

Willful Blindness and the Mistake of Underestimation: The Oslo Gamble

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Abstract

During the last half-century, several reputable scholars and defense professionals have devoted careful attention to the world view and aspirations of the Palestinian Arabs. Working independently, these researchers arrived at two basic findings. They described the strategic goals of the Palestine Liberation Organization and exposed the widespread denial of their importance by the political class of Israeli society, the media, and the influencers of mainstream opinion. This denial persists, and some of these authors used terms such as “willful blindness” or “willful ignorance” to describe this contradiction. The PLO program has never been a secret. Nonetheless, the great problem that must be explained is the pervasiveness of “willful blindness,” particularly the intentional refusal to understand Israel’s enemies, their goals and methods, as well as the danger they represent. It is precisely these views which the Rabin government chose to ignore when they entered into the Oslo Accords. This ignorance by choice undermines the country’s strength and prevents it from achieving peace.

Beyond the failure of the Oslo process to bring peace, there is a broader cultural dimension: how the Israelis view themselves and their place in the world and how official Israel understands its relationship with the Palestinian Arabs. During the 1960s, and for decades afterwards, the question of the Palestinian Arabs hardly influenced Israel’s national awareness. In our time, however, we must reassess this issue. It has become part of contemporary history, particularly of the twentieth century. In this essay, we shall consider this subject.

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The measure of prudence and resolution is to know a friend from an enemy; the height of stupidity and weakness is not to know an enemy from a friend Magnanimity is not to befriend the enemy but to spare them, and to remain on your guard against them.

(Ibn Hazm, Andalusian poet and historian of the Eleventh Century, quoted in Lewis, 2000: 403. The authors wish to thank the late Bernard Lewis for this reference).

[...] I cannot close my eyes in the face of such great dangers, especially since they are in plain sight, and I think that it is forbidden for the State to gamble, and it is forbidden to live with illusions (Justice Moshe Landau, 2000).

Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see [...] (John Lennon, 1967).

Introduction: Palestinian Rejectionism – The Basic Obstacle to Peace

Roughly fifty-five years ago, in May 1964, the Palestinian Liberation Organization was founded in Jerusalem. Its beginnings were modest, and in 1968 Fatah took it over. Not long afterward, a series of terrorist attacks, including the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in September 1972, shocked the world and put the PLO “on the map.” Some of the basic points which appeared in their credo and charter, the *Palestinian Covenant*, were:

The Jews are not a nation and not fit to achieve self-determination and a state (Article 20);

Only the Palestinian Arabs possess the right of self-determination in Palestine, and the entire country belongs to them (articles 3 and 21);

Any solution that does not involve the total liberation of the country is rejected. This aim cannot be achieved politically; it can only be accomplished militarily (Articles 9 and 21);

Warfare against Israel is legal, whereas Israel’s self-defense is illegal (Article 18). (Harkabi, 1974: 50).

From the founding of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964, the destruction of the State of Israel and the pursuit of the “armed struggle” has been its main goal. In fact, Ahmad al-Shukeiri [Shuqayrī], the first Chairman of the PLO (1964-1967) and the man who drafted the Palestinian Covenant, proclaimed in his book, *Liberation-not Negotiation*, that Palestine should be conquered only as a result of armed struggle and not as a result of compromise. Although the Palestinians and their well-meaning sympathizers have played it down, this fundamental policy has remained frozen in time. Despite having adopted a façade which has lent them a veneer of respectability, terror and violence have constantly remained a part of their program. Proof of this may be found in the well-publicized program of the PA to subsidize terrorists who have committed violent crimes against civilians. No Jewish (and Israeli) civilians can be innocent or entitled to mercy.

They are legitimate targets. The basic facts have been known, but over the years the reality of terror and political lies has been “defined down,” to use the expression of Patrick Daniel Moynihan. From a wider perspective, the problem has emerged that some countries have gradually come to recognize the use of terror as legitimate and even fashionable. A type of illusion has developed that the Palestinian Arabs could be bought off and that, if directed only against Jews and Israelis, a certain measure of violence could be condoned.

The French *moraliste* and observer of human behavior, François de la Rochefoucauld (1613-1680) wrote that, “Neither the *sun* nor *death* can be *looked* at with a steady eye.” Our problem is the dichotomy of the true Palestinian strategic goal of destroying Israel and the refusal of the Israeli political class to recognize this fact and the firm conviction with which the Palestinians support it, – even now. Denial of this “inconvenient information” has been costly for Israel, and thus it is necessary to revisit the subject. Accordingly, we must look with a steady eye at the Palestinian strategic goal and the willful blindness of the Israeli political class.

Yehoshafat Harkabi, the Chief of Israel’s Military Intelligence from 1955 to 1959, published an annotated edition of the Palestinian Covenant in English translation (Harkabi, 1979). There, he described the one-sidedness of the Palestinian outlook:

The Covenant, from beginning to end, in every one of its articles, is characterized by one-sidedness; the Palestinians arrogate rights that they are not prepared to grant to their rivals. There is no ray of light in Zionism; it is totally depraved. History is distorted—Zionism is represented as if it were from the start a conquering movement, while in fact its achievements were brought about by hard labor and its lands bought with money, and a case can be made that the Arabs by their attacks on Israel forced it into conquests. As against the vices of Zionism, Palestinians bathe in self-righteousness, conferring on themselves spiritual virtues and moral values. The Covenant is a document of arrogance, without a sign of the humility that should be the lot of the human condition; it is completely expressed in absolute terms, without traces of any humility (Harkabi, 1979: 13).

Despite having adopted various political initiatives over the intervening years, the PLO remains firmly committed to the 1964/1968 idea of the liberation of all of Palestine. On June 9, 1974, the Palestinian National Council of the PLO, which met in Cairo, adopted the “Ten Points Manifesto,” also known as the “Phases Plan.” It maintained that, while pursuing the “armed struggle” as the main method of liberating Palestine, it was necessary and acceptable to use other means, including diplomacy and guile, in order to gain a territorial foothold in Palestine, forming a national authority which could be expanded. During the early seventies, the North Vietnamese coached the PLO to devote careful attention to the intermediate stages of implementation. That is, to work for their goals in phases which would disguise their real purpose, permit strategic deception, and give the appearance of moderation (Abu Iyad and Rouleau, 1978: 65-67).

General Vo Nguyen Giap exhorted Arafat:

Fight by any method which can achieve victory. [...] If regular war can do it, use it. If you cannot win by classical methods, don't use them. Any method which achieves victory is a good one. We fight with military and political means with international backing (Abu Iyad and Rouleau, 1978: 65-67).

With these words, General Giap described the essence of a *People's War* (Abu Iyad and Rouleau, 1978: 65-67). Article 8 of the Ten Points Manifesto embodied the approach that the North Vietnamese had recommended:

Once it is established, the Palestinian national authority will strive to achieve a union of the opposing countries, with the aim of completing the liberation of all Palestinian territory, and as a step along the road to comprehensive Arab unity (Harkabi, 1979: 148).

Ever since adopting the Ten Points Manifesto, this strategy has served as the PLO's guiding principle (Karsh, 2014). Additional intermediate steps have included the declaration of a Palestinian State on November 15, 1988 (*Congressional Quarterly*, 2000: 468), followed

by the Oslo Accords of September 13, 1993 (*Congressional Quarterly*, 2000: 483) and September 28, 1995 (*Congressional Quarterly*, 2000: 489).

Hannah Arendt wrote that one of the main characteristics of totalitarian regimes is their absolute candor in proclaiming their real goals (Arendt, 1958: 378). There is no doubt that the PLO, the Palestinian Authority (and Iran), share several of these distinctly totalitarian characteristics. The distinguished twentieth century Sovietologist, Robert C. Tucker, described the form of movement to which the Palestinian Liberation Organization belongs. It is a “*revolutionary mass-movement regime under single-party auspices*” (Tucker, 1972: 7). This type of regime may be communist, fascist, nationalist, or religious:

In the case of the nationalist movement-regimes, especially in more recent times, the original revolutionary struggle is typically directed against a foreign colonial regime or regime of foreign dependency. With communist and fascist regimes, the typical – though not necessarily or invariable – pattern is one of revolutionary struggle against an indigenous order that is treated as though it were foreign (Tucker, 1972: 8).

