Ladies and gentlemen, we kindly ask that you remain seated during the document signing.

Gemma Ware: On September the 13th 1993, two men shook hands in front of the White House. Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin and the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat, were there to publicly sign the Israeli Palestinian Declaration of Principles, a framework for peace in the Middle East.

Amid a steady hum of applause, U.S. President Bill Clinton, standing in between the two men, shook Rabin's hand, turned and shook Arafat's. Then, arms outstretched, Clinton gestured for them to shake each other's hands. When they did, the audience erupted into cheers.

Despite the pomp and ceremony on the White House lawn, the principles signed that day, 30 years ago, had not been brokered by American diplomats in Washington. Instead, they were the result of months of secret meetings in Oslo, the capital of Norway. And they would mark the beginning of what became known as the Oslo Process, a series of negotiations aimed at bringing about a peaceful solution to decades of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Ultimately, the aim to end the conflict failed, resulting in 2000 with the eruption of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, known as the Second Intifada. Three decades on from the signing of the Oslo Accords, peace remains elusive.

I'm Gemma Ware and in this special three part series for The Conversation Weekly, we're taking you inside the Oslo Accords, through conversations with some of the key participants, three decades later. Revisiting the negotiations today can help provide lessons from history for a conflict now more entrenched than ever.

I'm joined for this three part series by two academics, James Rodgers, a reader in international journalism, and Amnon Aran, professor of international politics, both at City University of London in the UK. Welcome to both of you.

James Rodgers: Thank you, Gemma.
Amnon Aran: Thank you very much, Gemma.

Gemma Ware: So, James, let's start with you. You're a journalist who's reported around the world during your career at the BBC, but tell me about your own experiences of the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular.

James Rodgers: Between 2002 and 2004, during the second Palestinian intifada or uprising against Israel, I was the BBC's correspondent in the Gaza Strip.

At that time, I was the only international journalist based in the territory. So that wasn’t my first time in Gaza. My first time was actually in December 1993. It was a remarkable time and a very different time too, because not only was there an active conflict, but there was also an active peace process, and it was a really interesting experience being a journalist, and because I was able to talk to everybody, which, you know, it's quite difficult to cross between different sides.

It was hugely professionally challenging and also sometimes very personally difficult too, because of the suffering that, you know, you witnessed, but it was really interesting and actually, you know, led to my writing subsequently two books about the conflict and obviously sparked my interest in the series that we're doing now.

Gemma Ware: Amnon, you're a colleague of James's at City, tell me about your own interest in the Middle East peace process and I know it's been a big focus of your research but you also set up an Israeli Palestinian NGO as well.

Amnon Aran: Yeah, so I grew up in Israel and a bit like James in a very different time than we have now and I think one of the big differences was that actually it was a big debate and one big part of that debate was about how to resolve the Israeli Palestinian conflict peacefully.

And as sort of a young Israeli in my 20s, I really remember how the Oslo process began and how promising it seemed, at least at the outset, even though, of course, there were some clear challenges ahead. I also set up an NGO as a young Israeli, as you mentioned, which was really focusing on promoting the social rights of Israelis and Palestinians, which gave me, if you like, a sort of first hand kind of experience into the conflict, but also in possibilities to resolve it and to be in touch with Israelis and Palestinians together.

But I came out of that experience actually with more questions than answers, which led me to pursue my PhD and subsequently my academic career, where I wrote two books focusing quite heavily on the Oslo process, which still stays a large part of my own
research. So that's sort of what brought me into this series. I thought 30 years was an important marker to look and reflect back.

**Gemma Ware:** Why do the two of you want to retell this history at this point?

**James Rodgers:** Well, I think it actually came out quite a casual conversation that Amnon and I were just having over lunch one day, and we realized, you know, we both teach separate but related disciplines in a sense; and I realized that a lot of my students had wanted to do journalism stories about the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

But I also realized the students we teach, most of them are aged between 18 and 25 years old. It was a long time since the conflict had been day to day in the news for any extended period and I think it was a real thirst to understand it, but also a sort of lack of knowledge. So that was really one of the prime motivations for doing the series.

**Gemma Ware:** When the process began in 1993, just take us back to that moment and why this was such a step change from what had happened before.

