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Joseph Beare December 5, 2023

Lessons in Peacemaking: How Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin Defended Israel Through Vision and Territorial Compromise

By

Joseph Beare

Jason Ward
Adviser

History

Jason Ward

Adviser

Geoffrey Levin

Committee Member

Kenneth Stein

Committee Member

2023

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Abstract

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By Joseph Beare

Israel stands at the threshold of a historic choice. As of December 2023, its presence in the West Bank has grown to 450,000 Israelis outside of East Jerusalem. Unless something is done to halt the growth of Israeli settlers living outside of the major blocs, it is difficult to imagine anything other than a single binational state emerging in the next few decades. Real leadership is needed to preserve the possibility of two-state solution and separation between Israel and the Palestinians. Violent conflicts such as between Israel and the Arab world do not necessarily move toward resolution, even when continued conflict endangers the survival and prosperity of the regimes. Permanent ends to intractable wars—and even diplomatic breakthroughs such as the Oslo Accords—are not inevitable and the fact that they took place in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict serves as a testament to the courage of past leaders. Despite their differences, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin understood the value of compromise; they knew that giving up certain territories was imperative to ensure Israel's strategic welfare. Any future breakthrough will require Israeli prime ministers who are likewise willing to make difficult decisions to preserve Israel's future.

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Menachem Begin and the Israel-Egypt Peace 11

Chapter 2: Yitzhak Rabin and the Oslo Accords 33

Chapter 3: Applying the Lessons of the Past 56

Bibliography 81

Introduction

In 1948, Israel's founders had much more in mind than the mere creation of a state. After generations of persecution outside of their ancestral homeland, they sought refuge and redemption for the Jewish people. The state they actually established is a place of both extraordinary success and great human suffering. Daniel Gordis put it succinctly when he described Israel as a bold attempt by Jews to "take history into their own hands."[1] The horrors of European antisemitism during the twentieth century demonstrated the necessity of Jewish statehood in horrific terms. Zionism—the national liberation movement of the Jewish people—unfolded in the middle of the 1800s, but the Holocaust confirmed that the Jewish people simply could not rely on the international community—even the so-called liberal West—to protect them during their gravest trials.

After seventy-five years, Israel has achieved its raison d'être, serving as a safe-haven for Jewish refugees from Ethiopia, the Soviet Union and other countries ravaged by antisemitic violence. And yet, the Jewish state has also failed in one crucial respect: It has not made peace with *all* of its neighbors. Though Israel has negotiated and secured six treaties with Arab states, it has still not reached an accommodation with the Palestinians, who live west of the Jordan River. In the context of this protracted and unsustainable status quo, many academics have examined the factors that can serve as both impediments and catalysts to peace.[2] This thesis starts with the basic assumption that leadership and personality are amongst the most important of these factors. More specifically, I will analyze the decisive role of leadership—with a special emphasis on Israeli Prime Ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin—in producing the most significant diplomatic breakthroughs that Israel has forged with its Arab neighbors.

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[1] Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (New York: ECCO, 2017), 4

[2] See Laura Zittrain Eisenberg and Neil Caplan, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010); Jeremy Pressman, *The Sword is Not Enough: Arabs, Israelis and the Limits of Military Force* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Nathan Thrall, *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine* (New York: PICADOR, 2018).

From its establishment, Israel confronted unparalleled threats to its survival. In late 1947, United Nations Resolution 181 partitioned Palestine, then under the control of British colonial authorities, into separate Jewish and Arab states. Under the leadership of Israel's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion, the elected Zionist leadership in Palestine (the *Yishuv*) accepted the partition plan and Israel became an independent country on May 14, 1948. Meanwhile, neighboring Arab states rejected the UN resolution outright and condemned Israel as an illegitimate enclave that disturbed the homogeneity of the Arab world. Arab leaders vowed to defeat Israel militarily, with some more radical voices even calling for the extermination or expulsion of its Jewish majority. The partition plan provoked an all-out attack by the regular armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq on the fledging state, and the ensuing War of Independence.[3]

Israel survived this war, but it did not achieve an absolute victory as Arab states remained opposed to its existence *ex post facto*. The war ushered two distinct refugee crises: the mass displacement of Jews from Arab countries, and the displacement of some 750,000 Palestinians living in Israel to neighboring lands. Whereas Israel incorporated its newcomers as full citizens, surrounding Arab states confined many of the fleeing Palestinians to a perpetual refugee status. Moreover, though armistice agreements were signed in 1949, the Arab countries continued to uphold a state of war with Israel in the ensuing decades, refusing to recognize its legitimacy on any part of what they perceived as Arab land.

In fact, Arab unity against Israel's existence only began to splinter after the 1967 war, during which Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt; the West Bank from Jordan; and the Golan Heights from Syria in a stunning military victory that lasted only six days. The Six Day War began when Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser committed the *casus-bellis* of removing the UN peacekeepers from the Sinai and closing the Straits of Tiran, but it had the long-

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[3] Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1-36

term effect of laying the foundation for peace between Israel and *some* of its Arab neighbors.[4] It was, in the words of Mordechai Bar-On, a "significant watershed" which "changed dramatically all of Israel's existential parameters."[5] The significance of the 1967 changes were that Israel now held bargaining chips that could be exchanged for peace without touching on its territorial integrity within its de-facto borders. In accordance with UN Security Resolution 242, ratified in November 1967, Israel would be able to give up the captured territories for Arab recognition of its right "to live in peace with secure and recognized boundaries."[6] Indeed, the diplomatic opportunities created by the war were apparent to Israelis from both sides of the political spectrum in its aftermath.

Even still, the process of Arab moderation was not immediate. The Khartoum Summit of Arab countries in August 1967 produced a defiant declaration of "three noes" toward Israel—no peace, no negotiations, and no recognition.[7] At the same time, in the decades after their stunning military victory, many Israelis came to perceive the retention of the territories they captured as imperative for security or religious reasons (or both). With the revolutionary change in Israel's territorial status quo, many Israelis began to embrace a deep ideological concern for these lands, viewing them as the heartland of the Jewish patrimony and their retention as a religious imperative. Likewise, even more moderate Zionists began to perceive the captured territories as the only guarantor of strategic depth and security. Monographs by Galia Golan and Yael Yishai have explored the appeal of territorial maximalism within Israel and the ways in which it has complicated the peace process.[8] They made the obvious, though important, point that progress in Arab-Israeli

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[4] Kenneth Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace.* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1

[5] Mordechai Bar-On, "Six Days—A Watershed? Cleavages in the Way Israelis View Their History," in *Israel Studies* 23:3 (Fall 2018), 11

[6] "United Nations Security Council Resolution 242," *UN Peacemaker,* November 22, 1967, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SCRes242%281967%29.pdf

[7] Yoram Meital, "The Khartoum Conference and Egyptian Policy After the 1967 War: A Reexamination," in *The Middle East Journal* 54:1 (December 2000), 70

[8] Galia Golan, *Israeli Peacemaking Since 1967: Factors Behind the Breakthroughs and Failures.* (London: Routledge, 2015); Yael Yishai, *Land or Peace: Whither Israel?* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987)

diplomacy was achieved only once regional leaders overcame the constraints of domestic politics. The breakthrough of the 1970s and 1990s, they state, were made possible by Arab leaders who accepted Israel's right to exist as a sovereign state, as well as Israeli leaders who were willing to relinquish control of lands that some considered sacrosanct.

Lessons in Peacemaking tells the story of two Israeli leaders who, in their own ways, challenged the territorial maximalists. It marks one of the first systematic comparisons of Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin: the two prime ministers who led Israel to its greatest diplomatic coups with Arab neighbors. With the exception of Dr Kenneth Stein's *Heroic Diplomacy*, few of the inquiries on the Middle East peace process deal exclusively with the role of personality and leadership — and even fewer focus exclusively on the role of Israeli leaders across different peace initiatives.[9] Likewise, the numerous biographies written about both Begin and Rabin may be useful in providing an insight into their individual profiles, but they do not bring out the substantive commonalities that made them ideal peacemakers — or, indeed, the patterns across them that can help in establishing lessons going forward.[10] *Lessons in Peacemaking* fills this lacuna in the historical record. By focusing specifically on the two prime ministers who led their nation during its most significant peace initiatives, this comparative study addresses not only their differences, but the unappreciated commonalities in their worldviews, leaderships and objectives that can aid the cause of Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

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[9] Stein's *Heroic Diplomacy* (1999) used personally-conducted interviews with Arab, Israeli and American diplomats to analyze the personalities and leaders that contributed to the diplomatic breakthroughs of the 1970s. Its scope is largely limited to the interlocutors involved in the Israel-Egypt and the Israel-Sinai interim agreements, as well as the later peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

[10] For biographies on Begin, see Robert Rowland, *The Rhetoric of Menachem Begin: The Myth of Redemption Through Return.* (New York: University Press of America, 1985); Avi Shilon, *Menachem Begin: A Life.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Ned Temko, *To Win or Die: A Personal Portrait of Menachem Begin*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987); Daniel Gordis, *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's Soul*. (New York: Nextbook, 2014); Hillel Seidman, *Menachem Begin: His Life and Legacy*. (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1990); Lester Eckman and Gertrude Hirschler, *Menachem Begin: From Freedom Fighter to Statesman*. (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1979).
See below for biographies on Rabin

Begin and Rabin were very different leaders, but they were also part of a founding generation of Israelis that understood what it took to defend the state. On one hand, they were motivated by distinct ideologies and began their public lives as bitter foes within a divided Zionist independence movement. Begin assumed command of the *Irgun Zvai Leumi* in 1943. During this period, he advocated guerrilla warfare as a means of forcing Britain to withdraw from Palestine. The most notorious of the *Irgun's* attacks took place in July 1946, when the organization bombed the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, killing ninety-one people.[11] Only through violence against the colonial authorities, Begin believed, could the Jewish people obtain a state. So too, he was adamant on the territorial demarcations of this future state. "Let this be clear," he excoriated in a 1947 radio address, "the establishment even of this ghetto inside our Homeland will be carried out amidst flames of fire and rivers of blood."[12] While Ben-Gurion accepted the UN's partition plan, Begin rejected the proposed solution as an unjust severing of the Jewish people from their homeland.

In contrast, Rabin did not share the perception of the West Bank and Gaza as sacrosanct. As a young fighter in the *Palmach*, an underground Labor Zionist commando unit, he adopted the principles and worldview of mainstream Zionist leaders such as Berl Katznelson and Ben-Gurion: socialist economic policy and flexibility regarding the territories partitioned into separate states by the United Nations.[13] Tension between the Revisionist and Labor Zionist factions reached fever pitch in June 1948, when the Irgun leadership chartered a ship, the *Altalena*, carrying new immigrants, paramilitary fighters, and a huge cache of weapons in violation of the UN-sponsored truce. Misconstruing the shipment for a military putsch against the Labor Zionists, Ben-Gurion ordered his forces, which included a young Yitzhak Rabin, to open fire on the boat with Begin

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11 Joseph Heller, "'Neither Masada-Nor Vichy': Diplomacy and Resistance in Zionist Politics, 1945-1947," in *The International History Review* 3, No. 4 (October 1981), 540-564

12 Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, *Be Strong and Of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 91

13 Yael Aronoff, *The Political Psychology of Israeli Prime Ministers: When Hard-Liners Opt for Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 102/103

aboard. Embattled on all fronts by invading Arab armies, Israel stood on the precipice of civil war—Jew against Jew; the Irgun against the newly-established Israel Defence Forces (IDF); and Menachem Begin against the Labor Zionists, which included Rabin as a fledging leader.[14] The *Altalena* fiasco exposed the festering divisions that separated both Rabin and Begin at the time of Israel's founding.

On the other hand, once they assumed the mantle of Israel's premiership, Begin and Rabin came to embrace similar national aspirations and a common definition of what leadership required of them.[15] Despite their diverging upbringings and outlooks on the territories, they eventually shared an unrelenting commitment to Israel's security — and a pragmatic will to part with *certain* territories in its service. It is also noteworthy that the prime ministers, in each case, wanted to know where America stood and requested American material support and assurances before they acted. Begin headed the government during the 1970s negotiations with Egypt. In exchange for peace with the *de facto* leader of the Arab world, he conceded the Sinai and accepted a plan for Palestinian self-governance, but not sovereignty, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. He did so at the expense of his relationship with many leaders and former Irgun comrades on Israel's Revisionist right, who variously condemned him as a traitor. Over forty years on, the peace has survived notwithstanding Israel's controversial 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the more recent Muslim Brotherhood revolution in Egypt. Moreover, since the signing of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in 1979, no other Arab *state* has attacked Israel. The country today faces its gravest threats from Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.[16]

By the same token, Rabin made historic compromises to Israel's frontline enemies at the price of angering Israel's virulent settler community. In fact, he paid the ultimate price in early

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[14] Gordis, *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's Soul*, 82-97.

[15] Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, 8

[16] Robert Barron et al, "Middle East Peace: What can we learn from Camp David 40 Years Later?" *United States Institute of Peace: Making Peace Possible* (March 25, 2019), https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/03/middle-east-peace-what-can-we-learn-camp-david-40-years-later

November 1995 at the hands of a fanatical Jewish-Israeli assassin intent on derailing the peace process. Rabin held the premiership for two non-consecutive terms immediately before Begin took office and during the Oslo peace process of the 1990s. During his second term, he made the bold step of recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), previously designated as a terrorist group, as the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people. He also began a process of territorial withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, paving the way for limited Palestinian self-rule and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The fruits of Rabin's initiative are less tangible than Begin's, especially in light of recent bloody wars fought between Israel and the terror group Hamas, which today governs the Gaza Strip. However, there is little doubt that the Oslo process created a necessary framework for direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. It also paved the way for a peace treaty with Jordan in October 1994, as well as improved trade relations between Israel and the international community.[17]

These diplomatic successes would not have been possible had Rabin not made heroic concessions to the PLO. The steps he took were controversial, but he was willing to bear the cost of intense domestic censure for the sake of Israel's strategic needs. On this score, there was virtually no distinction between him and Begin, or any of the other Israeli prime ministers who had established and sustained the state during the tumultuous decades of its early existence. He did not share Begin's messianic zeal for maintaining Israel's control over Judaea and Samaria, but both leaders were driven by the same overarching priority: bettering the security condition of the people of Israel. At critical junctures in the Arab-Israeli conflict, they observed the stakes and came to the conclusion that it would be irresponsible not to seize the moment through vision, risk-taking and territorial compromise. To be sure, neither Begin nor Rabin achieved their peace agreements in a vacuum. Unlike many other Israeli leaders, they had the opportunity of negotiating with Arab

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[17] Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*. (New York: Random House, 2013), 260.

interlocutors who accepted Israel's basic right to exist, as well as American leaders who were willing to leverage considerable aid to bridge the differences of the two sides. And yet, the steps they took were still difficult — and necessary for their eventual breakthroughs.

Across three chapters, this thesis will compare two heroic leaders whose peace initiatives yield important lessons for today's Middle East diplomacy. Chapter I explores Prime Minister Begin's role in producing the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty of 1979. Begin did not write a memoir or grant many interviews after he left office. Likewise, the memoirs written by senior Israeli and American negotiators at Camp David are mostly personal accounts which diminish Begin's role as chief negotiator.[18] This makes it difficult to provide an accurate account of his rationale for territorial compromise, but not impossible. In this process, I have benefited from numerous Israeli government documents that have been declassified in recent years. Over fifty years after the events themselves, Begin's powerful and eloquent voice as Minister without Portfolio at the time of the 1967 war are now accessible through recently-released protocols by the Israel State Archives. So too, the Begin Center in Jerusalem has provided a treasure trove of speeches that he conducted during his life. A close examination of these primary documents reveal Begin as a complicated figure: an ideologue who refused to transfer sovereignty over the West Bank, but also a pragmatic diplomat who refrained from annexing the West Bank and made agonizing concessions regarding the Sinai. He knew that peace with Egypt would weaken Jordan and the Palestinians, the real challengers to Israel's control of the West Bank.

Chapter II evaluates the Oslo Accords of the 1990s and the tough decisions that Prime Minister Rabin made during his second term. It will utilize the numerous biographies written on

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[18] For American negotiators at Camp David, Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President.* (Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1995); Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*. (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983). For Israeli negotiators at Camp David, see Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981); Ezer Weizmann, *The Battle For Peace* (New York: Bantam, 1981)

Rabin—as well as his own memoir and public speeches—to apply the same psychohistorical framework as that applied to Begin's peace initiative.[19] It will dig into his background, with a particular emphasis on his upbringing in pre-state Israel, to contextualize his policies toward Israel's Arab neighbors. It will explore his assessment of the regional environments he faced and the decisions he made given the diplomatic opportunities at his disposal. Like Begin, Rabin trusted the threats made by Israel's enemies, principally by Iran and its Islamist proxies such as Hamas, but also saw an opening to transform the Middle East in a way that would enhance Israel's future security. Difficult territorial concessions, he came to understand, would allow Israel to deal with the long-term threat of Iran and Islamic fundamentalism by enhancing its ability to develop relations with a wider circle of moderate Arab actors.[20] He also knew that giving up parts of the West Bank to the PLO would allow Israel to safeguard its long-term survival as a Jewish and democratic state.[21]

The culminating chapter of *Lessons in Peacemaking* derives lessons from Begin's and Rabin's diplomatic achievements in the context of the political realities and forces that dominate the Middle East today. As of this writing, Israel's presence in the West Bank has grown to 450,000 Israelis outside of East Jerusalem. Unless something is done to halt the growth of Israeli settlers living outside of the major blocs, it is hard to envision anything other than the emergence of a single binational state where demographic trends gradually reduce the Jewish majority over time. In this perturbing scenario, Israel will risk becoming an undemocratic state where only half of its population is granted the right to vote, or rather a de-facto Palestinian state with a majority Palestinian voting bloc. A perpetual occupation—or what some critics describe as the 'One-State

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[19] Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, edited by Dov Goldstein. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). For biographies on Rabin, see Leslie Derfer. *Yitzhak Rabin: A Political Biography.* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Itamar Rabinovich, *Yitzhak Rabin: Soldier, Leader, Statesman.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Robert Slater, *Rabin of Israel: Warrior for Peace*. (New York: HarperPaperbacks, 1996); Shaul Webber, *Yitzhak Rabin: The Growth of A Leader.* (Tel Aviv: Dekel Academic Press, 2013).