Beyond the failure of the Oslo process to bring peace, there is a broader cultural dimension: how the Israelis view themselves and their place in the world and how official Israel understands its relationship with the Palestinian Arabs. During the 1960s, and for decades following, the question of the Palestinian Arabs hardly influenced Israel’s national awareness. In our time, however, we must reassess this issue. It has become part of contemporary history, particularly of the twentieth century. In this essay, we shall consider this subject.

Willful Blindness and Israel’s Failure to Understand its own Situation

Over the last half-century, several reputable scholars and defense professionals have devoted careful attention to the status and plans of the Palestinian Arabs. The publications of these researchers, when taken together, form a coherent school of thought, – or to use

the Hebrew term of Greek origin, an *escola*. Its leading exponents have been: the late Yehoshafat Harkabi, Yossi Kuperwasser, who, decades later, served as the Head of the Research Division of IDF Military Intelligence, Moshe Yaalon, former Chief-of-Staff and Minister of Defense, and Yigal Carmon, one-time Colonel and head of the Israel Military Intelligence Service under Yitzak Rabin. Carmon is the President and Cofounder of the Middle East Media Research Institute, MEMRI.

Working independently, these researchers arrived at two major findings. They identified the strategic goals of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and exposed the widespread denial of their importance by the political class of Israeli society, the media, and the influencers of mainstream opinion. This denial persists, and some of these authors used terms such as “willful blindness,” or “willful ignorance” to describe this outlook. The PLO program has never been a secret. Nonetheless, the great problem which must be explained is the pervasiveness of “willful blindness,” particularly the intentional refusal to understand Israel’s enemies, their goals and methods, as well as the danger they represent. This ignorance by choice undermines the country’s strength and prevents it from achieving peace. As we shall see below, it results in what Harkabi described as “Israel’s failure to understand its own situation.” It is precisely these views which the Rabin government chose to ignore when they entered into the Oslo Accords.

Half a century ago, in May 1970, Yehoshafat Harkabi, the Chief of Israel’s Military Intelligence (1955 to 1959), and later a Senior Lecturer on International Relations and Middle East Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote a pioneering study on Arab attitudes toward Israel, particularly the unappreciated problem of Arab anti-Semitism (Harkabi, 1972). He also published an annotated translation of the *Palestinian Covenant* where he describes the one-sided nature of Palestinian ideology and its refusal to accept the possibility of any virtue on the part of Israel (Harkabi, 1979). Although later in life he advocated the establishment of an independent Palestinian state (Harkabi, 1989), he also described a corresponding blind spot in the world view of the Israeli élite. Referring, for example, to Moshe Dayan’s eulogy of Roei Rothberg (Dayan, 1956), Harkabi asserted that:

Official Israel has been late in explaining to the people that the conflict may be protracted, in order to prepare them for it. The reason was not negligence; it seems

to have been more a lack of knowledge and understanding. It was my impression that a certain ignorance of the basic issue of the conflict and of the Arab position prevails even among the government élite. I think that familiarity with the 1968 Palestinian National Covenant is essential in analyzing the conflict. I wonder how many of our government ministers are acquainted with its principles, and how long they have known about it (Harkabi, 1970). [See particularly Moshe Dayan's eloquent eulogy of Roi Rotberg, the security officer of Kibbutz Nahal Oz, which was located on the armistice line between the Israel and Gaza. At the end of April 1956, Arab marauders crossed over, murdered him, then kidnapped and mutilated his body (Dayan, 1956).]

Harkabi consistently emphasized that there was a gap between the stated Arab positions which professed a quest for justice and their plan to destroy the Jewish state. As paraphrased by Yossi Kuperwasser, they claimed a superior status that placed them above the demands of universal morality. For them, terror and the targeting of innocent civilians were legitimate. Harkabi first wrote in 1969 that:

[...] The Arabs are unwilling to admit that their demand that Israel disappear borders on the absurd. No state can be expected to commit suicide. The tragedy of the Arab case is that their grievance cannot be redressed to their satisfaction without perpetrating an even greater evil. Human destiny decrees that many misfortunes cannot be rectified. The Arabs ruminating endlessly on past events and on the vices of Zionism will get them nowhere. Israel's problem is that with the best will in the world it cannot meet the Arabs' demand, because it is *unlimited* and cannot be satisfied so long as Israel exists. Their vision is not peace *with* Israel but peace *without* Israel (Harkabi, 1969).

Describing the ideology of the Arabs, Harkabi identified what he termed a *representation gap* between the Palestinian claim to moral superiority on the one hand and their "malicious intentions," on the other. This gap is similar to another type of cognition gap as for example Karl Dietrich Bracher's definition of the "problem of underestimation."

Bracher, an outstanding German historian, explained that Hitler's contemporaries could not grasp that his ideological program could ever find concrete expression in a violent political program of action. Describing Hitler's rise to power, he pointed out that the danger of his policies was that they were generally unappreciated and introduced the term, "the problem of underestimation." That is, "Many of Hitler's politically influential contemporaries were unable to believe that his ideological assertions were actually the basis of his policy" (Bracher, 1970). More recently, historian Jeffrey Herf explained that the "problem of underestimation and the causal impact of totalitarian ideology" also applies to the ideology of radical Islam (Herf, 2009). He states that:

"it is still difficult to convince the American political and intellectual establishment to take the ideology of radical Islam with the seriousness it deserves," and "ideas, even bad ideas, can be powerful indeed (Herf, 2009)."

Harkabi explained that Palestinian hostility toward "the Zionist entity" calls for politicide as its goal:

Why are we not prepared to withdraw in the absence of a settlement which will assure our security? Why do we have some territorial claims? Because we know that the Arabs have malicious intentions toward us which may force them to exploit our withdrawal. But since we do not present the malicious nature of the Arab position, a *representation gap* [authors' emphasis] arises between our explanations and their behavior. An information policy which does not conform to behavior is not convincing and is doomed from the outset (Harkabi, 1970).

Harkabi recommended that Israel draw the world's attention to this gap, and explained that there was an additional dimension which added to its complexity: Israel's governmental élite lacked the necessary knowledge to face this problem. He wrote that it was his impression that a certain ignorance of the basic issues of the conflict and of the Arab position prevailed even among the government élite (Harkabi, 1970). Offering an example, he told of the Foreign Ministry's refusal to publish and distribute copies of the Palestinian National Covenant:

The refusal of the Israeli Foreign Office in 1970 to use and distribute the 1968 Palestinian National Covenant, which I annotated, epitomizes the whole approach. I was very bluntly told that its publication in English, in order to bring the PLO position to the attention of public opinion, would be against Israel's interests. Afterwards this policy changed, culminating in January 1976 in the distribution of the Covenant with my annotations as a UN document to all UN members on the initiative of the Israeli representative. [Note that this belated decision followed the 1975 General Assembly Resolution 3379 of 10 November 1975 that "Zionism equals Racism."] The previous lack of understanding of how this document [*The Palestinian Covenant*] could be of great use for the Israeli case has all these years intrigued and deeply worried me, as a symptom of *Israel's failure to understand its own situation* [authors' italics] (Harkabi, 1977: 185).

In a more recent newspaper interview, Yigal Carmon is more specific. His words are blunt:

Question: Today Carmon no longer believes that the idea of two states is feasible. In his view no solution of any kind for the Israel-Palestinian conflict can be envisaged in the foreseeable future. Perhaps in a number of generations when the Arabs will finally give up on [what they call] the 'Right of Return,' will there be a chance for regional change. And do you still identify with the Left?

