Israel P.L.O. Peace Treaty Essay, Research Paper

The Middle East has always been known as the Holy Land, the land of the Bible. For centuries, prophets have walked there, nations have collided and conquerors have come and gone. While Jews claim a three thousand-year-old attachment to this ancient land, Arabs also stake their devotion. In 1993, these two peoples, involved in a tragic conflict that has lasted more than half a century, saw the possibility of a new beginning. It was called the Oslo Accord, and it transformed the political realities of the Middle East (Peres, p.2) However, there have been many turbulent events that have followed the signing of the Accord, events that have undermined the agreement and are threatening to drive Israelis and Arabs apart once again.

Since the founding of Israel in 1948, there has been continuous conflict between Israel and the Arab states. This conflict has been marked by six bloody wars. In 1867, during the six-day war of Syria, Jordan and Egypt, Israel captured the West Bank, Sinai and the Gaza strip. Subsequently, a population of over a million Palestinian Arabs, together with their land was now under Israeli control. (Spencer, p.70) It was during this time that a Palestinian leader emerged, Yasser Arafat. Labeled a terrorist by Israel and the United States, he and his Palestine Liberation Organization called for the eviction of Israel from the occupied territories by force of arms. In 1979, Israel returned Sinai to Egypt by a peace treaty. Although Egypt’s Prime Minister Anwar Sadat was assassinated in 1982 by anti-peace forces, the peace still remained between the two countries. This paved the way for negotiations with Jordan, Syria, and the Palestines. (Hunter, p.17-20)

However, Israel’s continued occupation of the Palestinian territories led to the uprising of Arab youth in the West Bank and Gaza, known as the Intifada. For the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, the Intifada provided them with a new and assertive Palestinian identity. Israelis were also growing tired of their roles as occupiers, as soldiers trained to defend their country in war were finding themselves aiming their weapons at rock throwing teenagers. Many Israelis were disillusioned and desperately eager for a solution. When the United States and Russia initiated talks in Madrid and Washington at the end of the Cold War, it seemed that peace was attainable. But the talks quickly broke down as dogmatic assertions and old accusations were repeated. (Finkelstein, p. 14-15)

In June 1992, the Labour government was elected in Israel on a platform of peace and change. At its head was Yitzhak Rabin, former military chief of staff. His move from the battlefield to the negotiation table was a historical moment in the life of Israel. Madrid had failed because Israeli and United States delegates refused to deal with the PLO. But Rabin and foreign minister Peres, unlike their predecessors, were willing to pursue new avenues for peace. The way was now paved for one of the most intriguing diplomatic accords of recent years, the Oslo Agreement. It was now clear that direct dialogue was needed between the PLO and Israel. (Peres, p. 12)

Secret talks were arranged between the two sides in Norway starting in January 1993. However, one key matter held up the talks, that being the Israeli ban on contact with the PLO. When the Israeli Knesset repealed this, the way to Oslo was open. Talks took place between January and May of 1993. As talks continued, complications arose, notably Israel’s insistence that it retain control of West Bank security. However, as trust grew, both sides compromised as they moved towards reconciliation and mutual recognition. After eight months of negotiations, an agreement of principles was signed secretly in Oslo. The declaration of principles bound Israel and the Palestinians to a five-year interim agreement. Power over Gaza and Jericho would be transferred to the Palestinians, economic programs would be developed and a new port built. Resolution of the harder questions such as Jerusalem would be left for a permanent status agreement to be concluded within five years. (“Days of Reckoning”, p. 34-35)

On September 13, 1993, Rabin and Arafat met on the lawns of the White House to sign a declaration of peace. The negotiations that had started in such secrecy were now confirmed before the world. The Oslo Agreement and the remarkable handshake of Rabin with Arafat symbolized a New Hope and feeling of mutual trust. For the accord to succeed that trust would have to be defended and shared by the Israeli and Palestinian people. In the months that followed, there was a sense of anticipation. Israel had ruled Gaza for three decades, but Oslo brought that occupation to an end. The events of the year also brought a host of unexpected benefits for the Israelis. The Arab economic boycott, which had lasted forty years, was suspended, and the attitude towards Israel in the Arab world changed for the better. Israel was now taking part in major regional economic conferences.

