

The Oslo Accords

Lessons in Middle East Peace Negotiations

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Abstract—

The Oslo Accords of the 1990s represented one of the most significant attempts to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through direct negotiations. Emerging from secret talks between representatives of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Oslo process transformed a long-standing relationship of mutual hostility into one of formal recognition and institutionalised dialogue. The Declaration of Principles signed in 1993, followed by the Oslo II Agreement of 1995, established the Palestinian Authority and created a framework for phased Palestinian self-government in parts of the occupied territories. However, the process ultimately failed to produce a final and comprehensive peace settlement. This article examines the Oslo Accords as a case study in the possibilities and limitations of negotiated conflict resolution. It analyses the historical background, principal provisions, achievements and failures of the Oslo process and identifies broader lessons for Middle East peace negotiations. The study argues that Oslo demonstrated the importance of direct dialogue, mutual recognition, secrecy in the initial stages and international facilitation. At the same time, its failure revealed the dangers of postponing core political questions, allowing asymmetries of power to remain unaddressed, failing to establish effective enforcement mechanisms and permitting violence and domestic political opposition to undermine negotiations. The article concludes that sustainable peace requires not merely agreements and diplomatic ceremonies but a credible, inclusive and enforceable political framework capable of addressing the fundamental causes of conflict.

Keywords—Oslo Accords; Israeli–Palestinian conflict; Middle East peace process; peace negotiations; conflict resolution.

1. Introduction

The Middle East has remained one of the most politically volatile regions of the modern international system, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is among its most enduring disputes. The conflict involves competing national identities, territorial claims, sovereignty, security, displacement and refugee issues, access to resources, and the status of Jerusalem. The diplomatic environment changed significantly during the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly with the First Intifada (1987–1993), the end of the Cold War, and the 1991 Madrid Conference, which created favourable conditions for direct Israeli–Palestinian negotiations (U.S. Department of State, 2008). Against this background, the Oslo process emerged as a major diplomatic breakthrough.

The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, signed in Washington, D.C., on 13 September 1993, established a phased framework for Palestinian self-government in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It envisaged a transitional period of no more than five years, during which the parties would negotiate a permanent settlement (Israel & Palestine Liberation Organization [PLO], 1993). A major achievement was the historic mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. In their exchange of letters on 9 September 1993, the PLO recognised Israel's right to exist in peace and security, accepted United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and renounced terrorism and violence, while Israel recognised the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people (Arafat & Rabin, 1993). The establishment of the Palestinian Authority and subsequent agreements in 1994 and 1995 further institutionalised Palestinian self-government,

security cooperation, elections, and administrative arrangements (Israel & PLO, 1995).

Despite these achievements, Oslo contained significant structural weaknesses. The most contentious issues—including Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, and permanent security arrangements—were postponed to final-status negotiations (Israel & PLO, 1993). The absence of sufficiently strong enforcement and monitoring mechanisms made the process vulnerable to delays, political changes, and violations. The considerable asymmetry of power between Israel and the PLO also affected implementation. Moreover, continuing violence, opposition from Palestinian militant organisations, Israeli extremist resistance, the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, and the expansion of Israeli settlements severely weakened mutual confidence. By the late 1990s and during the Second Intifada, security cooperation and political trust had deteriorated substantially (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012).

The Oslo experience therefore presents both the transformative potential and the limitations of negotiated peace. It demonstrated that deeply antagonistic parties can move from rejection towards recognition, dialogue, institutional cooperation, and limited self-government. At the same time, it showed that an agreement is not necessarily synonymous with peace. Sustainable peace requires more than an initial diplomatic breakthrough; it requires credible implementation mechanisms, effective monitoring, political legitimacy, and protection against spoilers, management of power asymmetries, confidence-building, and a clear pathway towards resolving fundamental disputes. The Oslo process consequently offers broader lessons for international conflict resolution: interim arrangements can create valuable opportunities for cooperation, but postponing core political questions indefinitely may deepen frustration and mistrust. Durable peace ultimately depends upon transforming diplomatic commitments into equitable, enforceable, and politically sustainable settlements.

2. Historical Background to the Oslo Process

The Oslo peace process emerged from a long history of competing Jewish and Palestinian national aspirations, territorial claims, displacement, and political conflict. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Zionism developed as a movement seeking a Jewish national home, while Palestinian Arab nationalism increasingly developed in response to changing political conditions and concerns over land, immigration, and political representation (Gelvin, 2021; Khalidi, 2020). During the British Mandate, these competing aspirations intensified. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 supported the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine while also referring to the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities (League of Nations, 1922). Growing Jewish immigration, Palestinian opposition, and the Arab Revolt of 1936–1939 deepened the conflict. In 1947, the United Nations proposed partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem under an international regime, but the proposal was rejected by Palestinian Arab leaders and neighbouring Arab states (United Nations General Assembly, 1947).

The establishment of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent Arab–Israeli War transformed the conflict. Large numbers of Palestinians were displaced and became refugees, creating the enduring Palestinian refugee question, while no independent Palestinian state was established; the West Bank came under Jordanian control and Gaza under Egyptian administration (Morris, 2008). The 1967 Six-Day War produced another decisive turning point when Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights. United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 subsequently emphasised the inadmissibility of acquiring territory through war and called for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied during the conflict, alongside recognition of the right of states in the region to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries (United Nations Security Council, 1967). Israeli control and settlement expansion in the occupied territories subsequently became major sources of Palestinian opposition, while Israel emphasised security and historical claims. These unresolved territorial

issues later became central to the Oslo negotiations (Shlaim, 2009).

The Palestinian national movement also evolved considerably. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), established in 1964, gradually became the principal representative of the Palestinian national movement under Yasser Arafat and Fatah. Although the PLO initially relied heavily on armed struggle and rejected Israel's legitimacy, its strategy gradually shifted towards diplomacy and acceptance of a negotiated settlement based on the territories occupied in 1967 (Quandt, 2005; Said, 1995). The 1974 Arab League recognition of the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people and Arafat's address to the United Nations General Assembly strengthened its international status. Meanwhile, the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty of 1979 demonstrated that sustained negotiations and third-party mediation could produce formal Arab–Israeli agreements, although they did not resolve the Palestinian question (Quandt, 1986).

The outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987 was another crucial development. The largely popular uprising demonstrated the political and social costs of Israeli occupation and made Palestinian participation indispensable to any credible peace process. In 1988, the Palestinian National Council proclaimed the State of Palestine and accepted United Nations resolutions associated with a negotiated settlement, while Arafat subsequently renounced terrorism and indicated acceptance of negotiations with Israel (Quandt, 2005). The international environment also changed dramatically following the end of the Cold War and the 1990–1991 Gulf War. The United States emerged as the dominant external power in the region and increased its diplomatic efforts. The Madrid Peace Conference of 1991 brought Israel together with Arab states and Palestinian representatives and established an important framework for negotiations, although the formal process soon encountered disagreements over territory, settlements, Palestinian representation, and political self-determination (Miller, 2008; U.S. Department of State, 2008).