Answer: Where does the idea come from that a man of the Left has to be blind? In the political sphere the Left in its blindness abandoned the stage to the Likud by its own choice. I take the view that one must look at reality and watch what is going on [...]. The mistake of the Leftists is that they decide what the Palestinians want. They say, "Let's give them 100 percent of the land and 100 percent equality," but they do not give the Palestinians what they really demand. I usually tell my friends on the Left: If peace does not come, it is not because of the settlers' guilt. There is no peace because of you (*Makor Rishon – Diokan*, July 6, 2018: 11).

It is remarkable that, despite his pride in belonging to the Left, Carmon (and his colleagues) remain squarely in the mainstream consensus of Israeli politics. In spirit,

they continue to be members of the Labor Party, which in his words had “abandoned the stage.”

In this spirit, one of the authors, Joel Fishman, can remember attending a lecture sponsored by MEMRI, the Middle East Media Research Institute, where Professor Yehoshua (Shuka) Porat was present. He was enraged and said that anybody with two eyes who could read the (Arabic) newspapers would know exactly what the true intentions of the Palestinians were. His message was clear: that if the government did not understand its own situation, it was negligent. Similarly, Moshe Yaalon, former Chief of Staff of the IDF and Minister of Defense, also dealt with the problem of willful blindness. Yaalon served as the head of military intelligence under Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Benjamin Netanyahu and as Chief of the General Staff under Ariel Sharon. A man of action who possessed a keen analytical ability, he published his conclusions in a book with the title, *The Longer Shorter Way* (Yaalon, 2008). Beyond his concrete observations with regard to the policies (and inaction) of Rabin and Sharon, he also focused on the problem of willful blindness. Yaalon took the discussion further by observing that defeatism and corruption usually accompany ignorance by choice. “The leadership did not want to deal with the truth, and this transmitted a message of weakness” (Yaalon, 2008: 80). Related side effects which adversely affect the national mood include the fact that Israelis tend to blame themselves for the shortcomings of their situation and are unable to take responsibility for their mistakes (Yaalon, 2008: 116, 120). Yaalon describes the climate of confusion and disappointment in Israel which followed the failure the Oslo adventure. His analysis of Israeli society reflects an appreciation of what has become known in defense circles as national resilience:

Three interest groups promoted the defeatist discussion: a leadership which does not lead; a press which does not report the truth, and a group of the very wealthy, who are interested in quiet – even if it be an illusory quiet – in order to assure maximal profits, which depend on high prices on the stock exchange. This is the link between, “capital – government – press” [*hōn-shiltōn-ve-itōn*]....These three forces, each of which fostered its own outlook, share in the creation of a dangerous delusion, which I see as a strategic threat of the first order, it being understood that behind the dialogue there sometimes stand honest people who

really believe, innocently, that it is in our power to bring peace, and that now, this is basically dependent on us. (Yaalon, 2008: 18).

These capable observers emphasize the denial by some of Israel's political class of the possibility of a strategic threat. The statements of Harkabi, Carmon and Yaalon bring us back to the basic gap between the intentionally deceptive and misleading rhetoric of the Palestinians, who present their case as a quest for justice, and the reality that their goal is the denial of Jewish nationhood, the negation of Jewish self-determination, and the destruction of the Jewish state. Moshe Yaalon bitterly wrote of a leadership which did not want to deal with the truth and of Israelis for whom the facts are not important (Yaalon, 2008: 115).

More recently, one of the authors of this paper, Yosef Kuperwasser, and his colleague Shalom Lipner, serving at Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs in 2011, analyzed the central problem of Palestinian rejectionism:

The true reason for the intransigence among Palestinian officials has nothing to do with settlement building; rather, it is their continued rejection of the Jewish character of Israel. The Palestinians are fully aware that once they sit down at the negotiating table and agreement is reached on all other outstanding issues, they will need to answer whether they are ready to recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. And as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the U.S. Congress this past May [2011], the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "has never been about the establishment of a Palestinian state. It has always been about the existence of the Jewish state." He continued: "The Palestinians have been unwilling to accept a Palestinian state if it meant accepting a Jewish state alongside it" (Netanyahu, 2011; Kuperwasser and Lipner, 2011).

Whenever the Palestinian Arabs received proposals for peace that deviated from their main objective, they rejected or evaded them. Beyond Camp David (2000) and Annapolis (November, 2007), the most outstanding example of this consistent policy was Mahmud Abbas' reaction to former US President Barack Obama's and Secretary of State Kerry's Six Point Proposal of March 2014 which they presented to him at the White House (*Ha'aretz*,

December 28, 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/criticizing-netanyahu-warning-against-one-state-kerry-s-full-speech-1.5479380>). Abbas promised an answer but never responded. On returning to Ramallah, he addressed a friendly audience in his presidential compound [*Mukatah*] where he proclaimed: “We traveled and we returned,” meaning, we entered the lion’s den and stood up to a major challenge. We kept our promise and adhered to the Charter, namely of liberating all of Palestine and fighting for the return of all the refugees to their homes. There will be no compromise on [the obligation of] the ‘Charter.’ Responding, the crowd chanted: “Israel must know that there is no substitute for the right of return” [*lazim tarif Israil haqq al-awda la badil*].

The 1987 Intifada and the Oslo Experience

The experience of the *intifada* set the stage for the Oslo misadventure which followed. The effects of the 1987 *intifada* are well-documented, but the accepted practice in Israel has been to look at political events as being isolated and ignoring their correlation with previous and subsequent historical events. In fact, the general tendency in the public mind has been to avoid looking for relationships. One could speak of the bias of *presentism*. For the purpose of this paper the experience of the 1987 *intifada*, which lasted roughly until 1991, is significant not only because it shows the cost of willful ignorance, but also because of its lasting consequences. In the history of Israel’s relationship with the Palestinian Arabs, it represents a type of turning point of great importance. Zeev Schiff and Ehud Yaari described the significance of the 1987 *intifada*, and their observations bring us back to the persistent problem, that is – the blindness of Israel’s political class:

[...After the Six Day War], a new conception had taken hold: that the Palestinians were not a factor in the Middle East equation. Above all, this conclusion was reached because the Palestinians simply did not exist in the political consciousness of most Israelis [...]. Thus, the greatest responsibility for the surprise lies with Israel’s political echelon, the men who stood at the helm [...] when the uprising broke out (Schiff and Yaari, 1989: 41, 43).

Schiff and Ya'ari noted:

The IDF was not prepared for a mass civilian uprising. It never considered this possibility. The uprising took place in an area it had considered unimportant. There was a lack of crowd control supplies. The hesitation and confusion of the IDF was matched by a new daring on the Palestinian side. Israel was unable to apply its military strength. The Palestinians did what other armies could not do. They could neutralize Israel's military advantage (Schiff and Yaari, 1989: 117, 118, 120).

Further, they wrote,

[...] The result was that suddenly Israel was exposed in all its weakness, which was perhaps the real import of the surprise. The shock of being caught off guard was further aggravated by Israel's failure in addressing world public opinion; it was simply incapable of making a case for its position while its army was shooting down unarmed women and children (Schiff and Yaari, 1989: 31).

Schiff and Ya'ari disclosed that Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin seized command and personally directed Israel's military response:

[...] The man who was making the decisions and directing this war for better or worse, was Rabin himself. He delved into the smallest details and followed up on decisions to see that they were carried out satisfactorily. Because of his temperament, Dan Shomron accepted the role of staff officer, rather than fight for his prerogatives as commander of the forces fighting the *intifada*. The result was that Israel's defense minister assumed responsibility for running the campaign against the *intifada*. Its achievements and failures were primarily his, and Rabin essentially admitted as much [...]. (Schiff and Yaari, 1989: 139).