**Amnon Aran:** Well, it's really, we're talking about an era where Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PLO, were sworn enemies. There was, in fact, a law in Israel that you were prohibited to even meet members of the PLO. Both Israel and the PLO did not even recognize each other as entities, let alone agree to talk to each other. And the whole narrative and the whole history was really predicated upon the mutual denial of both rights to that one piece of land— the land of Israel Palestine.

**Gemma Ware:** Okay. And we're going to be talking to some of the negotiators involved in the Oslo Accords process. And for this first episode, James and Amnon, you've been speaking to the Norwegian diplomat, Jan Egeland. Tell us a bit about him.

**James Rodgers:** Well, he was the head of the United Nations Humanitarian Aid Relief Efforts from 2003 to 2006. He's currently Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council. But he was also Norwegian deputy foreign minister and while working in Norway was one of the liaisons between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization at the time the process began.

So, he was exactly the kind of insider that we wanted to talk to for the podcast. So, when we spoke to him I started by asking him why it was called the Oslo process and why it started when it did.

**Jan Egeland:** The name the Oslo agreement came from the Americans that received our draft agreement on a silver platter, if you like. And while they were having official
negotiations in Washington between Israel and a Palestinian Jordanian combined
delegation. And of course, that was part of a larger process that started in Madrid before
we were an intense back channel where three-four of us in Oslo hosted, in secrecy,
oficial representatives of the government of Israel and of the Palestinian Liberation
Organization, the PLO. And that did lead to a tremendous breakthrough in one of the
most difficult and long standing conflicts of our time and age, namely the
Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And we told the Americans that this has happened in secrecy. And the then Secretary of
State, Warren Christopher said, we cannot pretend as if it came out of the Washington
talks. This is an Oslo agreement.

**Amnon Aran**: We usually have the United States as the mediator and here comes
Norway into the picture. And I was wondering if you could tell us maybe a bit more
about what really was Norway trying to achieve, and also specifically about your own
involvement in what was a secretive process after all.

**Jan Egeland**: Yeah, I mean, it was in September of 1993. We assembled in front of the
White House and the Oslo Agreement was then officially signed by Israel and PLO, with
President Clinton as the host. And many asked, why Oslo? Of all places, as Time
magazine asked.

The answer to that was really that few countries in the world would have the kind of
direct access to the leadership of both sides and the trust and confidence of both sides. So
there were countries who were even closer to Israel than Norway was, and there were
countries who were much closer to the PLO than we were, but they didn't have both
sides.

So when I became the deputy foreign minister in 1991, then foreign minister, Torvald
Stoltenberg, he told me to travel to Israel and Palestinian areas and say, listen, look, if
there are opportunities for bridge building here, because we have this unique relationship
with both sides; and then the PLO came to us in secrecy and said, Sweden, who we're
very close to, have said that you might help us vis a vis Israel because we're ready for
dealing with them for the first time. We're not going to fight them anymore with weapons.
We want to talk.

And parallel to that, we, through FAFO, a trade union, investigative social science
institute, Mr. Terje Rød Larsen, a friend of mine, had contacts with the Israeli deputy
foreign minister, Yossi Beilin, my counterpart as deputy Norwegian foreign minister.
And on the Israeli side, there were also clear interest in establishing contacts with the other side, with the good officers of Norway. But it had to happen in secrecy, because at the time, PLO was as much seen as a terrorist organization as Hamas is today. People were in jail in Israel for having contacts with the PLO. And within the PLO, it was seen as treason to deal with the occupier Israel. So it had to happen in secrecy and we were good at organizing such a discreet back channel in Oslo.

**James Rodgers:** Could I just ask, why do you think it happened at that moment—describe some of the political circumstances?

**Jan Egeland:** Yeah, no, it was a unique period, 1992 we started on the Israeli side. The labor party, with the leading characters Shimon Peres and Yishak Rabin, they were seeing that the cost of perpetual occupation was frankly too big, it couldn't be sustained.

But they were not yet in power when we started, it was Likud which was in power then, but this initial thinking was starting to mature in within the Israeli Labor Party. And on PLO side, it was very clear they were broke after the Iraq war; you will remember Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. big coalition led by the United States liberated Kuwait, went into Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Yasser Arafat had done a strategic mistake in embracing Iraq and the Gulf countries that had financed the PLO felt this was betrayal and they cut assistance to the PLO, which was in a very weak position. And that led to them saying, we cannot continue just using military means. Terrorism, as Israel will call it, we need to start talking.