The limitations of the Madrid process encouraged the development of a secret Norwegian channel involving Israeli and Palestinian representatives. Facilitated by Norwegian intermediaries and conducted outside the formal diplomatic framework, the talks allowed participants to explore politically sensitive proposals concerning Palestinian self-government, Israeli withdrawal, and mutual recognition (Waage, 2005). By 1993, these negotiations had produced sufficient progress for the Israeli and PLO leaderships to endorse a direct political process. The result was the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements in Washington, D.C., on 13 September 1993, witnessed by U.S. President Bill Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat (U.S. Department of State, 2008). The accompanying exchange of letters on 9 September 1993 was equally significant: the PLO recognised Israel's right to exist in peace and security, accepted Resolutions 242 and 338, and renounced terrorism and violence, while Israel recognised the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people (Arafat & Rabin, 1993). Thus, Oslo emerged from a convergence of historical grievances, Palestinian political transformation, the First Intifada, post-Cold War diplomacy, the Madrid process, and Norwegian mediation. Its significance lay in converting long-standing adversaries into negotiating partners, although the process inherited unresolved disputes over territory, refugees, Jerusalem, settlements, security, and Palestinian self-determination.

3. The Oslo Accords: From Secret Diplomacy to Formal Agreement

The breakthrough of the Oslo process represented a major transformation in Israeli–Palestinian diplomacy because it enabled previously hostile parties to establish direct communication and explore a negotiated settlement. Unlike earlier formal and largely public initiatives, the Norwegian channel was characterised by secrecy, informality and flexibility, allowing representatives to discuss sensitive proposals without immediate domestic political pressure (Waage, 2005). This

confidential environment was particularly important because both Israel and the PLO faced significant political constraints: Israel had long refused to recognise the PLO as a legitimate negotiating partner, while Palestinian groups remained divided over recognition of Israel and compromise. Norwegian facilitators primarily acted as communication facilitators rather than imposing solutions, helping the parties overcome mistrust and develop their own proposals (Waage, 2005). The negotiations also benefited from changing strategic calculations. The PLO increasingly recognised the limitations of armed struggle and the importance of diplomatic legitimacy, while the First Intifada, the end of the Cold War, and changing regional circumstances encouraged both sides to reconsider existing policies. These developments created sufficient convergence for direct negotiations despite continuing differences over their ultimate political objectives (Miller, 2008).

3.1 The Exchange of Letters and Mutual Recognition

One of the most consequential developments in the Oslo process occurred in September 1993, when Israel and the PLO exchanged letters of mutual recognition. On 9 September 1993, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat formally recognised “the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security.” The PLO also accepted United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 as the basis for negotiations, renounced terrorism and violence, and committed itself to pursuing a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin subsequently responded by recognising the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and agreeing to begin negotiations with the organisation (Arafat & Rabin, 1993).

The exchange of letters was historically significant because it transformed the political relationship between the two principal adversaries. Recognition did not resolve the territorial dispute, nor did it establish Palestinian statehood, but it created a new diplomatic reality. Israel accepted the PLO as a legitimate Palestinian interlocutor, while the PLO accepted the existence

and legitimacy of Israel. This represented a shift from a relationship based primarily on rejection and confrontation towards one based on negotiation and reciprocal political recognition.

Mutual recognition also established an important psychological foundation for the peace process. Negotiations between adversaries require some degree of acceptance that the other side possesses legitimate interests that must be considered. By recognising each other as negotiating partners, Israel and the PLO created the possibility of discussing issues that previously appeared politically impossible. The exchange therefore demonstrated that peace processes frequently begin not with agreement on substantive questions but with recognition that the opposing party must be engaged rather than excluded.

3.2 The Declaration of Principles: Oslo I

The culmination of the initial Norwegian negotiations was the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, commonly known as Oslo I, in Washington, D.C., on 13 September 1993. The agreement was signed by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and PLO negotiator Mahmoud Abbas, with U.S. President Bill Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat participating in the historic ceremony. The public handshake between Rabin and Arafat became one of the most recognisable images of the post-Cold War peace process (U.S. Department of State, 2008).

The Declaration of Principles established an interim framework for Palestinian self-government in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Rather than immediately determining the final status of the territories, it envisaged a transitional process through which authority would gradually be transferred to Palestinian institutions. The agreement provided for Palestinian elections, the creation of a Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority and the progressive transfer of specified governmental responsibilities (Israel & PLO, 1993).

The agreement was deliberately structured around the principle of gradualism. The negotiators did not attempt to resolve every aspect of the conflict at once. Instead, they sought to create a transitional arrangement that could generate confidence and cooperation while permanent-status negotiations proceeded. The Declaration established a transitional period of no more than five years, during which negotiations on permanent status were expected to begin and ultimately address the fundamental political questions separating the parties (Israel & PLO, 1993).

This approach reflected an important assumption: cooperation on practical matters could gradually transform relations between the parties and make a comprehensive agreement more politically feasible. If Israeli and Palestinian institutions could work together, violence could decline, Palestinian administrative capacity could increase and mutual confidence could develop. In theory, the successful implementation of interim arrangements would create the political conditions necessary for a permanent settlement.

3.3 The Gaza–Jericho Agreement and the Creation of the Palestinian Authority

The next major stage of the Oslo process was the Gaza–Jericho Agreement, formally known as the Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area, signed on 4 May 1994. The agreement provided for the withdrawal of Israeli military forces from specified parts of Gaza and Jericho and established arrangements for Palestinian self-government in those areas (Israel & PLO, 1994).

An important institutional consequence of the agreement was the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as the principal Palestinian governing institution during the interim period. The PA assumed responsibility for a range of civil administrative functions, including education, health, social welfare, taxation and other governmental services in areas under its jurisdiction. Although the PA did not constitute a sovereign Palestinian state, its establishment represented the first significant institutional

expression of Palestinian self-government in the occupied territories.

The creation of the Palestinian Authority was therefore both a practical and symbolic development. Practically, it allowed Palestinians to administer aspects of their own daily affairs through institutions that were distinct from the Israeli military administration. Symbolically, it represented an important step towards Palestinian political self-determination. However, the authority of the PA remained geographically and institutionally limited, and Israel retained substantial control over borders, security and other strategic matters.

The establishment of the PA also introduced new challenges. The Palestinian leadership was required to construct administrative institutions under difficult economic and political conditions while simultaneously maintaining cooperation with Israel. The Authority's legitimacy depended partly upon its ability to demonstrate that the Oslo process could improve Palestinian political and socio-economic conditions. As the peace process slowed, however, disappointment over the limited extent of Palestinian autonomy increasingly affected perceptions of the Authority.

3.4 Oslo II and the Division of the West Bank

The next major stage was the signing of the Israeli–Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, commonly known as Oslo II, on 28 September 1995. The agreement expanded the framework established by Oslo I and provided more detailed arrangements for Palestinian elections, administration, security cooperation and territorial responsibilities (Israel & PLO, 1995).

One of the most consequential features of Oslo II was the division of the West Bank into three administrative categories: Areas A, B and C. These categories reflected different combinations of Palestinian civil administration and Israeli security control.

Area A was placed under Palestinian civil and internal security responsibility. It initially covered the major Palestinian population centres. Area B involved Palestinian civil administration while Israel retained overriding security responsibilities. Area C, which constituted the largest territorial category, remained under extensive Israeli civil and security control, although the agreement envisaged a process of further territorial arrangements during the transitional period (Israel & PLO, 1995).

The A, B and C arrangements were intended to be transitional rather than permanent. The underlying assumption was that the division would eventually be superseded by a final-status agreement. Nevertheless, the territorial arrangements had long-term consequences because the expected transition from interim administration to permanent settlement did not occur as originally anticipated.