[20] Efraim Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*. (Washington D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1999).

[21] Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, *Be Strong and of Good Courage,* 201

Solution'—poses a direct threat to Israel's character and identity as a Jewish and democratic state. It is also a recipe for continued violence as Palestinians will not accept an outcome in which they have neither national rights nor equal rights in a binational state and Israelis will not accept minority-status under a Palestinian state.[22]

Put simply, Israel stands at the threshold of a historic choice. Real leadership is needed to preserve the possibility of genuine peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Violent conflicts such as between Israel and the Arab world do not necessarily move toward resolution, even when continued conflict endangers the survival and prosperity of the regimes. The absolute destruction of the Tamil leadership in the Sri Lankan conflict is a case in point. Permanent ends an intractable wars—and even diplomatic breakthroughs such as the Oslo Accords—are not inevitable and the fact that they took place in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict serves as a testament to the courage and vision of past leaders. Despite their differences (and imperfections), Begin and Rabin understood the value of compromise; they knew that giving up certain territories was imperative to ensure Israel's strategic well-being. Any future breakthrough will require Israeli prime ministers who are similarly willing to make difficult decisions to preserve Israel's future.

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[22] Ibid., 273-205

Chapter I: Menachem Begin and the Israel-Egypt Peace

Menachem Begin's Worldview and the Strategic Equation in 1977

As prime minister, Menachem Begin faced a starkly different strategic equation than his predecessors. Upon his election in May 1977, Israel was still reeling from the particularly bloody 1973 Yom Kippur War with Egypt and Syria, but it also faced a more favorable climate for peacemaking than ever before in its short history. The new territorial status-quo begot by the 1967 changes created an entirely new strategic equation. Israel's stunning victory not only demonstrated to Sadat that Israel was a *fait accompli*, but incurred what he perceived as an unsustainable economic and political cost for his native Egypt. The loss of revenue from the Sinai oil fields (which brought in an estimated annual income of one billion dollars); the closure of the Suez Canal; the influx of refugees from the occupied territories into Cairo; and the need to rebuild the army resulted in mammoth economic losses and compounded Egypt's dependency on neighboring, oil-rich Arab states.[23] In this context, the Egyptian premier came to perceive closer alignment with the United States, and the accompanying detente with Israel, as the only remedy to Egypt's unprecedented economic woes and regional dependence.

Unanimous rejection of Israel by the Arab world ended in November 1977 when Sadat visited Jerusalem. "Today I tell you, and I declare it to the whole world," Sadat insisted during his address before the Knesset, "that we accept to live with you in permanent peace based on justice."[24] At a crucial moment in the history of the Middle East, he transformed the conflict from a military confrontation over Israel's existence into a political conflict to be resolved through direct negotiations. He granted Menachem Begin something that had been withheld from all of his

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[23] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Egyptian Politics Under Sadat: The Post-Populist Development of an Authoritarian-Modernizing State.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 26; John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes.* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 66.

[24] "Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to the Israeli Knesset," *Center for Israel Education*, Accessed April 30, 2023, https://israeled.org/resources/documents/egyptian-president-anwar-sadat-to-the-israeli-knesset/

predecessors, namely, an Egyptian leader that was willing to abandon maximalist demands regarding territory. For the first time in its short history, Israel had the opportunity to resolve a peace treaty with an Arab state and not just any Arab state but Egypt, the greatest and strongest of the Arab countries.[25]

Yet at the same time, Sadat's acceptance of Israel was not enough to produce the historic detente; political changes that occurred *within* Israel during the 1970s were equally decisive in producing the Camp David Accords and the subsequent Israel-Egypt treaty.[26] The Israeli national election of May 17 1977, known in Israel as the "turnabout" (mahapach), ushered the most dramatic change in Israeli politics since the establishment of the state: that is, the ascendance of Menachem Begin and his party, the Likud. This unexpected change portended a major alteration in Israeli foreign policy, as well as its domestic policy. For the first twenty-nine years of Israel's existence, the Labor party had ruled the state, with Begin and his party subordinated to the opposition and derided as too irresponsible to assume the mantle of state power. When Begin eventually became the leader of the government in May 1977, it was feared that the chances of a political settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict had diminished considerably.[27] After all, his policies regarding the occupied territories and possible peace agreements were motivated by decidedly different considerations than those of the Labor party and his predecessor, Yitzhak Rabin.

For Begin, the key was *Eretz-Yisrael*. His ideology and upbringing imposed unmistakable limits on how far he would go to secure a peace treaty with Egypt. Put simply, he would not agree to any settlement that he believed would compromise Israel's national security or its claim to lands that *belong* to the Jewish people. A disciple of the Revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the prime minister fervently believed that the West Bank—which he referred to by its biblical names of

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[25] Golan, *Israeli Peacemaking Since 1967*, 44/45

[26] Pressman, *Sword is not Enough*, 80-85

[27] Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process 1977-1982: In Search of Legitimacy for Peace* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 19

Judaea and Samaria—and the Gaza Strip were endowed to the Jewish people by historic, even religious, right.[28] On the day after the UN partition vote in November 1947, Begin issued the following order: "The land has not been liberated but mutilated. *Eretz Yisrael* will be restored to the people of Israel—all of it—and forever."[29] Rather than heed the pragmatic calls of Ben-Gurion to accept the partition plan, he insisted that the *Yishuv* not settle for anything less than a Jewish state that reigned sovereign over the entirety of what he considered the Jewish patrimony.[30] According to Revisionist philosophy, this included not only Jerusalem (which was withheld from Zionist control under the original partition), but Gaza, the West Bank and even the lands east of the Jordan River (parts of modern-day Jordan). Up until 1964 the Herut party would put "Jordan" in quotes in their party platforms.[31]

Even though Begin tacitly abandoned Israel's claim to the lands east of the Jordan River sometime in the 1960s, he never wavered in his commitment to Jewish sovereignty over the West Bank. After the Six Days War, he did not perceive the West Bank and Gaza as bargaining chips to be traded in exchange for promises of peace, but rather advocated that these lands be retained for historical and security reasons. Indeed, the lands that he expounded as the cradle of Jewish civilization assumed a historical and strategic significance after 1967. Begin—then serving as Minister without Portfolio as part of a national unity government which included Herut for the first time—participated in several cabinet discussions held between June 15 and June 19. During these sessions, government ministers devised a strategy on how Israel ought to handle the newly-occupied territories. The cabinet agreed that East Jerusalem should be annexed. That Israelis were largely

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[28] Arthur Hertzberg, "Israel and the West Bank: The Implications of Permanent Control," in *Foreign Affairs* 61, No. 5 (Summer 1983): 1064-1077

[29] Ibid., 1075.

[30] Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, 90/91

[31] Ibid., 80.

barred from accessing the holiest area for Jews between 1948 and 1967 played a decisive role in this position.[32]

So too, an overall consensus did emerge between the Herut/Likud leader and his fellow ministers that the Jordan River should serve as Israel's eastern border for security purposes, though Begin was the only minister who favored retaining the entirety of the West Bank (including the more populated areas).[33] "I say, simply," he stated, "Western *Eretz Yisrael* is all ours. What is the fear to say this?"[34] For Begin, the security rationale for retaining the West Bank coexisted with—and complemented—his notions of historic rights to the Jewish homeland. Having grown up in Poland during the zenith of European antisemitism and lost immediate family members to the Holocaust, he was defined by what Alan Dowty has termed the "Jewish worldview," itself the product of a unique history of persecution.[35] On a deeply personal basis, the memory of the Holocaust was ever-present in Begin's life and the larger trajectory of the Jewish people had significant implications for his approach to diplomacy and territorial compromise. Like many Israelis, he equated the Jewish state's antagonists with historic enemies of the Jewish people and excoriated the pre-1967 borders as inadequate to protect Israel from national destruction.

In Begin's eyes, any territorial forfeiture of the strategically-important West Bank to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which he regularly castigated as the "Nazi organization of the Arab states," could lead deterministically to a second Holocaust.[36] This area, on the territory's eastern perimeter and adjacent to Jordan, had granted Israel's adversaries an ideal vantage point to

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[32] "Transcript of a sub-committee of the Security Cabinet," *Israel State Archives*, June 15 1967, https://catalog.archives.gov.il/en/chapter/summary2/

[33] Ibid

[34] Ibid., 30.

[35] David Ignatius, "Menachem Begin: Shaped by Holocaust," in *The Washington Post* (March 10, 1992), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1992/03/10/menachem-begin-shaped-by-holocaust/09422729-23ca-49b3-8f9b-2c36bf0a9542/; Alan Dowty, "Israeli Foreign Policy and the Jewish Question." In *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3, No. 1 (March 1999), 1

[36] Gerald M. Steinberg and Ziv Rubinovitz, *Menachem Begin and the Israel-Egypt Peace Process*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 33

attack Israel's population centers in both the 1948 and 1967 wars. Even Abba Eban, a well-known dove who served as Israel's first Ambassador to the United Nations, excoriated the pre-1967 lines as the "Auschwitz borders."[37] Begin invoked this precarious security situation after the 1967 war as part of his justification for retaining the territories: "The survivors of the Holocaust," he lamented in during a 1970 speech, "are now in mortal danger from the Arab… rockets which would undoubtedly be positioned in the territories relinquished by Israel."[38] Put simply, the security issue, in addition to Begin's ideological commitment to Greater Israel, informed his opposition to any semblance of foreign sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A return to Jordanian rule, or an independent Palestinian state run by PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, could simply not be reconciled with Begin's ideological commitments.

At the same time, Begin was acutely aware of the national security dividends associated with a bilateral peace between Israel and Egypt. Moreover, he was willing to make monumental concessions in the Sinai which, along with the Golan Heights, was not considered part of historic Israel. This is illustrated by their exclusion from the crest of both the Irgun and later the Herut party.[39] Moreover, a close examination of the post-war cabinet meetings and Begin's writings and statements during the 1970s reveal that he harbored no sentimental or other ties to the Sinai or the Golan Heights, and was prepared for substantial territorial concessions in return for peace agreements with Egypt and Syria.[40] Negotiating a peace treaty with one of Israel's Arab neighbors was a way for Begin to garner international and domestic legitimacy after years of derision in the opposition. As Amos Perlmutter has wrote, the desire for peace became a "personal attribute for

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[37] Gordis, *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's Soul*, 163

[38] Arye Naor, "Lessons of the Holocaust versus Territories for Peace, 1967-2001," in *Israel Studies* 8, No.1 (Spring, 2003): 130-152, 140
See also "Israel's Territorial Concessions July 13, 1977," *Israel State Archivesneighbors,* July 13, 1977, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RAc1fs7i34vyIFXWshObLGanftfqawIN/view

[39] Golan, *Israeli Peacemaking Since 1967*, 43

[40] Ibid

Begin, a part of his schemata… He burned to achieve some sort of peace. Peace meant glory, a place in history, legitimacy."[41] Even more importantly, Begin understood that a peace treaty with Egypt would serve Israel's strategic interests after decades of conflict and the traumatizing experience of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Three-thousand Israelis died in this war — and the heavy losses imbued Begin, and most Israelis, with the understanding that Israel would have to make territorial compromises to protect its future.

The argument went as follows: Egypt would be enticed to remove itself from the Arab-Israeli conflict and conventional wars between Israel and its neighbors would cease as other Arab states would not be prepared to attack Israel without Egypt's aid.[42] In his speech to his party conference in the winter of 1977 shortly before the elections, Begin insisted that his first concern would be to prevent war if his Likud party were called upon to form a government. Likewise, in the aftermath of his historic election, he made a bilateral peace with Egypt his highest priority by sending the new Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan to secretly convene with Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister Hassan Tuhami about the prospects of territorial withdrawal in exchange for peace in September 1977.[43] The decision to orient the Israeli peace initiative toward Egypt did not deviate from the approach of past Israeli governments. Prime Minister Rabin had signed two disengagement agreements with Sadat, both involving Israeli withdrawal from parts of Egyptian territory—to the Gidi and Mitla passes—without a formal peace treaty.[44] The Egyptian orientation rested on two perceptions: that the Egyptian-Israeli conflict was territorial rather than ideological, and that wars would cease once Egypt, the figure-head nation within the Arab world, was persuaded to remove itself from the cycle of violence.[45]

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[41] Amos Perlmutter, *Life and Times of Menachem Begin.* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 336, 327

[42] Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process 1977-1982*, 22

[43] Ibid., 20/21

[44] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 146-187

[45] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 146-187

Begin inherited this policy-concept, but also made made crucial modifications. First, he believed that the incremental approach required that Israel give up too much in exchange for meagre promises and vied for a full-fledged peace treaty with Egypt, even if only a separate peace. During the 1970s, Begin attacked involvement in these negotiations as dangerous for Israel, citing frequent declarations from the Egyptian government that their main objective in the negotiations was to strengthen their military capabilities, and stridently reiterated his policy of "no withdrawal without a peace treaty."[46] Second, Begin possessed the necessary political capital and hawkish credentials to obtain domestic legitimacy for territorial compromises. As leader of the foremost right-wing party in the Knesset, Begin would face less parliamentary backlash than his predecessors for showing flexibility in negotiations with the Arabs. This was the perception of the American administration, as well as President Sadat himself.

Indeed, Begin's situation as leader of the Likud was a key consideration for his Egyptian interlocutor, who only visited Jerusalem and embarked on his peace initiative because he trusted Begin and Dayan as having the political will and capital necessary to make difficult decisions. Tuhami emphasized in his private meeting with Dayan that Sadat had "no confidence" in Rabin's first government to make bold concessions.[47] Likewise, President Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski noted during a private meeting with Carter in 1977 that "Begin eventually might be better able than the Israeli Labor Party to deliver the concessions necessary for peace."[48] Put simply, Sadat and American officials perceived Begin as someone who could obtain the necessary public support for risk-taking and territorial compromise — and this was partly the outcome of Begin's own signaling to Sadat upon his election. Begin was aware of his ideal positioning within the Israeli body politic and made it clear to Sadat from his earliest days as prime

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[46] Ezer Weizman, *Battle for Peace* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 115

[47] "Summary of Dayan-Tuhami meeting," *Israel State Archives,* September 16, 1977, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YDsxzaqavVPBcdkOXQpEoI5S6Jlqa_Ea/view

[48] Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor*, 99.

minister that he was willing to make far-reaching territorial and ideological compromises, even if he would not relent on his core principles regarding Judaea and Samaria.

A Break with Ideology and his Former Comrades

Begin began devising his peace plan shortly after Sadat's visit in November 1977. It comprised two parts, one for peace with Egypt and one for special autonomy arrangements for the Palestinians. The peace plan was based on the accurate assumption that Sadat urgently needed peace and would be ready to sign a separate treaty with Israel provided that Begin gave back the entire Sinai—itself, an extremely painful concession—and make at least symbolic gestures in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In his original peace proposal, Begin pledged to transfer sovereignty over the entire Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, but insisted that Israel's airfields and civilian settlements remain in place with their inhabitants subject to Israeli law and permitted to maintain a defensive police force. Ultimately, Begin would accept that the prize of peace far-outweighed the price of dismantling the settlements. But at this early stage, he held fast to his position.

Regarding the West Bank and Gaza, he was prepared to grant the Palestinians limited self-governance or autonomy, but not a state.[49] Sadat's visit had made clear that Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai would not be enough to placate the Egyptian premier. He would need at least nominal gestures in the West Bank and Gaza in order to defend his peace plan before the Arab world and implied as much during his speech before the Knesset: "As for the Palestinian cause," he insisted, "no one can deny that it is the crux of the matter…the solution lies in recognizing a state for the Palestinian people."[50] Begin preferred to ignore Sadat's declarations about statehood as no more than lip service. For good reason, he believed that Sadat did not actually want a Palestinian state and was rather forced into making such grandiose statements by both his advisors and his detractors

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[49] Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process 1977-1982*, 63

[50] Eitan Haber et al, *The Year of the Dove* (New York: Michaelmark Books, 1979), 69

in the Arab world.[51] Accordingly, Begin decided not to offer anything more than a *via-media* between Palestinian statehood and Israeli military rule. For decades he had dreamed of annexing the West Bank and fought for the idea of an indivisible land of Israel. Yet the realities of international politics and diplomacy awakened Begin from his utopian dream almost immediately upon assuming office.[52]

To keep the prospect of a bilateral Israel-Egypt peace alive, Begin did not annex the West Bank and offered Sadat and Carter a system of limited self-rule for the Palestinians. Under his conception of autonomy, which was first outlined to President Carter in December 1977, the military government would be abolished and Arabs living in the West Bank and Gaza—who he referred to only as the "Arab inhabitants of Eretz Yisrael"—would elect an administrative council whose powers would be determined through negotiations between representatives from Israel, Jordan, and elected officials from the West Bank and Gaza.[53] Meanwhile, Israel would maintain its claim to sovereignty over these territories and Jews would retain their right to settle in the West Bank. This arrangement, Begin believed, would provide Sadat with a symbolic victory for the Palestinians and adequate political cover in the Arab world, while precluding the establishment of a Palestinian state on what he perceived as land that belonged to the Jewish people.[54]

So too, autonomy was the only solution that satisfied Begin's genuine concerns for the rights of Israel's Arab inhabitants. The prime minister had always believed that Jewish nationalism was compatible with civil liberties. He had a genuine desire to end Israel's military rule of millions of Arabs living in the West Bank. "The Arab nation in the land of Israel, which we recognize, should

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[51] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 230

[52] Haber, *The Year of the Dove,* 105

[53] "Meeting Between Prime Minister Begin and President Carter at the White House," *Israel State Archives MFA 6862/11*, December 16, 1977, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WmLHO6C1PZO8Q9vu0-kWfBRtZKNWcWU8/view

