



NORWAY'S ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE TALKS: BETWEEN A STRONG STATE AND A WEAK BELLIGERENT

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This article focuses on the secret “back channel” negotiations that led to the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo agreement of September 1993. The author traces the evolution of Norway’s role from low-key facilitator to active mediator, paralleling the upgrading of the channel from an informal exploratory bridge-building exercise to official negotiations at the highest level. In detailing the unfolding of the talks and the Norwegian actors’ differing relations with the two sides, the article also sheds light on the limitations and drawbacks of third-party mediation (especially by a weak intermediary) in a peace process marked by a fundamental asymmetry of power between the negotiating parties.

“THE GREATEST ACTS of statesmanship were made by people who did not know what they were doing,” the famous historian A. J. P. Taylor once commented.¹ The remark applies very aptly to the two Israeli academics, the three Palestinian representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and a Norwegian couple who came together under the auspices of a research institute in a small Norwegian town on 20 January 1993. None seemed likely candidates for a government mandated peace mission, yet the secret meeting that cold winter day launched a process that evolved into the “Oslo back channel” that ultimately, some eight months later, produced the accord that was to change the face of the Middle East.²

Today, when hindsight has made clear the flaws of the agreement, and when the results of the “Oslo process” have proved to be quite different from what many had hoped, it might be instructive to reflect on the role of Norway in shepherding this process, and, in a larger sense, to reflect on the entire issue of third-party intervention in negotiations marked by a fundamental imbalance of power.

At first glance, it might seem odd that a small and remote country like Norway, on the periphery of Europe and geographically and culturally far from the

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Middle East, could succeed where more powerful states had failed in presiding over a breakthrough in one of the most intractable conflicts of the twentieth century. Yet on closer examination, Norway's advantages as a mediating venue become clear. A small and powerless state has incentives to promote international peace and cooperation, and in so doing it acquires influence and prestige and a role on the world stage. Norway, with a strong humanitarian tradition, had long been involved in UN and other peacekeeping missions, and in the late 1980s had embarked on an "engagement policy" of international humanitarian activism.³ Norway was also a trusted ally and NATO partner of the United States, which in the last analysis would have to play the key role in any Middle East peace settlement.⁴ Most important was its acceptability to both sides. Norway was traditionally one of Israel's best friends.⁵ Even though its almost unlimited enthusiasm for Israel had dimmed slightly after the 1967 war, it continued to be one of the Jewish state's staunchest supporters in Western Europe and the United Nations.⁶ It was precisely Norway's close ties with Israel and the United States, and its reputation for "decency," that made the Norway option attractive to the PLO, despite the fact that it had been one of the last European countries to establish contacts with the Palestinian organization, toward which it continued to have highly restrictive policies.⁷ Indeed, it was PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat himself who, as far back as 1979, first proposed Norway as a channel for negotiations. Arafat approached the Norwegian government several more times during the 1980s, and in 1989 he specifically asked the Norwegian foreign minister to convey a message to Israel's foreign minister, suggesting Norway as a venue for direct talks. While Norway passed this proposal on to Israel, even offering financial backing for the channel as well as technical and human support, Israel gave the offer as little consideration as it gave the earlier offers.⁸

THE NORWAY CHANNEL BEGINS

By the early 1990s, however, the international situation had greatly changed. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the United States was able to put together an international coalition on the understanding that, following the successful ejection of Iraq from Kuwait, the United States would turn its attention to settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The result was the Madrid Peace Conference in autumn of 1991, followed by bilateral talks in Washington, D.C., on four tracks between Israel on the one hand and Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians on the other. Under the Madrid terms of reference, the PLO had been excluded from the negotiating table and the talks were led by Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza.⁹ But the talks lagged: contrary to American and Israeli hopes and expectations, the Palestinians from the "inside" did not become independent of the PLO and move forward on their own. Instead, they continued to focus on the fundamental but thorny issues that the Israelis, backed by the United States, did not wish to discuss, such as UN resolutions, international law, settlements, and the illegality of the occupation. As time went on, it became clear that there would not be any progress as

long as the PLO remained excluded. Moreover, since the Israeli Labor party had come to power in the summer of 1992, a number of political figures—especially Foreign Minister Shimon Peres—were convinced that with Arafat and the PLO severely weakened politically by perceived support of Saddam Hussein and financially by the loss of funding from the Gulf, the time was ripe for clinching a deal. Thus, when the Norwegians proposed to host secret talks between the PLO and the Israelis that would run parallel with the Washington talks, Israel (or more precisely, Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin) accepted the offer. The Oslo venue would allow Israel to explore the views held by the PLO without any commitment.¹⁰

As for the PLO, it had nothing to lose and everything to gain. In fact, several PLO representatives had asked for Norway's help in the early 1990s. Among these was Ahmad Qurai', better known as Abu Ala', who in February 1992 raised the issue of a possible Norwegian involvement with Terje Larsen, who was to become the prime mover in the Norway channel.¹¹ From the Palestinian perspective, the Norwegian setting would bring the marginalized PLO back to center stage and would give Arafat complete and direct control over the Palestinian side in the negotiations.¹²

The Oslo back channel opened in January 1993, with two academics, Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak, on the Israeli side, and Abu Ala' and two aides on the Palestinian side. Though the Palestinian participants were all PLO officials, the talks at this stage were entirely informal and exploratory, almost "academic." The only Israeli official aware of the meetings was Beilin, who was deeply involved from the beginning and watched progress closely, with Peres (who became enthusiastic) and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (who was very skeptical) informed only after the first round. The Norwegian government, obviously, had approved and eagerly backed the talks: Deputy Foreign Minister Jan Egeland briefly attended the first meeting and Mona Juul, Larsen's wife and one of the key Norwegian players, was herself a diplomat and worked in the Foreign Minister's secretariat. But at this early stage, the talks could not even be called a "back channel." The aim was merely bridge building and the creation of informal political contacts to see if anything could be done to help get beyond the stalemate in Washington. Any new ideas or results produced in Norway would be transferred back to the official negotiations in the United States.¹³

Norway's role at the beginning was modest and largely unplanned, developing as it went along. The Norwegians saw themselves not as mediators but as facilitators. They never interfered in the negotiations or even were present when they were going on. Their contribution consisted of getting the parties together, booking flights and hotels, paying the bills, arranging meetings and, not least, keeping the negotiations going and secret. The Norwegians achieved virtually total secrecy for the talks, which were mainly held in isolated locations where the participants had to spend most of their time with each other. Most important, they used their good offices to promote trust between the two sides. This involved providing shelter, a small-group setting, food, drinks,

and outdoor walks—an informal and cozy atmosphere that would foster the development of friendships between the main players.¹⁴ The emphasis was on breaking down stereotypes, smoothing over existential obstacles, clearing misunderstandings, and overcoming a lack of willingness to talk.¹⁵