For Palestinians, the division of the West Bank was often perceived as producing fragmented territorial control rather than genuine sovereignty. The Palestinian Authority exercised substantial authority in some population centres but lacked control over the territory as a whole. Movement between Palestinian communities was also affected by Israeli security arrangements, checkpoints and restrictions. From the Israeli perspective, differentiated territorial arrangements were connected to security requirements and the gradual transfer of responsibilities. The contrasting interpretations of these arrangements became another source of political tension.

3.5 Security Cooperation and Institutionalisation of the Peace Process

Security cooperation constituted another important element of the Oslo framework. The agreements established mechanisms through which Israeli and Palestinian security institutions were expected to coordinate in order to prevent violence and maintain public order. This was significant because the success of the peace process depended not only on political negotiations but also on the ability of the parties to manage security threats.

In principle, security cooperation could have served as a confidence-building mechanism. Regular communication between security officials created channels through which incidents could be addressed and escalation could potentially be prevented. It also demonstrated that former adversaries could cooperate on practical matters despite continuing political disagreement.

However, security cooperation was politically sensitive on the Palestinian side. Many Palestinians regarded cooperation with Israel as necessary for maintaining the peace process but simultaneously viewed it as compromising the struggle against occupation. This tension became increasingly difficult to manage as the political benefits of Oslo appeared less certain. For Israel, continued Palestinian security cooperation became an important measure of the PLO's commitment to peaceful coexistence. Consequently, security failures or terrorist attacks often produced demands for stronger Palestinian action, while Palestinian leaders faced domestic criticism over cooperation with Israeli security institutions (Quandt, 2005).

3.6 Economic Cooperation and the Oslo Framework

Economic cooperation was another component of the Oslo process. The Protocol on Economic Relations, commonly known as the Paris Protocol, established the economic relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Authority during the transitional period. The framework sought to regulate trade, taxation, labour movement and economic relations between the two sides (Israel & PLO, 1994).

Economic cooperation reflected the belief that material interdependence could reinforce political stability. Improved economic conditions could strengthen public support for peace, while increased cooperation could create shared interests that discouraged renewed conflict. International donors subsequently provided significant assistance to Palestinian institutions, viewing economic development as an important component of peace building.

Nevertheless, the economic arrangements also generated controversy. Palestinian economic dependence on Israel remained substantial, while restrictions on movement and access to markets limited the potential for autonomous economic development. Consequently, economic cooperation did not always produce the expected sense of mutual benefit. For many Palestinians, economic difficulties became associated with the limitations of the Oslo system itself.

3.7 The Temporary Nature of the Oslo Framework

One of the defining characteristics of the Oslo process was its explicitly interim nature. The agreements were not intended to constitute a final peace treaty. Instead, they established transitional institutions and procedures through which the parties were expected to negotiate permanent-status issues.

The Declaration of Principles anticipated that negotiations on permanent status would begin no later than the beginning of the third year of the interim period. These negotiations were expected to address the most difficult questions, including the status of Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders and relations with neighbouring states (Israel & PLO, 1993).

This sequencing produced both an opportunity and a structural vulnerability. On the positive side, postponing the most contentious questions made it possible to reach an initial agreement that might otherwise have been impossible. The parties could begin cooperating without first resolving every historical dispute. On the negative side, however, postponement meant that the most fundamental sources of conflict remained unresolved while political conditions on the ground continued to change.

The Oslo framework therefore contained a fundamental contradiction. It created institutions and procedures designed to lead towards a permanent settlement, but it did not itself determine the precise political destination of that process. The success of Oslo consequently depended heavily upon future negotiations,

sustained political commitment and effective implementation.

3.8 The Fundamental Contradiction of Oslo

The tension between interim arrangements and permanent political objectives ultimately became one of the central weaknesses of the Oslo process. The agreements established a Palestinian governing authority without creating a sovereign Palestinian state. They divided responsibilities without resolving the underlying territorial dispute. They institutionalised security cooperation without eliminating the sources of insecurity. They encouraged economic cooperation while leaving substantial economic dependence intact.

In this sense, Oslo can be understood as a process rather than a final peace agreement. Its success depended on whether the transitional arrangements could generate sufficient confidence to produce a comprehensive settlement. The agreements were therefore inherently forward-looking: their legitimacy and effectiveness were connected to the expectation that the interim period would eventually culminate in negotiations over permanent status.

The tragedy of Oslo is that the transitional framework became increasingly durable while the final settlement remained elusive. The institutions created by the agreements survived, but the political process that was supposed to transform them into a comprehensive peace settlement progressively weakened. As violence increased, settlements continued to expand and political trust declined, the distinction between the “interim” and “permanent” stages became increasingly problematic.

The Oslo Accords should therefore be understood as both a diplomatic breakthrough and an incomplete peace architecture. They demonstrated the extraordinary possibilities of direct negotiation, mutual recognition and incremental confidence-building. At the same time, they illustrated the dangers of postponing core disputes without establishing sufficiently strong mechanisms to guarantee that they will

eventually be resolved. The experience suggests that interim agreements can provide valuable breathing space, but they become vulnerable when the parties lack a credible and enforceable pathway from transitional arrangements to a final political settlement.

Ultimately, the movement from secret diplomacy to formal agreement represented a remarkable transformation in Israeli–Palestinian relations. Israel and the PLO moved from mutual rejection to formal recognition; Palestinian self-government was institutionalised; security and economic cooperation were established; and a structured framework for future negotiations was created. Yet the Oslo process left unresolved the very questions that lay at the heart of the conflict. Its historical significance therefore lies not only in what it achieved but also in what it failed to accomplish. The gap between institution-building and conflict resolution, between interim governance and sovereignty, and between political recognition and substantive settlement would become increasingly important in explaining the subsequent deterioration of the peace process.

4. Major Achievements of the Oslo Accords

The Oslo Accords represented a major diplomatic breakthrough despite failing to produce a comprehensive and permanent Israeli–Palestinian peace settlement. Their most significant achievement was mutual political recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In September 1993, the PLO recognised Israel’s right to exist in peace and security, while Israel recognised the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, transforming their relationship from confrontation and non-recognition towards direct political negotiation. The Declaration of Principles also established a five-year transitional period for the gradual development of Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while postponing contentious issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, and security to permanent-status negotiations (United Nations, 1993; U.S. Department of State, 1993). A second major achievement was the creation of

Palestinian self-government institutions and the gradual transfer of administrative responsibilities in areas such as education, health, taxation, and social welfare. The 1994 Gaza–Jericho Agreement and the 1995 Oslo II Interim Agreement further developed arrangements concerning Palestinian elections, administration, security cooperation, and Israeli redeployment (United Nations, 1994, 1995). Although Oslo did not resolve the fundamental conflict, it established unprecedented Israeli–Palestinian diplomatic relations and provided an institutional foundation for Palestinian self-administration.

4.1 Mutual Recognition Between Long-standing Adversaries

The most significant achievement of the Oslo process was the establishment of mutual political recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). For decades, Israel and the PLO had regarded each other primarily as adversaries, and the absence of mutual recognition had been a fundamental obstacle to direct negotiations. A decisive breakthrough occurred on 9 September 1993, when PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat formally recognized Israel’s right to exist in peace and security, accepted United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, committed the PLO to a peaceful resolution of the conflict through negotiations, and renounced terrorism and other acts of violence. In response, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and agreed to commence negotiations with it within the Middle East peace process (United Nations, 1993; U.S. Department of State, 1993).

