as interpreted by those who crafted it. That crucially includes the U.S. government from 1967–1971, as Finkelstein shows in a careful review of the evidence and the efforts to deny it in influential writings of Abba Eban and others. Since then the United States has stood alone (with Israel) in rejecting the withdrawal condition it had helped frame, and the required revision of the facts has become “received wisdom,” as Finkelstein observes. Washington’s achievement at Oslo is real, and a matter of no slight significance.

The Oslo principles extend to the Gaza Strip, where Israel retains the 30 per cent that it considers of value and general control over the rest, which is barred from direct access to the Arab world. The final permanent settlement is to impose similar conditions on the West Bank cantons assigned to Palestinian administration, Rabin and others had made clear.

To appreciate more fully what the victors achieved at Oslo, we may recall that in 1988, when the U.S. and Israel refused to recognize any Palestinian rights, Rabin had called for Israeli control of 40 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reiterating the basic stand of his Labor Party from 1968. In 1995, Rabin settled for Israeli control of about twice that much, along with ratification of whatever Israel and its sponsor have done and may choose to do. For Israel to retain so much territory would be pointless, however, and it will presumably rearrange jurisdictional matters in subsequent imposed agreements.

There has been another change since 1988. At that time, the U.S. and Israel refused to have any dealings with the PLO. In 1993, in contrast, Rabin and Peres recognized it as “the representative of the Palestinian people,” at least in a side letter. That transformation has evoked much acclaim

from U.S. commentators, who were particularly impressed by Rabin's ability to overcome the revulsion he felt for his old enemy.

The visionaries themselves saw it a bit differently: "There has been a change in them, not us," Peres informed the Israeli public as the Oslo I accords were announced; "We are not negotiating with the PLO, but only with a shadow of its former self." The shadow had accepted Israel's demands, abandoning the radical extremism that had rendered the PLO unfit for entry into the peace process: its call for mutual recognition in a two-state settlement as advocated in a near unanimous international consensus. A few days after Peres's explanation, Thomas Friedman wrote exultantly in *The New York Times* that Arafat's concessions were "a letter of surrender, a typewritten white flag, in which the PLO chairman renounces every political position on Israel that he held since the PLO's foundation in 1964." Fair enough, though Friedman fails to add that both he and his journal, and their colleagues rather generally, refused to allow those "political positions" to be known, meanwhile falsifying them in remarkable ways, as amply documented.

Subsequent agreements impose still harsher terms of surrender. At Oslo II "we screwed the Palestinians," Peres told the Chinese Ambassador. Explaining the accords to a gathering of ambassadors in Jerusalem, Peres dismissed the idea that the permanent settlement might involve a Palestinian state, emphasizing that "this solution about which everyone is thinking and which is what you want will never happen." Rabin's position was the same. There has been no meaningful departure from the official stand of Israel's Labor-Likud coalition government of 1989, ratified by the Bush administration in the 1989 Baker plan: there will be no "additional Palestinian state in the Gaza district and in the area between Israel and Jordan" (the latter, already a "Palestinian state"), and "no change in the status of Judea, Samaria and Gaza other than in accordance with the basic guidelines of the (Israeli) Government." Oslo I and II established these principles, which have yet to reach the mainstream here.

What is taking place in the territories conforms to the principles. Settlement has extended rapidly since Oslo I, with special inducements to attract new settlers, and huge construction programs to ensure that areas assigned to Palestinian administration will be isolated and invisible to Jewish settlers traveling on the "bypass roads" that cantonize the territory. The budget proposal for 1996, supported by the right-wing Likud opposition, provides almost \$40 million for "new Jewish settlements in the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip." Benefits offered to new settlers include subsidies for fish ponds in the arid Gaza Strip, where, as in the West Bank, Israel has taken most of the water resources for green lawns, swimming pools, artificial lakes for tourist hotels, and water-intensive agriculture, while Palestinians in nearby refugee camps, villages, and towns often lack water to drink. The budget assigns the sector of Gaza that Israel intends to keep to the Israeli Negev. As always, the plans rely on vast U.S. subsidies.

There are disagreements between the two major political groupings (labor and Likud), but of the sort familiar here. Benvenisti was again on target immediately after Oslo II in describing the bounds of the mainstream spectrum: at one extreme, "a peace which imposes an unconditional surrender on the Palestinians," at the other, "a peace with somewhat more generous terms of surrender."

Asked how Israel expects the Palestinians to accept such terms, Peres's new Foreign Minister, former army chief of staff Ehud Barak, answered simply: "We are the ones with the power." Realistic, and traditional. A major contribution of Finkelstein's study is to show how "the language of force" has been the operative principle, and to place both the actual facts and the "mythology of conquest" in which they are disguised in a much broader historical and ideological context.

