This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast ‘Inside the Oslo Accords Part 3: Israel-Palestine: the legacy of Oslo and the future of a two-state solution,’ published on September 26, 2023.

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Gemma Ware: In the decades since the Oslo peace process fell apart, there have been a number of further attempts to find a peaceful solution to the Israel Palestine conflict. The Saudis tried it with an Arab peace initiative in 2002.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: It was rejected by Israel. US President Donald Trump had a go too in 2020 with his own peace plan.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: It was rejected by the Palestinians. But today, in 2023, the key final status issues required to find a permanent solution to the conflict remain unresolved. And the conditions for compromise have all but evaporated. In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu was re-elected as prime minister in November 2022, going into coalition with the extreme right wing.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: In the Palestinian occupied territories, the leadership is divided. Gaza is controlled by the militant political group Hamas, while the West Bank is controlled by the Palestinian Authority, led by Fatah.

I'm Gemma Ware and you're listening to ‘Inside the Oslo Accords’, a special podcast series from The Conversation Weekly. In this final episode in our series, we're looking at what legacy the Oslo peace process has left the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and what lessons it provides for the future.

I'm joined once again for this final episode of the series by James Rodgers, a reader in international journalism and Amnon Aran, professor of international politics, both at City, University of London in the UK. Welcome back both of you.

James Rodgers: Hello Gemma.
**Amnon Aran:** Hello Gemma.

**Gemma Ware:** We're going to be hearing a bit more in this episode from the conversations you've had with the Palestinian political and civil society leader Hanan Ashrawi and the former Israeli politician Yossi Beilin.

You can hear the first part of those interviews in episode two of this series, which you can find scrolling back in our podcast feed. But before we hear from them about their views on the legacy of the Oslo Accords, let's just explain a few terms that we'll be hearing in this episode. Because underlying the principles set out in the Oslo Accords was the idea of a two state solution to the Israel Palestine conflict. James, can you explain what that meant then and also what it means today?

**James Rodgers:** Well, very simply Gemma, the two state solution is the idea that a state of Palestine would be created alongside a state of Israel, but here, of course, we come already to the issues that made finding a permanent solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict so very difficult.

What should the status of Jerusalem be, given that it contains sites sacred to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity? What about those people who lost land and property when they or their ancestors fled their homes in what was Palestine before the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and where would the borders of these two states meet?

**Gemma Ware:** OK, and a big question for the two state solution is what to do about settlements. These are Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which most of the world considers illegal under international humanitarian law, although Israel disputes this. Amnon, what's the current situation with Israeli settlements?

**Amnon Aran:** Well, the key point here really, Gemma, are the settlements in the West Bank, which Israel occupied in the 1967 war or Six Day War. And those really expanded extremely rapidly. According to Peace Now, a very reliable Israeli NGO that collects data on settlements, the number of settlers when the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 was 116,300. Whereas currently, they comprise just over 465,000, excluding Jerusalem and its environs.

Now, the settlements are often described as an obstacle to peace because to create a contiguous Palestinian state in the West Bank, a significant number of settlements would need to be uprooted or evacuated, which proved immensely difficult in the past, and at present is probably impossible. Now, also, of course, the political power of the settler movement has significantly grown, especially
in the current government of Benjamin Netanyahu, where politicians such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, who argue that Israel should annex the West Bank, actually occupy key ministerial positions.

**Gemma Ware:** Okay, thank you. And so we've got those two definitions, which I think are really important to understand where we're going with this episode. But now we're going to turn to the legacy of the Oslo process.

**Amnon Aran:** Yes and when I spoke to Dr. Yossi Beilin, who was the Israeli deputy foreign minister when the Oslo Accords were signed, and a key negotiator, I asked him whether he agrees that Oslo was ultimately a failure or whether there were any successes that came out of the process too. He offered some very interesting insights.

**Yossi Beilin:** It was an earthquake which changed everything. It was conducive to peace with Jordan. Without Oslo, there would have been no peace with Jordan. It caused, for Israel, a huge growth in our economy. Policy wise, we doubled the number of embassies in Israel, after Oslo. So the legitimacy of Israel, the fact that the international companies which boycotted Israel queued to build their arms in Israel. Everything changed as a result of it.