The significance of this development extended beyond the formal exchange of letters because it fundamentally altered the diplomatic framework of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The Declaration of Principles, signed on 13 September 1993, explicitly stated that the two sides would recognize their mutual legitimate and political rights and seek to end decades of confrontation through an agreed political process (United Nations, 1993). Mutual recognition therefore created a basis for treating the conflict not simply as a struggle between incompatible claims, but as

a political dispute that could be addressed through negotiation between recognized representatives of the two peoples. In this respect, Oslo demonstrated that even deeply entrenched adversaries can move from rejection and confrontation toward dialogue when changing political circumstances and strategic incentives make negotiation possible. Although recognition did not eliminate fundamental disagreements over territory, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, security, and Palestinian statehood, it created an unprecedented diplomatic channel through which these issues could be addressed. The exchange of recognition letters thus became the political foundation for subsequent Israeli-Palestinian agreements and remains one of the most important legacies of the Oslo process (United Nations, 1993, 1995).

4.2 Establishment of Palestinian Self-Government Institutions

One of the most important institutional achievements of the Oslo process was the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as an interim self-government body. The Gaza-Jericho Agreement of May 1994 provided for the creation of the Palestinian Authority, while the subsequent Oslo II Agreement of 1995 expanded and clarified its powers and responsibilities. Through these arrangements, authority was progressively transferred from the Israeli military government and Civil Administration to Palestinian institutions in designated areas. The transfer covered important areas of civil administration, including education and culture, health, social welfare, tourism, taxation, and other public services. Oslo II further provided for an elected Palestinian Council with legislative and executive responsibilities, thereby giving institutional expression to the principle of Palestinian interim self-government (United Nations, 1993, 1994, 1995).

Although the Palestinian Authority possessed limited and geographically differentiated powers, its establishment nevertheless represented a significant institutional transformation. Under Oslo II, the West Bank was divided into Areas A, B, and C, with different degrees of Palestinian and Israeli administrative

and security responsibility. In Area A, the Palestinian Authority assumed responsibility for internal security and public order; in Area B, it exercised responsibility for public order for Palestinians while Israel retained overriding security responsibility; and Area C remained largely under Israeli control during the interim period (United Nations, 1995). Thus, the Oslo process did not establish a fully sovereign Palestinian state, but it created functioning Palestinian administrative structures and provided Palestinians with a degree of control over their political and everyday affairs that had not previously existed in this form. In this sense, the creation of the Palestinian Authority was an important attempt to translate the principle of Palestinian self-government from a political aspiration into concrete administrative and institutional arrangements (United Nations, 1995).

4.3 Institutionalisation of Dialogue

A further achievement of the Oslo Accords was the institutionalisation of communication and dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian representatives. Prior to Oslo, the absence of formal relations between Israel and the PLO severely restricted opportunities for sustained direct negotiation. The Declaration of Principles of 1993 attempted to overcome this problem by establishing formal mechanisms through which the two sides could communicate, coordinate policies, address disputes, and implement the provisions of the agreement. In particular, Article X provided for the creation of a Joint Israeli-Palestinian Liaison Committee, composed of an equal number of representatives from both sides. The committee was mandated to address matters requiring coordination, issues of common interest, and disputes arising from the implementation of the interim arrangements. The Oslo framework also envisaged an Israeli-Palestinian Economic Cooperation Committee, demonstrating that dialogue was intended to extend beyond political negotiations into economic and administrative cooperation (United Nations, 1993).

The institutional framework was subsequently expanded through the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement (Oslo II). The

agreement retained the Joint Liaison Committee and established additional mechanisms, including the Joint Civil Affairs Coordination and Cooperation Committee, regional civil-affairs subcommittees, and a Monitoring and Steering Committee responsible for overseeing implementation and encouraging cooperation between the parties (United Nations, 1995). These arrangements were significant because they sought to make Israeli-Palestinian interaction more regular, structured, and institutional rather than dependent solely on personal relationships between political leaders. The Oslo process therefore introduced a framework in which disagreements could be addressed through established channels of negotiation and coordination rather than exclusively through confrontation. Although these institutions could not overcome the deeper political disagreements that ultimately undermined the peace process, their creation represented an important experiment in conflict management and demonstrated the potential value of institutionalised dialogue in negotiations between long-standing adversaries (United Nations, 1993, 1995).

4.4 Demonstration of the Value of Back-Channel Diplomacy

The Oslo process provided a significant demonstration of the potential value of back-channel and confidential diplomacy in resolving deeply entrenched conflicts. The negotiations that produced the 1993 Declaration of Principles began through a secret channel involving Israeli and Palestinian representatives in Norway, facilitated by Norwegian diplomats. The confidential nature of these discussions allowed the participants to explore politically sensitive issues without the immediate scrutiny of the media, opposition groups, and domestic constituencies. This was particularly important because, at the time, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had no formal negotiating relationship. The Norwegian channel therefore created an informal diplomatic space in which representatives could gradually develop trust, exchange ideas, test possible compromises, and work toward a framework that could subsequently be presented to political leaders for

formal approval (Waage, 2005; United Nations, 1993). The eventual signing of the Declaration of Principles in Washington, D.C., on 13 September 1993 transformed what had begun as a clandestine diplomatic initiative into a publicly acknowledged peace process (United Nations, 1993).

The Oslo experience also demonstrates that secrecy is a facilitating mechanism rather than a substitute for political legitimacy. Confidential negotiations can reduce political constraints during the exploratory phase of diplomacy, but agreements ultimately have to be accepted, implemented, and sustained by the societies affected by them. The Oslo Accords faced considerable opposition from sections of both Israeli and Palestinian societies, while subsequent political violence and disagreements over implementation weakened public confidence in the peace process. The lesson, therefore, is not that successful peace agreements should necessarily be negotiated in secrecy, but that back-channel diplomacy can create the necessary political space for adversaries to explore compromises that may be difficult to discuss openly at the initial stage of negotiations. Once sufficient common ground has been established, however, confidential diplomacy needs to be complemented by transparency, public communication, institutional mechanisms, and broader political support if an agreement is to become durable (Waage, 2005; Zartman, 2000).

5. The Structural Weaknesses of the Oslo Process

The failure of the Oslo process resulted from a combination of structural weaknesses and adverse political developments rather than a single event or leadership failure. Although the agreements established mutual recognition, Palestinian self-government, security cooperation, and a framework for further negotiations, they postponed fundamental issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, security, and Palestinian statehood to permanent-status negotiations (United Nations, 1993). This created uncertainty about the ultimate outcome and lacked sufficiently strong mechanisms to ensure compliance or prevent actions that could undermine mutual confidence. These weaknesses

were compounded by political violence, settlement expansion, domestic opposition, leadership changes, and declining public support. The assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 was a major setback, while continuing disagreements over implementation further weakened cooperation. The absence of a clearly defined and mutually accepted final settlement made the process vulnerable to changing political circumstances and competing interpretations. The Oslo experience therefore demonstrates that sustainable peace requires not only diplomatic breakthroughs but also credible implementation mechanisms, reciprocal confidence-building, domestic political legitimacy, and a clear pathway towards resolving the underlying causes of conflict (Makovsky, 1996; Pressman, 2003).