As mentioned above, Schiff and Yaari wrote that the Palestinians neutralized Israel's military advantage (Schiff and Yaari, 1989: 120). Israel was not prepared for the strategic surprise of 1987, and its leadership had no idea how to make the case for its position before world opinion, nor did Israel have any understanding that it was necessary. This is important, because the media now became a participant, and public opinion a new front. Following the example of the Algerians and the North Vietnamese, the Palestinian side learned how to exploit the electronic media in order to make Israel look bad in world opinion and to undermine Israeli domestic support for the struggle at the front. For their part, the Israelis, who were accustomed to waging war in open spaces, had no idea how to deal with this unfamiliar type of modern guerilla warfare, known as "People's War" (Fishman, 2003).

The effective outcome of the 1987-1991 *intifada* was a victory for the Palestinians. Rabin lost this battle but did not take responsibility for this setback, in part because the confusion of the Gulf War obscured this reality. Arafat had sided with Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War (August 1990 to February 1991), but the leadership of Israel failed to take advantage of the fact that Arafat had badly compromised himself.

Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz, the Prussian strategist of war [1780-1831], described a type of defeat in battle, where the "abandonment of the fight remains the only authentic proof of victory:"

[...] There is no accurate measure of loss of morale; hence in many cases the abandonment of the fight remains the only authentic proof of victory [...]. We only wish to draw attention to the fact that in the majority of cases it is difficult to distinguish between the abandonment of intentions and the abandonment of the battlefield; the impression produced by the former, both in military and civilian circles, should not be underrated (Clausewitz, 1984: 253).

The experience of the *intifada* shook Rabin's confidence, and when he was confronted with the organized terror of the "peace process," the experience adversely affected his policy decisions. The testimony of respected contemporaries supports this interpretation. [General] Uri Saguy, who in 1991 became the Chief of the Israeli Military Intelligence

Directorate, evaluated the impact of the 1987 *intifada*. His analysis conforms to the views of the intelligence professionals whom we have cited. Saguy points to the problem of ignorance, especially of the country's history:

Despite the fact that people are inclined to attribute great weakness to the PLO in the wake of the Gulf War (which is true), the weakness of the PLO nevertheless does not mark the disappearance of the Palestinian Problem in the Land of Israel. All the more so, the influence of the *intifada* on the Israeli citizen and particularly on the decision-makers was much stronger than the influence of the study of the history of the struggle for the Land of Israel. What's more, these very people [the decision-makers] do not always immerse themselves in this type of learning (Saguy, 1998: 189).

Norman Podhoretz, the retired editor of *Commentary*, described Rabin's state of mind. He explained that the experience of the 1987 *intifada* had broken his morale, and he doubted that the citizens of Israel still had the will to fight. Podhoretz wrote:

My own guess is that Rabin in his heart of hearts was also motivated by the realization that Israel did not know how to deal effectively with the *intifada*, a new form of warfare that the Palestinians had now been waging for some six years. When the *intifada* first erupted in 1987, Rabin (then defense minister under Yitzhak Shamir) had declared that he would "break the bones" of the Palestinian rioters. But breaking their bones did not avail, especially as the Palestinians – adopting a tactic that was at once brilliant and evil – were sending their *children* to throw stones at armed Israeli soldiers, most of all when TV cameras were present. In the end it was Rabin himself and a large segment of the Israeli people who were broken by the *intifada*: broken in spirit, broken in morale. Prudently Rabin never acknowledged anything like this in public (Podhoretz, 2000).

When Podhoretz wrote that Rabin himself was "broken by the *intifada*," he described the symptoms of a condition which Carl von Clausewitz termed the "loss of moral equilibrium." He wrote:

All in all, loss of moral equilibrium must not be underestimated merely because it has no absolute value and does not always show up in the final balance. It can attain such massive proportions that it overpowers everything by its irresistible force [...] (Clausewitz, 1984: 232).

In his chapter, “The Effects of Victory,” Clausewitz added:

The outcome of a major battle has a greater psychological effect on the loser than on the winner. This, in turn, gives rise to additional loss of material strength, which is echoed in loss of morale; the two become mutually interactive as each enhances and intensifies the other. So one must place special emphasis on the moral effect, which works in opposite directions on each side: while sapping the strength of the loser, it raises the vigor and energy of the winner. But the defeated side is the most affected by it, since it becomes the direct cause of additional loss [...] (Clausewitz, 1984: 253).

It should be noted that Schiff and Yaari had written that the hesitation and confusion of the IDF was matched by a new daring on the Palestinian side (Schiff and Yaari, 1989: 117, 118, 120), and this is precisely the situation that Clausewitz described. Independently, Moshe Yaalon confirmed the Podhoretz analysis and explained its practical outcome. Rabin suffered from defeatism. He believed that the country was not prepared to fight as it had in the past. Yaalon also described the harmful effects of the timid message that Rabin communicated to the public:

[...] He feared that the people were tired and would not be prepared to fight any more. And at every single stage of the confrontation the leaders were dogged by the same fear: the fear that the reserves would not be mobilized, that parents would not support soldiers who had to fight and that, at the moment of truth, there would be no fighting spirit. There was great concern about this matter, and they spoke about it clearly enough. It was not only Hassan Nasrallah who called us a spider’s web. Many among us also thought that we were like

that, and therefore there was no daring. Accordingly, the struggle with the Palestinians was conducted cautiously. And suddenly the day after the slaughter on March 27, 2002 at the Passover Seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya, there was a turnaround. People who were not even called up arrived at their reserve units. They fought for every place in every tank and APC [armored personnel carrier]. In many units the mobilization was about 130%, and therefore, even before going into battle, there was a huge show of force. Operation Defensive Shield began as a show of strength. It proved that we were not a spider's web and that when it was necessary to fight, we knew how – both the army and society (Yaalon, 2008: 135).

As Yaalon described, being unable to mobilize a citizen army (and for any head of state to think he does not have the military option) is a sign of serious weakness. A demoralized Rabin forfeited the option of defending the country by military means. Effectively, Yaalon described a situation in which the Palestinians had beaten Rabin, but not the Israeli people.

The Uninformed Decision – an Outcome of Willful Blindness

The direct consequence of willful blindness is an uninformed decision or policy. When the decision-making process is isolated from vitally important information, the end result cannot be more than a gamble at best. While one may view this subject within the context of the Israeli experience, similar and comparable cases of mistakes may also be found elsewhere. These would include, for example, Chamberlain's decision to enter into the Munich agreement of 1938, and in America, an institutionalized blindness that ignored or underestimated the threat of Islamic terror (Rowse, 1961; *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004). Of course, the management of knowledge and vital information requires a readiness to consider all types of data, including "inconvenient information," to use the expression of the late Walter Laqueur. One may observe that a certain state of mind accompanies the inability or unwillingness to cope with a complicated and potentially dangerous reality. For example, the authors of the *9/11 Commission Report* lamented a

definite lack of imagination which made the United States vulnerable to strategic surprise (*The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004: 339-348). It is noteworthy that this report reflects a new and important type of thinking, the conviction that past mistakes provide a type of resource from which one may draw valuable lessons.

Ultimately, “history’s judgment,” to use the expression of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, may be harsh, holding politicians and their governments accountable for their failures of leadership (*The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004: 340). This explains the expressions of bitter sentiments which persist decades after the Munich Agreement. Likewise, in Israel, feelings of public anger concerning the surprise of the Yom Kippur War and the Oslo misadventure have increasingly found expression in the public discourse. Even posthumously, national leaders are no longer spared.

Yigal Carmon in his article, “The Story behind the Handshake,” which first ran in *Commentary* of March 1994, described the circumstances under which The Declaration of Principles was signed in Oslo:

On August 20, [1993] at the Norwegian government’s guest house, [Johan Jorgen] Holst [the Norwegian Foreign Minister] and a few Norwegian colleagues hosted, Peres, Gil, Savir, Singer, Hirschfeld, and Pundik, who were joined by Abu Ala and his assistants, for the signing ceremony. The Israelis were there for one of the most momentous diplomatic moves in the history of their country – *without having consulted a single military authority, a single intelligence officer, or a single expert on Arab affairs* [authors’ italics]. To be sure, Rabin himself had gone over every word; though only later he would realize, as he had admitted publicly, that the document left “hundreds” of issues untouched; later still, he would declare that “the legal formulations of Oslo are rubbish” and that “what will be decisive are the facts on the ground” (Carmon, 2002: 17).