[54] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 231; Yehuda Avner, *The Prime Ministers: An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2010), 496

be given cultural autonomy," Begin said in 1975.[55] He knew, for example, that Jabotinsky had outlined a similar program in *The Jewish War Front* and that Jews living in large European empires had been allowed to govern themselves in lieu of sovereignty.[56] Begin did not consider Israel to be occupying the West Bank and Gaza. He stridently believed that the land had been endowed to the Jewish people and "liberated" by the Israeli army in 1967.[57] But he also understood that a substantial Arab population was living in these areas. Israel could not give the Arab inhabitants of *Eretz-Yisrael* national independence because Judaea and Samaria "belonged" to Israel and provided a decisive strategic buffer against aggressive Arab states. At the same time, Israel could not give them citizenship, since that would alter the demography of the Jewish state to the point where Israel would be forced to compromise with either its Jewish or democratic character. This was unacceptable for Begin; in a speech to the Knesset on December 28 1977, he made clear that Zionism and "apartheid" were incompatible. The only solution, therefore, was some form of *separation* that preserved Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank—that is, limited self-government as opposed to continued military rule or Palestinian statehood.[58]

The autonomy plan, and the remaining colonial outposts in the Sinai, constituted the major obstacles to an Egypt-Israel peace treaty during the early negotiating process and later at Camp David. Until the culmination of Camp David in September 1978, Sadat and President Carter maintained that Begin ought to transfer sovereignty over the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. A full withdrawal from Judaea and Samaria, they contended, was the only path toward a comprehensive peace between Israel and the entire Arab world. On the first day of Camp David, Sadat outlined Egypt's negotiating position in decisive terms: Israel's full evacuation of the Sinai, as

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[55] Haber, *The Year of the Dove,* 106

[56] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 233

[57] Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S. Relationship From Truman To Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 153

[58] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 233

well as all lands captured in the 1967 war (including East Jerusalem) in order to pave the way for a Palestinian "national entity."[59] Meanwhile, the briefing materials prepared for Carter by aides before the Camp David meetings reveal that American officials wanted Israel to halt the construction of settlements in the West Bank and to accept a process of withdrawal that would eventually lead to Palestinian "self-determination" and the fulfillment of their national rights.[60]

To Begin, the request was ludicrous. He wanted a peace deal with Egypt, but not at any cost. The West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem—what he considered the cradle of Jewish civilization—were simply not on the negotiating table. He perceived the Jewish right to settle in the West Bank as sacrosanct. Moreover, though it was not clear what Palestinian self-determination meant to the various parties, the idea of relinquishing the West Bank and Gaza to an independent Palestinian state was anathema to both Begin and even those who did not share his ideological fervency for the occupied territories. His was still an era when even left-wing politicians in Israel rejected the very notion of full-fledged Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank for fear that it would serve as a grave security threat. Sadat was demanding that Israel not only decrease its strategic depth by giving up the Sinai, but lay the foundation for a state for a group—the PLO—which remained expressly committed to Israel's destruction in the strategic plateau to its east.[61] Indeed, he and President Carter picked an issue on which Begin simply could not and would not compromise. They exhibited an ignorance of Begin's ideological commitment to settlement in Judaea and Samaria; the political constraints he faced as the democratic leader of a nation which opposed Palestinian statehood en-masse; and the existential threats that Israel faced from its neighbors. In so doing, they nearly condemned the peace process to failure.[62]

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[59] Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough*, 161

[60] "Study Papers for the Camp David Talks," Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, September 5, 1978, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SysHX-T4HmhCSYma-0AOtonK9_jiMoDc/view

[61] Gordis, *The Battle for Israel's Soul*, 170

[62] Ibid., 162

After thirteen days of negotiations, the Camp David meetings succeeded only because Sadat, as Begin assumed, wanted a peace deal with Israel and the return of the Sinai more than he cared about the Palestinian issue. In fact, there is ample reason to believe that President Carter wanted a comprehensive settlement much more than Sadat did. Arye Naor, who was cabinet secretary under Begin and a negotiator at Camp David, has contended that Sadat gave up nothing that truly matter to him, noting that he "couldn't care less about the Palestinians" and actually feared the establishment of a radical PLO state in the West Bank.[63] This meant that Begin did not face the unbearable dichotomy between peace with Egypt and Israeli sovereignty in Judaea and Samaria. The Camp David Accords contained three main parts—a preamble, an Egyptian-Israeli section, and a framework outlining a compromise agreement on the Palestinian dimension. The preamble mentioned UN Resolution 242, but did not state that it applied on all fronts. Meanwhile, the West Bank/Gaza segment of the Accords established an ambiguous process by which the Palestinians would obtain "full autonomy" after a period of five years, subject to negotiations held between Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians.

Nowhere in the agreement was it stated when autonomy would begin and, under its terms, Israel would only be required to begin its military withdrawal from the West Bank after elections were held for the self-governing authority. No mention was made of withdrawal of civilian settlements or a long-term freeze on settlement building.[64] In other words, this was not the comprehensive peace that President Carter had wanted and virtually begged Begin to give him. As Stein wrote, the Camp David Agreement was "light years away from discussions of less than eleven months earlier about a comprehensive peace, a full-fledged conference."[65] In the years following the agreement, the autonomy talks stalled and Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank continued

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[63] Ibid., 172

[64] "Camp David Accords: The Framework for Peace in the Middle East," *Jimmy Carter Presidential Library*, September 17, 1978, https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/additional-resources/camp-david-accords/framework-for-peace-in-the-middle-east

[65] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 252

at a measured pace.[66] Regarding the Palestinian question, Begin had gotten his way, while his interlocutors had not.

The same cannot be stated, however, of the Egyptian-Israeli section of the Accords. Begin's technique of procrastination may have succeeded in entrenching Israel's control over the West Bank and Gaza, which remained under Israel's military control even if it was not annexed, but he was not able to evade agonizing concessions over the Sinai. As Dayan has wrote, the Camp David conference was the "decisive, most difficult and least pleasant stage of the Egypt-Israel peace negotiations," mainly because Israel had to "revolve agonizing psychological and ideological crises" in order to secure an agreement.[67] While Sadat was adamant that the Egyptian people would not agree to a single Israeli settler or soldier remaining on his soil, Begin was driven by a similarly strong ideological commitment to the Sinai settlements and had assured the Israeli public that they would remain. Begin attempted to convince President Carter of the nature of the settlements, the reason they were constructed in the first place, their security value, and their ideological importance. All this, however, failed to convince the American President, who was aligned with Sadat's demand for the removal of the settlements.[68]

Under considerable pressure from Carter to change his mind, Begin conceded on the settlements on conference's twelfth day. The meeting that evening of President Carter and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance with Begin, Dayan and legal advisor to the Israeli delegation Aharon Barak was, according to Dayan, the "eleventh hour of the negotiations."[69] At some point in the course of the negotiations, Begin realized that peace with Egypt required that he deviate from his original

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66 Colin Shindler, *Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream: Power, Politics and Ideology from Begin to Netanyahu* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1995), 99

67 Dayan, *Breakthrough*, 153

68 "Memorandum of Conversation between US President Jimmy Carter, US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan at Camp David," *Center for Israel Education*, September 16, 1978, https://israeled.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/8.-19780918-Memorandum-of-Conversation-between-US-President-Jimmy-Carter.pdf

69 Dayan, *Breakthrough*, 182

peace plan. The dichotomy between the settlements and an agreement with Egypt—that is, between peace and land—had never been clearer.[70] Weizmann argued in his memoirs that the pressure exerted by Carter was decisive in producing a breakthrough.[71] Carter warned Begin several times that a failure to concede on the settlements would doom the peace process; increase the possibility of conventional warfare between Israel and Egypt; and severely damage the Israel-US military, political and economic alliance. Carter noted that the discussion on the twelfth night of Camp David was "obviously very painful" for the prime minister, who used terms such as "ultimatum" and "political suicide."[72] Confronted with the specter of another war with Egypt and an isolated Israel on the world stage, Begin relented; he agreed to submit the issue of the settlements to the Knesset within two weeks of Camp David's conclusion, though he did so reluctantly.

Dismantling the settlements was demonstrably difficult for Begin for it required that he risk alienating his political base and uproot Jewish settlements, namely, the bedrock of the Zionist movement. Israel had been established on the initiative of mostly European Jewish pioneers who had broke with historical trends of persecution and dependency in the late 19th and early 20th century by settling on what they perceived as their historic homeland.[73] Moreover, the pervading ethos of settlement within Israel did not dissipate after its establishment. If anything, the Six Day War ushered an even more ideologically fervent settler movement which involved idealistic Israelis —with the encouragement and aid of Begin, Ariel Sharon and the Labor government—-building new outposts in areas of both religious and strategic value. Convinced that the pre-1967 borders were indefensible, some seven-thousand Israeli citizens—mostly recent emigres from Russia—

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[70] Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process*, 129

[71] Weizman, *Battle for Peace*, 345

[72] Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 396

[73] Yael Yishai, *Land or Peace*, 129/130

moved to the Sinai to provide a crucial buffer-zone between Israel and Egypt.[74] They saw themselves as standard-bearers of a legacy of Zionist settlement and the Sinai as their new frontier.

The idea of removing these same settlers—and razing their towns—proved too much to bear for many within Begin's coalition. Although most Israelis supported Begin's overtures to Sadat, a vocal minority censured his acceptance of Palestinian autonomy and his evacuation of the Sinai settlements. Even though Begin had managed to retain Judaea and Samaria under considerable pressure, his detractors concocted their own version of the events. In their eyes, Begin was laying the foundation for a future Palestinian state and the evacuation of further settlements built outside of Israel proper. When the Knesset met to ratify the Camp David Accords on September 27, 1978, only two-thirds of those belonging to the governing coalition voted in favor, meaning that Begin needed to rely on the opposition, comprising Labor and more dovish parties. The vote was eighty-four in favor and nineteen opposed, with seventeen abstentions. Almost half of the MKs of Begin's own party failed to support his position.[75] Even worse, the most bitter attacks of the peace deal came from Begin's ideological colleagues and closest friends, men and women who had fought with him in the underground against the British mandate. The sharpest criticisms were voiced by Likud members of the Knesset Geula Cohen and Moshe Shamir, as well as extra-parliamentary settler groups such as Gush Emunim, the Movement for a Greater Israel, and the Sinai settlers.[76]

As Israel stood on the precipice of a monumental peace, its prime minister—who had spent a lifetime carving out both a deeply felt ideology, as well as a cult of personality—was lambasted as a traitor by his former comrades. The Camp David Accords, they excoriated, constituted a total surrender to the Arabs and an egregious deviation from the Likud platform and Zionist ideology. The day after Begin signed the Accords on the White House Lawn, the Sinai settlers released an

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74 Ann Mosely Lesch, "Israeli Settlements in The Occupied Territories, 1967-1977," in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1977), 28

75 Shindler, *Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream*, 98/99

76 Yishai, *Land or Peace*, 121

announcement stating that "the return of the Sinai settlements is an anti-Zionist act and goes against the history of the Jewish people."[77] On the same day, Gush Emunim and the Movement for Greater Israel attacked the agreements, in separate statements, as "treacherous" and called on the prime minister to resign.[78] Begin struggled with the condemnation he faced and admitted as much at the White House signing ceremony for the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in March 1979: "To accept abuse from foreigners and, what is more painful, from my own people and even my close friends. This effort, too, bore some fruit."[79] Begin himself had pledged to settle in Northern Sinai when he stepped down from office.[80] The harsh realities of international relations and diplomacy forced him to give up on these post-retirement plans, as well as his aspiration of a united nationalist camp.

The Camp David Accords divided Begin's political coalition and drew intense censure from the far-right, but this did not deter the prime minister from following through on the letter of the agreement and the later treaty it precipitated. In 1982, Begin fulfilled Israel's obligation to remove the last of the Sinai settlements. The largest demonstration took place in April of that year, when some residents of the small secular town of Yamit refused to leave their homes. In the end, Israeli soldiers were ordered to forcibly remove the protesters.[81] The image of Israeli soldiers and police forces turning high-powered water hoses on Israeli citizens and extricating Jews from their homes was seared into Israel's collective consciousness. Some of the most resistant settlers were even forced by the IDF into cages.[82] This was undoubtedly the most difficult sacrifice Begin made as part of the peace process. Having devoted his life to the right of Jews to defend themselves by building

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[77] Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process*, 147/148

[78] Ibid., 151

[79] Shindler, *Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream*, 100

[80] Ibid

[81] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 260

[82] Itay Stern, "Back to the Israeli Sinai Desert Town That Vanished," *Haaretz* (April 14, 2020), https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-04-14/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-personal-price-sinai-settlers-paid-for-peace-with-egypt/00000180-5bd7-db1e-a1d4-dff771780000

settlements in their ancestral homeland and the periphery, he was now enforcing their dismantling to the chagrin of his former supporters.

Camp David in Retrospect

The concessions agreed to at Camp David were necessary, though excruciating for Begin. As he declared before the Knesset in September 1978: "We don't want there to be war every five years. For this peace we have sacrificed 12,000 of our best boys, in five wars, one war after the other, one battlefield after another. We want to put an end to that. This is the opportunity; this is the chance."[83] Historic decisions require compromise, and Begin had come to understand this. No longer the Irgun commander scorned as a terrorist throughout the West, he had assumed the mantle of seasoned statesman and peacemaker. In spite of his 1982 war in Lebanon and other dubious policies-initiatives during the waning years of his political career, the Begin of Camp David was driven by a sense of duty to *all* the people of Israel as opposed to the dogmatism of the rejectionist right. At Camp David, he weighed the risks and determined that peace with Egypt and its national security dividends were worth the burden of relinquishing the settlements. Driven by a pragmatism that he lacked in the past, he stated: "The peace treaty was on one side of the scales and the settlements were on the other… With the pain, the insults, the shouts—no other way. To my dying day, I will believe this is the right choice."[84] Over forty years later, the absence of a *conventional* war between Israel and its neighbors has vindicated the sacrifice he made.

The peace treaty with Egypt has been one of Israel's greatest strategic assets. Since its signing, Egypt and Israel have not engaged in war and no other Arab state has attacked Israel. The prime ministers that followed Begin—including Rabin—faced their gravest security threats from non-state actors such as the PLO, Hamas and Hezbollah.[85] This can be attributed, in large measure,

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[83] Netanel Lorch, *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 2274

[84] Ibid., 2272-2273

[85] Makovsky and Ross, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, 156

to the wording of the final treaty, which essentially stated that Egypt was bound to observe the treaty with Israel above all other treaties with Arab states. The "Priority of Obligations" clause, contained in Article 6 of the final treaty, has survived a tumultuous forty-year period which included the assassination of Sadat in 1981, Israel's war in Lebanon in 1982, and the brief tenure of the Muslim Brotherhood in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011.[86]

Granted, Egypt-Israel relations over the past forty years have not been marked by considerable warmth or cordiality. The Egyptian press mercilessly attacked Israel's war in Lebanon; Israel's ambassadors to Egypt have been socially boycotted; and academic and cultural exchanges are extremely limited.[87] Yet the peace did mean that young Israeli soldiers and ordinary citizens would no longer be killed on Egyptian battlefields. Begin achieved his raison d'être of keeping Egypt out of any future military engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Likewise, the two countries cooperate on a wide range of security issues including rooting out Islamic State militants in the Sinai, confronting the emerging threat of Iran, and exchanging information to maintain security in the Gaza Strip.[88]

These remarkable successes are the outcome of the courageous and venerable leaderships of Begin, Sadat, and Carter. At Camp David, Begin and Sadat met occasionally on walks around the series of small cottages that characterized the complex. The details of the two agreements—and the most painful concessions made by both sides—were rather extracted in private meetings between American mediators and the respective Israeli and Egyptian interlocutors.[89] Indeed, success at

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Haisam Hassanein, "It's a 'cold peace' with Israel; Egypt prohibits full normalisation," in *The Hill* (March 25, 2018), https://thehill.com/opinion/international/379882-its-a-cold-peace-with-israel-egypts-government-prohibits-full/

[88] Gregory Aftandilian, "Egypt's Ties to Israel Deepen Despite Public Misgivings," in *Arab Center Washington DC* (March 19, 2021), https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/egypts-ties-to-israel-deepen-despite-public-misgivings/

[89] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 252
See also Daniel Strieff, *Jimmy Carter and the Middle East: The Politics of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Palgrave, 2015)

Camp David was largely due to Carter's commitment to an Egyptian-Israeli peace. His determination and willingness to bring pressure to bear on both leaders, especially Begin, was unprecedented for an American president and proved decisive in finding compromises when others might have given way. For two consecutive weeks, President Carter eschewed domestic policy and focused on resolving one international conflict. His effort bore some fruit; he secured a major foreign policy achievement in the form of Israel's first peace treaty with an Arab state, even if the final settlement did not inaugurate a warm peace between Israel and Egypt, or the full-fledged peace between Israel and the entire Arab world that he had envisioned.[90]

In the decades since Camp David, Carter has rued his administration's failure to resolve a comprehensive Middle East peace and blamed one man—Menachem Begin—for what he has described as an historic missed opportunity. As he wrote in *Palestine: Peace, not Apartheid*: "We all knew that Israel must have a comprehensive and lasting peace, and this dream could have been realized if Israel had… refrained from colonizing the West Bank."[91] In Carter's eyes, Begin's refusal to negotiate Palestinian statehood denied him a more complete peace deal in 1979 and perpetuated the plight of the Palestinian people *ex-post facto*. Samuel Lewis, U.S. Ambassador to Israel at the time, explained that "Begin would never consider admitting the [Jewish] right to settle wasn't a right, and Carter, basically, was asking [Begin] to agree that settlements were illegal."[92] The Israeli prime minister was willing to refrain from annexing the West Bank for fear of alienating the United States and Sadat, but he simply could not accept any agreement that denied Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank or, indeed, the Jewish prerogative to settle in *all* parts of their ancestral homeland.