5.1 Postponement of Core Issues

One of the most significant structural weaknesses of the Oslo process was its decision to defer the most contentious questions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to later permanent-status negotiations. The 1993 Declaration of Principles explicitly provided that negotiations on permanent status would begin no later than the beginning of the third year of the interim period and identified issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, and relations with neighbouring states for discussion at that stage (United Nations, 1993). The strategy reflected a gradualist approach: rather than attempting to resolve every fundamental disagreement immediately, the parties would first establish interim arrangements, develop cooperation, and build sufficient confidence to address the more difficult questions later. This sequencing was intended to make negotiations politically manageable and to create a process in which practical cooperation could gradually generate the trust necessary for a comprehensive settlement (Beilin, 1999; Pressman, 2003).

In practice, however, the postponement of the core issues created considerable uncertainty about the final destination of the peace process. Instead of eliminating the most fundamental sources of disagreement, the interim framework left them unresolved while political developments

on the ground continued to influence the eventual bargaining environment. In particular, the continuing dispute over settlements, territorial control, security, Jerusalem, and Palestinian political aspirations contributed to growing mistrust between the parties. The absence of a clearly agreed final-status outcome also meant that Israelis and Palestinians could attach different expectations to the same interim process. Thus, while phased negotiations can be useful when parties require time to build confidence, postponing virtually all fundamental questions carries significant risks. A successful transitional arrangement must provide a credible pathway toward a mutually understood end state; otherwise, interim measures may become an indefinite process of management rather than a bridge to conflict resolution (Pressman, 2003; Zartman, 2000). The Oslo experience consequently illustrates the importance of balancing gradualism with sufficient clarity regarding the ultimate political objectives of a peace agreement.

5.2 Power Asymmetry Between the Parties

A major structural weakness of the Oslo process was the considerable asymmetry of political, military, territorial, and institutional power between the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Israel entered the negotiations as an internationally recognized sovereign state with established governmental institutions, a powerful military, substantial economic resources, and effective control over significant aspects of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), by contrast, represented a stateless national movement whose political objective was the achievement of Palestinian self-determination and whose institutional capacity was considerably weaker. Although the Oslo agreements formally recognized both sides as negotiating partners, the existence of formal equality at the negotiating table did not eliminate the underlying material inequalities between them. Asymmetry therefore affected the ability of the parties to negotiate, interpret, and implement provisions of the

agreements on relatively equal terms (Le More, 2008; Pressman, 2003).

This imbalance became particularly significant during the implementation of the Oslo arrangements. The agreements established differentiated areas of Palestinian and Israeli authority and retained substantial Israeli responsibilities and security powers during the interim period (United Nations, 1995). Consequently, the Palestinian side remained dependent on Israeli cooperation in several important areas while lacking the sovereign authority normally available to a state implementing an international agreement. This created an inherent vulnerability within the process: the stronger party possessed greater capacity to influence territorial and security developments, whereas the weaker party had fewer independent means of enforcing compliance. The Oslo experience therefore demonstrates that formal negotiations alone cannot overcome structural inequalities of power. Durable peace agreements involving highly unequal parties require credible monitoring, effective dispute-resolution procedures, reciprocal obligations, and implementation mechanisms that can prevent the stronger party from unilaterally altering the conditions under which negotiations take place. Without such safeguards, an agreement may institutionalise an unequal relationship rather than transform it into a sustainable basis for conflict resolution (Le More, 2008; Zartman, 2000).

5.3 Weak Implementation and Enforcement Mechanisms

Another major structural weakness of the Oslo process was the limited strength of its implementation, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms. The agreements contained numerous obligations concerning security cooperation, redeployment, elections, administrative responsibilities, and further negotiations, but their implementation depended substantially on continued cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian sides. The 1995 Interim Agreement established joint committees and mechanisms for coordination and dispute resolution, including the Joint Liaison Committee and Monitoring and

Steering Committee; however, these institutions were primarily designed to facilitate cooperation rather than impose binding external enforcement when either side failed to fulfil its commitments (United Nations, 1995). As political trust deteriorated, disagreements increasingly emerged over the pace and scope of Israeli redeployment, Palestinian security responsibilities, settlement activity, territorial jurisdiction, and the interpretation of reciprocal obligations. The absence of a sufficiently powerful third-party mechanism capable of compelling compliance meant that violations or disagreements could contribute to further mistrust rather than being effectively contained through an independent enforcement process (Le More, 2008; Pressman, 2003).

The Oslo experience demonstrates that the signing of an agreement is only the beginning of a peace process. Durable agreements require clearly defined obligations, realistic implementation schedules, credible monitoring, transparent verification, and effective procedures for addressing alleged violations. Although the Oslo agreements created several bilateral institutions for coordination and dispute management, the process remained heavily dependent upon the willingness of the parties to cooperate and sustain reciprocal commitments (United Nations, 1995). When that willingness weakened, the institutional mechanisms proved insufficient to prevent the progressive deterioration of the process. This provides an important lesson for future peace negotiations: agreements between adversaries should establish who is responsible for implementation, how compliance will be independently verified, how disputes will be adjudicated, and what consequences may follow from serious or repeated violations. Third-party monitoring and credible guarantees can be particularly important where negotiations involve substantial power asymmetries, because they can reduce uncertainty and provide weaker parties with greater confidence that negotiated commitments will be honoured (Zartman, 2000). The Oslo experience therefore highlights the need to move beyond diplomatic declarations toward robust systems of implementation and accountability.

5.4 Continuing Violence and the Destruction of Trust

The persistence of political violence during the Oslo period was one of the most damaging factors affecting the peace process. Peace negotiations between deeply divided societies depend heavily on public confidence, and acts of violence can quickly undermine that confidence by strengthening perceptions that compromise is dangerous or ineffective. During the 1990s, attacks by Palestinian militant organisations, including Hamas, as well as violence by Israeli extremists, repeatedly placed pressure on the political leaderships supporting the Oslo framework. Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel in particular generated fear and anger among the Israeli public, while Israeli settlement-related violence and extremist opposition contributed to Palestinian perceptions that the peace process was failing to address their political and territorial concerns (Pressman, 2003). Violence therefore produced a negative feedback loop in which insecurity weakened public support for compromise, declining support made political leaders more cautious, and political difficulties in turn made further violence and confrontation more likely.

The assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995 by Yigal Amir, a Jewish extremist opposed to the Oslo process, represented an especially devastating blow to the peace initiative. Rabin had been a central political actor in negotiating and implementing the Oslo framework, and his assassination demonstrated the capacity of domestic extremist actors to disrupt an internationally significant peace process. The subsequent escalation of violence further weakened confidence between the parties and contributed to growing political opposition to the concessions associated with Oslo (United Nations, 1995; Pressman, 2003). Palestinian militant attacks against Israeli civilians similarly undermined Israeli public confidence and strengthened political forces opposed to further territorial concessions. The Oslo experience consequently illustrates the importance of addressing the problem of “spoilers”—individuals

or groups who seek to undermine peace processes through violence, political mobilisation, or deliberate rejection of negotiated compromise. As Stedman (1997) argues, successful peace processes require strategies for managing spoilers and reducing their capacity to derail negotiations. Peace agreements must therefore incorporate effective security arrangements, mechanisms for preventing violence, and political strategies for maintaining domestic legitimacy, and measures capable of sustaining public confidence when crises occur.