Both David Makovsky and Dore Gold disapproved of the Rabin government’s method of making decisions without the benefit of professional advice (Makovsky, 1996: 38). Gold stated that:

[...] As things stand, however, every major Israeli security organization – the Mossad, the General Security Services, Israeli military intelligence, as well as the IDF – was cut out of the loop [...] (Gold, 1995: 38).

How was it possible that Rabin could use amateurs and forgo the benefit of professional military and legal advice? Furthermore, one may ask if there was too great a concentration of power on the executive level, and if the decision-making process with regard to national security failed to function properly (Makovsky, 1996: 78). As Carmon described, there was hardly any previous thought or preparation devoted to the drafting of this critically important document. He based his statement on the recollection of Yossi Beilin:

At the time they all still believed that the purpose of the negotiations was to draft a proposal that would be signed by the official delegations to the peace talks in Washington, which on the Palestinian side, of course, did not formally include the PLO. The Israelis thought they were getting a behind-the-scenes PLO endorsement, nothing more. Indeed, on August 15, only five days before the Declaration of Principles was initialed in Oslo, Rabin said at a government meeting that he hoped “Israeli elements” (a euphemism for “peace camp” ministers and other dovish politicians) would not undermine Washington’s policy of dissociation from the PLO (Carmon, 2002: 17).

If one can believe Beilin’s story, the Israeli representatives wittingly or unwittingly stumbled into the Declaration of Principles [DOP] agreement. Effectively this meant that the outcome of the Oslo agreement would not depend on foresight [*machshavah techilah*] but on the events that followed, or to use Rabin’s words, “the events on the ground.” For Israel, the meaning that the government would attach to this *fait accompli* became an important public issue. Having signed the DOP in Washington on September 13, the would-be “Architects of the Peace” made conscious efforts to stifle real discussion and to introduce an alternate reality: the culture of “The Peace.” They made great efforts to create the illusion that the Oslo peace process marked a totally new beginning in human history and that the lessons of the past were no longer relevant. Accordingly, the government

framed the debate in a manner that would disqualify arguments based on empirical historical experience (Lahat, 2004: 106).

Prime Minister Rabin's World View and his Political Choices

Prime Minister Rabin was the head of the government that engaged in the Oslo process, which meant that he had the authority to lead and make decisions. Had his leap of faith resulted in a lasting peace with the PLO, it would have been a brilliant accomplishment. On the most basic level, the logic of entering into an arrangement with the PLO defies explanation. There are many unanswered questions. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some of the basic ideas upon which the government's policy was based, as well as the circumstances that influenced the prime minister's decisions. In order to fathom this subject (which became an example of willful blindness), it is necessary to reconstruct Rabin's world-view by drawing on his own statements and those of his contemporaries.

We know, for example, that long before Oslo, Rabin believed that winning the peace would have such great strategic value that it was worth a gamble. At the same time, several contemporary observers noted that Rabin's working method was deliberate and purposeful. Ehud Yaari and Zeev Schiff as well as Moshe Yaalon wrote that Yitzhak Rabin was a thorough worker who carefully followed up on his projects, even attending to their minute details (Schiff and Yaari, 1989: 139). This insight applied both to the 1987 *intifada* and to the peace process (Yaalon, 2008: 82).

Decades before Oslo, Rabin expressed his own ideas about the strategic value of peace. Addressing a gathering of Columbia University alumni on January 16, 1975, at the Shalom Tower in Tel-Aviv, he forcefully defended the prospect of an interim agreement with Egypt. Rabin had become prime minister in April 1974 after the resignations of Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan. His main rival, Shimon Peres, was the Minister of Defense, and the new government was weak. (O'Brien, 1986: 537, 539). On this occasion, he proclaimed that he was prepared to gamble anything for peace, because the rewards outweighed the risks and he was willing to accept the price of failure

(one of the authors, Joel Fishman, was present at this address). Rabin was probably referring to the first contacts that led to the future Sinai Pact, which was concluded on September 1, 1975 and signed in Geneva on September 4. According to its terms, Israel would withdraw from the Sinai mountain passes and return the Rudais oil fields to Egypt, in return for modest Egyptian political concessions and American assurances (*Congressional Quarterly*, 2000: 441).

On a different occasion, probably around 1986, Rabin addressed a gathering of Jewish leaders in what was then the Laromme Hotel in Jerusalem. He told his audience that the Camp David peace treaty with Egypt was Israel's greatest accomplishment, one that surpassed all of its victories. This event was so important that, sometime between 1978 and 1981, he had personally traveled to Egypt to interview Anwar Sadat about the Camp David negotiations. (The Camp David negotiations took place in 1978, and Sadat was assassinated in 1981.) Interestingly enough, Rabin revealed that, during the talks, King Hussein of Jordan repeatedly telephoned Sadat begging to join in, but Sadat refused. Rabin asked Sadat why, and he explained that the negotiations were so delicate that Jordan's presence could have prevented Egypt from achieving peace with Israel. The fact that Rabin raised the subject of his interview with Sadat at this time suggests that making peace with Jordan was on his mind then. (Joel Fishman was present at this gathering. Rabin disclosed there that he taped these conversations with Sadat.)

When we examine Rabin's world view, there is one more proposition which deserves careful attention. He did not consider the Palestinians to be an enemy. Therefore, Israel could make peace with them. On several occasions he expressed this thought. On March 26, 1995, Prime Minister Rabin received an American interfaith delegation led by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago. At this friendly meeting, he described Israel's place in the region and the government's policy. He first pointed out that Israel's growing economic advantage compared to the other countries of the region was becoming a source of concern for those countries. He explained that with the Iraqi missiles fired at Israel's population centers during the Gulf War (1991), the best assurance of Israel's security would be to make peace with its neighbors. According to Rabin, Israel's greatest enemies were Iraq and Iran. Therefore, it should try to make peace with Syria and the Palestinians. He then volunteered that "the Palestinians are not our enemies," and so determined was he

to carry out his policy that he was fully prepared to push a peace agreement through the Knesset, even with a majority of one vote (Fishman, 2001). It was implicitly understood that the support of the five Arab members of the Knesset would be needed in order to build this majority.

Rabin was consistent, and he actually said the same thing in his last speech: “I want to say plainly: We have found a partner for peace among the Palestinians – the PLO, which was once an enemy and has ceased terror.” Writing in *Ha’aretz*, Akiva Eldar disclosed that somebody had mysteriously edited this passage out of the official transcript (Eldar, 2000). Thus, Rabin held this belief until his last day. Whether his assumption was correct is an open question.

If indeed the Palestinians were not our enemies, who in Rabin’s view was the real enemy? One need only consult the public record to find the answer. It is no secret. For Rabin, Israel’s real enemy, and the “Cowards of The Peace” was the Likud, whom he accused of disloyalty and collaborating with Hamas against the security of the state (Tal and Alon, 1995). We could give several examples of this outlook, but for the present, one will do. In June 1995, the question was raised whether the Palestinians in Gaza would launch katyusha rockets against Israel. Rabin responded in what became known as “The Cowards of the Peace” speech. Rabin proclaimed:

We know the horror stories of the Likud. Look, they also promised us katyushas from Gaza. It has already been a year since the Gaza strip has been effectively put under the control of the Palestinian Authority. There has not been a single katyusha, and there will not be a single katyusha, and so on, and so on, and so on. This is all chatter. The Likud has a deathly fear of peace. Cowards of the Peace! This is today’s Likud! (*Jerusalem Post*, June 20, 1995).