But if you ask me, as we see it today, 2023, it is a failure because it did not achieve its main goal. And if I may say so, my main goal. You talk to the Palestinians, they say, OK, on the one hand, we never had our own institutions. It is for the first time, even if they are not exactly Jeffersonian or whatever, but still, this is something that we did not have, but it's not enough. It's not enough, and if I have to vote whether it was a failure or a success, I will vote for a failure.

**James Rodgers:** Are there any lessons that future negotiators can perhaps learn from your experience from the process?

**Yossi Beilin:** Endless. Endless. You learn a lot from such a process. I wrote an article about trust in negotiations, and it is used to be perceived as if a major component of negotiations, that if you don't have trust, you cannot negotiate and vice versa. And I'm less sure about it than I was in the past.

We developed a very high level of trust between the two delegations, the two small delegations in Norway. When they came to us with the demand to freeze the settlements, and we came to Rabin and said, “this is a very obvious demand of the Palestinians.” He asked us to try to convince them not to mention it as part of the agreement. Because he said, “my government took a decision in 92,
immediately after we came to power. Decision number 360, to freeze the settlements.” If now it appears in the agreement between us, in the Oslo agreement, it will be as if I succumb to the Palestinian demand to freeze it and politically, it will be for me very difficult to justify it. Please tell them that this is my view and my request. And because of the trust between us and their belief that Rabin is a man of his word, they gave up on this important clause.

Now, two years later, Netanyahu came to power and began to build the territories. And when there was criticism against him, he said, “What am I breaching?” And we said “the Oslo Agreement, the spirit of Oslo.” Because the substitute for that clause was that the parties will not take decisions which will have an impact on the permanent agreement. And the meaning was that if you build settlements, you have an impact on the permanent agreement, but it was not written as that. So he said, “show me, where is it written that I cannot build settlements?” And since it was not written, he continued and built settlements until today.

For example, if you ask me, what am I learning? One of the things that I learned is that trust is not a sine qua non for success. Sometimes, even if you trust the negotiators on the other side, you must insist on things because you should understand that they will not be there forever. And so you may be just mistaken by the relations that you develop with the other side around the table.

**Amnon Aran:** And really speaking to maybe more contemporary negotiators and negotiations, I was wondering if you could share with us your opinion about whether this sort of fundamental premise of Oslo, namely, some sort of two state solution. In your opinion, is the two state solution still viable? Or have we missed that train?

**Yossi Beilin:** What I need is a border. In the past, during the Oslo process, there were about 90,000 settlers in the West Bank, and maybe 20,000 would have found themselves on the east side of the future border. Since I don't know the border, I cannot give you the number, but this was the dimensions.

Today, you have almost half a million settlers on the West Bank. So the issue of evacuating all the settlements on the eastern side of the border is becoming the biggest hurdle on the way for peace. It is more difficult than Jerusalem and refugees and other things because all these issues were solved in formal and informal negotiations since Oslo.

So today, if somebody says, “I'm still for the two state solution”, I say, “thank you very much. But what does it mean? What does it mean? You really believe
that an Israeli prime minister will take it upon himself or herself to evacuate so many people?” And since I believe in the need for a border in order to assure that Israel is Jewish and democratic and doesn't fulfill its own rights by hurting the rights of the Palestinians. I think that we should have a structure of a confederation, which a loose confederation, without a joint parliament or leadership or whatever. But a very close cooperation, which will allow all those settlers who would like to remain in the Palestinian state, to do that as permanent residents of Palestine and the citizens of Israel. And that the same number of Palestinians who wish so, and who are Palestinian citizens would be allowed to Israel under the same legal status.

If you save the Israeli future leadership, the headache of an evacuation, and if they are ready for peace and for the two state solution, like the leaders today of the more liberal camp in Israel, if it is Lapid, if it is Gantz. I believe that in such a situation, the two state solution can be established. But just to say I'm still for the two state solution and go to sleep, it will not happen. It will not happen. It became now much more difficult, but not impossible. And if we decide that because of whatever reason we don't do this, Israel will have to do it unilaterally. Like Sharon did in Gaza, which is a very problematic solution, very problematic. You do something without the consent on the other side, the price might be very high.

James Rodgers: Yossi Beilin, thank you very much for some fascinating insights into history and indeed a possible vision of the future. Thank you.

Yossi Beilin: Thank you.

Gemma Ware: So Yossi Beilin mentions there the Israeli move by Ariel Sharon's government in 2005 to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza. Amnon, can you explain why this was so significant and what the reaction was to that decision?