The effectiveness of this facilitative approach and the intimacy it fostered was soon clear. The terms of reference of the Norway talks were basically the same as those guiding the Washington talks: the mandate was to reach an “interim” accord establishing self-governing arrangements for the Palestinians, with the substantive and difficult issues—Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, and borders—to be deferred to “final status” negotiations that would begin later. But while the talks in Washington had reached a stalemate, those in Norway were moving forward. One very important factor was the establishment of “ground rules” that mandated total secrecy and the retractability of all positions put forward in the talks and prohibited “dwelling on past grievances.” Even more important was the greater flexibility of the PLO negotiators: Arafat was in charge, and he could make whatever concessions he found suitable.¹⁶ Still, without the famous “Oslo spirit” created by the Norwegians—Larsen in particular—the atmosphere of friendship and humor and the sense of shared excitement they fostered, not to mention the constant encouragement and reassurance and “hand holding” they provided at difficult and uncertain phases of the talks, it is possible that Oslo would not have happened, and it certainly would not have succeeded in producing an agreement.¹⁷

The culmination of the first phase of the secret meetings in Norway was the drafting of the Sarpsborg Declaration of Principles (DoP), completed in March 1993. Named for the small Norwegian town where it was negotiated, the joint document merged Israeli and Palestinian versions and had three major elements. First, Israel agreed to withdraw completely from Gaza, which would be placed for a limited period either under an Egyptian trusteeship or under a UN or multinational mandate. Second, an interim autonomy scheme for the West Bank would be worked out, whereby powers would be transferred gradually, step by step, to the Palestinians. Third, a mini-“Marshall Plan” involving huge amounts of international assistance was to be worked out for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and economic cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian interim authorities was to be developed.¹⁸ Indeed, the economic component of peacemaking was a major focus of the Sarpsborg DoP. The Israelis had conceded nothing with regard to the final status issues, and even the arrangements spelled out in the accord could be halted and reversed. Unlike in the past, though, this was now enough to satisfy the PLO.¹⁹

THE TALKS BECOME OFFICIAL

Meanwhile, Rabin and Peres had been monitoring the “pre-negotiations” through Yossi Beilin. In the four months since the talks began, the participants involved in the Oslo back channel had established a working

relationship and significant progress had been made. The Israeli team was continuously surprised by PLO flexibility and optimistic as a result. Abu Ala' was seen as "a man of his word, a man with whom we could do business."²⁰ But the Palestinians, who did not even know if Peres and Rabin were aware of the talks, were increasingly frustrated at the lack of high-level Israeli involvement. Larsen, pressed by Abu Ala', flew to Israel to see Beilin and returned with assurances of Israeli seriousness. But Abu Ala' insisted on official Israeli representation, and in early May he told Larsen that the Palestinians were ending the talks unless Israel upgraded.²¹ This threat, coupled with Peres's conviction that now was the time to make a deal with the much weakened PLO, led to the upgrading of the level of Israeli representation in May 1993. This was the start of the first formal negotiations ever between Israel and the PLO: what had been unofficial exploratory talks now became the main (though still absolutely secret) channel of Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, though the Washington talks continued. A high-ranking Israeli diplomat, Director General of Foreign Affairs Uri Savir, became chief negotiator, with Hirschfeld and Pundak still part of the team but parked on the sidelines.²² From this time forward, Peres and Rabin increasingly took charge, though the involvement of Peres, long convinced that the Norway channel would bear fruit, was initially more direct, with Rabin still very skeptical and more interested in pursuing a breakthrough with Syria. Israel was now negotiating for real.

After initial talks between Savir and Abu Ala', negotiations began in earnest, especially with the arrival of Yoel Singer, a lawyer with the Israeli Defense Forces for twenty years. Whereas the Palestinians had expected the Sarpsborg DoP to be the basis of the talks, Singer began drafting a new version tailored to Israeli requirements. This involved first and foremost the process of

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clarifying, hardening, and withdrawing the concessions contained in the Sarpsborg joint document. As Foreign Minister Peres chose to put it, Israel began to "revise [its] position on . . . basic ideas."²³ Indeed, a number of provisions in the earlier document had been deeply problematic for the Israeli government. The provision that outstanding questions that could not be resolved between the parties should be referred to binding international arbitration was immediately eliminated. So was the suggestion that East Jerusalem would be part of the area under Palestinian self-rule—the status of Jerusalem was

not to be addressed in the DoP, and if the Palestinians pressed the point, the Israelis warned, they would kill the entire negotiations.²⁴ There would be no trusteeship for Gaza following Israeli withdrawal. This proposal, apparently envisaged as a Namibia-style UN administration of Gaza to ensure gradual Israeli withdrawal and to prepare for the possible establishment of a Palestinian state, had caused particular consternation among Israeli policymakers, who feared it would serve as a precedent for UN involvement in Israeli administration of the occupied territories. Israel wanted no interference from the outside. Ever

since 1948, successive Israeli governments had consistently fought any kind of UN involvement in what they considered internal Israeli affairs. Moreover, in recent history, trusteeships had been established as a phase in a decolonization process designed to lead to full independence, whereas Israel's declared position opposed the creation of a state following the interim period.²⁵

What Singer's draft, presented to the Palestinians in early July and modified somewhat in intensive negotiations over several days, did contain was "full autonomy" for the Gaza Strip and partial autonomy in the main West Bank towns, starting with Jericho (whose area was undefined). This would give Arafat the foothold he needed in the West Bank. The autonomy, however, was limited to the specific areas of education, health, tourism, welfare, and taxation, with Israel to retain responsibility for internal as well as external security. The Israeli army would redeploy first from the Gaza Strip (except for the settlements) and Jericho and then from the other West Bank towns, though redeployment was to be "a matter for Israel's sole discretion." The DoP could include a requirement for "consultation" with the Palestinians but not for "agreement."²⁶ At the end of the two days, the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators each took Singer's amended draft—known as the Grefsheim DoP for the town where it was negotiated—to their respective leaderships.