6. Domestic Politics and the Problem of Political Opposition

International peace agreements do not operate in a political vacuum; their survival depends heavily on domestic political legitimacy and public acceptance. The Oslo process generated enthusiasm among sections of Israeli and Palestinian society but also faced strong opposition from political parties, religious groups, settlers, militant organisations, and other actors who viewed compromise as a threat to their national, territorial, religious, or security interests. On the Israeli side, right-wing and religious-nationalist groups opposed territorial concessions and recognition of the PLO, while on the Palestinian side, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other organisations rejected recognition of Israel and the Oslo framework (Milton-Edwards, 1996; Shlaim, 2009). This demonstrated that negotiating leaders had to manage not only relations with their external counterparts but also competing pressures within their own societies.

The most dramatic manifestation of Israeli domestic opposition was the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995 by Yigal Amir, an Israeli Jewish extremist who opposed the Oslo process and territorial concessions. Rabin's assassination removed a central political figure associated with the peace process and intensified uncertainty about its future direction (Morris, 2008). Palestinian society similarly experienced growing dissatisfaction as the expected benefits of Oslo failed to materialise quickly. Continued Israeli military presence, settlement expansion, restrictions on movement, economic difficulties, and the absence of a clear

path towards independence weakened public confidence, while attacks by Palestinian militant organisations reinforced Israeli fears about the security consequences of further concessions. Such actors can be understood as spoilers—groups that seek to obstruct peace agreements because they perceive them as threatening their interests or ideological objectives (Stedman, 1997).

The Oslo experience also exposed a tension between confidential diplomacy and democratic participation. The secrecy of the initial negotiations helped Israeli and Palestinian representatives explore sensitive compromises without immediate domestic political pressure, contributing to the breakthrough (Waage, 2005). However, once the agreements became public, political leaders had to persuade wider constituencies to accept compromises in which they had played little direct role. This created a legitimacy gap between diplomatic elites and sections of Israeli and Palestinian society. Sustainable peace processes therefore require a carefully managed transition from confidential negotiations to broader public ownership through political communication, parliamentary engagement, civil-society participation, and realistic expectations. At the same time, governments must distinguish between legitimate political opposition and violent attempts to sabotage peace.

Political leadership was another crucial factor. Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat were required to take significant political risks by engaging with former adversaries and defending compromise before their respective constituencies. However, the Oslo experience demonstrated that individual leadership, although important, cannot by itself guarantee the survival of a peace process. Agreements need strong institutions, cross-party support, public legitimacy, and mechanisms capable of maintaining commitments during elections, leadership changes, and political crises. Excessive dependence on individual leaders makes peace processes particularly vulnerable to assassination, electoral turnover, or changes in government policy.

Ultimately, domestic politics was not merely an obstacle to Oslo but a central arena in which the struggle for peace was contested. Israeli and Palestinian leaders were engaged in a form of two-level negotiation, simultaneously bargaining with each other and managing their domestic constituencies. The central lesson is that a peace agreement must be politically sustainable at home if it is to survive internationally. Future peace processes should therefore combine confidential diplomacy with broader public engagement, address legitimate domestic concerns, protect agreements against violent spoilers, establish credible security and implementation mechanisms, and create political constituencies capable of defending compromise. The Oslo experience demonstrates that peace is not achieved simply through signing agreements; it requires societies to accept, implement, and sustain them over time (Stedman, 1997; Waage, 2005).

7. Lessons for Middle East Peace Negotiations

The Oslo Accords offer important lessons for future Middle East peace initiatives by demonstrating that successful peace requires more than diplomatic recognition or the signing of agreements. It depends upon clear political objectives, sustained commitment, effective implementation and monitoring mechanisms, public legitimacy, and the capacity to manage violence and political opposition. Although Oslo showed that long-standing adversaries can establish communication, mutual recognition, and institutions for cooperation, its deterioration highlighted the risks of postponing fundamental disputes and allowing developments on the ground to undermine trust (Pressman, 2003; United Nations, 1993). Future peace initiatives should therefore link transitional arrangements to a clearly defined pathway for resolving core issues, while incorporating credible third-party monitoring, dispute-resolution mechanisms, safeguards against unilateral actions, and strategies for managing violent spoilers and domestic opposition. Above all, durable peace requires broader public support and institutions capable of sustaining compromise beyond

individual leaders and changing political circumstances. The central lesson of Oslo is that peace processes must transform not only relations between political actors but also the institutional, security, and societal conditions that sustain conflict (Stedman, 1997; Zartman, 2000).

7.1 Recognition Must Be Accompanied by a Clear Political Vision

Mutual recognition was one of the most important achievements of the Oslo process, but recognition by itself was insufficient to resolve the underlying Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The 1993 Declaration of Principles established mutual recognition and created a framework for interim Palestinian self-government, yet it deliberately postponed negotiations on several of the most contentious permanent-status questions, including Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, and borders (United Nations, 1993). This approach reflected the belief that confidence-building and gradual cooperation could create the political conditions necessary for addressing these issues at a later stage. However, the absence of an agreed final political vision meant that the two sides could participate in the same transitional process while maintaining substantially different expectations about its ultimate outcome. As Pressman (2003) observes in his analysis of the later negotiations, unresolved disagreements concerning the nature and scope of a final settlement became increasingly important as the Oslo process progressed.

The experience therefore suggests that political recognition should be accompanied by a sufficiently clear vision of the desired end-state. A phased peace process can provide valuable time for confidence-building, institutional development, and gradual implementation, but its interim arrangements should be connected to clearly define political objectives. Future negotiations should establish, as far as possible, a mutually understood framework concerning issues such as territorial boundaries, political sovereignty, security arrangements, governance, and the rights of the populations concerned. Clarity does not necessarily require every detail to be settled at the beginning; rather, it requires the

parties to understand what the transitional process is intended to achieve. Without such a shared destination, interim agreements may become open-ended, allowing each side to interpret the process according to its own political objectives. The Oslo experience consequently demonstrates that recognition can open the door to peace, but a credible and mutually understood political vision is necessary to guide the parties through that door toward a sustainable settlement (Pressman, 2003; United Nations, 1993).

7.2 Trust Cannot Be Built Solely Through Time

The Oslo process demonstrates that trust does not automatically develop simply because negotiations continue over an extended period. The agreements were based partly on the expectation that gradual cooperation, reciprocal recognition, and the implementation of interim arrangements would generate greater confidence between Israelis and Palestinians. However, trust in a peace process depends on the parties' perception that commitments are being honoured and that negotiations are producing meaningful improvements in security and political conditions. Where agreements are only partially implemented, or where violence and political uncertainty continue, the passage of time may actually deepen suspicion rather than create confidence. The Oslo experience therefore suggests that confidence-building must be based on observable actions and reciprocal commitments, rather than on the assumption that continued interaction will eventually produce trust (Pressman, 2003; United Nations, 1995).

For future peace initiatives, trust-building measures should therefore be specific, reciprocal, verifiable, and connected to tangible improvements in people's lives. Such measures may include effective security cooperation, reduction of violence, respect for agreed obligations, improved freedom of movement, economic cooperation, and the development of institutions that demonstrate the practical benefits of peaceful relations. The importance of implementation is particularly significant because each fulfilled commitment can provide evidence that cooperation is possible, while repeated

violations can reinforce perceptions of bad faith. Moreover, confidence-building should address not only the concerns of political leaders but also the experiences of ordinary citizens, whose support is essential for sustaining a peace process over time. The central lesson of Oslo is consequently that trust must be actively constructed through credible behaviour, reciprocal implementation, and measurable improvements in security and everyday life; it cannot be expected to emerge merely from the continuation of negotiations (United Nations, 1995; Zartman, 2000).