During this period, relations between Israel and Jordan improved, opening the path for peace. In October 1994, nearly a year after the meeting of Rabin and Arafat, Israel and Jordan officially ended more than fifty years of conflict. Israel’s new partnership with Jordan encouraged Syria to negotiate for the return of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in the Six-Day War. Though inconclusive, the talks were a major step forward. (Peres, p. 40-45)

Over a hundred new countries expressing their willingness to establish diplomatic ties with Israel followed the post-Oslo response of the Arab world to Israel, and foreign investments soared. However, the Peace Accord also had many enemies, including the Israeli settlers in the occupied territories as well as Arab radicals. At first, the adversaries of the accord were careful not to act on their opinion against a diplomatic achievement so universally celebrated, but the time would come when they would take their action. The main Arab opposition to the peace accord is rooted in the militant Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements. Both groups call for total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied lands, and to give the Palestinians more freedom and independence. In Israel, the minority opposing the accord includes the ultra-nationalists and the religious right wing. They believe that giving up territory is in total opposition and conflict with the ideals of the land of Israeli movement. (Hunter, p. 217)

On both sides, religion and inflamed emotions have again and again brought the peace process to the brink of annihilation. The first spark between the two sides was ignited in Hebron, the site of the tombs of the patriarchs, a building sacred to both Jews and Arabs. Early in 1994, Baruch Goldstein, a religious Jew, opened fire and killed thirty-nine Arabs while at prayer. In April of 1994, in response to the Hebron killings, two Arab suicide bombers blew up Jewish buses in northern and central Israel. Fifteen dies and seventy were injured. (Peres, p. 177-178)

Many other terrorist attacks took place during the course of 1994. On October 19, a Palestinian suicide bomber killed twenty-two Israelis and wounded forty-eight in a bus explosion in Tel Aviv. In the following month, a Palestinian suicide bomber on a bicycle in the Gaza Strip took the lives of three Israeli soldiers. On December 25, another Palestinian blew himself up on a bus in Jerusalem, wounding twelve Israelis. However, these terrorist actions did not stop with the New Year. On January 22, 1995, two Palestinians blew themselves up at a junction in central Israel, killing twenty-one Israelis. Hamas claimed responsibility for all these attacks. (“Chronology of Bombing Attacks Following September 1993 Accord”)

The Israeli and Palestinian dispute is about many things, but at its centre is the dispute over land. It is about two people’s claims to the same territory, the West Bank. For many Palestinians, Oslo did not offer enough. They claim all the occupied territories are theirs, including east Jerusalem. In 1977, Israeli Jews had been encouraged by the new right-wing Likud government to settle in the West Bank. Since then, their number has grown to over 125 000 settlers. Surrounding them in small towns and hundreds of villages live over a million Arabs. Most settlers feel a deep bonding between themselves, the Bible, and Jewish historical roots in the area. Despite worldwide criticism of their actions, the settlers believe that occupation of the land is justified historically and legally. The prospect of Arab self-rule on the West Bank struck at their very existence, and in the summer of 1995, the settlers poured out to protest the expansion of Palestinian self-rule. When Rabin ignored the protests, the volume increased, and anger built. The right-wing protests continued, growing more hostile and violent each day. During this time, on July 24, 1995, two Palestinian suicide bombers blew themselves up outside two Jewish settlements in the West Bank, killing seven Israelis and an American. (Finkelstein, p. 130-140)

In an atmosphere of growing tension, the Labour party responded with a massive rally for peace in Tel Aviv. The date was November 4, 1995, and just passed ten o’clock p.m., Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was shot dead by Yigal Amir, a religious law student opposed to the peace process. Devastated by the loss, the country mourned for their Prime Minister who had been a martyr for peace. Rabin had been murdered in an attempt to halt the peace process, however initially the effect was just the reverse. The opposition was shocked into silence, and four more West Bank cities were handed over to the PLO. (“A Martyr to Peace”, p. 26-28)