The Israelis had known that "the Palestinians would have difficulty digesting" even the revised version of the new DoP.²⁷ All the same, they expected them to accept it and were therefore surprised when the negotiators returned from Tunis when the talks reconvened on 10 July at Halvorsbøle and brought with them an extensive set of far-reaching demands.²⁸ Among the twenty-six demands were Israeli recognition of the national rights of the Palestinian people, replacement throughout the document of the term "Palestinian" by the term "PLO," and commitment to implement UN Security Council Resolution 242 (which from a Palestinian view meant full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories), shared control of the border crossings between the West Bank and Jordan, extraterritorial roads linking Gaza and the West Bank, and a self-governing structure that could lead to a future Palestinian state. The Palestinians also tried to bring Jerusalem back into the autonomy area by demanding that Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem be allowed to vote and stand for elections. They also raised again the issue of outside arbitration and an international presence to guarantee implementation of the agreement.²⁹ All of these demands were totally unacceptable for Israel, which strove to do everything possible to make sure that "the permanent status of the territories was not prejudiced by the terms of the interim agreement."³⁰

FROM FACILITATOR TO MEDIATOR

The upgrading of the talks and the revised Israeli demands seemed inevitably to require a different kind of third party assistance. Hitherto, the Norwegians had insisted on being low-key facilitators and supporters, almost never

involving themselves in substance or being present during the talks themselves. Even before the official upgrade, there were signs that this very limited role was going to change: in April 1993, Norway appointed a new foreign minister, Johan Jørgen Holst, an ambitious and gifted analyst and brilliant formulator who immediately made clear his intention to play an active role, with a hands-on, personal involvement in the process. In a marked departure from the Norwegian team's practice, he surprised both the Israelis and the Palestinians not only by attending the fifth round of talks on 8-9 May—before the upgrade—but by actually participating directly in the negotiations. Indeed, his presence was a further incentive for the Israelis to upgrade. With official PLO representatives and Norwegian participation at the ministerial level, Israel could not continue to be represented by academics with no official position.³¹

With the crisis that erupted with Abu Ala's return from Tunis on 10 July, the new foreign minister had ample opportunity to exercise this new role. He had already traveled to Israel in mid-June to explore the extent of Israel's involvement: his discussions with Peres made the latter's commitment to the talks clear, but he was unable to determine Rabin's role. In July, he then used the cover of an official visit to Tunisia to meet with Arafat. By that time the Oslo back channel was in deep crisis, about which Holst had been fully briefed not only by his Norwegian colleagues but also by the Israelis, who suggested specific questions they wanted him to raise with Arafat; they also reiterated their own red lines so that the Norwegians would reflect them in their conversations with the chairman. The meeting, at which Larsen and Juul were also present, took place at the PLO headquarters on 13 July. In the discussions, it became clear that Arafat had a complete overview of the talks and was closely following the details. It was also clear that he attached great importance to the Oslo track. He was, however, uncertain as to whether Israel wanted a deal, and the Norwegians assured him that it did.³² At the meeting, Holst "stressed the danger of the talks collapsing under the weight of the Palestinians' new demands" presented at Halvorsbøle.³³ Much of the discussion centered on Arafat's demand for an extraterritorial corridor between Gaza and the West Bank, which Holst insisted was entirely unacceptable to Israel. Instead, he suggested the far vaguer "safe passage"—a term he apparently suggested himself—which actually promised nothing.³⁴

The Israelis had asked to be briefed about the meeting: given the crisis in the Oslo track, the Norwegian assessment appears to have been important in determining whether or not the Israelis would continue. Holst, who was to remain in Tunisia vacationing with his family, wrote a long letter to Peres giving a detailed account, and sent Larsen and Juul to Jerusalem to give their impressions in person. In his letter, Holst told Peres that he had been "friendly but firm" with Arafat, complaining that the PLO was now "deviating from the substance of realistic proposals" and stressing that "the PLO can never achieve a better deal than now."³⁵ The letter also detailed the discussions on extraterritoriality versus "safe passage": this was just one issue where the Norwegians provided crucial information on where the Palestinians would be willing to

concede, with Holst conveying his impression that the chairman would accept the weaker formula.³⁶ On the other hand, Holst did point out to Peres that if Jericho were not included in the Gaza package—Rabin up to then had continued to oppose strongly its inclusion in the final document—Arafat would be confronted with an “impossible sales problem.”³⁷ Finally, Holst emphasized his “impression that Arafat was very much behind the Norway talks. He was involved in the details and dedicated to the talks’ success. This made an impression on the Israelis.”³⁸

The Israelis, however, wanted more information and assurances, and the Norwegians decided to have another meeting with Arafat. In a letter to Holst delivered by Larsen and Juul, Peres thanked the Norwegian foreign minister for his efforts, repeated the Israeli “red lines,” and asked Holst to try to speed up the talks.³⁹

On 20 July 1993, Holst, Larsen, and Juul met with Arafat a second time. Holst reported on this meeting in another letter to Peres dated 21 July. Again, a major issue was safe passage, as the Israelis wanted clarification on Arafat’s intentions and Arafat refused to be pinned down. Holst described how he had told Arafat that Israel was prepared to take “a bold step,” but because Israel’s primary concern was security, continuation of the intifada or terrorist acts would end all chances for an agreement. He had emphasized that the Palestinians had a unique opportunity to obtain self-rule, and that this could be “converted at a later stage to full independence, as well as economic development.” He had warned that “holding up the process. . . . for the sake of arguing over a formula, was likely to be a fateful mistake.”⁴⁰ Finally, he had urged Arafat to do his utmost to ensure that the document would be signed at the next round, which was to begin on 24 July 1993 at Halvorsbøle.⁴¹

It was clear from Holst’s letter that he had been optimistic about the success of the next round. He was mistaken. When the talks reconvened the Palestinians were still holding out on most issues. The Israelis were surprised and disappointed: it had apparently not occurred to them that the Palestinians would “resist compromise” and not surrender to their version. The Norwegians had failed to warn them of the opposition they would face. On the contrary, they had led Peres and the Israeli team to believe that Arafat had “understood” the message—either come up with what the Israelis defined as serious compromises or there would be no deal.⁴² Faced with the Palestinian demands, Israel had little or nothing to give, and the talks seemed on the brink of collapse.

However, neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis were prepared to abandon the Oslo back channel. At the last minute, Savir put on the table Israel’s remaining trump card: mutual recognition, which the Israeli negotiators knew very well that they craved. But they were not only proffering a carrot, they also had a stick. The mutual recognition would depend on Palestinian acceptance of Israel’s latest version of the DoP that reflected the final concessions it was prepared to make. It was an all or nothing offer: The PLO had to agree to the formulations in the DoP that were crucial to Israel, while

there were no promises on the issues on which the Palestinians were demanding Israeli adjustments. There was no more room to maneuver for the Palestinians. When the round ended at the end of July, the Israelis decided not to schedule another meeting, but to “wait for an announcement from the PLO, via the Norwegians, that the Palestinians were prepared to modify their positions.”⁴³

There followed a flurry of intense Norwegian activity and interventions with both sides to keep the channel open and to close the gaps. By this time, the Norwegians clearly saw the situation very much through the eyes of the Israelis and blamed the Palestinians for lack of progress and compromise. In his meeting with Abu Ala', Holst (as he reported to Beilin) had made it clear that it was his responsibility to persuade Arafat to accept the package.⁴⁴ The Israelis appreciated the efforts of the Norwegians and in particular that of Holst.⁴⁵ The Israeli foreign minister used the Norwegian foreign minister as an instrument in the negotiations, assuming with good reason that the Norwegians would present the Israeli point of view to Arafat. The role of the Norwegians was that of “softening the position of Arafat,” who was “terribly weak.”⁴⁶ According to Beilin, who was intimately involved with the negotiations, the Norwegian foreign minister was prepared “to do anything in his power to prevent the talks from collapsing.”⁴⁷ What this mainly consisted of was leaning on the Palestinians to persuade them to accept what they were offered by Israel. The usual argument seems every time to have been that this was absolutely the best offer that the Palestinians could get, and accepting it was therefore in the best interest of the Palestinians. Furthermore, argued the Norwegians, the PLO was the one who needed an agreement and had the most to gain from it.⁴⁸ Israel was so strong that it could afford to wait. Either the Palestinians gave in, or there would be no deal.