Rabin’s declaration contains two emphatic messages: that the fear of katyushas being fired from Gaza totally lacks merit, and those who expressed this concern did so in bad faith. They have a deathly fear of peace, which is a characteristic of the Likud. With the advantage of hindsight, we know that Rabin was dead wrong. His words reveal a distinct lack of imagination. The cost of Rabin’s mistake has been high. Gaza became a new front

for Israel. Rockets fired from Gaza have disrupted the life and economy of the South. Living in a war zone also has its human costs. It is not generally known, for example, that today many citizens of Sderot receive therapy for trauma and that Sderot has the highest number of miscarriages in Israel. The second element of Rabin's speech is an attack on the Likud, laced with hatred and contempt.

What could be the reason for such animosity? Rabin and the Labor party clearly viewed the Likud as Israel's real adversary. Later in this paper, we shall return to the subject in greater depth.

The Principle of Reversibility and its Central Importance

Ultimately, the principle of reversibility became a major theme of Rabin's approach and thus of governmental policy. According to David Makovsky, Shimon Peres first introduced this principle during the spring of 1993 as a tactic to persuade Rabin to go along with some of Arafat's demands which he had originally rejected out of hand. A senior Peres aide explained to Makovsky:

In meetings with Rabin, Shimon would minimize the importance of the whole gambit [...]. He wouldn't say, "We're doing something revolutionary," he'd say, "Let's try this. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work. But why not try?" (Makovsky, 1996: 37, 38).

While Peres used the reversibility tactic to downplay a major decision, Rabin actually made it the cornerstone of his own policy and a means of rationalizing it to himself, his inner circle, and the Israeli public. The political topography that Rabin had to navigate consisted of people, politics and ideas. Having taken into account the circumstances, Rabin chose to make peace with the Palestinians rather than the Syrians. The following considerations entered into the equation, and in practical terms, they provided the rationalization, – at least to himself, – of his political choice:

- (1) As a policy objective, making peace was good for Israel and worth the risk.
- (2) There was the issue of values. Who could object to “The Peace”? According to Jewish tradition, the pursuit of peace is a virtue: “Depart from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.” Psalm 34: 15, and “[...Hillel said: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace...” *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:12.
- (3) Culturally, the idea resonated.
- (4) There would be more domestic political support for a peace with the Palestinians than with the Syrians.
- (5) There was a powerful peace lobby in the Labor Party which included such politicians as Peres, Beilin, Ramon, Merom, Burg and others who were members of the so-called “Peace Camp.”
- (6) There were also external considerations, such as the fear of what might happen if Israel did not make peace. There was the danger of Islamic radicalism on the rise and the need to make peace in order to protect ourselves from it.
- (7) Internationally, making peace would bring Israel legitimacy, while not making peace would have the opposite effect. Further, making peace with the Palestinians would pave the way for an agreement with the Jordanians. If, in the worst case, the peace initiative failed, Rabin could reverse the process.

Points 1 to 6 would apply equally to the Palestinians and to the Syrians, but in Rabin’s view, point 7, making peace with the Palestinians had the critical advantage of reversibility (Yossi Kuperwasser, personal communication, December 22, 2019). Rabin’s political advisor, Jacques Neriah, explained how Rabin understood the concept of reversibility. He chose the Palestinian option because he could repudiate it if things did not work out, whereas an agreement with the Syrians would be irreversible. According to Neriah:

Rabin preferred the Palestinian track because he maintained that any solution reached with them would be reversible, and that is because of territorial proximity, control over external security, the absence of a hostile army, and the possibility of a quick return of the IDF to territories that were transferred to the Palestinians. According to him, a peace agreement with an Arab state would fix borders and thus be irreversible: a return to the *status quo ante* would necessitate a war. Furthermore,

Rabin believed in a federative solution with the future Palestinian entity. This solution would be based upon self-determination for the Palestinians and their integration into an economic-political, Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian system as opposed to an agreement with Syria which could not enforce normalization and commercial relations, but at best would prepare the ground for the future (Neriah, 2016: 28-29).

Rabin's choice embodies the themes of risk and reversibility. And he was ready to take a gamble. We know this, because in early February 1994 he literally used this word in a personal conversation with Isi Leibler, an Australian-Jewish community leader of world stature now living in Israel:

[...] I know that I am engaged in a gamble for peace. I am confident we will win this gamble, but if the Palestinians go back on their commitments or resort to violence, we will take everything back (Isi Leibler, personal communication, February 3-11, 1994).

While Rabin had long held that making peace was worth a gamble, it is unclear that he appreciated that the lives of Israeli civilians would be part of the cost. For example, Rabin's decision to arm the Palestinian police also incorporated the idea of reversibility. Many Israelis remember Rabin's confident declaration on Israel television in the winter of 1994 after the murder in December 1993 in Hebron of two members of the Lapid family. (Hamas had taken credit for this deed):

Stop being afraid! [...] There is no danger that these guns will be used against us. The purpose of this ammunition [these weapons] for the Palestinian police is to be used in their vigilant fight against the HAMAS. They won't dream of using it against us, since they know very well that if they use these guns against us once, at that moment the Oslo Accord will be annulled and the IDF will return to all the places that have been given to them. The Oslo Accord, despite what the opposition claims, is not irrevocable (Bodansky, 2000: 98).

We shall make no mention of Arafat's Johannesburg speech of May 26, 1994 in which he declared that he entered into the Oslo agreement in bad faith, and of the terror attacks which both Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad perpetrated and in which they inflicted on Israel a large number of civilian casualties. From the signing of the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the PLO on September 13, 1993, until September 2000, 269 civilians and soldiers were killed in terrorist attacks in Israel (Foreign Ministry of Israel, 2000). These irrefutable facts were part of the price of Rabin's gamble. Rabin's statements reflect an abundant confidence in Israel's relative advantage and an underestimation of the resourcefulness of his Palestinian adversaries. He also stated that Palestinians were not our enemies (but rather Israel's ally in the fight against Hamas). We have cited above two occasions when Rabin made this statement. One of the authors heard it personally.

The Test of Reversibility

The major question before us remains unanswered: When it became obvious that he had lost his gamble, why did Prime Minister Rabin falter? After all, the principle of reversibility represented Rabin's promise to the Israeli public and to himself. In order to find an answer, one must again draw on the testimony of respected contemporary observers. Surprisingly, there seems to be one basic explanation, that the Prime Minister and many of Israel's political class experienced a crisis of confidence.

For Rabin, Oslo did not work out as planned, and a new reality emerged. In effect, Rabin discovered that the peace process was not reversible. He had made a mistake in judgment as to what the Palestinians really wanted and their strategic goal. There was also the question as to how durable the international gains would be for Israel. The Palestinians would never be satisfied. They would always want more, as would the international community. Rabin did not understand the consequences of gambling. Gambling is addictive, and the gambler wants to stay at the table, to place new bets in order to recoup his (or her) losses. The gambler does not know when to walk away from the table, prompted by shame or by the unwillingness to "take possession of one's own mistake." Rabin was unprepared to admit failure, which is a human weakness (Yossi Kuperwasser, personal communication, December 22, 2019).

When we do speak of gambling, the real professionals stay in the game until they win, but in order to do this they must commit tremendous resources. Darrell M. West of the Brookings Institution described how, for example, billionaires invest in American politics and are ready to take heavy losses in hopes of winning in the end. Casino owner Sheldon Adelson stated:

I happen to be in a unique business where winning and losing is the basis of the entire business. So I don't cry when I lose. There's always a new hand coming up. I know in the long run we're going to win.

Marc Short, the strategist for the Koch Brothers, repeated the same thought: "Our members are committed to the long term, not to one individual cycle" (West, 2014: 49). However, Rabin's resources were finite, and by the end of March of 1995, the public opinion polls indicated that he was losing public support, while that of his opponent, Netanyahu, was on the rise. On March 27, 1995 *Ha'aretz* published an article reporting on a recent opinion poll. The title of the article was, "Decline in Public Support for the Negotiation with the PLO; the National Morale in the Dumps." The bottom line of the article, based on a sample population comprised largely of middle-class adults living in urban areas, was:

In the event of a contest between Yitzhak Rabin and Binyamin Netanyahu to lead the government, it was found that 60 percent of those asked would vote for Netanyahu, as opposed to 40 percent for Rabin (*Ha'aretz*, March 27, 1995: 3).