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90 Ibid

91 Jimmy Carter, *Palestine: Peace, not Apartheid* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 216

92 Kenneth Stein, "My Problem With Jimmy Carter's Book," In *Middle East* Quarterly 14, No. 2 (Spring 2007), 7/8

True, Begin's commitment to the settlements undoubtedly complicated the post-Camp David Palestinian autonomy talks, as well as Carter's more grandiose objective of a Middle-East peace process which included other Arab actors. Carter has publicly claimed that Begin promised to halt settlement construction for five years during the fateful meeting on September 16, though the memorandum of conversation from that night reveals that Begin only committed himself to a three month freeze. A complete freeze for any period longer than three months, he maintained, was "out of the question."[93] In the end it was Israel's continued construction of these settlements in the West Bank, as well as the build-up of tensions on the Lebanese front, that prompted both Foreign Minister Dayan's resignation and President Sadat's unilateral suspension of the autonomy negotiations in May 1980.[94]

And yet, Begin's refusal to forfeit the West Bank was not the only obstacle to progress between Israel and other Arab actors. Had Begin not refused to negotiate sovereignty for the Palestinians, Carter believes that he could have both won a second term and subsequently secured peace agreements between Israel and Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians. Historians are less certain. On the one hand, Begin had no tangible item to offer to the Palestinians, which meant that Carter could not initiate a conclusive Israeli-Palestinian negotiating process in 1979. On the other hand, at the time of the Camp David negotiations, no other Arab actor—including Jordan—was willing to cross the same ideological rubicon that Sadat had by recognizing Israel. Arafat and many other Arab states remained fundamentally opposed to Israel's existence on any part of the disputed territory in the late 1970s. Neither the Jordanians nor the Palestinians were willing to participate in the subsequent peace talks to help implement the Camp David agreement regarding Palestinian rights in the West Bank and Gaza—a reality which Carter more readily conceded in

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[93] "Memorandum of Conversation between US President Jimmy Carter, US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan at Camp David," *Center for Israel Education*, September 16, 1978, https://israeled.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/8.-19780918-Memorandum-of-Conversation-between-US-President-Jimmy-Carter.pdf

[94] Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 673

earlier monographs such as *The Blood of Abraham*, written in 1985.[95] Likewise, the murder of the PLO representative in London Sa'id Hamami in early 1979 sent a clear message that anyone suspected of approving Sadat's initiative would pay a heavy price.[96] In other words, the failure of Camp David to produce a comprehensive peace was the result of Begin's ideological red lines, but also the endemic unwillingness of the Arab world to come to terms with Israel.

As a result of these constraints, the Israel-Egypt peace treaty was the "ceiling" of any diplomatic breakthrough in the Middle East during the late 1970s — and it was made possible only through the determination and resolve of its chief protagonists. The costs of making peace in the Middle-East are perceived as great, and any diplomatic progress in the region requires considerable courage from its leaders. When Sadat travelled to Jerusalem in November 1977, he did what no Arab leader had done in thirty years: he recognized Israel's right to exist within secure borders. Most of the Arab world lashed out at Sadat for signing the Camp David Accords and a peace treaty with the avowed enemy. In Baghdad at the March 1979 Arab ministerial conference, it was decided that the widest range of political and economic sanctions be imposed on Egypt, short of declaring war. The vitriol reached fever pitch in October 1981, when Sadat was tragically assassinated while attending a military parade by a young Egyptian lieutenant who belonged to a Muslim fundamentalist organization.[97] Without Sadat's historic initiative and immense political courage, the Egypt-Israel peace simply could not have happened.

Moreover, though Begin has been belittled for defining his priorities narrowly, he also played a decisive role and his actions warrant more credit than he has received in a historiography largely shaped by President Carter's memoirs. The context of his time was crucial. The international and regional conditions of the 1970s had not transformed Sadat into a strident Zionist, but they had

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[95] Jimmy Carter, *The Blood of Abraham: Insights into the Middle East* (Boston: Sedgwick and Jackson, 1985), 45

[96] Haber, *The Year of the Dove,* 138

[97] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 260

convinced him of the need for a closer alliance with the United States, made possible only through detente with the Jewish state. No other Israeli leader had enjoyed the luxury of negotiating with an Egyptian president who was truly willing to jeopardize his country's historic bond with the Arab world by making peace with Israel. Begin was the beneficiary of this entirely new strategic equation. And still, his success as a peacemaker cannot be attributed solely to the favorable context in which he operated. The actual closing of an official peace treaty between Israel and Egypt required what Stein has defined as visionary leadership and "heroic diplomacy"—that is, leaders who were willing to make territorial compromises to serve their nation's long-term strategic interests, even in the face of intense criticism from their domestic constituencies.[98]

For all the condemnation he has faced since Camp David's conclusion, Menachem Begin decidedly fit this mould. Another right-wing leader may have annexed the West Bank upon assuming office, but Begin put the national interest before his ideological commitments. While he was far from a military strategist, he understood that symbolic gestures over Judaea and Samaria and difficult territorial concessions regarding the Sinai would significantly reduce the likelihood of conventional warfare with the Arab world.[99] Consumed by an overwhelming sense of national responsibility, Prime Minister Begin weighed the options and made the difficult decision of subordinating his personal ideology and dividing the right-wing nationalist coalition he had spent so many years leading.

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[98] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 1

[99] Ibid., 265

Chapter II: Yitzhak Rabin and the Oslo Accords

Yitzhak Rabin's Worldview and the Limits of Military Power

Since his early childhood, Yitzhak Rabin had been conditioned to defend his community. He did not share Begin's experience of European antisemitism or his strong ideological attachment to the entirety of historic Israel/Palestine. Yet he was still raised in a pre-state Israel characterized by grave upheaval, animosity and conflict between the *Yishuv* and Arab Palestinians, who also had nationalist aspirations. He was initiated into military matters at the young age of thirteen when Arab Palestinians attacked his school—the Kadouri Agricultural Academy—during the 1936 Arab revolt.[100] Rabin's instructor Yigal Allon, another one of Kadouri's graduates, later recruited him to serve as part of the Palmach; a conglomeration of strike or assault units established by the Jewish Agency in 1941 and incorporated into the IDF upon Israel's establishment. As part of the Palmach, he served as a platoon leader, participated in operations against Vichy French forces and trained his men for the inevitable war between the Zionists and the Arabs. It was also during this period that Rabin was offered a scholarship to study hydraulic engineering at the University of California at Berkley. He deferred it upon graduation from Kadouri because he, in his own words, was "incapable of leaving the country, and (his) friends, during wartime."[101]

This old-fashioned sense of duty motivated Rabin throughout his public life. When five Arab states invaded Israel shortly after Ben-Gurion's declaration of independence in 1948, he was charged with coordinating the convoys transporting supplies—civilian and military—to the substantial Jewish population in Jerusalem and with breaking the Arab siege of the Old City. The war carried many important lessons for Rabin. His Harel brigade failed to capture the Old City and the operation incurred a staggering human cost of one hundred dead and four hundred wounded. In speaking to the US Congress in 1994, he returned to the terrible price paid by his men during the

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[100] Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, 7-10

[101] Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and of Good Courage,* 164; Yael Aronoff, *The Political Psychology of Israeli Prime Ministers*, 102

war: “For me and my comrades-in-arms, every scrap of metal lying there by the wayside is a bitter memory. I remember, as though it were just yesterday.”[102] In Rabin’s eyes, the dramatic failure of the Harel brigade was the product of the numerical disparity between Israel and Arab countries, but also the lack of planning by the Zionist leadership before Israel’s establishment. He maintained that the losses sustained by his brigade in 1948 were entirely avoidable.

In his memoirs, Rabin blamed Zionist leaders such as David Ben-Gurion for their failure to adequately prepare the nascent IDF forces for the Arab onslaught. On the eve of the UN vote on partition, the Palmach numbered only 2,200 troops and its weapons stockpile contained no cannon, artillery or anti-tank weapons. Rabin believed that the course and outcome of the war would have been appreciably different “if the Yishuv’s leadership had given priority to the creation of an independent force.”[103] For the remainder of his life, he personally set out to remedy the failures that had denied his brigade from winning the battle over Jerusalem. His early experiences with Israel’s enemies imbued him with a “profound sense of moral responsibility, a kind of debt of honor toward the men whose courage… had blocked the Arab advance.”[104] He would forgo his dream of studying hydraulic engineering and dedicate his life to ensuring that the State of Israel would never again be unprepared to meet aggression.

Not surprisingly, military power lay at the centre of this mission. Rabin understood that a state such as Israel—surrounded by neighbors committed to its destruction—could only survive through a superior military capable of defending the nation in conventional warfare. In his eyes, even peace depended on Israel’s comprehensive power as the Arab states would accept Israel’s existence only once they realized it could not be defeated in war. As such, Rabin spent the majority of his career not withdrawing from territories, but building and demonstrating Israel’s military

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[102] “Address by Prime Minister Rabin to the U.S. Congress,” *Jewish Virtual Library,* July 26, 1994, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/address-by-prime-minister-rabin-to-the-u-s-congress

[103] Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, 20

[104] Ibid., 45

prowess. As David Makovsky wrote: "He was shaped by the IDF, and he also shaped the institution and its approach to its array of missions."[105] As the Chief of Staff of the military in 1967, Rabin was the architect of the IDF's sweeping victories in the Six Days War. Furthermore, after he left the IDF and assumed different roles in the political world, including the role of Ambassador to the United States, he made sure that Israel retained its qualitative edge against the Soviet-aided Arab states by procuring American weapons. In a 1976 interview, he said: "Our future power will determine the chances for peace in the region. Weakness is not a recipe for negotiations. If our neighbors come to realize that Israel is not weak, they will eventually see the rationale for mutual compromises, reconciliation and peace."[106] The imbalance in the distribution of military power was the decisive element in Israel's continued existence and any future peace agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

At the same time, Rabin was acutely aware of the limits of military power. According to his realpolitik philosophy, true security could be achieved only through a combination of military might and territorial concessions. As early as January 1976, Rabin told the then-Director General of the Foreign Affairs Ministry Shlomo Avineri that Israel could not and should not hold on to most of the territories captured in the Six Days War.[107] In a later 1987 lecture at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, Rabin again questioned whether military force could achieve far-reaching political goals. "Through military means," he noted, "the attempt to bring about a war that will end all wars is a dangerous course of action and an illusion."[108] He went on to explain that "force of arms alone cannot bring about the desired termination of the Arab-Israeli conflict."[109] Rabin made this

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[105] Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, 170

[106] Efraim Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 174

[107] Shlomo Avineri, "Rabin's Strategy: understanding security and the limits of power," in *Fathom* (Autumn 2015), https://fathomjournal.org/rabin-ebook-rabins-strategy-understanding-security-and-the-limits-of-power/

[108] Yitzhak Rabin, "The Limits of Power," in *The Suez-Sinai Crisis 1956: Retrospective and Reappraisal*, edited by S.I. Troen and M. Shemesh (London: Routledge, 1990), 238-242.

[109] Ibid

statement in the midst of the first intifada; a series of violent Palestinian uprisings that took place throughout the occupied territories in defiance of the occupation from 1987 to 1993. More than anything else, the intifada *reinforced* Rabin's long-held belief that peace could not be imposed by force alone.

Having initially ordered his security forces to brutally repress the Palestinian protesters and stone-throwers by "breaking their bones," Rabin came to see that Palestinian resistance would not dissipate in the face of military might and the associated pain and deprivation.[110] Rabin had always believed that difficult decisions, involving "mutual compromise" and Israel's withdrawal from at least some territories, would be required of the country's leaders at some point in the future. During the time of the Lebanon War, he wrote: "We must view the territories that we conquered as bargaining chips for negotiations with our neighbors for the attainment of peace or for the advancement of political objectives aimed at amelioration of the Israeli-Arab conflict."[111] But the intifada added a sense of urgency to this long-stated objective. By the 1990s, Rabin had come to the realization that Israel could no longer equivocate. Peace with Israel's immediate neighbors was deemed a national security imperative in the face of more daunting threats on the periphery and he knew that Israel's immediate neighbors would not be placated by military power alone. The time had come, he believed, for Israel to cede the bargaining chips it obtained in 1967, including the religiously-sacrosanct West Bank.

The Centrality of Israel's Security and the Strategic Equation in 1992

As Begin had fifteen years previously, Rabin saw an opportunity and a necessity to fundamentally transform the region through parting with certain territories when he began his second term in 1992. The peace with Egypt did not immediately resolve Israel's national security problems, but it did significantly reduce the threat of conventional warfare and certainly laid the

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[110] Benny Morris, "Israel's Rabin Illusion," in *The National Interest, The Establishment's Demise* No. 142 (March/April 2016), 58-66, 63

[111] Yoram Peri, "Afterword," in *The Rabin Memoirs*, 347

foundation for a change in the posture of certain Arab actors towards Israel. As Egypt entered the peace camp, so did other Arab states gradually vie for diplomacy over warfare. At the 1991 Madrid Conference, both Syria and the PLO were forced by the United States to come to Madrid and negotiate with Israel on its terms: direct negotiations and no preconditions on an Israeli withdrawal from territories captured in 1967. When the Labor party formed a government after the 1992 elections, Israel faced a much improved strategic equation, stemming largely from the fall of the Soviet Union.[112]

The international and regional conditions were such that long-term enemies of Israel, including those that had virulently rejected Sadat's initiative, wanted—in fact, needed—a diplomatic breakthrough with the Jewish state. The Eastern European countries, now free from Soviet interference, renewed the diplomatic relations that they had severed in 1967 and former Soviet republics, even Muslim ones, opened diplomatic legations. Likewise, after the Madrid Conference, several African and Asian countries who had previously condemned Israel as an enemy of the "Third World" established full diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv.[113] In 1993, Rabin emphasized the change before a gathering of senior IDF officers: "The world is no longer against us…states that never stretched their hand out to us, states that condemned us, that assisted our bitterest enemies…regard us today a worthy and respectable address."[114] This language was new for Rabin and reflected an improved strategic environment.

These changing attitudes extended also to some of Israel's long-term adversaries in the Arab world. The Soviet Union's collapse created a new international reality; Israel's enemies—namely, Syria and the PLO—were deprived of their largest benefactor and therefore lost their ability to confront Israel militarily. This meant that Israel could negotiate with its Arab neighbors from a

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[112] Jonathan Rynhold, "Cultural Shift and Foreign Policy Change: Israel and the Making of the Oslo Accords," in *Cooperation and Conflict* 42, No. 4 (December 2007), 419-440

[113] Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 135

[114] Ibid., 136

position of strength; a pre-requisite for progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process.[115] To make matters worse for the PLO, its leader Yasser Arafat had sided with Iraq and Saddam Hussein, the losing side in the 1991 Gulf War. This angered aid-providing Arab states and resulted in a dramatic decrease in funding as the PLO faced increasing challenges from within the Palestinian national movement. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait eliminated their payments to the PLO, including "liberation taxes" paid by Palestinians working in the Gulf states. Accordingly the PLO's annual budget was cut in half, to somewhere between $100 million and $120 million.[116] For its part, Israel absorbed some five-hundred thousand emigrants from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Many of these immigrants were highly-skilled and their arrival compounded the perception amongst Arab states—and non-state actors such as the PLO—that Israel was a *fait accompli*.[117] In fact, at a November 1988 meeting of the quasi-parliamentary Palestine National Council (PNC) in Algiers, the PLO took its first formal step toward recognizing Israel by accepting UN Resolution 181 and 242.[118]

Rabin took note of these changing circumstances with a *cautious optimism*. Peace appeared a serious possibility, but he harbored no illusions as to the considerable dangers facing Israel at the beginning of his second term. Israel was increasingly threatened by peripheral countries such as Iran and Iraq which were both opposed to Israel's existence and intent on developing unconventional weapons. Rabin was particularly concerned by the revelations emerging from the Gulf War regarding the great progress Iraq had made in the area of chemical and biological weapons. "The possibility that nuclear weapons will be introduced in the Middle East in the coming years is a very grave and negative development from Israel's standpoint," he stated during a 1992

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115 Mohamad Morra, "The Palestine-Israeli Peace Process after the Cold War," in *Journal of International Relations and Foreign Policy* 4, No. 2 (December 2016), 63-86, 73

116 David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord* (New York: Westview Press, 1996), 108

117 Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 135

118 Muhammad Muslih, "Towards Coexistence: An Analysis of the Resolutions of the Palestine National Council," in *The Journal of Palestine Studies* 19, No. 4 (Summer 1990), 3-29

inaugural address before the Knesset.[119] Rabin warned that a future war could incur a large number of civilian casualties.

Relatedly, the Israeli prime minister observed the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a tremendous danger. "Our struggle against murderous Islamic terror," he insisted in 1992 Knesset speech, "is also meant to awaken the world which is lying in slumber. Today we must stand in the line of fire against the danger of fundamentalist Islam."[120] Islamic terror, Rabin believed, posed a threat to the entire world, but especially Israel. While the withering of funding for the PLO meant that it was weaker and more likely to acquiesce to Israel's demands, it also rendered the occupied territories ripe for extremist agitation. Despite dipping into its reserves, the PLO was forced to close many of its hospitals, universities, community centers, and newspapers in the disputed territories and impose significant austerity measures. Financial aid to the territories dropped from $120 million in 1989 to $45 million in 1991 and 1992.[121]

The withering of PLO-funded welfare institutions in the West Bank and Gaza created a power vacuum that was increasingly being filled by the Islamic Resistance Movement or "Hamas"; an Iranian-funded, Islamist alternative to the secular-nationalist PLO whose absolutist approach to territory did not permit any political compromise with Israel. There is a strong case to be made that Rabin recognized the PLO in 1993 partly because he viewed them as a more viable—albeit far from ideal—negotiating partner to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than Hamas. When he took office in 1992, the West Bank and Gaza were slowly becoming a crucible of growing Hamas radicalism. He knew that Israel could not afford a situation where Hamas became the preeminent

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[119] "Address to the Knesset by Prime Minister Rabin Presenting his Government," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs,* July 13 1992, https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/General/1-address-to-the-knesset-by-pm-rabin-presenting-his-government-13-july-1992

[120] Ibid

[121] Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO*, 108

political force in the territories because there is, in his words, "no solution to a theological conflict."[122]

On the campaign trail, Rabin pledged to produce an interim agreement with the Palestinians within nine months of forming a government. During one of his earliest meetings with President Bill Clinton in March 1993, Rabin explained his analytical assessment and vision for peace: "There is a certain period of time before fundamentalism peaks and before Iran obtains weapons of mass destruction and missiles." Making peace with the inner circle of Arab states, Rabin argued, would "reduce the risk in the external circle."[123] Rabin understood that past enemies of Israel were not only weaker, but threatened by the same fundamentalist Islamists that threatened Israel. He wanted to exploit this convergence by seeking a breakthrough with Syria or the Palestinians.