Amnon Aran: Yes, it was very significant because it was the first time that Israel withdrew from a territory it occupied in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, evacuating Jewish settlers lock, stock and barrel, without receiving from the Arab side anything in return. Now, it was really perceived by some Palestinians as a major achievement of the strategy Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement, claims as the resistance, which Hamas presented as an alternative to the failure of the PLO to make gains through its negotiations with Israel during Oslo. On the Israeli side, detractors of the withdrawal presented it as an example for why never again to give land to the Palestinians as several clashes between Israel and Hamas have erupted since.
Gemma Ware: And James, I know you were actually there in Gaza at that point. Tell us what it was like.

James Rodgers: Yes, I was. I was reporting from Gaza that day in early February 2004 when Ariel Sharon announced that in the future there would, as he put it, be no Jews in Gaza. It was a memorable day, not least because it was a major Islamic festival, Eid al Adha, which of course is widely observed in Gaza.

The immediate Palestinian response in Gaza that day was one of surprise and of course doubt. Ariel Sharon was after all one of the main proponents of the settlement building program after Israel first occupied the Gaza Strip in 1967. And in a sense it was actually controversial because it was unilateral. This was something that was simply announced rather than agreed as part of the negotiation process. And the settlers who then lived in Gaza, whom I was in contact with and whom I was occasionally able to visit for my reporting, seemed shocked and devastated.

Gemma Ware: OK, so it really shows how important that idea of negotiated peace and negotiated settlements are. One of the other things we heard there from Yossi Beilin, was this idea for a proposed loose confederation, as a way forward from where we are now. How widespread a view is that currently in Israel?

James Rodgers: I mean, as Yossi Beilin himself pointed out, as I suggested, when we were talking about the Israeli withdrawal of settlements from Gaza, it would depend on some kind of agreement on the future of the settlements built on the West Bank, as we've been saying throughout the episode, really. The majority of the people who've gone to live there have done so because they consider it part of the land of Israel. So it's quite hard to see their agreeing to live in a Palestinian state. And the other point is such a solution would require a lengthy negotiation process, and at the moment there's an absence of willing negotiators on both sides and an absence of an international sponsor.

Gemma Ware: We're going to hear again, now from Hanan Ashrawi, who was a Palestinian negotiator back in the 1990s. She's got quite a different view of the legacy of the Oslo talks.

James Rodgers: Yes, that’s right. Hanan Ashrawi, as you say, a major figure in Palestinian political history over the last three decades. And as we heard in the last episode, someone who had doubts about the process from the outset. But as we will hear now, also someone who feels substantive, serious changes may be coming to the region. But first, we asked her that same question we put to Yossi
Beilin, whether she agrees with the statement that the Oslo process is a failure, or were there also any successes that she'd like to highlight?

Hanan Ashrawi: The process itself is a mechanism, is a tool. The substance and the signed agreements, this is what you look at. And I think the substance and the signed agreements are extremely detrimental to peace. So, you cannot call it a peace process. But the Americans, particularly Dennis Ross and his ilk, all they wanted was a process. And they said so long as there's a process and people were talking to each other, God's in his heaven, all's well with the world. Which is not the case, because the talks led nowhere. There was no goodwill. There was a lot of ill will. There was no seriousness of intent. So the process itself, in a sense, was used and abused by Israel and by the Americans to, not just to maintain the status quo, but to maintain Israel's power and its impunity.

And of course it's reward. It was rewarded enormously. It gained recognition from other countries. It gained diplomatic relations. It gained economic agreements. So it opened a door for Israel as they claimed we're involved in the peace process, don't bother us, don't ask us something else. I think one thing that the PLO leadership would always resort to as a major accomplishment or achievement of the signed agreements was the return of the PLO leadership from exile. And they saw this perhaps as an indicator of a further right of return or an implementation of the right of return. And they didn't see that Israel was very selective in who returned, even though there were about 6 million in exile or more. Israel saw this as a selected return at its mercy in order to implement their agreements.

So they wanted, for example, a strong police force. Why? Because they wanted them to protect the settlers and the army. They wanted them to control any type of Palestinian resistance. So ... ven that thing, which the PLO saw as a very positive development, Israel used and turned it into a negative in practice. Which led to further underlining the Palestinian leadership in that people were accusing them of being a surrogate occupation by proxy and so on, protecting Israel's security while unable to protect Palestinian security. So even those things that the PLO thought they did well, somehow were turned against them. Because of the nature of the agreement and because of the imbalance in power and control.

