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Oslo, Some Reflections

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A week is too long in politics, goes the conventional wisdom. So 18 years should be a millennium, especially in the Middle East. The historic handshake in the White House Lawns would have faded from the memory of most peaceniks. Nudged by President Bill Clinton when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat shook hands, they did make history. While no one underestimated the magnitude of the problem, there were genuine hopes for reconciliation; among the Israelis, Palestinians and the wider international community. The mutual recognition that Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization bestowed upon each other symbolized their desire to seek political compromise through negotiations.

Both sides avoided contentious issues to reach an agreement and start the process; Israel was not ready to explicitly speak of 'withdrawal' and Palestinians did not want to push statehood as the final outcome. The five-year interim period was considered sufficient to instil mutual trust and confidence to resolve complex, contentious and emotive issues such as borders, refugees and above all the Jerusalem question.

The Declaration of Principle, an outcome of innovative thinking on conflict resolution, however did not follow the script. Extremists on both sides did not want the agreement to succeed. Where the political space was available, the opposition used public protests and demonstrations; where it was not available, they resorted to violence and terror. In the end, more Israeli civilians were killed after Oslo than before and Palestinians suffered more after the handshake than before.

Still so long as the principal players were in control, both sides did push the process forward. Terror and wanton killing of civilians did not lead either side to abandon its determination. On

the Israeli side, a rightwing extremist assassinated Prime Minister Rabin over the peace process. Likewise, the Islamic militant group Hamas threatened and undermined every Palestinian institution headed by Arafat: Fatah, the PLO and eventually the Palestinian Authority. Yet the juggernaut did not stop.

By late 1995 Israel pulled out of most Palestinian centres of population and the first Palestinian elections were held in January 1996. Arafat became the first democratically elected leader in the Arab world. Both sides were committed to addressing the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Then things went horribly wrong. The spread of terrorism and violence affected and undermined the individual safety and security of Israelis and Palestinians alike. Soon principals of the Oslo process fell victim to extremism and were marginalized in their respective communities. In both societies, forces opposed to compromise and co-existence took to the centre stage. The compromise of the Oslo format became a liability. Rather than evolving the necessary trust and confidence, the five-year interim period became an era of a long list of unfulfilled promises and belied expectations. Peace became elusive to the Israelis and statehood proved to be a mirage for the Palestinians. Before long both began to view the other not as a partner in peace but as a hostile enemy. The pre-1993 rhetoric reclaimed the centre-stage.

Violence and terrorism pushed Israel to the right and unfulfilled statehood drove the Palestinians to seek solace in Hamas. Rather than pushing for peace, the failed process was capitalized upon by the opponents of Oslo. Half-hearted and short-sighted moves in Camp David in the summer of 2000 proved to be a disaster and resulted in the resurgence of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Before long, Israel re-occupied Palestinian territories it had vacated in 1995. Even the unilateral pullout organized by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005 did not materially affect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Nearly two decades after the Madrid Conference both sides are nowhere near an agreement. Oslo soon faded in public memory and even the most hardcore peacenik would not remember the short but hopeful times. Violence, extremism and short-sighted leadership have buried Oslo. Yet, whatever the next round is called, Oslo still remains the only option for the Israelis and Palestinians alike; one of hope, reconciliation and mutual respect and dignity. Distant dream? Yes, but no mirage.

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