A breakthrough on either track could spawn basic changes in the region, enhancing Israel's ability to make peace with a larger circle of moderate Arab states and thus respond to the threats he foresaw coming, primarily from Iran. This was no longer the cautious Rabin of the 1970s, who believed that Israel's best policy was to stall in negotiations with the Arabs. In Rabin's eyes, Israel had accumulated enough power to make territorial concessions without jeopardizing its security. In fact, as he reentered office in 1992, Rabin believed that Israel's bargaining power would not significantly improve in the future and that the context of the time offered a fleeting "window of opportunity" to fulfill his vision of peace with the "inner circle" of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians.[124]

Rabin also believed that any deal with the Arabs would yield third-party benefits to Israel. American assurances of military aid had always been an important element of his foreign policy doctrine. Like Begin, Rabin believed that Israel ought to have the backing of a major power and

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[122] "Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's Reasons for Signing the Oslo Accords," *Center for Israel Education* November 1, 1995, https://israeled.org/resources/documents/yitzhak-rabin-oslo-accords/

[123] Rabinovich, *Yitzhak Rabin*, 182

[124] Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 139

vied for the support of the United States. America, he believed, was Israel's only dependable friend internationally. His tenure as Israel's ambassador to the United States, and the 1973 war in particular, validated that perception. European countries, including the United Kingdom and Germany, refused to allow America to use their bases and ports for the resupply of Israel during and immediately after the war for fear of alienating the Arabs and bearing the brunt of their oil weapon. In contrast, the U.S. and President Nixon heeded the call of Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir and replenished Israel's military after it suffered humiliating defeats to the Arab countries in the early stages of the war. The massive U.S. air and sea lift, starting in the second week of the war, not only saved Israel from what Moshe Dayan openly predicted as its destruction, but demonstrated how much Israel depended on the United States. "We had only one friend in the world," Rabin noted, "and that was the United States."[125] Rabin adhered to this credo throughout his life and consistently sought American guarantees of military aid as part of the peace process.

The annex to the U.S.-brokered 1975 Sinai II accord, negotiated by a Rabin-led Israeli government, included tremendous political and military benefits to Israel. Politically, the United States agreed not to deal with the PLO unless it recognized Israel and accepted UN Security Resolution 242. Militarily, Israel acquired F-15s and F-16s and cemented its strategic relationship with the United States.[126] During his second term, Rabin expected a similar "arms for peace" package from America to mitigate the security risks associated with territorial compromise. Without these guarantees, Rabin likely would not have made the bold decisions he did. "The struggle to get weapons is continuous, but the United States will aid us," he commented, "if it finds Israel displaying a willingness for peace."[127] Of course, there were other motives for territorial compromise; Israel's international image, especially in the aftermath of the first intifada, and the

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[125] Slater, *Rabin: 20 Years After*, 212

[126] Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 130

[127] Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 44

internal threat posed by the Greater Israel movement perturbed Rabin. Yet the need to defend Israel against hostile outside actors was always preeminent in his thinking. Despite efforts to portray his initiative as a fundamental departure from past policies and modes of thinking, the Rabin of the 1990s was no less strident in his commitment to defending the state of Israel. On this overarching priority, there was no distinction between the elderly statesman and the young Palmach warrior. As he wrote in 1993, "there is one area in which there will be no change, no difference, and no innovation, in the most important area of all: the security of Israel."[128]

Failure on the Syrian Track and an Uneasy Handshake with Arafat

Rabin was willing to make historic concessions to both Syria and the Palestinians, though he and the Clinton administration initially prioritized the Syrian track. A peace treaty with Assad, the leader of the strongest remaining military foe among the "inner circle," appealed to the power-oriented Rabin. Moreover, the dispute with Syria seemed less complicated than the Israeli-Palestinian rivalry because the Golan Heights was not imbued with the same level of religious or historical significance as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This made it easier for Rabin to relinquish the strategic plateau, from a political standpoint. In June 1992, during the election campaign, Rabin had promised voters that Israel would "not leave the Golan Heights, not even in exchange for a peace treaty."[129] He considered the Golan a great asset. In fact, after 1967 Rabin had fervently supported settling Jews on the Golan and, indeed, many of the settlers were connected politically to the Labor party. Qazrin, the Golan's main Jewish town, was founded during his first term as prime minister.[130]

However, Rabin also came to understand that Assad would not settle for anything less than Sadat had. The historic rationale set by Begin of full withdrawal for full-fledged peace was

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128 Yitzhak Rabin, "On the Road to Peace," in *The Rabin Memoirs,* 413

129 Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 143

130 Arye Shalev, *Israel and Syria: Peace and Security on the Golan* (London: Routledge, 2019), 46

compelling. As such, Rabin altered his negotiating position. On 3 August 1993, Rabin altered his negotiating position and stated during a conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher that Israel would fully withdraw from the Golan Heights conditional on Syria's acceptance of a peace package including security arrangements and normalized relations. Just as Begin had in 1978, Rabin agreed to swap strategic depth for peace with a historic foe. However, in contrast to Begin, he was not negotiating with a leader who was genuinely willing to cross the psychological threshold of recognizing and making peace with Israel. Christopher was unsuccessful in securing approval for the hypothetical deal with Assad. This intransigence frustrated Rabin and produced disaffection amongst both Israeli and American negotiators. "Assad wants everything handed to him and he wants to do nothing for it," he complained during a private conversation with American negotiator Dennis Ross in 1993.[131]

As a result of the impasse, Rabin prioritized the Palestinian track through the secret contacts taking place between deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin and Mahmoud Abbas in Oslo.[132] By signing the "Declaration of Principles" alongside PLO chairman Yasser Arafat on September 13 1993, he recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. He also accepted the concept of self-rule under a Palestinian Authority (PA) for a period of five years before final status negotiations commenced. In exchange, the PLO renounced terrorism and recognized Israel.[133] The agreement built on the 1978 Camp David Accords, in which Begin and Sadat agreed to start negotiations toward granting some form of self-rule for the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip without making any mention of a "Palestinian state." Two years later, the two sides met again and signed the Oslo II agreement, which instituted some of the Accords' proposals, including

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[131] Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight of the Middle Peace* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2004), 90

[132] Ibid., 101-103

[133] Yossi Kuperwasser, "Incentivizing Terrorism: Palestinian Authority Allocations to Terrorists and their Families," in *The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* (October 14, 2018), https://jcpa.org/paying-salaries-terrorists-contradicts-palestinian-vows-peaceful-intentions/#_toc_title

the creation of the PA and the withdrawal of Israel's military administration from certain Arab cities in the disputed territories. Under the interim agreement, the West Bank was divided into three separate areas. Area A, which included eight Palestinian cities, would be administered completely by the Palestinian Authority; Area C, which included the major settlement blocks, were to remain under Israel's military government; and Area B would be subject to joint control.[134]

To a large extent, the Oslo process marked the culmination of Rabin's long-stated goal to *separate* from the Palestinians. He knew that an indefinite occupation would carry an enormous burden: that it would not only jeopardize the prospects of peace with Israel's traditional foes within the Arab world, but Israel's future as a Jewish democracy. The external threat posed by Iran and Iraq constituted the primary rationale for the Oslo Accords, but the demographic facts vis-a-vis the West Bank and Gaza Strip were also significant for him. As of the early 1990s, there were some two million Palestinians living in the occupied territories.[135] Rabin understood that Israel could not proclaim itself a liberal democracy while denying millions of Arabs under its control any semblance of political and civic power. At the same time, Israel could not incorporate the Arab inhabitants of the captured territories into its body politic without jeopardizing its future as a Jewish state, with a Jewish majority. As Rabin stated during a speech before the Knesset in October 1995: "We had to choose between the whole land of Israel, which meant a binational state… and a state with less territory, but which would be a Jewish state. We chose to be a Jewish state."[136] Like Begin, he realized that the only viable solution to the Palestinian question was some form of separation between Israel proper and the West Bank, though the two leaders differed in how they envisioned this separation.

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134 Kenneth Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 266

135 Avi Shlaim, "The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, edited by Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 241-261, 245

136 "Prime Minister Rabin Speech to the Knesset on ratifying the Israeli-Palestinian interim agreement," *Jewish Virtual Library,* October 5, 1995, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/pm-rabin-speech-to-knesset-on-ratification-of-oslo-peace-accords

Begin, as preeminent leader of the Revisionist movement, favored autonomy as the ceiling of all negotiations over the Palestinian question during the 1970s. Rabin, on the other hand, did not harbor a strong ideological attachment to the West Bank and planned to eventually cede portions of the West Bank to a foreign sovereign—namely, the Jordanian monarchy. He stated in his 1979 memoirs: "I hope no less that Mr. Begin and his supporters will come to see that territorial compromise is not anathema and that it may well be the only feasible solution precisely because it is the most just."[137] Rabin opposed Palestinian statehood because it, in his words, would pose a mortal threat to Israel's security, especially if "ruled by the most extreme faction in the Palestinian political spectrum — the PLO."[138] Yet he was willing to relinquish control—and even sovereignty —to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which had cooperated secretly with Israel on security matters for many decades. In his memoirs, Rabin wrote: "I believe that Jordan is ready to accept such an approach. After all, King Hussein accepted the principle of representing the Palestinians and assuming responsibility for their affairs."[139] On many occasions, Rabin emphasized the importance of the Hashemite Kingdom as a buffer state between Israel and one of its most powerful foes, Iraq.

Rabin simply did not see the territories in ideological terms. He may have endorsed settlements built in areas of strategic value such as the Jordan Valley and the Golan Heights, but he fervently opposed building settlements in populous Arab areas. To do so would needlessly provoke the Palestinians and bring Israel closer to the 'One-State Solution' he so feared. Not surprisingly, Rabin did not see the "Greater Israel" movement—of which Begin was a figure-head—as heroic or as carrying on the legacy of past Zionist pioneers, but rather believed that the settlers posed a grave threat to Israeli democracy and its international standing. "A settler movement," he complained

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[137] Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (1979), 334

[138] Ibid., 334.

[139] Ibid., 333/334

during a 1976 interview, "is like a cancer in the social and democratic tissue of the state of Israel."[140] In other words, he was cognizant of not only the external threats facing Israel's existence, but the threat posed by Israeli citizens who cared more about the land of Israel than the state of Israel. Rabin's brand of Zionism championed democracy and a respect for human rights as a central element and he had always viewed the objectives of Gush Emunim as antithetical to the Zionist enterprise.

As he ascended to office for the second time in his life, Rabin acknowledged that Israel would have to withdraw from the lands considered sacrosanct by its messianic minority. To be sure, there were clear limits as to how far Rabin would go to achieve a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Under no circumstances would he tolerate a Palestinian state, which he always perceived as an unacceptable security threat to not only Israel, but Jordan. Rabin biographer Dan Kurzman and other proponents of the two-state solution have stated that Rabin was resigned to the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state.[141] In reality, Rabin was the last prime minister who did *not* publicly support Palestinian statehood.*[142] As late as October 1995, only months before his assassination, Rabin described his vision of a Palestinian "entity" that would be "less than a state, and which will independently run the lives of the Palestinians under its authority."[143] Indeed, David Makovsky wrote that Rabin never retreated from the position that "any future Palestinian entity should be linked to Jordan."[144] His assessment is corroborated by an October 1993 interview during

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[140] Rabinovich, *Yitzhak Rabin*, 117

[141] Dan Kurzman, *Soldier of Peace: The Life of Yitzhak Rabin* (London: Harper, 1998)

[142] *Rabin was the last prime minister to not publicly support Palestinian statehood before the ascendance of Naftali Bennett in June 2021.

[143] "Prime Minister Rabin Speech to the Knesset on ratifying the Israeli-Palestinian interim agreement," *Jewish Virtual Library,* October 5, 1995, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/pm-rabin-speech-to-knesset-on-ratification-of-oslo-peace-accords

[144] Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO*, 123

which Rabin reiterated his vision of a two-state solution between Israel and Jordan with a less-than-independent Palestinian entity sandwiched between them.[145]

Rabin recognized the PLO not because he hoped to establish an independent Palestinian state, which was the official position of the PLO, but because he came to realize that Arafat constituted the key to a diplomatic breakthrough on the Palestinian front, especially when compared with the Islamist Hamas movement. The intifada demonstrated that the Palestinians would not allow other Arab actors to represent them in the diplomatic realm. Furthermore, the later Washington talks, held in the early stages of the Clinton administration, highlighted that no non-PLO Palestinian held the clout necessary to make a deal with Israel. Rabin even agreed to permit Faisal Husseini, a resident of Jerusalem and prominent Palestinian leader, to head the Palestinian negotiating team in March 1993. However, once the administration made the proposal, Arafat summoned Husseini to Tunis and refused to let him leave for the peace talks in Washington.[146] Accordingly, Rabin agreed to continue the clandestine Israeli-PLO dialogue in Oslo, started by Yossi Beilin in early 1992, and eventually signed the Oslo I and II agreements once the PLO showed some flexibility. Rabin was not ideological about the Palestinians; like on all issues, he was pragmatic. Doubts about, and even outright hatred, toward the PLO did not preclude a breakthrough when he thought it would serve the national interest.[147]

At the same time, Rabin's suspicions of Arafat ran deep, and shaking his hand on the White House Lawn made him genuinely uncomfortable. He never relinquished his fear that Arafat, if provided a state, would invite neighboring Arab countries such as Iraq and Iran to deploy heavy weaponry on the West Bank mountains overlooking Israel's population centers and allow the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees to foment further violence. Likewise, Rabin held Arafat

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[145] Ibid.

[146] Ross, *The Missing Peace*, 98-103

[147] Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and Of Good Courage*, 176/177

directly responsible for countless acts of terror against innocent Israelis, including the egregious attack in 1974 on Ma'alot in which twenty-six people were killed, nearly all of them children.[148] This made it emotionally difficult for him to deal with the PLO chairman — and impossible for him to even consider entrusting Arafat with a state in such close proximity to Israel. As he stated during a speech shortly following the Oslo I signing: "I knew that the hand outstretched to me from the far side of the podium was the same hand that held the knife, that held the gun, the hand that gave the order to shoot, to kill."[149] The handshake notwithstanding, Arafat's past avowal of terrorism made him an implacable foe.

Of course, Rabin also knew that recognizing the PLO and ceding large portions of the Jewish patrimony to the newly established PA would be highly controversial with the Israeli public. The demonstrations against his government were ugly — and they became much more frequent and virulent after a wave of terror attacks committed by Hamas militants intent on derailing the peace process in 1994. As the IDF withdrew from Palestinian cities in the West Bank, Israeli citizens increasingly came to perceive the Oslo process as a direct affront not only to their historical-religious principles, but their personal security. In October 1994, twenty-two Israelis were killed by a suicide attacker on a bus in central Tel Aviv; in January 1995, twenty-one Israeli soldiers were killed when two bombs were detonated in a bus station; and in July of the same year, five Israelis were killed in another suicide attack on a bus in Ramat Gan. Between 1993 and 1996, close to three-hundred Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks.[150] For Rabin, Palestinian terrorism was not an existential threat, but a serious problem nonetheless insofar as it held the potential to thwart the peace process. Although the Oslo process was pursued by Rabin to serve Israel's long-term

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148 Ross, *The Missing Peace*, 91.

149 Rabin, "On the Road to Peace," in *The Rabin Memoirs*, 412

150 Itamar Rabinovich, *Waging Peace: Israel and the Arabs, 1948-2003* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 69-71

interests, it carried the immediate and unmistakeable cost of a terrorist campaign launched in Israel proper by Islamist enemies of the two-state solution.

Whatever the long-term benefits associated with Rabin's courageous decision, most ordinary Israelis became increasingly concerned with their personal security, as well as the new dependence on Arafat and the Palestinian Authority to cooperate over security matters. Not all of the attacks originated in areas under the PA's jurisdiction, but the prevailing perception was that they did.[151] In this context, religious zealots and security hawks such as Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu found common cause in opposing the Oslo process and fomenting the Israeli prime minister's assassination. By the summer of 1995, public disenchantment with the implementation of the Oslo Accords and growing opposition to rumors of withdrawals on the Syrian front began to erode the government's support base. The Oslo II agreement was barely approved by the Knesset.[152] In a scathing *New York Times* opinion piece, penned in September 1993, Netanyahu compared Rabin to the former UK Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who infamously appeased Hitler's territorial expansion and paved the way for the Nazi genocide. "Prime Minister Rabin," he wrote, "chose to favor Arafat and the well-being of the people of Gaza over the security of Israeli citizens."[153] Only a few months later, Netanyahu led a procession bearing a coffin with the inscription, "Rabin kills Zionism." Whether the coffin was for Zionism or, more ominously, for Rabin, is hotly disputed to this day.[154]

Outside the halls of the Knesset, opposition to the government's peace initiative became still uglier and more venomous. At demonstrations, placards featuring Rabin wearing a keffiyeh, a

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151 Ibid

152 Ibid

153 Benjamin Netanyahu, "Peace in our Time," in *The New York Times,* September 5, 1993, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1993/09/05/409993.html?pageNumber=114

154 Roger Cohen, "The Incitement in Israel that Killed Yitzhak Rabin," in *The New York Times* (December 4, 2019) https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/opinion/incitement-movie.html

symbol of the Arab resistance, and Nazi garb were commonplace.[155] Meanwhile, in synagogues throughout Israel and on online forums, Orthodox Rabbis variously chastised Rabin as a "rodef" (one whose acts threaten Jewish lives) and "moser" (one who hands over a Jew, or rather Jewish land, to a Gentile authority).[156] According to Jewish law, both crimes are punishable by death. This was the same world of messianic zealotry that confronted Begin as he withdrew from the Sinai and accepted a plan for Palestinian autonomy. Indeed, the realities of the peace process of the 1970s and the 1990s created a devastating predicament for radicals within the settler movement, who viewed Israel's retention of Judaea and Samaria as a prerequisite for the coming of the Messiah.[157] Whatever their true intentions were, Begin and Rabin made territorial compromises that were at least perceived by the settlers as an affront to their expectations of linear progress toward redemption.