One day previously, March 26, *Ha'aretz* had anticipated this report. Its headline and lead article dealt with the response of Rabin and the Labor Party to this dramatic loss of public support. It read: "Rabin: Likud is Collaborator with Hamas." Beneath the headline was the sentence, "In the leadership of Labor [there is] concern about the opinion polls which show that Netanyahu has an advantage; it was decided [to launch] an aggressive propaganda campaign." Hillel Halkin, a literary critic and novelist, first cited the *Ha'aretz* article in *Commentary*:

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin sharply attacked Likud yesterday [saying], the terror organizations are succeeding because Likud has become a collaborator with Islamic Jihad and Hamas [...] In inner consultations held at high levels of the Labor party, it was decided to step up attacks against the Right, especially against Likud and its leader. There is concern in Labor over polls, taken in the last several months, showing [Benjamin] Netanyahu with a large lead over Rabin. [...] Ranking members of Labor welcomed this changed line. One cabinet minister was happy that “The Prime Minister has decided to take off the gloves with Likud.” A second minister on the other hand, expressed concern that extreme language might cause the political arena to degenerate into verbal violence before the elections (Tal and Alon, 1995).

The same article indirectly gave an indication of Rabin’s state of mind. Netanyahu simply declared that the Prime Minister had “lost his mind.” Getting to the point, Netanyahu held Rabin responsible for the security situation: “Yitzhak Rabin forgot that the responsibility for the safety of the citizens of the state belongs to the Minister of Defense and to the Government -- and to them exclusively.” The same article also reported that:

MK Tsachi HaNegbi [Likud] called upon Rabin to give up his immunity in order to stand trial for his statements. In the entire history of the State of Israel such a base and incendiary expression has never been recorded [...]. It testifies to Rabin’s dismal mental state (Tal and Alon, 1995).

The article in *Ha’aretz*, which provides solid documentary evidence, explicitly describes a sharp drop in the public opinion polls as the motive for Rabin and the Labor party launching a campaign of incitement which vilified the opposition instead of defending the peace process on its merits. They faced a political crisis, the prospect of losing power, and their response was based on weakness. From this perspective, the Likud was cast as the enemy, civilian casualties became tolerable, and arguments based on security – such as the possibility that rockets might be launched from Gaza – were ridiculed and dismissed out of hand.

terror has been rationalized. We may observe the same mindset in Rabin's response to the argument that one day katyushas could be launched from Gaza. He contemptuously attacked the Likud as the "Cowards of the Peace."

Barry Rubin and Judy Colp Rubin (2003), the biographers of Yasir Arafat, identified an additional form of willful blindness which prevented Rabin and his colleagues from realistically evaluating their situation. They adopted an illusion, the preconceived notion that Arafat, when faced with the responsibilities of governing a country, would undergo a personal transformation which would turn him into a responsible leader:

One of the main reasons many had expected the peace process to succeed was the belief that actually governing a territory – being responsible for schools, roads, and garbage collection – would force Arafat to become more pragmatic in order to deliver benefits for his people. In practice, however, Arafat preferred his traditional political style, which depended on tough bargaining, minimal implementation of commitments, appeals for international support, appeals to negotiating partners for unilateral concessions, persuading extremists that he was on their side, and permissiveness toward violence to gain his objectives (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 153).

According to Barry and Judy Rubin, Arafat's actions represented "an expectation not met." Rabin and Peres actually believed that the framework and momentum of the negotiation process would contribute to its ultimate success. According to the Rubins:

Rabin and Peres were ready to pressure Arafat to crack down on those responsible for attacks yet also believed that advancing the peace process was the best way to reduce the violence and defeat the terrorists (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 153).

The facts on the ground indicate that, while Rabin spoke of reversibility, he could neither stay in the game, because his popularity was sinking, nor was he prepared to "take possession" of his mistake, because he might lose power. Rabin had lost his "moral equilibrium." The key example of willful blindness in this misadventure was Rabin's denial of the fact that

Yasser Arafat, the PLO, and Hamas were Israel's enemies. He may not have perceived that the other side had a strategic plan and was using a type of warfare that he did not know. This included the sophisticated use of the world media and employing terror as a policy tool. The essence of the problem was that he failed to distinguish between an enemy and a friend. The PLO was neither a friend nor a "peace partner." Could Rabin have known the truth but thought that he was able to overcome the obstacle of reality?

Willful Blindness in Perspective: The Analysis of Justice Moshe Landau

From a wider perspective, the cost of policy failure and the confusion which it caused among the Israeli public was lasting. Five years after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the retired President of the Supreme Court, Moshe Landau, gave an interview to *Ha'aretz Magazine* which ran on October 6, 2000. This took place at the time of the Jewish New Year, and these were troubled times. Ehud Barak was then prime minister, the second Intifada had begun a few days earlier, and the drama of Muhammad el-Dura was simmering. Six days later, on October 12, a Palestinian mob lynched two Israeli soldiers at the el-Bireh police station. Roughly one year later, 9/11 took place.

Justice Landau, it should be remembered, had served as the presiding judge at the Eichmann trial and had earned a reputation for his meticulous professionalism (Shaked, 2015: 1). As one might expect, he came well prepared to this interview with Ari Shavit. Despite his personal convictions, Landau did not name the politicians with whom he differed. Instead, he attacked their ideas, which is generally considered more refined and dignified. Nonetheless, one can easily identify the person(s) to whom he referred and the vocabulary of the Oslo era, particularly the idea of Rabin's gamble:

I am not a political person, neither right nor left, and I am naturally a moderate. I was a moderate judge, and I have moderate views on political topics. However, *I cannot close my eyes in the face of such great dangers, especially since they*

are in plain sight, and I think that it is forbidden for the State to gamble and it is forbidden to live with illusions. [Authors' italics] (*Haaretz Magazine*, October 6, 2000: 30).

It was a hard personal decision for Justice Landau to grant this interview because he maintained that judges must not speak out on controversial public issues. In his own words:

It was not easy for me to break away from this general approach but I have had enough. Things are happening now which cause me sleepless nights, things that make me fear for the existence of the State. [...] I fear for the existence of the State. I think that the existence of the Jewish State is in danger (*Haaretz Magazine*, October 6, 2000: 36).

Landau's interview is significant not only because it relates to the Oslo adventure but transcends it. Two decades later, his observations have retained their value. When it was first published, the value of this interview may not have been apparent, but with the passage of time, we can look at it as a significant document that deals with security and the health and morale of Israeli society. His comments would include what we now call "National Resilience," and his views conform generally to the observations of the intelligence professionals cited above. He dealt with the problem of willful blindness, to which he added the closely related danger of illusions influencing policy. Landau's observations thus add to the depth of our discussion. One may also note that, as a judge, he knew how to think independently, and faithful to the discipline of his profession, he delivered a fearless verdict. Landau's biographer, Michal Shaked of Tel Aviv University, wrote that during his long career Justice Landau had served on the Agranat Commission which studied the responsibility for the intelligence and military failures of the Yom Kippur War. He was traumatized by this experience and particularly by the illusion that became known at the time as the "*Conceptsia*" (Shaked, 2012: 512). This widely held view in Israeli military circles, which later became known as "the Concept," was described by the Agranat Commission in the following terms: "Egypt would not begin a war as it did not have the capability to strike at the main bases of the Israeli air force; and Syria would

attack Israel only with Egypt” (Bar-Joseph, 1995: 229). Landau had learned that illusions could distort state policy, and this made him sensitive to the questionable notions that had recently permeated public life in Israel. He said explicitly:

Sometimes the situation today reminds me of that before the Yom Kippur War: I am especially disturbed by our blindness, as if we already were living peacefully on our own homestead. We always see the injustice that was done to the other side and not the catastrophe that may happen to us [...]. This causes weakness, fatigue, self-deception, and the lack of readiness to struggle (*Haaretz Magazine*, October 6, 2000: 30).