And hence, on the two sides, these things started to mature. So when we started up with Israeli academics, not official Israel, and the PLO, it became official when the Israeli Labor government took over, and that led to the breakthrough of the Oslo agreement.

**News clip Amnon Aran:** On the back of that, I was wondering if maybe you could share with us, 'cause you said the process was secretive; What were, you know, the international responses, once news that the secret process was underway actually became public?

**Jan Egeland:** I think the international response was near unanimous positive. People couldn't believe it. There had been this enormous investment in the official peace negotiation started with Madrid process. It was initiated during President Bush, the father, not George W. Bush.

The reason they didn't succeed was that PLO, which was the one representative with some legitimacy across the Palestinian people could not be invited because it was seen as a terrorist organization. And thereby the Palestinians that were invited to these talks
under Jordanian umbrella had no mandate to agree on anything. They were dead in the water in the official negotiation. So, when we could announce the Oslo agreement, the Clinton administration decided to see it as a very positive thing. And we offered it as a ceremony in Washington because Norway cannot enforce anything.

We’re a small place. The United States is the power, both vis a vis, first and foremost, vis a vis Israel, but also vis a vis the Palestinians. So that's why it took place there and had near unanimous international support. Within Israel, of course, it was controversial on the nationalist right. And within the Palestinian radical organizations, it was also controversial, basically. And Hamas and Islamic Jihad and so on condemned it. But the PLO Fatah was, of course, in agreement what their leadership had done.

**Amnon Aran:** That sort of almost unanimous endorsement of the process, did you feel that was shared also throughout the Middle East, beyond Israel-Palestine?

**Jan Egeland:** Yeah, certainly by Egypt, certainly by Jordan. Of course, the agreement between Israel and Jordan followed. With Egypt, there was already a peace agreement with Israel. Syria did not agree. But no, globally, internationally, there was full support.

Russia was there on the outside of the White House as an official witness to the Oslo Agreement. The European Union became the biggest donor to the peace process. It was tremendous, their support. So in retrospect, it is sad to see that we were not able to really cement this peace process—show to the populations that peace is better than occupation and terrorism and war, and that the gains, the fruits of peace did not come to the populations in the region.

**James Rodgers:** It really is an extraordinary story. You know, these secret negotiations leading to this milestone moment in the history of the region. What are the greatest challenges that you remember?

**Jan Egeland:** It was, we were five individuals on the Norwegian side. Actually, we didn't even have security for these people and they, I remember they said, it's remarkable how discreet your security services are.

I looked at it the others and said, ‘We have no security, this is Oslo’. And then we understood we needed that because clearly there would be radicals that would have wanted to destroy this process. It was hard to keep it secret. There was one leak, actually coming out of Washington that I informed about there being a back channel.

And since there was one leak, we discontinued informing even Washington DC. When the whole thing was signed, the night between the 18th and 19th of August, just three
weeks before the signing ceremony in Washington, we were maybe 15 to 20 people present, including the two negotiating teams. And, the Israeli foreign minister, Shimon Peres was there, but he didn't even want to be on the official photo.

It was at 2 a.m. in the morning, in the middle of the night, because it was still not presented to the Israeli public, nor to the Knesset that did get it and approved it, just as the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s Congress got it and approved it.

Amnon Aran: That's really fascinating. And I want to go back to this question, really, of looking back a bit from where we are now and wondering if maybe you could share with us some of your reflections on the process now with the benefit of hindsight.

Jan Egeland: Yeah, I mean, of course, there's a lot of people who tell me, why didn't you get this into the agreement? And why was there nothing on the status of Jerusalem or on the final status of Palestine on these illegal settlements or on the refugees? And the answer was, it was impossible to agree on all of the final status issues. What we got was this mutual, official recognition of the two sides.

So the mutual recognition we got, and we got a series of principles, which was a schedule for how to negotiate in detail the final status issues: the borders, the status of a Palestinian state, of the future of Jerusalem as a capital for potentially two peoples, the future of the illegal settlements on Palestinian land, and the future rights of the Palestinian refugees. All of that couldn't be agreed at the time. There wasn't the apparatus to do it, it's also a complex issue.