Meanwhile, Israel was pressing hard for a rapid and final decision, insisting that the DoP be finalized first and that the question of mutual recognition be postponed until later. It was at this point—mid-August—that Peres, on an official visit to Sweden, asked the Norwegians to come to Stockholm to help “expedite matters.”⁴⁹ Larsen had told the Israelis that the Palestinians “love drama” and “proposed to telephone them in Tunis to tell them that Shimon Peres was right there with him—ready to negotiate the final points.”⁵⁰ Peres, however, did not want to speak to Arafat himself but needed someone of the same status to do the talking. Holst was not only the messenger, passing on to the Palestinians what the Israelis told him to pass on, but also the formulator (formulation being one of Holst's strongest suits). He told Arafat and his colleagues that both the Israelis and the Norwegians wanted to settle all of the outstanding issues with him over the telephone.⁵¹ Arafat was not particularly happy about conducting detailed political and legalistic discussions in his rather broken English over the phone—discussions involving the future of the Palestinian people. However, the negotiations had been set up in the way Israel wanted.⁵² Basically, the Palestinians were confronted with a *fait accompli*. After months of negotiations, the delicate final questions were solved during eight

hours of phone calls between Stockholm and Tunis on 18 August. Two days later, the Israelis, Palestinians, and Norwegians initialed the DoP in a secret ceremony in Oslo in the middle of the night.

MUTUAL RECOGNITION

What remained was the question of mutual recognition, which had been deferred at Israel's insistence until after the DoP had been concluded. The mutual recognition document had to be finalized before the official signing in Washington, set for 13 September, which added a note of urgency. What was to be negotiated was the Palestinian statement recognizing Israel—basically, the seven points that Israel demanded the PLO to accept if it were to win recognition from Israel; these were the points that Savir had handed to Abu Ala' at the end of July to avert the collapse of the talks, and Singer and Savir had already prepared a draft of the text for the Palestinians to sign. As for Israel's statement, there was nothing to negotiate. The PLO had already dropped its demand that Israel, too, renounce "violence and terror" against the Palestinians in exchange for their own such renunciation. Thus, before the negotiations even began, the PLO had agreed that Rabin's letter to Arafat would be a very brief, unadorned statement acknowledging receipt of the PLO letter, recognizing the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people on the basis of that text, and agreeing to begin negotiations.⁵³

Negotiations over mutual recognition began almost immediately after the secret signing and the announcement of the breakthrough to the world. From the outset, they were difficult. The issues being discussed had formed the core of the PLO's struggle against Israel for over forty years. Consequently, the PLO could not simply concede without putting up some degree of resistance. Moreover, in contrast to the earlier talks hammering out the DoP, the Israelis were in no hurry and did not even make a pretense of give-and-take: there was little humor this time to cover the take-it-or-leave-it bottom line. Essentially, the room for maneuver was confined to wording: the exercise was to transform Israel's seven principles into language acceptable to both sides.⁵⁴ The major sticking points were three: First, Israel's demand that the PLO renounce the use of terror and other violence not only on its own behalf, but on behalf of all the Palestinians living in the occupied territories (i.e., including Hamas and Islamic Jihad). Second, Israel's demand that the PLO accept Israel's right "to exist in peace and security." And third, Israel's insistence that the PLO amend its charter, removing the clauses that denied Israel's right to exist. Once again, Holst played a key role. According to Beilin, the Norwegian foreign minister threw the "full weight of his energy and expertise into the issue of mutual recognition, and the phone lines to Tunis and Jerusalem were hot."⁵⁵

In terms of the Norwegian participation, the negotiations over the mutual recognition text, like those at Stockholm, were entirely Holst's show. Norway's role as a mere facilitator had been left behind months ago, but it was during these negotiations that the shift to active mediation seemed complete. And

parallel to the shift from facilitator to mediator was a change in approach from one based on teamwork to one almost wholly dominated by Holst and his highly personalized, hands-on style. The change had been gradual, but as time went

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on the role of Deputy Foreign Minister Egeland, which had been key in the early phase, diminished progressively and almost vanished by the end of July. Similarly, Larsen had been the main orchestrator of the Oslo channel. He was the one who had done the talking, cajoling, persuading, and pushing, and who had kept things running. The Oslo back channel had been his project and his life. He and Mona Juul had been the absolute pillars

of the process, and though they continued to be important for contacts and practical matters, they were no longer at the center of what was happening. Increasingly, Holst had moved to center stage. Though personality factors certainly played a role, much of the change was a consequence of high stakes politics: as the peace process reached its climax, the top leaders in Jerusalem, Tunis, and Oslo increasingly took over. Holst was the foreign minister, and once he had involved himself so actively, it was natural that the role of others would be reduced.⁵⁶ Holst's operating style was far different from that of Larsen and Juul, sitting in on the negotiations themselves and participating in the discussions. At one point he handed a note to the Palestinians suggesting that it was time to give way on certain points. This aroused anger and suspicion that Holst was siding with the Israelis.⁵⁷ In fact, Holst's main concern was not to help the Israelis but to protect the Norwegian peace project and Norway's role. His personal prestige was now even more on the line, because the Norway channel was no longer a secret. The United States wanted a signing ceremony within two weeks, and Holst was determined not to let the Oslo DoP go unsigned simply because the mutual recognition text was not agreed upon.⁵⁸