More rational elements in Israel have never wanted to bear the burden of running downtown Nablus and Gaza City. Far preferable is for Palestinian forces to manage the Arab population on the model of the British in India, whites in southern Africa, the U.S. in Central America, and so on routinely. The means employed are also traditional: brutality and terror in cooperation with the real rulers, amply recorded by the Israeli press and human rights monitors. No surprises here either. After Oslo I, Rabin had informed the Labor Party that Palestinian forces would be able to handle the population without the interference from “bleeding hearts” that had hampered the Israeli military and police.

That only skims the surface, but let’s turn to the marketing of the accords. One aspect of the general portrayal is not implausible: the Oslo agreements might indeed resolve the conflict. How? Much in the manner advocated by New Republic editor Martin Peretz when he advised Israel to invade Lebanon in 1982 to administer to the PLO a “lasting military defeat” so that Palestinians will “be turned into just another crushed nation, like the Kurds or the Afghans,” and the Palestinian problem, which “is beginning to be boring,” will be finished. The U.S.-run “peace process” has been directed to these ends, which are, again, hardly without precedent. The most obvious one, on which Finkelstein draws with much insight, is the resolution of the conflict between the settlers of this country and “that hapless race of native Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious cruelty,” as John Quincy Adams ruefully described that peace process in later life, long after his own contributions were past. To mention another, the conflict between those who had sought a multi-ethnic Bosnia and advocates of a partition between Greater Croatia and Greater Serbia is also moving towards resolution, based as usual on the rule of force.

Beyond the realistic judgment that the conflict may be resolved, the standard portrayals of Oslo II have little merit, to put it rather mildly. The basic picture is that the longtime adversaries have abandoned their traditional goals, realizing at last that peace requires compromise and sacrifice. September 28 was a “Day of Awe” (Boston Globe), on which “Israel and the PLO sign agreement extending Palestinian rule to most of West Bank” (Reuters chronology). Rabin had “conquered the ancient lands on the West Bank of the Jordan,” but then was transformed to a man of peace and “negotiated the accord to eventually cede Israeli control of them to the Palestinians,” Serge Schmemmann reported in *The New York Times*. In the major *Times* thinkpiece after the assassination, Clyde Haberman wondered at the “evolution” in Rabin’s thinking as “his language underwent a remarkable transformation and so did his ideas about peace with the Palestinians”; “it was astonishing how far he had roamed from where he stood in 1992.” *Washington Post* Middle East correspondent Glenn Frankel reported that “when Rabin offered Israelis the possibility of ‘separation’ — of walling off the Gaza Strip and West Bank and getting Palestinians out of sight and out of mind — the majority responded with enthusiasm.” A *Post* editorial added that “the latest Israeli-Palestinian accord is a big one, making the historic move toward accommodation of the two peoples all but irreversible.” Headlines read: “Israel agrees to quit West Bank.” “Israel Ends Jews’ Biblical Claim on the West Bank” in “Rabin’s historic trade with Arabs,” a “historic compromise.” “Israelis, Palestinians find a painful peace,” establishing an “undeniable reality: The Palestinians are on their way to an independent state; the Jews are bidding farewell to portions of the Holy Land to which they have historically felt most linked.”

That’s a fair sample. A comparison with the facts is instructive.

The most interesting element of the doctrinal framework is the notion of “peace process” itself. That the U.S. and its Israeli partner have always sought peace is not in question: everyone

seeks peace, even Hitler, Stalin, and Attila the Hun. The question is: what kind of peace? In U.S. discourse, the term “peace process” is conventionally used to refer to whatever the U.S. government happens to be doing, often undermining diplomatic efforts. That is dramatically true in the present case. For 25 years, the U.S. has stood virtually alone in rejecting two basic principles of the international consensus on a peace settlement: that Israel withdraw from the occupied territories in exchange for peace, and (from the mid 1970s) that Palestinian national rights be recognized in the West Bank and Gaza. On both issues, the U.S. won hands down, a victory for the rule of force that perhaps should inspire “Awe,” enhanced still further by the doctrinal victory that accompanies it.

Finkelstein’s study explores in much greater depth than before how Washington undermined the basic principle of the international consensus it had helped to shape: the exchange of land for peace called for in UN 242. From 1967 to 1971, official U.S. policy was that any modifications of the prewar borders would be insignificant and mutual. So matters stood until February 1971, when Egyptian President Sadat accepted UN mediator Gunnar Jarring’s proposal for a full peace treaty with Israel in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory (there were no provisions for the other regions, or for Palestinian rights). Israel recognized Egypt’s “readiness to sign a peace agreement with Israel in an official document” as a “far-reaching development.” In his memoirs, Rabin describes Sadat’s move as a “famous...milestone” on the road to peace. Israel rejected Sadat’s offer, stating that “Israel will not withdraw to the pre-June 1967 lines.”