Three months after Rabin’s death, one of the key events called for by Oslo took place. The Palestinians held their first elections, marking the start of representative government. Eventually, eighty-eight people were elected to a new legislative council headed by Yasser Arafat. (Hunter, p. 56) Two and a half years after the signing of the Oslo Accords, a new spirit was felt in Gaza as it came under Arab administration. Where Israelis had patrolled, Palestinian police now kept order, and there was a building boom. In opinion polls, 70% of Palestinians supported the peace process. However, there were also disappointments. Millions of dollars had been promised in international development funds, but little money was actually arriving and the Palestinian government often proved ineffective. Oslo had promised change and possible Palestinian statehood, but 90% of the West Bank was still in Israeli hands, making the Palestinian goal of statehood distant. (Finkelstein, p. 120)

For months, Israel had pursued Yehia Ayyash, a Hamas member who orchestrated at least seven suicide bombings that killed fifty-five Israelis. A telephone bomb assassinated Ayyash; an act attributed to the Israeli secret service, the Mossad. His death sparked rage and fury throughout the West Bank, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad promised revenge and violent retribution. In the week between February 25 and March 3, 1996, three Israeli buses and a busy industrial centre were blown up by suicide bombers. Sixty people were killed and over a hundred and fifty injured. Islamic militants had found their moment to act to destroy the peace process. Israeli soldiers, fearful of more attacks, sealed the borders of the West Bank and Gaza, causing anger among the Arabs. On the Israeli side, the turbulence and bombings caused a resurgence of the anti-peace forces. (“Israel Mourns Bombing Victims”)

Shimon Peres, Rabin’s successor, called for national elections in June. The horrific events of that spring would have major consequences for the entire region. The appeal of the Oslo Accord lay in its promise of peace and security for Israel. Hamas, as an opponent of the peace process understood this well. When security is the main issue, bombs in buses make devastating negative arguments. Many Israelis, enraged by the terrorist attacks, began thinking the way that the terrorists wanted them to think. The Israelis saw Arafat as unwilling or unable to control the violence and felt that the Labour government was unable to guarantee their personal security. Instead of moving towards peace, it seemed as if they were moving towards disaster. (“Days of Reckoning”, p. 34-34)

Campaigns for the Israeli elections called for in June 1995 focused on the issues of peace and security, and whether to continue with the peace process or to slow it down. Prime Minister Peres argued for continuing Rabin’s policy. An intense believer in the Oslo Accord, he stressed the advantages of peace and the dangers of yielding to terrorist inspired fears. Confronting him was the new leader of the right-wing Likud party, Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu had served in the top army battle unit, and had later acted as Israeli ambassador to the United Nations. He was distrustful of Arafat, and opposed to the idea of a Palestinian state. He argued that a slow down of the Oslo Accord could end Palestinian violence and guarantee Israeli security. In an extremely close election, Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister by a manager of one half of 1%. (“Israel Mourns Bombing Victims”)

Among those who had voted for Netanyahu were the Israeli settlers and the religious right wing. Because of the small margin of Netanyahu’s victory, their support was crucial to him, and most were opposed to Oslo. The peace process could proceed only with Netanyahu’s backing, but his actions were ambivalent. This was most evident in Hebron, where a promised Israeli withdrawal was delayed for months. Hebron has long been a centre of controversy, with Arabs remembering the murders committed by Baruch Goldstein, and Israelis are still haunted by the massacre of Jews during a Hamas bus-hijacking in 1979. Today, Hebron is a divided city, with 500 Jews clinging to their ancient heritage in the town, among the populations of 125 000 Palestinian inhabitants. After months of delay, Netanyahu finally gave the order to withdraw from three-quarters of the city, but safeguard the Jewish remnants. The Jewish settlers still remain despite Arab disapproval. (“Israel Mourns Bombing Victims”)