Holst's "shuttle diplomacy" at Oslo's Plaza Hotel had not made much headway, however. In early September, Peres asked the Norwegians to meet him in Paris, where he wanted Holst to conduct another marathon negotiating phone session with the Palestinians, with Savir and Singer to supply the substance. This session, however, was far less successful than the Stockholm one. While Holst was pushing for resolution, at least partly for reasons of domestic Norwegian politics (Norway was in the midst of a general electoral campaign, and a foreign policy success would boost his own prestige and that of his Labor party), the Israelis seemed to be dragging their feet: "Peres was playing hardball with the Palestinians."⁵⁹ The only advance during two days of telephone negotiations was Arafat's agreement to give up his preferred formula of recognizing Israel's right to "live in secure and recognized boundaries" and to accept Israel's choice of the right to "exist in peace and security," which the Israelis saw as confirming the legitimacy of Israeli state.⁶⁰

The remaining issues were not resolved until a final round in Paris on 9-10 September involving numerous phone calls between the Israeli negotiators and

Jerusalem and between Abu Ala' and Arafat in Tunis, himself conferring with the PLO Executive Committee gathered with him. Most difficult was the issue of the PLO Charter. The PLO had already agreed to amend those provisions concerning Israel's right to exist, but the question was how to characterize the provisions. The PLO wanted the phrase "not in effect," while the Israeli formulation was "non-operative and non-valid"; in the end, the "compromise" phrase was that the articles "are now inoperative and no longer valid."⁶¹ The other remaining disagreement was over the PLO and violence. Israel would not budge on the formulation that the PLO must "renounce" violence and terror (the Palestinians wanted the word "reject"). Israel was also demanding that the PLO take responsibility not only for the violent acts of PLO members, but also of all Palestinians in the territories; it further wanted the letter to call on them to end the intifada. Here, however, Israel relented, and no mention was made in the text of the Palestinians in the territories. Instead, a parallel letter from Arafat to Holst was drafted stating that the PLO would call upon the Palestinians of the territories "to take part in the steps leading to the normalization of life" and to "reject" (rather than "renounce") violence and terrorism.⁶² At the end of the session, three letters had been drafted: the above-mentioned letter from Arafat to Holst, Arafat's letter to Rabin with PLO's recognition of the State of Israel, and Rabin's letter to Arafat with Israel's recognition of the PLO. A fourth letter from Peres to Holst committing Israel to allowing Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem to remain open was to be written after the signing ceremony and was to remain secret.⁶³ As soon as the session ended, the Norwegians carried the two letters to Tunis for Arafat to sign and then continued to Israel for Rabin to sign the letter recognizing the PLO.

The DoP was signed in Washington on 13 September 1993 by Peres and the PLO second-in-command Abu Mazin for Israel and the PLO, amid great fanfare. The highpoint, however, was certainly the famous "handshake" between Arafat and Rabin on the White House lawn. The Oslo Accord was nothing more or less than an initial agreement on principles. Seen in an optimistic light—which was the way in which the Norwegians viewed it—the agreement was a starting point, giving the PLO a territorial base, along with self-rule in Gaza and the small city of Jericho. An imperfect peace was better than a perfect war, as Jan Egeland argued.⁶⁴ But nothing in the accord pointed toward a future Palestinian state. There was no acceptance of the national rights of the Palestinians. UN Resolutions 242 and 338 were mentioned in passing, but the ambiguity of the resolutions allowed multiple interpretations. All of the most problematic and conflictual issues had been postponed for the final status negotiations, though Israel considered their mere mention to be a significant concession. On their road to an agreement, the Palestinians had given up many of their initial demands. Israel, on the other hand, had withdrawn many of the concessions it had made in the first rounds. What was left was a timetable in which difficult matters were postponed to the future, and the timetable itself depended wholly on mutual faith and trust between the parties. In essence, because of the asymmetry of power between the parties, the timetable—and

the future development of the entire process as laid out by the DoP—depended very much on Israel's "evaluation" of Palestinian performance.

NORWAY'S ROLE AND THE ASYMMETRY OF POWER

Norway's role in the peace process cannot be analyzed meaningfully without reference to the evolution of the process itself. At the heart of this process was the fundamental asymmetry of power between the two sides. Israel was the stronger party, possessing a clear national security agenda and unwilling to concede very much. The Palestinians, despite possessing a strong vision of a future state, were the weaker party and as such were willing to make significant concessions to avoid further marginalization of the PLO and the Palestinian cause. In such a situation, what room for maneuver did the Norwegians have?

The Norwegian actors initially saw themselves as facilitators, and it is certainly true that the facilitative model of third-party intervention prevailed in the first stages of the process. Under this model, "the facilitator, like the psychoanalyst, does not attempt to impose a solution on the disputants. Like a magician, the facilitator only invokes the specter of communicative power. The facilitator will create the conditions and parameters of debate and then will employ all the known facilitative techniques designed to protect the state of communication."⁶⁵

However, this is exactly what causes trouble. Many of the problems associated with the Oslo accords might be seen to have occurred simply because a powerless facilitation process carried the entire burden of a conflict resolution designed to solve one of the twentieth century's most intractable international conflicts. Norway, the small-state facilitator, shouldered what was previously seen to be an international responsibility. The question can therefore be asked: Was the Norwegian facilitative model, based on the "radical intimacy of the hearth," the appropriate channel in which to institutionalize a relationship between Israel and the PLO? Did the Norwegian facilitation help to constitute a state of affairs in which Palestinian claims to national self-determination were marginalized?⁶⁶

One of the most serious drawbacks of the facilitative approach is that it fails to address problems arising from power disparity between the parties, and the asymmetry of power in the Palestinian-Israeli case is nothing short of staggering. A facilitation exercise can create an illusion of genuine communication. It can create a sense of equality between the adversaries. Indeed, the Norwegians did everything possible to ensure a symmetrical process. They took pains to achieve equality in logistical arrangements. The Israelis and the Palestinians had the same cars, the same hotel rooms, the same amount of time for presentations, often the same food. This process symmetry enabled the Palestinian delegates to feel empowered and thus equal to their Israeli counterparts. But was this creation of process symmetry helpful in achieving a peaceful settlement? Is facilitation the appropriate approach in cases of overwhelming power imbalance?

And, again, what role and what room for maneuver does such a situation provide for the facilitator? Norway had no opportunity to impose solutions on unwilling parties. It could do nothing about the asymmetry of power on the ground. Such a third-party role could only be reserved a strong mediator, basically a superpower like the United States. Such a role was not possible for Norway.

Norway's role, then, was dictated not by sympathy for Israel or a desire to help it. Nor was it because the Norwegians necessarily agreed with the various Israeli positions put forward. Yet the outcome was the same: Norway invariably acted on Israel's premises, bowed to Israel's "red lines," bent over backwards to accommodate Israel's security concerns. The main reason for this position was that it was the only way to protect their role in the process: the Norwegians knew full well that they had to be acceptable as a facilitator first and foremost to the stronger party. They also knew that playing by Israel's rules was the only way an agreement could be reached and that if the Palestinians did not give in to what Israel considered important, the talks—and Norway's role—would end.