7.3 Final-Status Issues Cannot Be Avoided Indefinitely

The Oslo experience demonstrates that postponing fundamental issues can facilitate the initial stages of negotiation, but such postponement cannot continue indefinitely. The 1993 Declaration of Principles deliberately deferred several of the most contentious permanent-status questions—including Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, and relations with neighbouring states—to later negotiations (United Nations, 1993). This sequencing allowed the parties to establish interim Palestinian self-government and begin cooperation without immediately confronting every issue on which their positions remained deeply opposed. However, these questions were not peripheral to the conflict; they concerned the central questions of territory, sovereignty, security, identity, displacement, and political rights. As the interim period progressed without a comprehensive resolution of these matters, the distinction between temporary arrangements and the eventual political settlement became increasingly problematic (Pressman, 2003).

Future peace negotiations should therefore combine phased implementation with clearly defined procedures and realistic timelines for addressing final-status questions. Parties may legitimately begin with less contentious issues and use interim arrangements to build confidence, but the transitional stage should be linked to an identifiable pathway toward a permanent settlement. Clear milestones can help prevent an interim agreement from becoming an indefinite substitute for resolving the conflict itself. Such

milestones might specify when negotiations on borders, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem, security, and sovereignty will begin, what mechanisms will be used to resolve disagreements, and how progress will be assessed. The central lesson from Oslo is not that all difficult issues must necessarily be resolved at the beginning, but that deferral must have a credible endpoint. Without such a mechanism, a phased peace process may lose its transformative purpose and become primarily a framework for managing rather than resolving conflict (United Nations, 1993, 1995; Zartman, 2000).

7.4 Peace Requires Effective International Guarantees

The Oslo process demonstrates the importance of international facilitation, monitoring, and credible guarantees in negotiations involving parties with profound political and military asymmetries. Norway played a crucial facilitating role in the secret negotiations that preceded the 1993 Declaration of Principles, while the United States subsequently provided diplomatic support and helped sustain the broader peace process. However, facilitation and enforcement are not the same. A mediator can create channels of communication, help the parties formulate compromises, and encourage them to sign an agreement, but this does not necessarily give the mediator sufficient authority to ensure that the commitments are implemented. The Oslo agreements themselves established several bilateral mechanisms for coordination and dispute resolution, but implementation remained heavily dependent on Israeli-Palestinian cooperation rather than on a powerful independent enforcement mechanism (United Nations, 1993, 1995). This distinction is particularly important in conflicts where the parties possess unequal political, territorial, and military capabilities.

Future peace agreements should therefore give greater attention to credible international monitoring and guarantees. External involvement could include independent verification of commitments, regular reporting on implementation, agreed procedures for resolving disputes, and clearly defined responses to serious or repeated violations. Such mechanisms can

reduce uncertainty by providing both parties with greater confidence that commitments will not depend entirely upon unilateral goodwill. At the same time, international guarantees must be perceived as impartial, legitimate, and sufficiently credible by all parties; since a monitoring mechanism viewed as biased may itself become a source of disagreement. The lesson from Oslo is therefore not that international actors should impose settlements from outside, but that carefully designed international involvement can help create the conditions in which negotiated commitments are more likely to survive political changes and periods of crisis. Effective guarantees can thus complement diplomacy by transforming political promises into verifiable and accountable commitments (Stedman, 1997; Zartman, 2000).

7.5 Addressing Power Imbalances Is Essential

The Oslo experience demonstrates that formal equality at the negotiating table does not necessarily eliminate underlying inequalities of power. Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) entered the peace process with substantially different political, military, territorial, economic, and institutional capacities. Although the Oslo agreements recognised the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and established mechanisms for Palestinian self-government, Israel continued to exercise significant control over territory, movement, security, and other aspects of life in the occupied Palestinian territories during the interim period (United Nations, 1995). This asymmetry affected the implementation of the agreements because the parties did not possess equivalent capacities to influence conditions on the ground. As Le More (2008) argues, the political and institutional inequalities surrounding the peace process complicated the prospects for achieving a balanced and sustainable settlement. Consequently, an agreement may be formally voluntary while still generating limited confidence if the weaker party believes that the stronger party possesses greater ability to shape the practical outcome of negotiations.

Future peace processes should therefore pay greater attention to reducing the practical

consequences of power asymmetry. This does not necessarily mean attempting to make the parties equal in every respect; rather, it requires the creation of institutional safeguards that prevent disparities in power from undermining the credibility and implementation of negotiated commitments. Such safeguards may include third-party guarantees, independent international monitoring, protection of political and civil rights, transparent verification procedures, effective dispute-resolution mechanisms, and clearly defined restrictions on unilateral actions that could alter the negotiating environment. International guarantees can be particularly important where one party has greater territorial or security capabilities, because they can provide the weaker party with additional confidence that agreed arrangements will be respected. The broader lesson of Oslo is that sustainable peace requires not only agreement between adversaries but also institutions capable of managing the inequalities that exist between them. Without such safeguards, negotiations may reproduce existing power imbalances rather than provide a genuine pathway toward a mutually acceptable settlement (Le More, 2008; Pressman, 2003).

7.6 Security and Political Justice Must Proceed Together

The Oslo experience demonstrates the importance of addressing security concerns and political rights as interconnected dimensions of peace building rather than as competing priorities. Israeli security concerns were central to the Oslo framework, which included Palestinian commitments concerning security cooperation, the prevention of violence, and the maintenance of public order. At the same time, the agreements recognised the Palestinian right to interim self-government and established institutions intended to advance Palestinian political participation and administration (United Nations, 1993, 1995). The difficulty was that the two sides often approached the process from fundamentally different security and political perspectives. Israel sought credible guarantees against terrorism and violence, while Palestinians sought greater political autonomy, territorial control, and progress towards self-determination. When progress in one area

appeared disconnected from progress in the other, confidence in the overall process could weaken. As Pressman (2003) notes in his analysis of the later peace negotiations, disputes over security and political objectives became deeply intertwined with competing perceptions of what constituted a fair and viable settlement.

Future peace negotiations should therefore adopt a balanced approach that treats security and political justice as mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. Security arrangements must provide credible protection against violence while avoiding indefinite political restrictions that undermine the legitimacy of the peace process. Similarly, political agreements must address legitimate aspirations for self-determination, representation, territorial rights, and political participation while incorporating realistic mechanisms for protecting the security of all communities. This requires reciprocal obligations, independent monitoring, phased implementation, and mechanisms through which security concerns and political grievances can be addressed simultaneously. The broader lesson is that security without political legitimacy is unlikely to produce durable peace, while political arrangements without credible security guarantees may fail to survive domestic opposition and renewed violence. A sustainable peace process must therefore seek to create conditions in which both security and political rights reinforce one another rather than being treated as sequential or competing objectives (United Nations, 1995; Zartman, 2000).