The Oslo Accord calls for a final agreement in May 1998 on matters such as boundaries, new settlements, and refugees. It has been agreed that the complex problem of Jerusalem can wait until the final settlement stage, but that date is drawing close. (‘Chronology of PLO-Israel Peace Moves”) Jerusalem is a city sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Called the City of Peace, national ambitions and religious traditions have collided there throughout the centuries. From 1948 to 1967, Jerusalem was a divided city, with Jews in the West and Arabs in the East. Barriers and a no-man’s land separated the two. In June 1967, the Israeli’s captured Eastern Jerusalem in the Six Day Way. Jews once again had access to their holiest; the Western Wall of the Second Temple, and Jerusalem was declared the eternal capital of the Jewish State. Palestinians are equally determined that the East of the city becomes the capital of an independent Arab state. Jerusalem has a deep spiritual meaning for Muslims, as it was from the site of the Dome of the Rock that Mohammed is believed to have ascended to Heaven. (Peres, p. 171-172)

The proximity of the two faiths fighting for Jerusalem has made for confrontation. In September 1996, the opening of a tunnel near the Dome of the Rock, lead to Palestinian anger throughout Jerusalem and the West Bank. Under the Oslo Accord, Israel had agreed to the arming of Palestinian police, but those weapons were turned back against Israelis. In three days of bloody confrontation, more than sixty Israelis were killed along with sixteen Arabs. The partnership forged in Oslo was shattered by conflict. In an atmosphere of increasing bitterness, President Clinton and King Hussein tried to mediate the damage. Progress would require trust between the Israelis and Palestinians. (“Chronology of Bombing Attacks Following September 1993 Accord”)

In early 1997, the Israeli government permitted construction of a Jewish settlement in the South of Jerusalem. Arabs saw this as a direct threat to their hopes for a capital. Confrontation became the norm. In Hebron, Jews and Arabs once again faced each other in the angry streets. In a crowded Jerusalem market, another suicide bombing took fourteen lives, and wounded more than a hundred people. This attack was only that of many that has claimed the lives of over 250 Israelis and wounded more than 500 since the signing of the Accord in September 1993. (“Chronology of Bombing Attacks Following September 1993 Accord)

By the summer of 1997, negotiations between the two sides had come to a halt, and American and foreign initiatives to restart them proved very difficult. In an atmosphere of mistrust, positions hardened. (“U.S. Envoy Organizes Top Israeli, PLO Meeting”) The negotiators in Oslo struggled to change images and to alter perceptions of each other, but their hopeful vision for the future is in danger of being cast aside.

Finding a solution for the problem between the Israelis and Palestinians is not a simple task. Yasser Arafat’s ultimate objective is to obtain, by whatever means necessary, the maximum amount of current Israeli land and resources. Netanyahu’s objective must be the exact opposite, to yield the minimum amount of territory. One thing is for sure; the numerous terrorist bombings will not accomplish any of this. Maybe the time has come for a more comprehensive and all encompassing negotiation that would include all of the countries involved in the region. For example, why not create a “real” homeland for the Palestinians, the objective of the Palestinians, by taking territory from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel? After all, why should Israel be expected to make all the geographic sacrifices to fulfil the aspirations of the Palestinian people? Why not let all the countries that are expressing their concern for the future prospects of the Palestinian people pay the territorial price for their freedom and autonomy?

Few events have aroused such intense reactions as the Oslo Peace Process. However, the peace process has irreversibly transformed the Middle East. Things have been said that have never been said before, things have been done that were never done before, and written peace commitments have been exchanged. There are no guarantees for the future, and in an atmosphere of bombings and violence, peace cannot be forged. Dedicated opponents of peace can still dismantle the Accord bit by bit through their terrorist and violent acts, until every necessary element of friendship, trust, and co-operation that is required for the Oslo Accord to succeed, has been undone. The success of the peace process may not lead to perfection, but it will stop the endless cycle of wars and violence. For both Israelis and Palestinians a path of opportunities has been shown. It is a difficult path, but unless it is pursued, generations might pass before anyone will attempt such a peace process again.

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