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As Dennis Ross remarked, "Norway had to embrace the Israeli position. It would be no deal otherwise."⁶⁷ Given the asymmetry of power, Norway could either play this role or not play. It chose to play. Basically, this meant persuading the PLO to give up positions Israel found unacceptable on the one hand, and persuading the PLO to accept the positions put forward by Israel on the other.

Norway had neither carrots nor sticks to use in relation to Israel. With regard to the Palestinians, though, Norway had both. The stick was the argument that the Palestinians would ruin their chances for peace if they failed to clinch a deal. The carrot was getting foothold in Palestine or winning recognition from Israel. It could also offer economic assistance—not just from rich Norway but also from the rest of the international community—if the PLO would accept the proposals put forward by Israel. Then, the Norwegians argued, the dynamics that had been set in motion would gradually move the peace process forward, which would be in the interest of the PLO.

Having accepted the starting premises, a number of consequences followed. The interactions were markedly different with the two sides. There is no evidence to suggest Norwegian attempts to persuade the Israelis to see the Palestinian point of view or to tell the PLO negotiators where there might be some "give" in Israeli positions or what counter proposals might prove fruitful. In the telephone negotiations toward the end of the process, Holst and his colleagues were counseling the Israelis, whereas the PLO, whose negotiating experience was hardly comparable to Israel's, would surely have benefited from the presence in Tunis of international advisors. The Norwegians came when the Israelis wanted them to come; they passed on to the Palestinians what the Israelis wanted them to pass on; they told the United States what the Israelis

wanted them to tell and when. After the upgrading of the negotiations in May 1993, Israel asked the Norwegians to make no further mention of the talks to Washington, going so far as to say that if this occurred the negotiations would end altogether. The Norwegians obeyed, deliberately misleading (and running the risk of offending) their closest ally.⁶⁸

The commitment to reaching a settlement under these conditions inevitably colored Norwegian attitudes as well. It is clear from the documents that the Norwegians came to hold the Palestinians responsible for any delays in progress toward reaching a settlement, mirroring the Israeli attitude. Despite the fact that it had been the Palestinians who had begged the Norwegians to become involved in and to promote the peace process, these same Palestinians were now accused of slowing down the negotiations and of not being sufficiently eager for peace.⁶⁹ When the PLO negotiators, returning from consultations in Tunis, introduced changes in the Israeli-drafted Grefsheim DoP, the Norwegians chided them for backtracking on earlier agreements and “holding up the process.” Exactly the same accusations could have been made about the Israelis when they radically downscaled the jointly drafted Sarpsborg DoP: instead, Israel’s “revised demands” were excused as reflecting “red lines,” which had to be understood and accepted. If not, there would be no deal. It must be mentioned, however, that if Norway was negotiating on Israel’s premises, so was the PLO. Both Norway and the PLO accepted the terms.

In conclusion, the Norwegians wanted to achieve results through dialogue and a mainly facilitative approach to conflict resolution. They believed in the principle of gradualism, that trust could be built up and that positive developments might eventually lead toward a lasting peace in the Middle East. They believed that an irreversible peace dynamic would push the process forward. This peace strategy was perhaps overly optimistic, but the Norwegians expended great efforts to achieve their goals. They wanted to create peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians and a new international role for Norway. In the second goal they achieved some success: Oslo became known as the “Capital of Peace,” and Norwegian access to important world leaders increased. Norway, the “little fish in the big pond,” was asked to contribute to solving conflicts all over the world⁷⁰ and became involved in peace processes in Guatemala, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Colombia, and the former Yugoslavia, to name a few. Everyone seemed to need the Norwegians.

As for Norway’s primary goal, peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, after three years of intensive efforts an entire process had been mapped out and a number of additional agreements had been signed.⁷¹ But no peace was reached and none was in sight. In retrospect, it seems clear that to accomplish such a mission strong muscles are needed. Norway had none. And it would seem that, in cases of great asymmetry of power, the results that can be achieved by a powerless facilitator are no more than the strongest party will allow. Any other outcome could only be achieved by a superpower, someone with both strong muscles and the willingness to use them to achieve a sustainable peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Amos Elon, "The Peacemakers," *New Yorker* (Dec. 1993), p. 80.

2. The present article is based on my report "*Peacemaking Is a Risky Business*": *Norway's Role in the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1993-96* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute [PRIO], 2004), which was commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To complete the report, I was given full access to the Foreign Ministry's classified and recently declassified files, the verbatim records of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, records of government proceedings and the Norwegian parliament, and the Norwegian Labor party Archives. I also used documents of the U.S. State Department and the Socialist International and conducted numerous interviews with the leading actors in Norway, the United States, and the Middle East. The research and writing of this article have been funded by PRIO's Center for the Study of Civil War (CSCW).

3. Waage, "*Peacemaking Is a Risky Business*," pp. 3-4.

4. *Utenriksdepartementet* [Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hereinafter UD], 25.11/19, 167, memorandum, 25 September 1979, Hans Willhelm Longva (Chargé d'affaires); 25.11/19, 176, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 27 August 1980; 25.11/19, 185, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 3 July 1981; 25.11/19, 197, memorandum, 29 July 1982, Longva; interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva, 24 February 1999; Rolf Tamnes, "Oljealder 1965-1995" [The Oil Age] in *Norsk utenrikspolitikkens historie*, vol. 6 [The History of Norwegian Foreign Policy] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1997), pp. 379-81; Jan Otto Johansen, "Tendenser i norsk Midt-Østen-politikk" [Trends in Norwegian Middle East Policy] in Jon Kristen Skogan, ed., *Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Årbok 1979* [Norwegian Foreign Policy Year Book, 1979] (Oslo: Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt, 1980), pp. 62-66; Anniken Haugen Jebsen, *Why Norway? Norway's Involvement in the Middle East Prior to the Secret Oslo Channel 1948-1993* (Ph.D. diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 1997), pp. 21-24; Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Explaining the Oslo Backchannel: Norway's Political Past in the Middle East,"

Middle East Journal 56, no. 4 (Aut. 2002), pp. 603-4.

5. Hilde Henriksen Waage, *Da staten Israel ble til. Et stridsspørsmål i norsk politikk 1945-49* [When the State of Israel Was Born: A Matter of Political Conflict in Norwegian Policy, 1945-49] (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1989); Hilde Henriksen Waage, *Norge—Israels beste venn. Norsk Midtøsten-politikk 1949-56* [Norway—Israel's Best Friend. Norwegian Middle East Policy, 1949-56] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1996); Hilde Henriksen Waage, "How Norway Became One of Israel's Best Friends," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 2 (Mar. 2000), pp. 189-211; Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Norwegians? Who Needs Norwegians?" *Explaining the Oslo Back Channel: Norway's Political Past in the Middle East* (Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Evaluation Report 9/2000); Waage, "Explaining the Oslo Backchannel," pp. 597-615.