Justice Landau structured his answers, describing the external and internal dangers facing Israel. He spoke explicitly of the enemy’s strategy, and the religious/political values of Islam. His comments also reflect an understanding of human behavior. He described the strategy of the other side and objected that the government did not pay attention to the Phased Plan, to which he referred by name. His view combined several thoughts: that the PLO was the enemy; that it had a strategy which the government ignored, and that by projecting weakness Israel was causing itself harm:

This is the paradigm [...]. They [the Palestinians] are conducting a struggle against us on two levels. As long as they can gain concessions from us through diplomacy according to the *Phased Plan* – they do it. But when it no longer works, when we are no longer able to make more concessions, there will be a violent confrontation. This is the strategy and hence the danger. But *we wish to close our eyes in the face of this danger. We try not to see what may happen and we project weakness.* We retreat step by step. [Authors’ italics]. (*Haaretz Magazine*, October 6, 2000: 36).

He declared outright that he gave the other side full credit for being more sophisticated than Israel and implementing a systematic strategy. He saw no prospect for peace for the simple reason that the Palestinians “don’t want us here.” Landau was fully aware of the

significance of his statements and in his own way dealt with the accusation that those who did not accept Oslo were cowards:

It is clear to me that when people read my statements many will say that Landau is a cantankerous and cowardly old man; that we are making the “Peace of the Brave” while Landau is a coward, but I say that it is some of those who believe in the “Peace of the Brave” who are the cowards, because they say that if we do not make peace immediately or at any price, it will be bad and bitter, and destruction awaits us. Therefore they run after Arafat and beg him to agree to our enormous concessions. Because they are trying to save what can be saved, to salvage some kind of enclave, a Jewish enclave à la Singapore, around the Dan region. But of course, this also is an illusion (*Haaretz Magazine*, October 6, 2000: 36).

Taking a broader perspective, Justice Landau wrote of the danger of Islam. Without a doubt, his observations were politically incorrect. Even at present, there has been an institutional reluctance to recognize that a religion, such as Islam, could be a force with the potential of destabilizing international politics. One need only remember the shocked reactions which followed the publication in 1993 of Samuel Huntington’s article, “The Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington, 1993). Landau’s remarks articulated what was then an unspeakable truth and addressed the very basis of the Palestinian objection to any Jewish presence in Israel:

The great danger which I see is Islam. We would like to be at peace with Islam. And there are good and naïve people among us who have found some kind of partners for discussion with Islamic figures. But from the point of view of Islam, it is impossible to recognize the sovereignty of the Jews in any part of the countries which Islam claims for itself. Therefore, if we agree to recognize the superiority of Islam and to surrender our political independence, they will tolerate us, but if we do not agree, they will not tolerate us. They will act against us using violent terror. [...] As far as Islam is concerned, the entire land of Israel is *wakf* land. And legal experts know [what] *wakf* land means. It is property which is sanctified

to God. And that is the reason that for Arabs/Muslims it is forbidden to give the Jews a foothold of control in this land, and they must be driven out from here. In addition, on maps which are hung in classrooms in the Palestinian Authority, the State of Israel does not exist. Because this is the situation to which they aspire. This is their goal. There is rivalry between Arafat's rule and that of Hamas and other Islamic factions, but they will unite against Israel (*Haaretz Magazine*, October 6, 2000: 34).

Landau also described the dangerous state of mind that characterized the Oslo era. This included a weakness of resolve and defeatism. He also attacked several of the mantras which had become accepted truths, such as the proposition that making peace would obviate the need to defend ourselves:

I see great external dangers before us, but even greater than those is the internal danger: the general bewilderment, a confusion of concepts, social disintegration, and the weakness of national will, a lack of readiness to stand up for ourselves. The illusion that The Peace will obviate our need to defend ourselves and to fight. These things rob my peace of mind. They literally take sleep from my eyes and harm my physical health.

Moshe Landau expressed himself with moral clarity and *gravitas*. Describing the harm which illusions had caused, Landau stated that by projecting weakness Israel had lost its international standing, its independence (particularly with regard to the United States), and control over its destiny. Eight years later, in 2008, Moshe Yaalon independently arrived at several of Landau's basic conclusions (cited above) and validated his analysis, particularly with regard to National Resilience (Yaalon, 2008: 135). In a real sense, Landau's observations compliment those of the intelligence professionals, but his perspective was wider and deeper. Drop last sentence, please]: He was an unapologetic Zionist.

Conclusions

If we are looking for a single, credible explanation for what went wrong with the Oslo peace process, we may safely say that ingrained attitudes of willful blindness on the part of Israel's leadership and the adoption of illusions resulted in a setback that brought lasting harm to the health and unity of Israeli society. Well established traditions of willful blindness paved the way for mistakes of judgment, particularly those of underestimation. What happened cannot be reversed. We cannot take our chips back nor can we recover the lives of soldiers and civilians which were sacrificed. Nevertheless, we can still "take possession of our mistake" and learn from it. The Oslo misadventure presents an important opportunity for strategic learning. For the good of our country and its future we should seize this opportunity.

Appendix I

In a recent publication, *Incentivizing Terrorism*, Yossi Kuperwasser (2017) has identified the main elements of the Palestinian national ideology in its present day form. Here, one can observe how, according to Karl Dietrich Bracher's observation, an ideological outlook has been transformed into the basis of policy:

Jews are neither a people nor a nation but merely believers of a religion and therefore do not have the right of national self-determination in a nation state of their own (unlike the Arab-Palestinians who are a people and deserve their state).

The Jews do not have a national or sovereign history in the Land of Israel/Palestine. This is why their effort to justify their demand for a nation state on this piece of land, based on the vision of reconstituting the Jewish national home there (as stated in the mandate given to Britain by the League of Nations in 1922), is false and groundless [...].

Jews, in general, Zionists in particular, and settlers more than others, are terrible "creatures." They are by their nature (and this is where the classic stereotypic description of the Jews in European anti-Semitism comes into play) greedy, cruel,

isolationists, cunning, striving for world domination, responsible for all hardships, condescending, perceiving themselves as superiors and warmongering [...].

The struggle against Zionism is both national and religious. It is national in the sense that the Palestinians as a people have the right to all of Palestine, their homeland; and it is religious in the sense that Palestine was part of the early conquests of Islam and became a “House of Islam” (*Dar el-Islam*) and as such, according to some religious interpretations, cannot be ruled by anyone who isn’t Muslim. This is why those who die in the struggle are “witnessing martyrs” in the religious sense (*shahid*). Since Israel is considered to be a bridgehead for Western culture and influence in the Muslim Middle East, the battle against its existence is also justified as a part of the war to protect Islam against Western domination and Western culture.

The three imperative elements [in which ideology is transformed into policy] are: (1) A Palestinian should constantly struggle against Zionism, and all forms of struggle, including terror, are legitimate and should be glorified and rewarded [...]. Delegitimization, including BDS, is one of the recommended forms of struggle at this stage by all factions of the Palestinians. The PA recommends as well unilateral diplomatic activity and “popular resistance” (a term that refers to violent terror activities that do not involve the use of firearms or explosives, such as stabbings, vehicular attacks, Molotov cocktails and stoning), whereas Hamas recommends all forms of terrorism.

(2) Palestinians must regard themselves as victims – and the only ones – in the conflict. Their victimhood is a product of the colonialist West (which legitimized the establishment of the state of Israel) and of Zionism (which, they claim, is responsible for the creation of the refugee problem and the occupation since 1948 and 1967 alike). Because they are victims, they cannot be accountable or responsible for their actions, nor could they be criticized for the way they spend the money received from the donors.

(3) Palestinians should always be committed to all of Palestine, even if it is not realistic to believe that they would be able to rule over all of Palestine anytime soon. This commitment is unwavering, and any erosion of it is treason and justification of the Zionist narrative (Kuperwasser, 2017).

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