

Criticising Israel: A Lesson From the Past. Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat Shake Hands

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*Twenty-five years ago, on 13 September 1993, the then Israeli prime minister **Yitzhak Rabin** and the Palestinian leader **Yasser Arafat** shook hands on the lawn of the White House in Washington DC.*

The occasion was the signing of a 'declaration of principles' that, in theory, would lead within five years to a comprehensive peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. The so-called Oslo process - 'Oslo' because the secret negotiations that led to the agreement took place in the Norwegian capital - marked a brief moment of optimism during a conflict that has now lasted seventy years, ever since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

The principal Israeli negotiator was **Yossi Beilin**, and he has just published a [fascinating analysis](#) of why that moment of optimism was so brief. In a nutshell: because extremists on both sides unleashed a cycle of violence that in effect stopped the process in its tracks, and because the Israeli side failed to recognise that in 'asymmetrical negotiations', the stronger party must be careful not to gain too much.

I find his analysis of particular interest as it closely matches some of what I reported fifteen years ago, on the tenth anniversary of the Rabin-Arafat handshake, as a result of which I got into all sorts of trouble with pro-Israel lobby groups.

And it casts an interesting light on some of the current debate about when, and how, criticism of Israel and Israeli government policies is legitimate. (None of what follows, by the way, is meant to imply that the Palestinian side is entirely free from blame in the continuing conflict. The lack of leadership is not confined to only one side.)

In an [article](#) for the BBC news website to mark the tenth anniversary of the Oslo accords, I reported from Jerusalem:

'Within months of the [White House] signing ceremony, a Jewish settler shot dead 29 Muslim worshippers in a mosque in the ancient West Bank city of Hebron. A little over a month later came the first post-Oslo Palestinian suicide bomb. And in November 1995, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish fanatic.'

Those statements, each of which was entirely true, were condemned at the time by an influential US-based, pro-Israel lobby organisation, the [Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America](#) (CAMERA), as a 'distortion of historical fact'. And in a critique of my accompanying radio report, it added: 'Although Lustig tried to appear even-handed by interviewing both Israelis and Palestinians, it was clear he was not straying from BBC's "blame Israel" line.'

Now compare what I reported fifteen years ago with what Yossi Beilin wrote this week:

'The extreme right in Israel and Islamic groups used violence that we did not foresee to thwart the process and to denigrate it in the eyes of the public. The first murderous event occurred in February 1994, when a religious Jewish doctor from Kiryat Arba settlement, a reserve officer, entered the Hebron Cave of the Patriarchs in his military uniform and massacred 29 Muslims in cold blood and injured many others. The second event was the most dramatic: the assassination of Rabin in 1995 by an extremist Jew who did so explicitly to stop the process.'

Yossi Beilin held several ministerial positions in a succession of Israeli governments, including deputy foreign minister, minister of economy and planning, justice minister and minister for religious affairs. I think it would be quite a stretch to describe him as 'anti-Israel'.

I dredge up these memories from long ago because too many people still try to argue that criticising Israeli government policies, or even pointing to shared Israeli responsibility in failure, is somehow tantamount to being antisemitic, or at the very least anti-Israel. (My reporting in 2003 was attacked by CAMERA as part of the 'BBC's consistent efforts to blame Israel.' Once, when I was on a visit to Boston, they picketed the event at which I was due to speak and carried placards describing both me and a BBC colleague as antisemites.)

Back in 2003, I pointed out that one of the biggest failures of the Oslo process was that it did not include a commitment to halt the building of illegal Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land. The pro-Israel lobbyists objected to that as well, but this week Yossi Beilin backed me up: 'We succeeded in convincing the Palestinians not to mention a freeze in settlement construction, but Israel continued to build settlements after the Oslo agreement, and this was the gravest Israeli provocation.'

The wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya have knocked the Israel-Palestine conflict off the front pages. After all, how much reporting of endless Middle East conflicts can we take? But while we've all been obsessed with Brexit, President Trump has nonchalantly ordered the suspension of all US financial aid to the UN's Palestinian relief organisation UNRWA and of an additional \$25 million in aid to Palestinian hospitals in east Jerusalem.

The US president seems to think that the Palestinians can be bullied and threatened into submission. The hard-line Israeli prime minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**, who has never made any secret of his deep antipathy to the Oslo agreement and all it represents, seems to think the same.

History will prove them wrong. And it is not, and never will be, antisemitic to say so.

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