6. Heidi Olsen, "Seksdagerskrigen—et vendepunkt? Norge og Midtøsten-konflikten p. 1960-tallet" [The Six Day War—A Turning Point? Norway and the Middle East Conflict in the 1960s] (master's thesis, University of Oslo, 1998), pp. 80-86, 103-12; Jebsen, *Why Norway?*, pp. 14-15; Odd Karsten Tveit, *All for Israel* [All for Israel] (Oslo: Cappelen, 1996), pp. 394-405; Tamnes, "Oljealder," pp. 377-78; Waage, "Explaining the Oslo Backchannel," pp. 601-3.

7. Thorvald Stoltenberg, *Det handler om mennesker* [It's about People] (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2001), pp. 260-64; Jan Otto Johansen, "Tendenser," pp. 56-66; Tamnes, "Oljealder," pp. 379-80; Jebsen, *Why Norway?*, pp. 20-23; Waage, "Explaining the Oslo Backchannel," pp. 49-56.

8. Waage, "Explaining the Oslo Backchannel," pp. 605-7.

9. William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington and Berkeley: Brookings Institution and University of California Press, 2001), pp. 310-318; Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 484-501; *International Negotiation* 2, no. 2 (Nov. 1997).

10. Interview with Ghassan Khatib, 19 October 2002; interviews with Hanan

Ashrawi, 23 March 1999 and 19 October 2002; interview with Haydar 'Abd al-Shafi, 17 November 1999; interviews with Shimon Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002; interview with Avi Gil, 21 March 1999; interview with Uri Savir, 18 November 1999; interviews with Yossi Beilin, 23 March 1999 and 23 October 2002; Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, pp. 502-7; Uri Savir, *The Process: 1,100 Days that Changed the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 24; Shimon Peres, *Battling for Peace* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), pp. 323-24; Shimon Peres (with Arye Naor), *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), pp. 20-23; David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 25, 23, 40-41; Jane Corbin, *The Norway Channel: The Secret Talks that Led to the Middle East Peace Accord* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), pp. 53-56; Eytan Bentsur, *Making Peace: A First-Hand Account of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), pp. 104-6, 129-45; Hanan Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace: A Personal Account* (New York: Shimon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 139, 144, 162, 171-73, 199; Mohamed Heikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 415-16, 431-32, 436.

11. Waage, "Norwegians? Who Needs Norwegians?", p. 62-79.

12. Interviews with Ashrawi, 23 March 1999 and 19 October 2002; interview with Khatib, 19 October 2002; Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, pp. 183-85, 218, 242-46; Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin), *Through Secret Channels* (London: Garnet Publishing, 1995), pp. 113-14; Allon Groth, *The PLO's Road to Peace: Processes of Decision-Making* (London: The Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1995), pp. 59, 66, 71-74, 78-80.

13. Interview with Jan Egeland, 11 March 1999: "There was never any grand design"; interview with Ron Pundak, 21 March 1999; interviews with Yair Hirschfeld, 7 May 1998, 22 March 1999, and 22 October 2002; interview with Beilin, 23 March 1999; interview with Gil, 21 March 1999: The Israeli participation in the Oslo back channel was "not a part of a

grand plan"; interviews with Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002; interviews with Ashrawi, 23 March 1999 and 19 October 2002; interview with Abu Ala', 21 October 2002.

14. Interviews with Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; interview with Terje Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Mona Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; interview with Geir O. Pedersen, 18 October 2002; interview with Abu Ala', 21 October 2002; interviews with Beilin, 23 March 1999 and 23 October 2002; interviews with Hirschfeld, 7 May 1998, 22 March 1999, and 22 October 2002; interviews with Pundak, 21 March 1999 and 23 October 2002; interview with Savir, 19 November 1999; interview with Gil, 21 March 1999; interview with Yoel Singer, 4 June 2002; Corbin, pp. 40-52, 60-61; Yossi Beilin, *Touching Peace: From the Oslo Accord to a Final Agreement* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), pp. 68-69; Elon, pp. 80-81; Makovsky, p. 22.

15. Deiniol Jones, *Cosmopolitan Mediation? Conflict Resolution and the Oslo Accords* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 129, 143-44; Dean G. Pruitt, Jacob Bercovitch, and I. William Zartman, "A Brief History of the Oslo Talks," *International Negotiation* 2, no. 2 (Nov. 1997), pp. 177-82.

16. Makovsky, pp. 31-34; Peres, *Battling for Peace*, pp. 326-27; Corbin, pp. 59-63; Elon, p. 81; Abbas, pp. 119-38; Beilin, pp. 69-73.

17. Interviews with Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; interview with Larsen, 21 October 2002; interviews with Juul, 21 August 2002 and 22 October 2002; interview with Pedersen, 18 October 2002; Corbin, pp. 40-52, 60-61; Elon, pp. 80-81; Makovsky, p. 22; Beilin, pp. 68-69.

18. See note 16.

19. Ibid.

20. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 329; interviews with Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002.

21. Interview with Larsen, 21 October 2002; Elon, pp. 82, 84; Makovsky, p. 43; Corbin, pp. 64-65, 70-71.

22. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, pp. 329-30; Beilin, pp. 80-88; Corbin, pp. 76-94; Makovsky, pp. 45-49; Savir, pp. 5-28.

23. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 333. See also note 22.

24. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 332. During his initial talks with Savir, Abu Ala' consulted with the PLO leadership in Tunis concerning Jerusalem. He personally was against conceding on Jerusalem, but Abu Mazin and Arafat agreed to negotiate the DoP on the interim period without it. See Beilin, pp. 59-60; Savir, pp. 5-28; Makovsky, pp. 46-49; Corbin, pp. 84-86; Heikal, p. 443.

25. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 333; see also pp. 333-36; Beilin, pp. 88-92; Savir, pp. 26-28; Makovsky, pp. 49-52; Corbin, pp. 91-94.

26. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 334. See also note 24.

27. Savir, p. 35.

28. Makovsky, pp. 54-58; Savir, pp. 35-37; Beilin, pp. 104-5; Corbin, pp. 109-13.

29. Beilin, pp. 105-6; Makovsky, pp. 59-60; Savir, pp. 38-41; Heikal, pp. 447-49.

30. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 335.

31. Interviews with Larsen, 16 June 1999 and 21 October 2002; interviews with Juul, 16 June 1999, 21 August 2002, and 22 October 2002; interviews with Egeland, 11 March 1999 and 12 March 2002; interview with Pedersen, 18 October 2002; interview with Marianne Heiberg, 13 May 2002; UD 308.87, 4, Johan Jørgen Holst, "Reflections on the Makings of a Tenuous Peace," lecture delivered by Holst at Columbia University, 28 September 1993, published in *Middle East Insight* 9, no. 6 (Sept.-Oct. 1993), pp. 30-34; Beilin, pp. 79, 84; Savir, pp. 21-22; Corbin, pp. 95-113.