Washington had to decide whether to keep to its official stand and support Egypt, or to join Israel in rejecting the withdrawal principle of UN 242. In the internal debate, Kissinger prevailed, and Washington adopted his doctrine of “stalemate”: no diplomacy, just force. Since that time, the U.S. has led the Rejection Front. Using archival records that have previously remained unexamined, Finkelstein provides new understanding of these crucial events, which, as he also illustrates, have virtually disappeared from history. Because the facts are unacceptable, they have been replaced by endless deceit claiming that no Arab was willing to consider peace with Israel until Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem in 1977, when his startling break from immutable Arab rejectionism established a new climate, paving the way to the Camp David agreements.

The particle of truth in this familiar tale is that Sadat went to Jerusalem with an offer of full peace between Egypt and Israel. But as Finkelstein observes, that can hardly explain the excitement over the new dawn as an Arab leader finally broke ranks and recognized that Israel is here to stay. A sufficient reason why that cannot explain the excitement is that Sadat had made the same offer in 1971, the “famous milestone.” A further reason is that in his allegedly pathbreaking 1977 visit, Sadat did not content himself with Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory as in 1971, but went on to call for full implementation of UN 242, and beyond that, for “the achievement of the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people and their right to self-determination, including their right to establish their own state.” In thus going beyond UN 242, Sadat’s proposals in Jerusalem reflected an important shift in the international consensus, which finally departed from the rejectionist framework and agreed that the indigenous population also had rights in the former Palestine. That shift was expressed in a Security Council resolution of January 1976, which included the wording of UN 242 along with the new terms on the Palestinians that Sadat brought to Jerusalem. It was supported by most of the world (including Europe, the major Arab states, and the PLO), and vetoed by Washington. The facts have therefore been removed from acceptable history.

Why did the U.S. and Israel relax their policy of “stalemate” in 1977 and agree to accept Sadat’s 1971 offer? Finkelstein draws the rational conclusion, adding still further grounds for it. The October 1973 war showed Israel and Kissinger that they were mistaken in assuming that “war is not the Arab’s game” and that “the Arabs had no military option.” Since Israel and Kissinger understand “the language of force,” they recognized that the major Arab state must be neutralized to enable Israel to control the territories and attack Lebanon, as it has been doing since, with enormous U.S. assistance. Hence in 1977 Sadat was designated a “man of peace” and praised for his proposals on Israel and Egypt (reiterated from 1971). His much more far-reaching call for implementing the international consensus that Washington opposed was simply ignored.

Finkelstein ends his review of the “peace process” at this point. In later years, Washington continued to undermine diplomatic initiatives until the Gulf War taught the lesson that “What we say goes,” as George Bush proudly proclaimed, and with the rest of the world retreating from the scene, it became possible at last to impose Washington’s rejectionist agenda.

Imagery is different, to be sure.

Finkelstein’s study exhibits in meticulous detail the often startling gap between image and reality throughout the long conflict. One of the most dramatic examples is the “Peters Affair”: The publication of a book that provided American intellectuals with the welcome message that Palestinians were recent immigrants, attracted by Zionist initiative and enterprise, so that no moral issue arises if they return to their homes somewhere else. The book became an instant bestseller, eliciting a flood of laudatory reviews and commentary with scarcely a discordant note. Then a graduate student, Finkelstein checked the scholarly apparatus and discovered that the book was valueless, plagiarizing long-discredited propaganda and falsifying facts, figures, and documents in a most impressive fashion. His devastating analysis was circulated privately but refused publication, except for a summary in *In These Times*. The publishers then allowed the book to appear in England, where it was instantly demolished and ridiculed by distinguished scholars and other knowledgeable commentators. These exposures caused considerable embarrassment here, and led finally to some inadequate criticism in the mainstream. The story, which Finkelstein partially reviews (in particular, much underplaying his own role), is too revealing to survive, and has been consigned to the usual place.

Making effective use of records that have been largely ignored, Finkelstein’s work provides fresh insight into many aspects of the conflict of the past century, the broader historical and ideological framework in which it finds its place, and “the dominant culture that sustains that mythology”. His own judgment is clearly articulated: the dismissal of Palestinian rights that has dominated U.S. doctrine and practice is shameful, and the position of the doves — that in this conflict of rights, the Jewish settlers have the stronger claim — cannot be sustained. Whatever one’s conclusions about the latter issue, with its many facets, no reasonable person can question Finkelstein’s observation that “those who want to know can know the truth.” To that end, his work makes a notable contribution.

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