Begin was denounced as a traitor, but he evaded the violent strain that came to pervade Israel's messianic movement. After all, the Sinai was not a part of *Eretz-Yisrael* and Begin repeatedly stated that giving up the southern plateau actually saved Judaea and Samaria by removing the threat of conventional warfare. Moreover, his hand-wringing after the signing of the peace treaty and continued settlement assuaged the fears of many that he would give up the West Bank. Rabin was *not* granted the same benefit of the doubt. His recognition of the PLO, freezing of settlement construction, and creation of the PA was, according to Ehud Sprinzak, the "worst thing that could happen to Zionist messianism" — and he, unlike Begin, was not spared the violent retribution of Israel's far-right.[158] In fact, Rabin paid the ultimate price for his peace initiative in early November 1995, when a young Orthodox law student named Yigal Amir shot and killed the

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155 Israel Drori and Chaim Weizmann, "Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin against the Settlers: A Stakeholder Analysis," in *Public Administration Review* 67, No. 2 (March-April 2007), 302-314, 306

156 Ehud Sprinzak, "Extremism and Violence in Israel: The Crisis of Messianic Politics," in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 555 (January 1998), 114-126, 124

157 Ibid., 122

158 Ibid., 122

prime minister as he was leaving a peace rally in Tel Aviv.[159] "It was clear from Jewish law that 'din rodef' applied to the prime minister," Amir testified to the court that eventually sentenced him to life in prison.[160] He determined that Rabin's policies toward the Palestinians endangered Jewish lives, which placed him in the category of a "rodef" deserving of death.

President Bill Clinton has been adamant on what he believes are the political implications of Rabin's murder: "Had he not lost his life on that terrible November night, within three years we would have had a comprehensive agreement for peace in the Middle-East."[161] Historians are less certain that Rabin's assassination truly killed the peace process given the red-lines of both Rabin and Arafat, but it can be stated with certainty that Rabin's assassination had some tangible effect on the peace process. Rabin was replaced by his longtime rival within the Labor Party Shimon Peres, who made the strategic error of not calling an early election. Instead, he kept the original date for general elections in late October 1996 and ran on the policy decisions he made in the intervening months. This decision cost Peres and the Labor Party. The lack of progress on the Syrian front and another series of deadly suicide bombings in February and March of 1996 catapulted Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud to power and did not improve prospects for peace with the Palestinians and the Arab world. Although Netanyahu signed the October 1998 Wye River Memorandum, which transferred thirteen percent of the West Bank, including Hebron, to the PA, his commitment to fulfilling the spirit of the Oslo process was always tenuous.[162] By the same token, Arafat turned to further obstructionism and terrorism in the years after Rabin's assassination.

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[159] Michael Karpin and Ina Friedman, *Murder in the Name of God: The Plot to Kill Yitzhak Rabin* (London: Granta, 2000), 1-10

[160] "Killer of Rabin Testifies: Jewish Law Dictated Actions," *Jewish Telegraph Agency Archive,* March 4 1996, https://www.jta.org/archive/killer-of-rabin-testifies-jewish-law-dictated-actions

[161] Daniel Kurtzer, "The Collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations," in *The Peace Puzzle: America's Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace, 1989-2011*, edited by Daniel Kurtzer et al (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 110

[162] Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 74-97

Oslo in Retrospect

Thirty years on from Rabin's assassination, it is easy to dismiss the Oslo Accords as a bold attempt at a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace that failed to fulfill its promise. After all, Israel is yet to sign a peace treaty with Syria or a final-status agreement with the Palestinians. In comparison to the Camp David Accords negotiated by Begin, the fruits of the Oslo process are less palpable. Rabin's main failing was in underestimating the political opposition to his initiative, as well as the inherent flaws in the interim approach. Contrary to right-wing claims that Rabin gave up too much too quickly, the Oslo process was fatally slow. As American negotiator Aaron Miller has wrote, "even while they negotiated as friends, partners, and equals, the sides were forced to play their respective roles as occupied and occupier."[163] The logic behind the interim approach suited Rabin's cautious style in that it provided Israel with reassurance that peace would bring security and the Palestinians time to lay the groundwork for self-governance. However, it also allowed Hamas militants and "Greater Israel" fanatics such as Yigal Amir to perpetrate violence in the hope of derailing the peace process. Despite their dueling claims to the land of historic Israel/Palestine, both groups united in a common raison d'être of preventing a process that they believed would result in the establishment of a Palestinian state on *part* of historic Israel/Palestine.[164]

Yet Rabin's initiative also made good strategic sense. His objective, at least in part, was to safeguard Israel's survival as a Jewish democracy. Rabin would not let Israel slide into a binational reality—one state for two peoples, the antithesis of a Jewish democracy. To do so required repartitioning the Land of Israel. While it was then-deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin's initiative, he defended this achievement boldly and made it his own when he first became aware of the secret contacts in Oslo. A necessary corollary of this move was the entrenchment of the Palestine

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[163] Aaron Miller, "The Pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian Peace: A Retrospective," in *The Israeli-Palestinian Process: Oslo and the Lessons of Failure*, edited by Robert Rothstein et al (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), 33.

[164] Ibid

Liberation Organization in the disputed territories—a source of great emotional pain for Rabin—and the creation of facts on the ground which precluded an eventual annexation of the West Bank's most populous Arab areas in the ensuing years.

The Oslo Accords provided an outline for Israeli-Palestinian agreements and remains the accepted international framework for negotiations between Israel and the West Bank Palestinian leadership. Whether they liked it or not, subsequent Israeli governments, including those headed by Netanyahu, adhered to the partition created by Rabin's policies. They were cognizant of the international implications of refusing to implement the Oslo Accords and they proved unwilling to completely upend the new status quo.[165] Efraim Inbar was misguided to assert that "the ideology of Greater Israel… vanished as a realistic and respectable policy option" after Rabin's death.[166] Yet the Oslo Accords did establish a framework for a two-state solution by legitimizing direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and by putting Begin's autonomy plan into practice.

By the same token, Rabin withdrew from the West Bank to grant moderate Arab leaders the political cover they needed to sign formal peace treaties with Israel. Habitually preoccupied with issues of national security, Rabin knew that Israel would do well to insulate itself from the more extremist, Islamist-aligned states in the periphery. On this front, he also enjoyed some success. His efforts to conclude an agreement with Syria were foiled despite his willingness to part with the Golan Heights, but he did succeed in signing a peace treaty with Jordan in October 1994. Rabin was aware that King Hussein actually needed the 1993 Declaration of Principles to sign a peace treaty with Israel, even if Hussein secretly did not welcome the development and hoped to represent the Palestinian cause himself on the international stage.[167] On 26 October 1994, Rabin and King Hussein met in the Arava valley to sign what was then just the second treaty agreed between Israel

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165 "Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's Reasons for Signing the Oslo Accords," from the *Center for Israel Education* (November 1 1995) https://israeled.org/resources/documents/yitzhak-rabin-oslo-accords/

166 Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 170/171

167 Ralph Mandel, "Israel," in *The American Jewish Year Book* 95 (1995), 369-447, 388

and an Arab state. Rabin conceded parts of land in the Arava, increased Jordan's share in Israel's water resources, and leased certain farmlands from Jordan to avoid dismantling several Israeli settlements. In exchange, Jordan was willing to develop, in a remarkably short time, good relations with Israel in various fields and offered what has variously been described as "warmer peace" than was ever the intention of Egypt's leaders.[168]

Furthermore, there is no doubt that the Accords provided Israel with political and lucrative economic openings to the Gulf states, India, the Far East, and other regions of the world where closer relations with Israel were considered taboo until it withdrew from certain lands. During the 1990s, Jerusalem established or renewed ties with some thirty countries and the Vatican. Along the same lines, as many as fifteen Arab governments engaged in multilateral talks with Israel on issues such as arms control and regional security, water, regional economic development, the environment, and refugees.[169] These important political facts were Rabin's doing. The steps he took were difficult, both practically and emotionally, but they also carried enormous benefit for the country to which he devoted his life.

Thirty years on from his death, the circumstances of Rabin's tragic death have certainly provided the materials for the creation of a myth. Peaceniks in Israel and the United States today speak in the name of Rabin's legacy, with some even contending that Rabin was willing to accept a Palestinian state in direct contradiction of all the archival evidence.[170] In reality, Rabin would not acquiesce to any policy that he believed would threaten Israel's long-term survival, and he made it clear on multiple occasions that Palestinian statehood was a non-starter. He may have been a

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[168] "Israel-Jordan: Treaty of Peace," in *International Legal Materials,* January 1995, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20698413

[169] David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO*, 121

[170] Guy Ziv, "Fight the Right-Wingers Rewriting History: Rabin Wanted a Palestinian State," in *Haaretz* (November 2, 2017) https://www.haaretz.com/2017-11-02/ty-article/.premium/fight-the-rightist-revisionists-rabin-wanted-a-palestinian-state/0000017f-dc29-db5a-a57f-dc6b22c90000

complicated personality, and some of his views certainly changed over time, but the centrality of Israel's national security remained basically unchanged.

Specific policies could be modified to accommodate evolving geopolitical climates, but his devotion to Israel's strategic well-being remained ever-constant. He fought for Israel's independence in 1948 and the army he prepared for war achieved a stunning victory in 1967. The Rabin of the 1990s was motivated by the same raison d'être of protecting Israel in the face of long-term and immediate threats to its survival, no matter the personal or political costs. On this front, there was very little that separated Rabin and Begin, both of whom made difficult territorial compromise to serve what they perceived as the national interest. No political leader likes to make decisions that will trigger fierce opposition. Yet when the reality required them to act, Begin and Rabin had the necessary courage to make difficult decisions, believing that to do otherwise was simply irresponsible.

Chapter III: Applying the Lessons of the Past

The Moral and Strategic Necessity of the Two-State Solution

In its relatively short history, Israel has faced critical moments demanding brave decisions from its leaders. Begin and Rabin were two prime ministers who did not retreat in the face of grave national security challenges. Having fought for Israel's independence, albeit as leading members of warring factions in a divided Zionist independence movement, they understood what it took to produce a Jewish state and they accepted their charge to preserve it *ex-post facto*. Considerable security threats and intense domestic criticism did not preclude them from making difficult decisions. Unfortunately, the same cannot be stated of today's Israeli leadership, which also faces grave external and internal threats, but appears less poised to make territorial compromises. As of December 2023, Benjamin Netanyahu has served a combined sixteen years as Israel's prime minister. During this period, he has secured significant aid packages from the United States, as well as lucrative normalisation deals with peripheral Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.[171]

However, he has also presided over the current path that threatens to turn Israel into a binational state, namely, a prescription for continued conflict and the destruction of the Zionist dream. Although he has publicly accepted the wisdom of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, his actual policies have made the achievement of this lofty goal decidedly more difficult to achieve. Since he began his second term in 2009, the numbers from places such as Eli and Ofra—that is, isolated settlements outside of the major blocs—have grown from less than sixty thousand to more than one hundred thousand.[172] The reality of all these years of construction has

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[171] Shmuel Trigano, "The Abraham Accords: Contrasting Reflections," in *The Begin-Sadat Center For Strategic Studies: Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 188 (March 2021), 1-16

[172] Jodi Rudoren et al, "Netanyahu and the Settlements," in *The New York Times* (March 12, 2015), https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/12/world/middleeast/netanyahu-west-bank-settlements-israel-election.html

created what American negotiator Aaron David Miller described as a sense of "urgency and of panic."[173] As this number soars, the likelihood of a genuine separation between Israel and the Palestinians at some future point dwindles dramatically.

The Netanyahu governments have simply not seen what Makovsky and Ross describe as a "looming problem and the imperative of dealing with it."[174] After all, in purely military terms it is unclear how territorial withdrawal—of the kind made by Begin and Rabin—would serve Israel's strategic interests. Of the state actors that threatened Israel's security during its early existence, Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties with Israel; Syria has been devastated by a decade of civil war; Lebanon is bound by a 2006 ceasefire with the Jewish state which it cannot afford to break; and even Iraq, though perceived as a major threat during Rabin's second term, is today unstable and inwardly focused.[175] In other words, the threat posed by Israel's immediate neighbors to its sovereignty—and to the security of its individual citizens—has been minimized, albeit not completely assuaged, by both the build-up of Israel's military, as facilitated by the United States, and a combination of favorable international and regional developments.

Of course, a potentially nuclear Iran and its proxies remain a significant challenge. Since 2006, Israel has fought five wars with Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and a sixth, in Lebanon, with Hezbollah. The most gruesome of these wars took place in late 2023, when Hamas terrorists briefly assumed control of towns in the south of Israel, murdered several hundreds of innocent people, and took scores of Israeli civilians and soldiers hostage.[176] The "Simchat Torah" massacre was a terrible human tragedy and it reminded many Israelis of their tenuous position in the

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[173] Ibid

[174] Makovsky and Ross, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, 274

[175] Steven Cook, "The U.S.-Israel Relationship No Longer Makes Sense," in *Foreign Policy* (March 13, 2023), https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/13/us-israel-relationship-security-democracy-values/

[176] Bill Hutchinson, "Israel-Hamas conflict: Timeline and key developments," in *ABC News* (October 30, 2023), https://abcnews.go.com/International/timeline-surprise-rocket-attack-hamas-israel/story?id=103816006; Bruce Hoffman, "Israel's War on Hamas: What to Know," *The Council on Foreign Relations* (October 9, 2023), https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/israels-war-hamas-what-know

Middle East. And still, it is dubious whether territorial withdrawal from the West Bank and the establishment of a Palestinian state would actually satisfy either Iran or its terroristic proxies. After all, Iranian leaders such as Ayatollah Khamenei have consistently derided Israel as an unwanted "cancerous growth" that needs to be usurped, while Islamist groups such as Hamas maintain a similarly dogmatic approach to Israel's existence on *any* part of historic Israel/Palestine.[177] As a result, most Israelis find the status quo of occupying Palestinians in the West Bank quite sustainable.

Furthermore, Israel is not isolated and its continued occupation of the West Bank has not prevented it from establishing warmer ties with significant constituencies in both the Arab world and the larger international community. Yes, the occupation is heavily criticized in the halls of European Parliaments, and hostility is growing on American campuses, especially among segments of the political left.[178] But Israel is not suffering international alienation and its economy, with its bustling technology sector, is the source of new global partnerships. Israel's technology and innovation in fields of agriculture, artificial intelligence, medicine, and arms development make it an attractive place for investment in the eyes of not only western countries, but Arab states historically precluded from establishing warmer ties with the Jewish state.

In fact, the increasing threat of Iran; growing demands for the delivery of basic goods and services after the Arab Spring in 2011; and impatience with an ineffective Palestinian leadership have all led a number of Arab states to embrace detente with Israel. Israel and Saudi Arabia are yet to sign a peace deal, but the Abraham Accords of September 2020 delivered bilateral normalisation agreements between Israel and several other Gulf States, including the United Arab Emirates

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[177] Amir Vahdat and Jon Gambrell, "Iran leader says Israel a 'Cancerous Tumour' to be Destroyed," *The Associated Press* (May 22, 2020), https://apnews.com/article/a033042303545d9ef783a95222d51b83

[178] Doron Ben-Atar and Andrew Pessin, *Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech, and BD*S (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018)

(UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.[179] Made possible through generous offers of economic and military aid from the United States, the agreements have ushered unprecedented economic, political and cultural cooperation between Israel and the Arab world. The UAE, for example, is Israel's largest trading partner in the region with more than 600 million dollars in bilateral trade.[180]

In light of Israel's relative strength in the international arena and the territorial maximalism of its most daunting foes, many question whether the country's national security equation justifies or requires the kinds of difficult territorial compromises that characterized the Begin and Rabin eras. On one hand, the occupation appears not only manageable, but necessary given the short-term security threats posed by Iran and its proxies. Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett—a prominent critique of the two-state solution—wrote in a 2014 *New York Times* op-ed that the "old models of peace between Israel and the Palestinians are no longer relevant" and that "Israel cannot withdraw from more territory."[181] On the other hand, there are grave long-term dangers associated with the policy that perpetuates Israel's control of the West Bank. "Without a realistic prospect for an end to the occupation," the U.N. Special coordinator on the Middle East Tor Wennesland has noted, "it is only a matter of time before we face an irreversible, dangerous collapse and widespread instability."[182] Despite the considerable economic, political and diplomatic gains made by Israel in the past seventy years, its long-term survival as a Jewish and democratic state—a preoccupation shared by Begin and Rabin—continues to hang in the balance as a direct result of its control of the West Bank.

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[179] Dennis Ross, "The Abraham Accords and the Changing Shape of the Middle East," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (June 21, 2022), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/abraham-accords-and-changing-shape-middle-east

[180] David Makovsky and Josh Kram, "Think Regionally: A US Role for Deepening the Abraham Accords," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (October 3, 2021), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/think-regionally-us-role-deepening-abraham-accords

[181] Naftali Bennett, "For Israel, Two-State Is No Solution," *The New York Times* (November 5, 2014), https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/opinion/naftali-bennett-for-israel-two-state-is-no-solution.html

[182] "Without Prospect of End to Occupation, Middle East Region Faces Irreversible, Dangerous Collapse, Special Coordinator Tells Security Council," *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases* (January 19, 2022), https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14769.doc.htm

The costs of the status quo are abstract, but that does not make them any less serious. While Yoram Ettinger, a former member of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, has argued that the "Jewish state is not facing a potential Arab time bomb," the actual demographic figures are much more sobering.[183] As of late 2022, over seven million Jewish Israelis lived in Israel and the West Bank, and seven million Palestinians lived in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.[184] In the context of Arab-Palestinian fertility rates that dwarf Jewish fertility rates in Israel, the emergence of an Arab majority in *Eretz Yisrael* over the next few decades is a probability, if not a certainty. In this dreaded scenario, Israel will be forced to either grant only half of its population the right to vote or risk becoming a *de facto* Palestinian state with a Palestinian majority. Therein lies the threat to Israel's character and identity, as well as a recipe for continued violence and conflict. In cases where there is more than one national or sectarian group competing for control of the same land, the result has almost always been continued and intensified warfare. Put simply, a one-state model is not a viable option because Palestinians will not accept an outcome in which they have neither national rights nor equal rights in a binational state, and Jewish Israelis will not acquiesce to living as minorities under a Palestinian state.[185]

A two-state solution that satisfies both Israel's long-term interests and the national aspirations of the Palestinian people is, rather, the *only* solution to the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, as the diplomatic breakthroughs of the past have shown, an Israeli-Palestinian peace will undoubtedly require brave Israeli and Palestinian leaders capable of making decisions that spawn intense domestic backlash, as well as third-party mediators who are willing to bring

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183 Yoram Ettinger, "Jewish-Arab Demography Defies Conventional Wisdom," *in-FOCUS* (Spring 2018), https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2018/04/11/jewish-arab-demography-defies-conventional-wisdom/

184 Claudia De Martino, "Israel: A Demographic Ticking Bomb in Today's One State Reality," *Aspenia International Analysis and Commentary* (July 10, 2023), https://aspeniaonline.it/israel-a-demographic-ticking-bomb-in-todays-one-state-reality/

185 Seth Frantzman, "What Articles on Israel's 'one-state reality' get wrong - analysis," in *The Jerusalem Post* (April 16, 2023), https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-739378
See also Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and Of Good Courage*, 273-305

significant pressure to bear on both sides to make the necessary compromises. Unfortunately, these conditions are absent from the geopolitical climate today and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. To the extent that peace is still possible, the lessons of the past provide a clear guide as to where each side must change, as well as a tragic reminder of how far Israelis and Palestinians are from a lasting peace.