Amnon Aran: I was wondering, if you thought 30 years back, the so-called two state solution is still viable. And if it isn't, what paths ahead would you, would you see, what trajectories have you identified?
Hanan Ashrawi: Yeah. If you look at reality on the ground, it would take a very very large grain of salt to believe that the two state solution is viable. Because Israel has annexed over 60% of the land. In between, it is building. It is planting settlements and outposts and so on, to totally segment the West Bank. To control the water, to control the resources and the freedom of movement and so on, to transform Palestinian reality whether the cities, towns, villages or camps into secondary realities through an infrastructure that serves only the settlers, on Palestinian land, the road system and so on, and to link up the settlements to Israel through a statistically apartheid system and apartheid roads. And it's very clear that Israel is destroying or has destroyed the two state solution. So when the Europeans tell you we are for the two state solution, all you need to do is go back to negotiations, ven a skeptical laugh isn't enough to describe how people react.

Seriously? You sat back and you allowed Israel to destroy the two state solution, to destroy the Palestinian state, to destroy all aspects of statehood. And then you say, we are for it. So why did you allow Israel to do this? Why didn't you use international law? Why didn't you use your power? So in a sense, the two state solution is a very convenient, and may I say, cheap excuse to do nothing. And to appease the political conscience of people who allowed it to be destroyed by saying we are still for it, pat ourselves on the back, on the shoulder and say we've done it. We're for it. They even, and before they used to help the authority to build institutions of state. Now they've reduced it to a minimum. The Arabs are not helping. The PA is about to collapse financially. Israel is stealing the Palestinian customs money, which is a major source of income. And nobody's saying anything.

Really, that is a sort of a dynamic that is destroying Palestinian reality underground in every possible way, including lives. And, people talk about the two state solution. It's not viable, unless miraculously somehow they develop the insight, the backbone, the ability to hold Israel to account, not just to stop settlements, but to begin the dismantlement of settlements that are taking all this land and so on. And I don't see that happening because they're very busy rewarding Israel rather than holding it to account or using sanctions against it.

James Rodgers: Without that miracle as you describe it, Dr. Ashrawi, what alternatives are there then, to a two state solution?

Hanan Ashrawi: I think right now we are seeing an end of an era. We are seeing the end of an era, in which Israel presents itself to the world as the only democracy in the region or as having shared values with the West or the
Judeo-Christian tradition or as in many racist ways they talk about the villa and the jungle and so on.

That Israel now, through public opinion, and through, of course, communications and social media and so on, is beginning to expose itself for what it is. As a fundamentalist, Zionist enterprise that is really based on a settler colonial agenda, a displacement replacement paradigm, as Ilan Pappé says, to replace, displace all Palestinians, whether physically or culturally or geographically and so on, and replace them with another people. And they are appropriating our culture. Our history. Look at our archeological sites and so on, in order to create an agenda that they were here, not us. They want to be the indigenous people and to remove us as indigenous people.

Public opinion is moving. There is solidarity with Palestine among people of conscience and knowledge. This is one thing.

And in Palestine, there's a new dynamic as well. The whole rationale and logic and discourse of negotiated settlement and all you need to do is be nice and play the American-European game and you’ll be OK. This has gone. Nobody believes in that anymore. And the young people are talking about our rights, our freedom, and ending the occupation, ending the apartheid system itself, the right of return for Palestinians. But we have to reinvent our own system, away from this dependency and manipulation bias. And it has to be done using and relying on the insights and the courage of the younger generation, who knows nothing but the oppression, is the lack of any kind of freedoms and rights.

And I think it's very important that our leadership. I don't want to say geriatric, I always said so, but I am now geriatric myself. However, I think, you know, they should learn that change is an imperative and it is coming. And you might as well leave gracefully through a system of democratic transfer of power and authority. And of course, gradually. I think the world will begin to understand that there can be no peace, no stability, no prosperity within the whole region unless the Palestinian question is resolved justly, not resolved by defeating the Palestinians who refuse to be defeated.

And Israel is, in a way, imploding from within, frankly, if you look at what's happening. Because you cannot keep the injustice and lawlessness and criminality and inhumanity of the occupation, separate from an internal political system. Gradually, the chickens are coming home to roost, because settlers who are now in control. It's the whole settler system and the violence and the dehumanization and the total disregard for human rights, that are taking over
and they are being practiced within Israel. And this is what is awakening Israeli public opinion.