7.7 Peace Agreements Must Be Protected Against Spoilers

The Oslo experience demonstrates that peace agreements are particularly vulnerable to “spoilers”—individuals, organisations, or political groups that deliberately seek to undermine negotiations through violence or political mobilisation. During the Oslo period, extremist opposition emerged on both sides, and acts of violence repeatedly weakened public confidence in the peace process. The assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir in November 1995 was an especially significant example of how a domestic extremist could

disrupt a peace initiative supported by the political leadership. Palestinian militant organisations also carried out attacks against Israeli civilians, contributing to fear and strengthening political opposition to further concessions. Stedman (1997) argues that spoilers can exploit weaknesses in peace processes precisely because violence can alter political calculations, reduce public willingness to compromise, and increase pressure on leaders to abandon negotiations. The Oslo experience therefore demonstrates that even when political leaders remain committed to diplomacy, organised violence can create conditions under which the peace process becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Future peace agreements must therefore incorporate strategies for managing and containing spoilers without allowing violence to determine the political direction of negotiations. Governments need effective and lawful security and policing mechanisms capable of protecting civilians and preventing violent actors from acquiring political leverage through attacks. At the same time, security responses must be carefully calibrated because excessive or indiscriminate measures can generate new grievances, undermine public confidence, and potentially strengthen extremist organisations. A sustainable approach requires a combination of effective law enforcement, political communication, protection of civilian populations, accountability for violence, and continued commitment to negotiation. Peace processes should also establish mechanisms for identifying emerging spoilers, coordinating security responses, and maintaining political dialogue during periods of crisis. As Stedman (1997) emphasises, the objective is not merely to defeat spoilers militarily but to prevent them from acquiring sufficient influence to derail the broader political process. The central lesson of Oslo is therefore that peace agreements must be designed not only to accommodate the negotiating parties but also to withstand deliberate attempts by violent and extremist actors to destroy the possibility of compromise.

8. Oslo and the Contemporary Crisis of Middle East Peace

The legacy of the Oslo Accords continues to shape the political realities of Israel and the Palestinian territories. Although Oslo was intended as a temporary framework leading to a permanent settlement, several of its institutions and arrangements have become enduring features of the political landscape. The Palestinian Authority remains an important institution of Palestinian governance, while the territorial and administrative arrangements established through Oslo II continue to influence conditions in the West Bank (Israel & Palestine Liberation Organization [PLO], 1995). However, the central issues postponed by Oslo—including Palestinian statehood, borders, Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, refugees, and security—remain unresolved. The failure to address these questions transformed what was intended to be an interim arrangement into a prolonged and fragmented political order, contributing to Palestinian frustration and weakening confidence in the incremental approach to peace (Khalidi, 2020).

The continuing relevance of Oslo is also evident in the persistence of political and security divisions. The Second Intifada and subsequent violence severely damaged the confidence generated during the early peace process, while the political division between Fatah and Hamas further complicated Palestinian representation and governance (Gelvin, 2021). On the Israeli side, changes in governments and political coalitions have produced differing approaches to negotiations, settlements, security, and territorial compromise. These developments demonstrate the vulnerability of peace processes to leadership changes, electoral politics, political polarisation, and declining public confidence. Once trust has been repeatedly damaged, restoring faith in negotiations becomes particularly difficult. Nevertheless, the Oslo experience should not be regarded as proof that diplomacy is impossible. The mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO and the creation of Palestinian governing institutions remain important examples of how diplomacy can transform relationships between long-standing adversaries.

Future peace initiatives can therefore learn important lessons from both the achievements and

shortcomings of Oslo. Direct dialogue remains essential, but it should be supported by a clear political framework, realistic timelines, credible implementation and monitoring mechanisms, dispute-resolution procedures, and stronger third-party guarantees. Interim arrangements may help build confidence, but they should be connected to tangible progress towards resolving fundamental political questions rather than becoming permanent substitutes for a final settlement. Future negotiations must also address the asymmetry of power between the parties while taking legitimate Israeli security concerns and Palestinian demands for self-determination into account. Reciprocity, economic and social improvements, and mechanisms for preventing violent spoilers are equally important for sustaining public support for peace (Pressman, 2003; Stedman, 1997; Zartman, 2000).

The Oslo Accords should therefore be understood as a historic but incomplete peace process rather than either a complete success or an absolute failure. They demonstrated that former adversaries could move from confrontation and non-recognition towards dialogue, mutual recognition, self-government, and institutional cooperation. At the same time, their inability to resolve core disputes, combined with political violence, settlement expansion, domestic opposition, leadership changes, and inadequate implementation mechanisms, exposed the limitations of the framework (Israel & PLO, 1993; United Nations, 1993). The enduring lesson is that peace requires more than signed agreements: it requires the transformation of political institutions, security relationships, public expectations, and social attitudes. Future initiatives must therefore combine direct diplomacy with credible guarantees, interim confidence-building with substantive political progress, and elite negotiations with broader public legitimacy if a durable and sustainable peace is to be achieved.

9. Conclusion

The Oslo Accords remain one of the most consequential experiments in modern Middle East diplomacy because they transformed the political relationship between Israel and the Palestine

Liberation Organization (PLO). After decades of confrontation and mutual non-recognition, the two sides entered direct negotiations, formally recognised one another, and established institutions for Palestinian self-government (Arafat & Rabin, 1993; Israel & PLO, 1993; Quandt, 2005). The process demonstrated that deeply divided adversaries can move towards negotiation when political leadership, changing strategic circumstances, diplomatic facilitation, and mutual recognition create opportunities for compromise. However, Oslo remained incomplete because fundamental issues—including Jerusalem, borders, settlements, refugees, security, and Palestinian statehood—were postponed rather than resolved. The absence of a clear and enforceable pathway from interim arrangements to a permanent settlement ultimately weakened confidence in the process.

The Oslo experience also highlights the importance of implementation, power balance, domestic legitimacy, and third-party guarantees. Israel and the PLO possessed substantially unequal military, economic, institutional, and diplomatic capabilities, while the agreements lacked sufficiently strong mechanisms to ensure consistent implementation and address violations. Domestic opposition, political violence, leadership changes, and violent spoilers further undermined the process; the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 illustrated the vulnerability of peace initiatives to internal political polarisation (Morris, 2008; Stedman, 1997). Future peace processes should therefore combine confidential diplomacy with broader public participation, establish realistic timelines and monitoring mechanisms, provide credible international guarantees, and protect negotiations against spoilers. Equally important, both parties must perceive meaningful benefits from compromise. Israeli security concerns and Palestinian demands for political rights, self-determination, territorial integrity, and effective governance must be addressed within an integrated framework rather than treated as competing objectives.

Ultimately, Oslo should be understood neither as a complete success nor as a

meaningless failure, but as a historic diplomatic breakthrough and incomplete peace architecture. Its greatest achievement was demonstrating that former adversaries could recognise one another and establish institutions of cooperation; its greatest weakness was failing to convert this breakthrough into a durable political settlement. The central lesson for contemporary and future Middle East diplomacy is that peace must be both negotiated and constructed. Negotiation can create a framework, but sustainable peace requires credible implementation, reciprocal commitments, institutional resilience, public legitimacy, security, political rights, and progress towards resolving the underlying causes of conflict (Pressman, 2003; Waage, 2005). Future initiatives should therefore preserve Oslo's emphasis on dialogue and mutual recognition while avoiding its shortcomings by linking interim confidence-building to clearly defined political objectives and a realistic pathway towards a lasting and mutually acceptable settlement.

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