Courageous Israeli Leadership is Essential

Prime Ministers Begin and Rabin provide a useful, if imperfect, template for Israeli diplomacy. Though motivated by different ideological perspectives regarding Judaea and Samaria, there is inherent value in the two leaders' common approach to leadership. They were bound by a profound sense of duty and never lost sight of what they defined as strategic necessity—all political, personal and even ideological considerations were subordinated to the national interest. At critical junctures in history, the prime ministers knew that territorial compromise, though difficult from a political and logistical standpoint, was necessary to serve Israel's long-term goals and that a failure to act would be irresponsible. For Begin, the choice was historic. Unlike his predecessors, he had an opportunity to make peace with Egypt, the greatest of the Arab military threats. Israel had fought successive wars with Egypt, and Begin knew that Sadat would be the figurehead of any Arab coalition against the Jewish state. As such he parted with the Sinai, including its settlements, and accepted a plan for autonomy in the West Bank.

Taking on his ideology and his former colleagues in the underground proved painful for Begin, but he would not forgo what could be gained—namely, an end to the state of conventional warfare between Israel and the Arab world—and risk a major foreign policy fiasco in lieu of a peace settlement. After all, Sadat could have easily returned to the rejectionist camp after exhausting his diplomatic option and US-Israel relations could have soured, as President Carter threatened they would, had Begin not made the compromises necessary for peace. Fifteen years after Camp David, Rabin also saw an opportunity that must not be lost. In fact, he faced what Makovsky and Ross

described as a "geopolitical tsunami."[186] The fall of the Soviet Union, the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the relative weakness of the PLO and Syria created an ideal "window of opportunity" for Israel to insulate itself from the distant and long-term threat of Iran and to safeguard its existence as a Jewish democracy. Rabin failed to secure a final status agreement with either Syria or the Palestinians, though he still paid the ultimate price for ceding parts of the West Bank to a newly-established Palestinian Authority.

Once convinced of the unprecedented opportunities they faced and the dangers of retaining certain territories, there was nothing that could convince Begin and Rabin to choose a different path, not even intense domestic censure from former comrades or violent zealots. Real leaders, presidential historian Doris Goodwin wrote, have "an ambition for self that becomes something larger."[187] Begin and Rabin were decidedly motivated by a "larger" ambition to defend the people of Israel, as well as an unrelenting mental resilience in the face of personal and political adversity. It is hard to overstate the tumult that both Begin and Rabin faced before they became prime ministers and how their upbringings—in Poland and the *Yishuv*, respectively—had readied them to overcome challenges in service of the Jewish people. Begin lost his parents and siblings to the Holocaust and lived a few precarious years as an underground revolutionary in pre-state Israel. The personal threat of incarceration that Begin faced from the British authorities conditioned him for the difficult compromises he made as prime minister. Precisely, it meant that he, like Rabin, who had fought in numerous wars with Israel's Arab neighbors, could tolerate intense personal attacks and threats.

So too, Begin's life in the diaspora at a time of intense global antisemitism defined his public life. It imbued him with knowledge of the endemic dangers facing the Jewish people, a suspicious worldview regarding the international community, and a deeply-felt obligation to ensure that Israel would never again be unprepared in the face of genocide and annihilation. The territorial

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[186] Makovsky and Ross, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, 292

[187] Quoted in Peggy Noonan, "How to Find a Good Leader," *The Wall Street Journal* (November 1, 2018), https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-find-a-good-leader-1541111329

compromises he made were not deviations from this fundamental mission, but a necessary means to defend Israel in the face of external threats. "His drive for power," William Quandt wrote, "seemed deeply rooted in the trauma of his own people. He was determined to make Israel a strong Jewish state."[188] Rabin's duty to defend his nation was driven by a similar awareness of the endemic dangers facing the Jewish people, though he did not grow up in Europe or lose family members to the Nazi genocide. Instead he fought in the War of Independence and witnessed first-hand the hatred that drove Israel's neighbors. The horrors of the 1948 war demonstrated to Rabin that Israel could not afford to be unprepared given her unforgiving neighborhood. "The Yishuv leadership," he believed, "had not prepared enough weapons of the quality required or sufficiently trained the combat forces."[189] Like Begin, he committed his entire public life to defending the state of Israel — and he, too, came to embrace difficult territorial concessions in service of what he perceived as the national interest.

Begin and Rabin began their public lives as rivals, but eventually embraced similar national aspirations and a degree of mutual respect. In October 1994, Rabin in the Knesset said: "This government has decided that, under certain conditions, peace is preferable to Sharm al-Sheikh—just as the Likud government, headed by Menachem Begin, bravely decided."[190] Heaping praise on Begin was designed to prepare the Israeli public for additional territorial concessions. It was also a way for Rabin to signal his appreciation of the Likud leader's ability to revise his positions and take risky decisions in the interest of a secure, democratic and internationally accepted Jewish state. On this score, both leaders left powerful legacies. Begin swapped the strategic depth of the Sinai for a de-jure end to the state of war with Egypt, as well as a de-facto end of conventional warfare with other Arab countries who would not wage war on Israel without the Egyptian linchpin. So too,

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188 William Quandt, "Menachem Begin: A Past Master at Negotiation," *The Brookings Review* 2, No. 2 (Winter 1983), 12-16, 13

189 Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, 28

190 Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, 163

Rabin's creation of the PA and withdrawal from parts of the West Bank laid the foundation for an historic peace with Jordan and for warmer relations with much of the international community.

Of course, these successes do not detract from Begin's and Rabin's larger failure—or rather inability—to secure a comprehensive Middle East peace, itself the product of unfavorable regional circumstances and their own ideological red lines. Indeed, there was yet another commonality between the two prime ministers: they were both opposed to Palestinian statehood in the West Bank, a minimum condition for peace amongst even the most moderate segments of the Palestinian community. The demographic threat posed by the one million Arab inhabitants of *Eretz Yisrael* constituted a serious problem for the two leaders given their shared liberal sensitivities. Begin had always believed that his brand of Jewish nationalism was compatible with civil liberties. In 1962, he publicly opposed keeping the Israeli Arab population under martial law and in 1953, he opposed the Qibya attack led by Ariel Sharon because it claimed innocent Arab lives.[191] Rabin upheld a similar commitment to democratic ideals, noting in late 1994 that Israel ought to withdraw from the West Bank to maintain a "Jewish, democratic, liberal way of life."[192]

Yet neither were willing to acknowledge the full national rights of the Palestinians. What they had in common was a belief that at some point the Palestinians and the international community will accept an outcome in which Palestinians do not have a state. Begin took a decidedly hard-line on territory and the Jewish right to settle in all of the West Bank, while Rabin favored a Palestinian autonomy arrangement under Jordanian sovereignty, even though Jordan renounced its claim to the West Bank in 1988. Even if Begin and Rabin feared the prospect of a binational state and genuinely believed that the Palestinians were entitled to run their own lives in some shape or form, they ignored the fact that the Palestinians actually do have a distinct national identity, championed by nations around the world and articulated in the charters of the Palestinian

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[191] Makovsky and Ross, *Be Strong and Of Good Courage*, 101/102

[192] Ibid., 201

political parties.[193] The Israeli prime minister that eventually secures a final-status agreement with the Palestinians will likely have to go even further in his willingness to compromise than Begin and Rabin—that is, he or she will need to cross the rubicon that they never could and accept Palestinian statehood in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

We remain a long way from this point. As of December 2023, the incentives for Israel's leaders and populace to cede further territory are weak. While the long-term identity crisis posed by Israel's retention of the territories are an abstraction for most Israelis, the perception of Palestinian hostility and endemic fears of national annihilation remain very real. When Sadat visited Jerusalem and spoke in front of the Knesset, the seat of the unrecognized capital of Israel, he made a genuine signal of peaceful intent. By explicitly recognizing Israel's legitimacy as part of the region, he overcame the psychological barrier—what Galia Golan described as "the most important obstacle to peace for Israelis."[194] The visit went a long way in overcoming entrenched suspicions amongst the Israeli populace generated by decades of conflict in the Middle East and generations of persecution in the diaspora. This meant that Israeli leaders and citizens felt more secure taking the risk of giving up a degree of its strategic depth.

Israelis are less trusting of the Palestinian leadership than they were of Sadat, especially after unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon and the Gaza Strip in 2000 and 2005, respectively. The withdrawals left what Israeli political scientist Hirsh Goodman lamented as "deep and indelible scars on Israel" by creating power vacuums that were filled by Hezbollah in the North and Hamas in the South.[195] They produced not calm, not security, not peace, but thousands of cross-border

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[193] Shmuel Rosner, "Why the 'Jordanian Option' Won't Die," *The New York Times* (September 21, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/opinion/israel-peace-plan-jordan-kushner.html

[194] Golan, *Israeli Peacemaking Since 1967*, 44

[195] Hirsh Goodman, "The Dangers of Unilateral Israeli Withdrawal From the West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs: Israeli Security, Regional Diplomacy, and International Law* (2017), https://lessons.myjli.com/survival/index.php/2017/03/22/the-dangers-of-unilateral-israeli-withdrawal-from-the-west-bank-and-eastern-jerusalem/

incidents and a barrage of rockets toward Israel's population centers.[196] The rationale behind the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, as articulated by then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was that the enclave would become a hub of economic activity and peaceful coexistence, perhaps laying the foundation for further withdrawals from the West Bank and the creation of a Palestinian state. "The Palestinians bear the burden of proof," Sharon stated in his national address shortly before the evacuation, "they must fight the terror organizations, dismantle their infrastructures and show sincere intentions of peace."[197] This did not happen: Gaza did not become a beacon of coexistence, but a jihadist enclave after Hamas' ascendance to power in 2007.[198] Since withdrawing its forces and settlements from Gaza in 2005, Israel has fought four major wars against the Iranian-backed terror group, including the most recent ground incursion spawned by a surprise cross-border Hamas attack which killed more Israeli civilians than any other war fought between the Jewish state and its neighbors.[199]

Upheaval in the region and rejection among Palestinians make it difficult for Israelis to consider the demographic threat or to contemplate unilateral withdrawal from further territory. Given the intransigence of Hamas and the widespread conflicts in the region, unwillingness to give up the West Bank is neither surprising nor unreasonable. Without an Israeli security presence, the illicit Palestinian arms industry in the West Bank could easily flourish and the terrorism of Iran's proxies may become institutionalized. In this dreaded scenario, Israeli neighborhoods in Jerusalem, or Kfar Saba and the entire centre of Israel (including Ben-Gurion Airport), would be vulnerable to

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196 Ibid

197 "Ariel Sharon Address before the Israeli Disengagement from Gaza," *CSPAN*, 15 August 2005, https://www.c-span.org/video/?188483-1/israeli-disengagement-gaza

198 Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Moral Clarity* (Boston: Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, 2009)

199 Julia Frankel, "Israel-Hamas War: Casualties, Injuries, and People Displaced," *Associated Press* (November 1, 2023), https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-death-toll-numbers-injured-5c9dc40bec95a8408c83f3c2fb759da0

both deadly ground incursions and rockets fired from hills only a few kilometers away.[200] Accordingly, a negotiated peace settlement with the Palestinians or a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank is simply not possible at this moment.

However, separation from the Palestinians at some point in the future is still necessary if Israel wishes to retain its democratic and Jewish character. There are actions that Israel could take to preserve the two-state outcome in lieu of complete separation for the time being, all of which will be difficult given the cleavages that define Israel today. An end to settlement construction east of the security barrier is a major policy step that could keep the prospect of a two state solution alive until Palestinian leaders are willing to negotiate. Financial incentives should also be offered to Israelis living in isolated settlements to move back into the major blocs or within green-line Israel.[201] These will not be easy policies to implement given the political clout and virulence of the settler community, but a courageous Israeli prime minister can build broad-based national support for such a policy by framing the stakes as being about security and survival, as both Rabin and Begin did. Like them, he or she will confront intense public condemnation. And like them, he or she will be required to make a difficult tradeoff to preserve Israel's long-term security and survival as a Jewish democracy.

Even Heroic Leaders Need Genuine Negotiating Partners

Although Begin and Rabin were transformative leaders, they were not, as noted by political scientist Bruce Jentleson, "so extraordinary as to achieve transformational impact irrespective of context."[202] Unlike the prime ministers that served before them, they both had the opportunity of dealing with Arab leaders who were willing to recognize Israel, though Sadat was a more genuine peace partner than Arafat. Egypt's territorial, economic and psychological losses from the June

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200 Goodman, *The Dangers of Unilateral Israeli Withdrawal*, n.p.

201 Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and Of Good Courage*, 289

202 Bruce Jentleson, *The Peacemakers: Leadership Lessons from Twentieth-Century Statesmanship* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1

1967 War perturbed its leaders. Sadat was resentful of the losses in revenue from the Sinai oil fields, the costs of absorbing refugees from the canal cities, and the humiliations of Egypt's increasing dependence on oil-rich Arab states for aid.[203] Consumed by the economic and political turmoil incurred by Egypt's loss of the Sinai in 1967, Sadat crossed a psychological threshold that no other Arab leader had before him by recognizing Israel's legitimate place in the Middle East. He did so at the expense of his relationship with the Arab world, which unanimously denounced him as a traitor.

This historic detente would have been anathema to Sadat's predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who personified hatred of Israel and relished his status as figurehead of the pan-Arab movement. "From the almost twenty years of Nasser's rule," Stein wrote, "Israelis neither considered or expected any Arab leader to end the Arab commitment to destroy Israel."[204] Sadat's earliest speeches, many of which were rife with antisemitic remarks, gave the impression of someone who would not significantly deviate from the rejectionist policies of his predecessor—a close alliance with the Soviet Union, renewed leadership of the Arab world, and continued warfare against Israel on both the battlefield and in the international community.[205] In the early fall of 1970, Israeli and American officials had no reason to believe that Nasser's death marked a new era in Israel-Egypt relations.

In making this assumption, Israelis and Americans fundamentally misread the new Egyptian premier, whose raison d'être was actually to distance himself from the mistakes of his predecessor and thus restore the Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty. Unlike Nasser, he was not a dogmatist. He was motivated by an unwavering vision of what he wanted for Egypt, but everything else was negotiable. Specifically, he hoped to move Egypt out of the Soviet sphere of influence; to curry closer diplomatic ties with Washington; and to restore the Sinai Peninsula, including its lucrative oil

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[203] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Egyptian Politics Under Sadat*, 26; John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 66

[204] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy,* 1

[205] Ibid., 1/2

fields, to Egyptian control. If he could have achieved these goals while avoiding a peace agreement with Israel, he would have done so. Instead he provided Israel with what its leaders never expected: a full-fledged and bilateral peace, which included only meagre stipulations for the Palestinians who lived under Israel's control.[206]

Sadat possessed unalterable objectives, but he was flexible in what he would accept to achieve his desired end of restoring the Sinai. As Usamah al-Baz, a key official who shaped Egyptian diplomacy during the 1970s and 1980s, stated during an interview with Dr Stein: "Sadat was a man of vision who looked beyond today's constraints and possessed a messianic sense." He added that "his willingness and ability to take courageous political steps and unprecedented risks were greater than what Nasser was ever willing to do."[207] Sadat's preference was "Egypt-first." He preferred to work with his Arab peers to achieve a multi-lateral peace. No leader likes to incur criticism from their brethren. But he was also aware of the shortcomings of Arab leaders and he had neither the temperament nor the political will to wait for them to abandon their staunch ideological commitments. As such, Sadat signed a separate peace with Israel to the displeasure of rejectionists throughout the Arab world. Without Sadat's ascendance to power, the breakthrough at Camp David and the subsequent Israel-Egypt peace treaty simply would not have happened. Begin's willingness to break with his ideology and former comrades was crucial, but so was Sadat's capacity to withstand the inevitable and virulent abuse of the Arab world.[208]

Rabin operated under much greater constraints than Begin. The Syrian President Hafez Assad was not willing to accept Israel, even in exchange for the entire Golan Heights, and while the PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat may have rhetorically recognized Israel's sovereignty in September 1993, he was not Sadat. To be clear, there were reasons for Oslo's failure to deliver a

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206 Ibid

207 Ibid., 3/4

208 Golan, *Israeli Peacemaking Since 1967*, 44

comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace besides Palestinian intransigence. After all, Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Israeli settler before any final-status negotiations had commenced and he himself never publicly accepted the concept of Palestinian statehood. Returning the whole Sinai with its demilitarization guaranteed was not only politically easier than relinquishing Judaea and Samaria given its lesser historical value, but it was perceived as less dangerous. The close proximity of the the West Bank and even Gaza to Israel's population centers made any kind of withdrawal from these lands increasingly difficult for Rabin to implement and justify.[209] And yet, Arafat's failings of leadership also contributed to the disappointment of the Oslo process; a reality that has been confirmed by not only American presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, but Arafat's closest advisors.[210]