So I'm saying there's a new dynamic emerging and we are at the beginning of a new transition. We know that there are new systems of power and relations, whether with China or with others emerging here, which would shift the alliances and the alignment. So, you cannot talk about a one state solution somehow because Palestinians don't want to be Israelis, you know, and we don't want to see greater Israel being superimposed on all of historical Palestine. No, we don't want that. And we don't want to be third level human beings in this situation or we have no rights whatsoever, because that's the only so called de facto one state solution available, which is the apartheid system that Israel has created. So what we need to do is to ensure that we have full rights, recognition of our rights and humanity, and then whatever political system emerges, that's about it.

**James Rodgers:** Hanan Ashrawi, thank you very much for talking to us.

**Hanan Ashrawi:** You’re most welcome. It's my pleasure. Thank you.

**Gemma Ware:** Hanan Ashrawi mentions there, the one state solution. Now this is an idea that's gained some traction in recent years. Amnon, can you tell us a bit more about what a one state solution might actually entail?

**Amnon Aran:** Absolutely. The one state solution is actually a very contested idea. I don't think there's really an agreement on what it means. For some, it would entail the principle of one vote for every man and woman in the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. But at the other side of the spectrum, we find the Israeli right’s conception of creating one state by simply annexing the West Bank and having unequal rights for Israelis and Palestinians.

Now, this idea, of course, is opposed by Palestinians and by Israel's center left and would probably be strongly opposed by the international community. And finally, Hamas, the Islamic resistant movement, has expressed its ambition to establish, in the fullness of time, an Islamic state on the whole area of Israel-Palestine. And to date, really, no group has yet to gain enough support and power to secure their agenda.

**Gemma Ware:** OK, so it means a lot of different things to different people. James, Hanan Ashrawi argues that there's a new dynamic, a new paradigm being created within Israel. Is that how you see it? And if so, what does it mean for this conflict, 30 years on from the Oslo Accords being signed?
James Rodgers: I mean, it's certainly true that there's younger generations of Palestinians who do not remember the Oslo era. Or either of the two intifadas, those uprisings against Israeli military occupation, that characterize an earlier era of the conflict. And on the Israeli side, this year has been notable for protests against plans the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has for legal reforms, including for the role of the Supreme Court and move his opponents see as an attack on democracy.

Gemma Ware: Where do we go from here? What are we meant to take away? And are there any meaningful attempts to currently find a permanent solution to the conflict?

Amnon Aran: Well, I'm afraid, Gemma, that at the moment there aren't any formidable attempts that we can see, like the ones that we observed in the 1990s. Instead, Israel and the Palestinians are really entering into a de facto one state reality, but without the political blueprint for how to govern it. And this leaves really major questions for the future. What does this one state reality mean for Israeli democracy and for Israel's identity as a Jewish state? What is the fate of millions of Palestinians living in the West Bank, under a deepening and increasingly brutal occupation and what would be their response? And of course, what position will the international community take towards a conflict, it was once so heavily engaged in, but now seems to gradually distance itself from?

James Rodgers: Yeah, where do we go from here? I mean, there are changes underway in both Israel and the Palestinian territories, but nothing that makes me feel that in the near future, there'll be any kind of serious attempt to find a permanent solution. And I'd like to suggest two main reasons why.

Firstly, as we've been hearing throughout this series, the Oslo process started because there was a degree of willingness on both sides, and because bigger international events, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1991 Gulf War, as well as the situation in the region, had in a sense created conditions where the process might start. That's not true now.

Secondly, and this is my observation based upon my time reporting from the region, diplomacy has not really found a way to address the religious elements of the conflict, where land is seen not just as a commodity, but also as having some kind of sacred significance.

Gemma Ware: OK, James, Amnon, thanks to both of you for guiding us through the series over the past few episodes. It's certainly given me new
perspectives, if not much hope of a peaceful resolution in the near future. So, thank you for sharing your insights with us.

James Rodgers: Thank you, Gemma.

Amnon Aran: Thank you very much, Gemma, and to the whole Conversation team.

Gemma Ware: That's it for this final episode of ‘Inside the Oslo Accords’ from The Conversation Weekly.

It was produced by Mend Mariwany, with assistance from our producer, Katie Flood. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor. Alice Mason runs our social media, and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts.

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