So, we started with that immediately afterwards. In talks in Taba, we insisted that they negotiate with each other. So there was no mediator, it was direct negotiations: Israel and PLO, with us as hosts and facilitators in secrecy.

It would have been much better if we had had full agreement on everything and boom, a fully fledged Palestinian state was set up and some settlements would have been uprooted, some could stay. Jerusalem would be the capital of the two people, therewould be a right of return of the Palestinian refugees. It would have been better, it was absolutely impossible.

So, the alternative to the Oslo Agreement would have been nothing and perpetual occupation of all of the West Bank and Gaza, which was horrific at the time, and perpetual conflict.

News clips
James Rodgers: Coming on to that perpetual conflict, obviously the diplomatic process is stalled to say the very least, at the moment. Do you think now, with all your experience, do you think this conflict can be solved?

Jan Egeland: It can. All historically, all wars end. The 30 war ended after 30 years. The 100 year war after 100 years.

So, this will end somehow and it will end with political agreements, but what's heartbreaking is that it’s not easier now than it was 30 years ago in 1993. It's more difficult than when we did not succeed, when we failed in the 1990s. Many more illegal settlements, hundreds of thousands of more settlers on Palestinian occupied soil. Even more Palestinian refugees, far away. Third, fourth, fifth generation of refugees. So a more complex issue, more bitterness between the two sides.

The leaderships are not at all of the same quality in terms of able and willing to make peace talks. The Palestinian leadership is split, weak, old. And the Israeli government is full of extremists. And there's no other way of explaining these types who are encouraging violent settlers to beat up Palestinian women and children. This is the leadership now.

So one of the lessons I think is: we could not have a secret Oslo channel now between the two sides because they would be unable and unwilling to talk. Only chance now is a forceful muscular mediation led by the United States.

Amnon Aran: On actually the issue of the United States, and obviously Norway launched the process, the Oslo process, which then the United States took over, and I was wondering if you could share with us, how do you assess their achievements, the United States during the long process that they led?

Jan Egeland: Well, I don't like their absence for the time being they haven't been really very active at all of late. There was a big effort done during the Clinton administration and they were close to agreements, and it's still debated who's to blame for this non breakthrough after the initial breakthrough with the Oslo Agreement.

There has been progress in talks between Israel and other Arab states, but it's not solving the Palestinian issue, which is the burning issue; here’s a whole population under occupation. Here’s insecurity for both Israelis and Palestinians and zero justice for Palestinians who are more and more feeling hopelessness and bitterness.
I'm yearning for seeing much clearer leadership from the United States and basically pushing through. Since the two sides do not have leadership capable or willing to do the job themselves.

James Rodgers: Jan Egeland, thank you very much.

Amnon Aran: Thank you very much indeed.

Jan Egeland: Thank you.

Gemma Ware: Such a fascinating insight into what was really going on from the Norwegian perspective as the kind of intermediary. Amnon, how do you think Norway's role in the process is remembered today?

Amnon Aran: Well, I think the first thing is that really Norway enabled and facilitated one of the most significant breakthroughs in Arab Israeli relations, which was a no mean feat at the time.

And the second thing, of course, is that they really secured the process and they managed it really in the highest, diplomatic standards possible. And I think finally, what I think is remembered today, but also was very clear at the time is that Norway really punched above its weight. It was almost unthinkable that a relatively marginal player in the Arab-Israeli conflict of the size of Norway, would be able to sort of really play such a central role in kickstarting and enabling this Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough.

Gemma Ware: So, in this episode we've heard about how these secret negotiations unfolded, but as you say that handshake on the 13th of September 1993 was really just the start of a process, not an actual peace agreement. So, what happened next?

James Rodgers: Well, that's what we're going to be looking at. We've got two more episodes in the series, we'll be looking at what happened next and what Oslo means today. I mean, there was a long diplomatic process which followed. Some will say ultimately unsuccessful. Others will point to successes which they do believe the process led to. And we're going to be talking to negotiators, insiders from both sides. Yossi Beilin and Hanan Ashrawi. So do join us for the next two episodes.

Gemma Ware: And do subscribe to The Conversation Weekly, so you don't miss out on either of those installments of ‘Inside the Oslo Accords’.

That's it for this episode, part one of Inside the Oslo Accords from The Conversation Weekly.
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