32. UD 34.4/87, 6, memorandum, 15 June 1993, Rolf Willy Hansen (Head of Division); 11.7/4, 30, minutes from meeting between Peres and Holst, 13 June 1993, Hansen, 16 June 1993; 25.11/19^o, 2, memorandum, 17 June 1993, Juul (Mona Juul was traveling with Holst). These documents do not disclose the secret back channel. See also UD 25.11/19^o, 2, memorandum, 25 June 1993, Longva; memorandum, 21 July 1993, Kjell Harald Dalen (Acting Regional Adviser); 11.7/4, 30, Tunis, p.t. Rabat to Foreign Ministry, 15 July 1993. These documents do not disclose the secret back channel, but they confirm that Arafat and Holst had a conversation alone. Interview with Egeland, 12 March 2002: "The role of Norway was all the time to persuade the Israelis to negotiate with the Palestinians.

Israel was less willing to negotiate, the Palestinians were overeager, [they] were on us all the time." Interview with Peres, 24 October 2002: For Holst, "nothing was too small," he was "unbelievable," he "never gave us up"; interview with Singer, 4 June 2002; interview with Pundak, 23 October 2002; interview with Shlomo Gur, 21 October 2002; Corbin, pp. 95-96; Beilin, pp. 106-10; Savir, pp. 42-44; Peres, *Battling for Peace*, pp. 337-42; Makovsky, pp. 60-61.

33. Beilin, p. 106.

34. Corbin, pp. 119-22; Beilin, pp. 106-10; Savir, pp. 42-44; Makovsky, pp. 60-61; Heikal, pp. 447-49; Peres, *Battling for Peace*, pp. 337-42; also confirmed in an interview with Marianne Heiberg, 13 May 2002.

35. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 342. No documents on the negotiations in the Oslo back channel were found in the Foreign Ministry's files; no minutes, no memos, no letters seem to have been filed. When, for instance, the Norwegian Foreign Minister had meetings in connection with the negotiations in Norway with the Israeli Foreign Minister, the American Secretary of State, or the Chairman of the PLO, not a single word seems to have been put down on official paper. Furthermore, while extracts from letters written by the Norwegian Foreign Minister are quoted in books, these letters cannot be found in the archives of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nor have these letters been found among the private letters of late Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst.

36. See note 34.

37. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 332.

38. Makovsky, p. 61.

39. Corbin, pp. 124-25; Beilin, pp. 106-10; Savir, pp. 42-44; Makovsky, pp. 60-61. This letter is to be found neither at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor among Holst's private papers.

40. Beilin, pp. 108-9. This letter is to be found neither at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor among Holst's private papers.

41. Ibid. Larsen in particular, now more sceptical, had not been confident that Pundak would present the whole picture to Peres. Pundak was passionately committed to the Oslo peace process, and he always took the most optimistic views in the discussions with his superiors. Corbin, p. 125.

42. See note 32.
43. Beilin, p. 112. See also Corbin, pp. 134–38; Savir, pp. 49–51; Makovsky, pp. 63–64.
44. Beilin, p. 113.
45. This is confirmed in interviews with all of the main Israeli actors: interviews with Peres, 25 March 1999 and 24 October 2002; interview with Gil, 21 March 1999; interview with Savir, 18 November 1999; interviews with Beilin, 23 March 1999 and 23 October 2002; interview with Pundak, 21 March 1999; interviews with Hirschfeld, 7 May 1998, 22 March 1999, and 22 October 2002; interview with Gur, 21 October 2002.
46. Interview with Peres, 24 October 2002; Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 343.
47. Beilin, p. 113. According to Beilin, Peres's tactics worked well with Holst: "His expression of personal appreciation for Holst was no doubt gratifying to the Norwegian Minister, who was henceforward prepared to do everything in his power to prevent the collapse of the talks."
48. Interview with Jan Egeland, 12 March 2002.
49. Peres, *Battling for Peace*, p. 345.
50. Ibid.
51. With Arafat were Abu Ala', Abu Mazin, Hassan Asfour, Yasir 'Abid Rabbuh, and Lebanese politician Muhsin Ibrahim. Corbin, p. 155.
52. Corbin, pp. 153–60; Beilin, pp. 117–18; Savir, pp. 55–57; Peres, *Battling for Peace*, pp. 345–46; Makovsky, pp. 70–73.
53. Corbin, pp. 179–98; Beilin, pp. 126–29; Savir, pp. 67–77; Makovsky, pp. 79–81.
54. Ibid.
55. Beilin, p. 127; see also note 52.
56. Interviews with Larsen, 16 June 1999 and 21 October 2002; interview with Pundak, 23 October 2002; interview with Egeland, 12 March 2002; see also note 52. Abu Ala' also emphasizes the personal role played by Holst at this stage: interview with Abu Ala', 21 October 2002.
57. Corbin, p. 182. This letter is neither found in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor among Holst's private papers.
58. See note 52. This line of argument is confirmed in an interview with Heiberg, 13 May 2002.
59. Corbin, p. 185. See also note 52; interview with Singer, 4 June 2002; Beilin, p. 116.
60. Corbin, p. 185; see also note 52.
61. Corbin, pp. 186–87; see also note 52.
62. The letters of recognition, along with the text of the Oslo agreement, are published in full in *JPS* 33, no. 1 (Aut. 1993), pp. 114–21.
63. Holst's private papers, kept by Heiberg, include copies of these four letters. The existence of the secret letter, dated 11 October 1993, was revealed by Arafat in a speech in Johannesburg in May 1994, causing huge embarrassment internally in Israel.
64. This comment was made by Jan Egeland at the launch of the report by Waage, "Norwegians? Who Needs Norwegians?", PRIO, Oslo, 9 January 2001.
65. Jones, *Cosmopolitan Mediation?*, p. 19; see also pp. 18, 71.
66. Jones, *Cosmopolitan Mediation?*, p. 144; see also pp. 18–19.
67. Interview with Dennis Ross, 6 June 2002.
68. See my forthcoming article, "The 'Minnow' and the 'Whale': Norway and the United States in the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1993–96."
69. Interview with Egeland, 12 March 2002. See note 32.
70. Aisha Labi, "Little Fish in a Big Pond: How Tiny—though Rich—Norway Became a Master in the Art of International Diplomacy," *Time Magazine* (European edition), 8 July 2002.
71. Even after the September 1993 agreement was signed, and throughout President Clinton's first term, Norway continued to play a very active—but no longer leadership—role in the implementation of the accords.