

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's Reasons for Signing the Oslo Accords (1 November 1995)

Source: Yehuda Avner, *The Prime Ministers an Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership*, The Toby Press, 2010, p. 707.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Oslo Accords, September 13, 1993, an agreement between Israel and the PLO that spelled out potential Palestinian self-rule, scholars and diplomats who worked back then have written dozens of articles, published interviews, and participated in video documentaries praising and criticizing and the Accords (a partial listing of those publications maybe found on the CIE site in contemporary readings for August and September 2018). Not surprisingly, almost all analyses of why the Oslo Accords were good or bad rests on expectations of what was anticipated. For those who opposed any partition of the land of Israel into Jewish and Arab states, it was "obviously" a dismal failure; for others who believe now as they did then, that only a two-state solution will bring peace to Israel, have not given up on the notion of separating Palestinians and Israelis. Diplomats involved at the time have provided stirring recollections of how the Accords unfolded as well as occasional acknowledgements of their personal failures in the negotiations and implementations of the Accords. To our knowledge, none of the recent publications, oral interviews or videos commemorating the Oslo Accords, tried to explain why Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Accords with PLO leader, Yasir Arafat. There is a record of why he signed the accords.

Three days before his assassination, on November 1, 1995, Rabin told his speech writer Yehuda Avner, why he signed the Oslo Accords with Yasir Arafat on the White House lawn. Rabin did not like Arafat, nor did he trust the PLO leader. 'Distaste' might not be too strong a term to describe his feeling for the Palestinian leader who had spent a life-time killing Israelis and Jews and seeking to undermine Israel's existence. However, Rabin was a pragmatist. He preferred Arafat's secular oriented PLO to the theologically dominated Hamas, supported in part by Iran. Rabin believed that failure to bolster the secular stream in the Palestinian national movement would only elevate Hamas. Further, he believed a secular national conflict over territory could be resolved but a Jewish-Islamic theologically based conflict would go on for decades. 25 years after Rabin made that decision, the PLO secular wing and leadership remains in a continuous struggle for the hearts, minds, and direction of the Palestinian future. Rabin's decision, unacceptable to many at the time, contained good strategic sense and so far has lasted in time. It provided an outline for Israeli-Palestinian agreements, though not fully implemented nor fully observed by both parties, it remains the accepted international framework for political discussions between Israel and the West Bank Palestinian leadership. There is no doubt that the Accords provided Israel with enormous economic and trade openings to India, the Far East, and the rest of the world.

Ken Stein, April 2014 and September 2018

Question from the author: Yehuda Avner: Why did you shake Arafat's hand?

Rabin: “Number one: Israel is surrounded by two concentric circles. The inner circle is comprised of our immediate neighbors—Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and, by extension, Saudi Arabia. The outer circle comprises their neighbors—Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen and Libya. Virtually all of them are rogue states, and some are going nuclear.

Number two, Iranian-inspired Islamic fundamentalism constitutes a threat to the inner circle no



Palestinian Hamas founder Shakyh Ahmed Yassin pictured with Iran's Ayatollah Khamanei. This is an alliance that Rabin wanted to thwart by recognizing the PLO. Photo: Public Domain.

less than it does to Israel. Islamic fundamentalism is striving to destabilize the Gulf Emirates, has already created havoc in Syria, leaving twenty thousand dead, in Algeria, leaving one hundred thousand dead, in Egypt, leaving twenty-two thousand dead, in Jordan, leaving eight thousand dead, in the Horn of Africa—the Sudan and Somalia—leaving fourteen thousand dead, and in Yemen, leaving twelve thousand dead. And now it is gaining influence in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Iran is the banker, pouring millions into the West Bank and Gaza in the form of

social welfare and health and education programs, so that it can win the hearts of the population and feed religious fanaticism.

Thus, a confluence of interest has arisen between Israel and the inner circle, whose long-term strategic interest is the same as ours: to lessen the destabilizing consequences from the outer circle. At the end of the day, the inner circle recognizes they have less to fear from Israel than from their Muslim neighbors, not least from radicalized Islamic powers going nuclear.

Number three: the Arab-Israeli conflict was always considered to be a political one: a conflict between Arabs and Israelis. The fundamentalists are doing their level best to turn it into a religious conflict—Muslim against Jew, Islam against Judaism. And while a political conflict is possible to solve through negotiation and compromise, there are no solutions to a theological conflict. Then it is jihad—religious war: their God against our God. Were they to win, our conflict would go from war to war, and from stalemate to stalemate.

And that, essentially, is why I agreed to Oslo and shook hands, albeit reluctantly, with Yasser Arafat. He and his PLO represent the last vestige of secular Palestinian nationalism. We have nobody else to deal with. It is either the PLO or nothing. It is a long shot for a possible settlement, or the certainty of no settlement at all at a time when the radicals are going nuclear.”

November 1, 1995