If Rabin was apprehensive to the idea of an independent PLO state on Israel's borders, Arafat did almost nothing to alter his mindset. As Israel conceded areas of the West Bank, he continued to promote hostility toward Israel. Only a week after the signing of the Oslo I Accord, Arafat, unaware that he was being recorded, told an audience at a Johannesburg mosque that the agreements the PLO had just signed were tantamount to the pact signed by the prophet Mohammad with a Jewish tribe in Hijaz in 628 ad: a tactical move the Muslims reneged on a few years later.[211] He also failed to quash violence emanating from the occupied territories. As the former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk noted, terrorism against innocent Israelis spiked during the Oslo process at least partly because Arafat refused to "confront Hamas" by "systematically uprooting its terrorist infrastructure."[212] Arafat was distinct from Begin, Rabin and Sadat insofar as he was

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209 Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process*, 267

210 Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Arrow, 2005); John F. Harris, "Two decades ago, Bill Clinton threw a Hail Mary for Middle East peace," *The Washington Post* (July 5, 2023), https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2023/07/05/bill-clinton-israel-palestine-camp-david-summit/; "Bush Calls for End to the Arafat Era," *Haaretz* (June 25, 2002), https://www.haaretz.com/2002-06-25/ty-article/bush-calls-for-end-to-the-arafat-era/0000017f-e0ae-d9aa-afff-f9fe0f030000

211 Benny Morris, *Israel's Rabin Delusion*, 62

212 Ross, *The Missing Peace*, 766; Martin Indyk, "Is Yasser Arafat a Credible Partner for Peace?" *Brookings* (June 6, 2002), https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-yasser-arafat-a-credible-partner-for-peace/

unwilling to be anything other than a symbol of unity amongst Palestinian nationalists. For purely strategic reasons, there was recognition and little resistance to meetings with Israelis at any level. Arafat made a major strategic blunder in siding with Saddam Hussein, and his leadership was being challenged from within the Palestinian national movement. He needed to secure something tangible for the Palestinians and Rabin proved willing to oblige the PLO in its quest for recognition and self-governance, especially when he realized that the religiously-fanatical Hamas was the alternative.[213]

However, Arafat was also never willing to completely give up the military option or to make the requisite compromises for peace with Israel. To do so would require that he confront rejectionists in the Palestinian community and possibly suffer the same fate as Sadat. American negotiator Dennis Ross put it most succinctly when he wrote that peace was not an option for Arafat because "to end the conflict (was) to end himself."[214] Fearful of bearing the brunt of the Palestinian maximalists, Arafat failed to crack down on terrorist groups such as Hamas and refused a two-state solution when offered it by President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 2000-2001. The Clinton parameters, which have been described as "remarkable" in their generosity by the Saudi Ambassador to the United States Bandar bin Sultan, included a Palestinian state on 95% of the occupied territories, a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, and $30 billion in compensation for Palestinian refugees.[215] "I hope you remember sir," Bandar sternly warned Arafat in January 2001, "what I told you. If we lose this opportunity, it is not going to be a tragedy, it is going to be a crime."[216] Despite his promises that he would take the deal if provided cover by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Arafat rejected Clinton's proposal even as his Israeli interlocutors were satisfying almost

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[213] Ibid, 766

[214] Alan Dershowitz, *The Case For Israel* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 118

[215] Elsa Walsh, "The Prince," *The New Yorker* (March 24, 2003), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/24/the-prince-3, 55; Khaled Elgindy, "How the Peace process Killed the Two-State Solution," *Brookings* (April 12, 2018) https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-peace-process-killed-the-two-state-solution/

[216] Shlomo Ben-Ami, *Prophets Without Honor: The 2000 Camp David Summit and the End of the Two-State Solution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 166

every Palestinian condition for peace. In so doing, he committed a mistake of historically unforgivable proportions—indeed, a "crime" against the Palestinians and the entire region.

No better offer from Israel was possible short of national suicide, but Arafat still rejected it. He did not even offer a counterproposal and instead ordered preparation for renewed terrorism, which eventually escalated into a second and even deadlier intifada.[217] In *Preventing Palestine*, Seth Anziska wrote that Israel has used the peace process as means of preventing Palestinian statehood.[218] In his words, Menachem Begin and his successors prevented Palestinian statehood even as its leaders were "moving forcefully toward diplomacy" and acceptance of Israel.[219] Arafat's intransigence—from the PLO's genesis in 1964 to the early 2000s—demonstrates that this is a half-truth at best. Indeed, the Palestinian leadership must also assume a large share of the blame for "preventing Palestine." They have been far better at rejection than at acceptance of reality. On the occasions when they could have obtained a state, Israeli negotiators and American mediators have been met with resistance and defiance. In the Palestinian narrative, rejection of Israel has preserved the purity of the cause, as well as the myth that a Palestinian state will one day exist *instead* of Israel. In reality, it has denied them their legitimate rights of statehood and absolved their leaders of the need to prepare their divided publics for difficult compromises.

Peace required that Arafat stand up in front of his own people, particularly the refugees of 1948, and tell them the hard truth: that they were not going to return to their homes and that Israel's existence as a Jewish state, with a Jewish majority, was a fact. He was not willing to do so. In retrospect, his decision to equivocate—and to not accept a Palestinian state that was limited in territory—was a massive miscalculation, a historic blunder which has both brought further misery to Palestinians and tragically set the tone for Palestinian leadership. The popularity of Hamas has

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217 Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 75-80

218 Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine:A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 6

219 Ibid., 12

grown enormously over the past twenty years and ineffectual Fatah leaders in the West Bank regularly deny the Jewish connection to any part of *Eretz-Yisrael*.[220] Mahmoud Abbas—the current president of the PA—has never formally recognized Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. He has also been accused by Israeli and American officials of incentivizing terrorism against Israelis through distributing subsidies to imprisoned terrorists and their families.[221] According to the official PA budget, funding for the program exceeded $300 million in 2016 alone.[222]

An end to the cycle of violence can only be achieved through Israeli and Arab leaders who both understand the value of compromise and the need to face down inevitable domestic opposition. Begin and Rabin were courageous in their approach to diplomacy and territorial compromise, but neither achieved their diplomatic breakthroughs in a vacuum. Sadat's rise to power and moderation provided Begin with an enormous opportunity for full-fledged peace with the most powerful Arab state. Likewise, the fall of the Soviet Union and Arafat's decision to side with Saddam Hussein meant that Rabin was able to achieve a breakthrough with the Palestinian national movement, even if he and Arafat were not willing to make the necessary compromises for a two-state solution and Palestinian sovereignty. Any further breakthroughs on the Palestinian front will require not only Israeli leaders who feel secure enough to give up sovereignty over the West Bank, but Palestinian leaders who truly accept Israel in deed as well as rhetoric. A transformation in the psyche and values of both sides is an imperative for peace. Unfortunately for the Israelis and the Palestinians, it is also an illusion as long as Gaza is governed by Hamas and as long as Fatah leaders in the West Bank refuse to prepare their public for difficult compromises with Israel.

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[220] Robert Barron and Adam Gallagher, "Palestinians' Divided House Hampers Peace," *United States Institute of Peace: Making Peace Possible* (July 1, 2021), https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/07/palestinians-divided-house-hampers-peace

[221] Dore Faith, "A New Palestinian Authority NGO Decree Might Halt US Aid to the West Bank and Gaza," *The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 197 (August 2021), 6

[222] Kuperwasser, "Incentivizing Terrorism," *The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs,* n.p.

Even Heroic Leaders Need Assurances from the United States

In theory, the United States could aid in bridging the differences of the two sides. It is noteworthy that even heroic leaders such as Begin and Rabin needed U.S. mediation efforts and promises of material support to make their diplomatic breakthroughs. In accessing Camp David, President Carter offered something substantive to bring Sadat to the negotiating table. During the 1970s, Sadat's primacy was regaining the Sinai and relieving Egypt's dependence on oil-rich Arab states which tended to attach political strings to their aid packages.[223] He resented Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, which routinely threatened to withhold aid when Egyptian newspapers and officials wrote disparagingly of their princes.[224] In signing a peace treaty with Israel, he was able to restore Egyptian sovereignty, or at least limit the influence of other Arab states on Egyptian politics, through qualifying Egypt for considerable American financial and military aid. Shibley Telhami wrote that Sadat hoped to "free (Egypt) from economic dependence on other Arab states through aid from the United States."[225] Since Camp David, Egypt has been the recipient of one of the largest recipients of US aid, second only to Israel.[226]

By the same token, Israel's leaders needed guarantees from the United States to make historic compromises. There was certainly a limit as to how far Begin and Rabin would go to secure American aid. In their own ways, both leaders resented the American perception of Israel as a mere asset to be managed and influenced according to the United States' strategic needs, especially when Israel was being asked to compromise what they perceived as its core interests. Begin clashed with more than one American president on this score. He was amongst the most vocal detractors of the

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223 Shibley Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990)

224 Ali Dessouki. *The New Arab Political Order: Implications for the 1980s.* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 326

225 Telhami, *Power and Leadership*, 105

226 Soheir Morsy, "U.S. Aid to Egypt: An Illustration and Account of U.S. Foreign Assistance Policy," *Arab Quarterly* 8, No. 4 (Fall 1986), 358-389, 358

Nixon administration's 'Rogers Plan,' which called for a ceasefire with Egypt along the Suez Canal: "Nobody asks Israel what it thinks anymore, because this state is no more than a toy in the international game of power politics."[227] So too, Begin would never concede, at least in rhetoric, that Israel truly *needed* the aid of a superpower to survive. After all, political Zionism was conceived as the only response to a hostile world that could not be depended upon. For millennia, the survival of Jews in the diaspora rested on the goodwill of the non-Jewish regimes that hosted them, which often resulted in egregious episodes of persecution against Jewish communities.[228] As Dowty wrote, "the Holocaust was merely the latest and most brutal chapter in a long history."[229] As someone who experienced the horrors of mid-century European antisemitism, Begin was personally steeped in this history.

Moreover, his sense of isolation in a hostile world was immeasurably increased by a string of events that followed Israel's establishment. The experience of the 1948 war when the Jewish community faced a general arms embargo; the sudden French and British "defection" from the 1956 Sinai campaign; the traumatic days preceding the 1967 war when the French imposed an abrupt arms embargo on Israel; and the frequent UN votes lambasting Israel, including the infamous 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with a form of racism, compounded the widespread feeling that Israel could not depend on the outside world for protection.[230] The general apathy of the international community to the Nazi genocide, as well as to the catastrophic events that followed Israel's founding, demonstrated that the Jewish people could not trust outsiders to safeguard their

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227 Steinberg and Rubinovitz, *Menachem Begin and the Israel-Egypt Peace Process*, 20

228 Dowty, "Israeli Foreign Policy and the Jewish Question," 8

229 Ibid., 4

230 Gil Merom, "Outside History? Israel's Security Dilemma in a Comparative Perspective," in *Security Concerns: Insights from the Israeli Experience*, edited Daniel Bar-Tal, Dan Jacobson, Aharon Klieman (London: Jai Press,1998), 59

security. Begin once quipped that "there is no guarantee that can guarantee a guarantee."[231] As he saw it, only the strength of Israel's own armed forces prevented national destruction at the hands of intractable enemies.

Even still, Begin could not completely depart from past cycles of dependency: Israel was/is a small nation surrounded by armies vowed to its destruction, and its prime minister understood that he would do well to secure American aid. Like Zionist leaders before him and the itinerant leaders of the shtetl, he sought a sympathetic outside patron and protector. The Camp David Accords were conceived as both a means for peace with the Arab world's most powerful state and as a mechanism to curry financial and military assistance from the United States. Notwithstanding their tenuous personal relationship, Carter and Begin set an important precedent of cooperation between their two nations that continues to this day. President Carter not only compensated Israel for the loss of the Sinai air bases, but offered to provide annual assistance to Israel of three billion dollars. In addition, as Israel was giving up the Sinai oil reserves that it had been exploiting, Carter pledged that the United States would supply Israel's oil needs if Egypt did not.[232] All these commitments added to Begin's perception that peace with Egypt served a larger national interest — and they also made it easier for him to market his controversial concessions to a risk-averse Israeli public. He may have signed the deal anyway, in light of the stakes, but the promise of a military and financial cushion made it decidedly easier for him to take the historic leap. Even if he was naturally suspicious of diplomatic initiatives led by non-Jewish outsiders, Begin understood the value of superpowers such as the United States to Israel's security.

For his part, Rabin also understood that American aid would be forthcoming if he withdrew from the disputed territories. Although the breakthrough of mutual recognition between the PLO

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[231] David Makovsky, "When International Guarantees Utterly Failed," in *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (May 4, 2017), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/when-international-guarantees-utterly-failed

[232] Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, 299

and Israel was mediated secretly by officials in Norway who had limited, if any, contact with Washington, the United States still played an important role in facilitating the agreements.[233] President Clinton agreed to remove the PLO from the State Department's list of terrorist organizations. In so doing, he granted Arafat with a strategic victory over Hamas, as well as what political scientist Mark Perry described as a "moment of personal triumph" after decades spent as a revolutionary scorned throughout the West.[234] At the same time, it is difficult to overstate the centrality of America to Rabin's conception of security, especially in the context of risk-taking and the peace process. Much like Begin, he placed little faith in the good intentions of the international community through his public addresses, while seeking to bolster Israel's defense through an alliance with a strong world power—namely, the United States as opposed to the Soviet Union or France.

Rabin constantly looked to Washington for signs of approval or disapproval in fashioning Israel's national strategy. He also pursued territorial compromise to secure American aid. "Foreign aid," Scott Lasensky wrote in relation to the Oslo initiative, "provided momentum to the peace process."[235] Unlike in previous breakthroughs, Israel did not request economic or even military assistance for the Oslo I and II agreements. However, Rabin still made sure that extensive new aid packages to Israel, including early warning surveillance, advanced fighter aircrafts, and missile defense, would be attached to any final status agreement. Not surprisingly, he anticipated that territorial compromise with the Palestinians or Syria would involve enormous strategic and political risks.[236] President Clinton's role, in his own words, was to "minimize those risks" through providing Rabin with the means to protect Israel from external adversaries, as well as added

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[233] Scott Lasensky, "Paying for Peace: The Oslo Process and the Limits of American Foreign Aid," in *Middle East Journal* 58, No. 2 (Spring 2004), 210-234, 218

[234] Mark Perry, "Remembering Arafat: "We're almost there," in *The New Arab* (November 11, 2014), https://www.newarab.com/opinion/remembering-arafat-were-almost-there

[235] Lasensky, "Praying for Peace," 211

[236] Ross and Makovsky, *Be Strong and Of Good Courage*, 299

justification for territorial compromise as he defended his peace deal before the Israeli electorate.[237] point is that for Israel's leaders to make genuinely tough political decisions, they will need help from the United States. No amount of American aid could convince Rabin or Begin to compromise on what they perceived as Israel's core strategic needs, but Presidents Carter and Clinton still played an important role in lessening the burden of territorial compromise. It is also unlikely that Sadat or Arafat would have entered into a diplomatic process with Israel had American administrations not offered them the material rationale to do so.

And still, there are also limits as to how effective American aid can be in producing peace. The recent Abraham Accords demonstrate that U.S. financial and military assistance can bear fruit for Arab-Israeli diplomacy. For example, the UAE normalized ties with Israel in 2020 largely because the United States offered to lift restrictions imposed by the Congressional Israel Qualitative Military Edge Act of 2017, which bans the sale of advanced U.S. weapons to Israel's Arab foes.[238] However, there is also an important distinction between the Abraham Accords and Israel's past breakthroughs with Egypt and the Palestinians: Begin and Rabin were required to make difficult territorial compromises to secure peace agreements with Egypt and the PLO, whereas Benjamin Netanyahu was not. In the words of Rabin's former advisor Itamar Rabinovich, Netanyahu managed to "turn lemons into lemonade."[239] He basically "generated an asset out of nothing" when he secured normalisation agreements with leading Gulf states without having to give up any part of the occupied territories.[240] The Abraham Accords may have constituted a significant achievement in Israel's relations with segments of the Arab world, but they did not resolve the more pertinent Palestinian question or require considerable courage on the part of Israel's prime minister.

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[237] Ibid., 202

[238] Ariel Bachar, "JCPOA," in *Public Contract Law Journal* 46:4 (Summer 2017), 873-894

[239] Tova Norlen and Tamir Sinai, "The Abraham Accords - Paradigm Shift or Realpolitik," in *George C. Marshall: European Center for Security Studies* 064 (October 2020), https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/abraham-accords-paradigm-shift-or-realpolitik

[240] Ibid

Further breakthroughs on the Palestinian front can only be achieved through a more difficult trade-off from Israel's leaders. And while America can certainly help in mitigating the costs, it cannot completely absolve Israel's prime minister because there will always be strategic and political costs associated with territorial compromise. The truth is that peace is simply not possible without strong and courageous leadership from the relevant regional players. In past cases, American aid was effective only once Israeli prime ministers demonstrated the political will necessary for a diplomatic breakthrough. The case studies of Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin lend powerful examples of the capacity of leaders to achieve truly transformational change. They were not perfect insofar as they had their own ideological red-lines regarding Palestinian statehood. Yet both made unexpected historic compromises. Unlike Netanyahu and Bennett, they understood that "peace for peace" was not an option and that Israel had to part with certain territories to secure its future. In spite of their differences in upbringing and ideology, there is eternal value in their common willingness to confront domestic criticism and abuse in the service of a shared raison d'être: the strategic well-being of the Jewish nation-state.

Israel today faces grave threats, and the actions of the two former prime ministers lend important lessons in dealing with them. Peace agreements with Egypt, Jordan, and a host of Gulf countries have undoubtedly served Israel well, but its long-term security and survival as *the* Jewish safe-haven can only be achieved through further compromises with the Palestinians and a two-state solution. To be sure, a peace deal with the Palestinians may not be possible in the near term. Division between the PA and Hamas, the pervasive appeal of territorial maximalism in the occupied territories, and succession politics all rule out the emergence of a Sadat-like leader for the foreseeable future. Yet there are actions that Israel can take to preserve the possibility of peace and ensure its survival as a Jewish and democratic state. The domestic backlash to these policies will be great, but there are lessons to be drawn from past breakthroughs. Begin and Rabin recognized the

importance of compromise and the costs of inaction. For the sake of Israelis, Palestinians and the entire region, Israel's leaders must draw from their wisdom in making their own historic decision.

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