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Chapter Two

Three Decades and Counting: Assessing the Oslo Accords through a Security Lens

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Chapter Two

Three Decades and Counting: Assessing the Oslo Accords through a Security Lens

Alaa Tartir

After nearly three decades of their existence, neither the Palestinian Authority (PA) nor the internationally-adopted and sponsored Oslo framework, brought the Palestinian people any closer to realizing their inalienable right to self-determination. In fact, these decades of peace and state building processes, have made Palestinians weaker, more fragmented, and further away from statehood, let alone equality, justice, and freedom. This chapter aims to explain this conclusion through offering a contextual analysis of the Palestinian-Israeli security coordination in the shadow of a failed “peace” process. It utilizes the Oslo framework’s security coordination lens to illustrate how Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip have had to (and continue to) live under and suffer not only from the brutality of the Israeli colonial occupation but also from additional layers of oppression created by their own national governing bodies. The chapter examines the Oslo Accords from a security perspective and presents its recipe and triangle, and offers an analysis of the ramifications of the security doctrine adopted by the PA in its venture to build a Palestinian state. It concludes that over the past three decades complex structures, contradicting dynamics, and undemocratic institutions had emerged and solidified in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and therefore, reversing the Oslo’s Triangle is a prerequisite to ensure a prosperous Palestinian future.



Elsewhere

2020 | 50 x 50 cm, part of a constellation of 20 artworks, mounted on matt diasec.

Source: **Steve Sabella**, <https://stevesabella.space/pages/elsewhere>

Introduction

For the past thirty years, the annual anniversary of the Oslo Accords in September marked an opportunity to reflect on the progress, consequences, and failures of the Accords. The various involved and concerned actors perceived the results and outcomes differently; sometimes remarkably differently. Three decades on, however, illustrates that a sovereign and viable Palestinian state remains unattainable, while Israel's settler colonial endeavour and structures of Apartheid continue to expand and solidify.

Every September, Palestinians are reminded that their political leadership is fixated on a failed and obsolete framework that contributes to the denial of their basic rights. They are also reminded that the notion of peace shrank to a mere function of securitised processes and arrangements, as the Oslo Accords—at their core—are a security arrangement between the occupied and the occupier to sustain the status quo and to ensure the existing imbalances of power. Therefore, the Oslo Accords are neither an avenue for peace, nor a framework that will bring the Palestinian people any closer to realising their inalienable right to self-determination. In fact, it made Palestinians weaker, more fragmented, and further away from statehood—let alone equality, justice, and freedom.

This chapter explores these dynamics by examining and unpacking the Oslo Accords through a security lens. It focuses on eight elements to show that the Oslo Accords security doctrine not only induced a “statehood framework” that was doomed to fail, but also that the much-touted good governance approach and the security sector reform project adopted by the Palestinian Authority (PA) over the past decades resulted in the growth of authoritarian trends and structures of repression, rather than in processes of democratisation, inclusiveness, and accountability. Today, the Palestinians' governance structures at all levels are weak and undemocratic.

Problematising the Oslo Accords' structural transformations and deficiencies

Originally as an externally imposed and sponsored framework, and subsequently as an adopted paradigm by the Palestinian Authority political leadership, the Oslo Accords created processes, institutions, and arrangements resulting in structural transformations and deficiencies. These, in turn, affected and shaped major aspects of the lives (and deaths) of the Palestinians, particularly in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

At the *societal* level, the Oslo Accords framework distorted Palestinian civil society, redefined and reconceptualised key pillars of the social contract, and further fragmented and divided the Palestinian people. At the *economic* level, the Oslo Accords framework solidified the status of dependency of the Palestinian economy on, and the asymmetric containment by, the Israeli economy, creating an economy that is inherently reliant on international aid and assistance and institutionalising a process that denied the Palestinian right for development. At the *political* level, the Oslo Accords framework led to the domination of personalised styles of governance over inclusive, accountable, and participatory approaches, nourishing structural and self-enforcing forms of corruption instead of instilling effective mechanisms to ensue accountability and transparency, and alienating the Palestinian people from the core of the political system and structures of governance.

These structural transformations and deficiencies are neither unintended nor accidental. They are integral to the design of the Oslo Accords and constituted fundamental pre-requisites for the so-called peace process and the PA state-building project. They are also an outcome of the obsession of the PA leadership with the idea and notion of statehood as a means and an end in itself to realise rights and self-determination. The entrenchment of these structural transformations and deficiencies over the years was amplified by the PA leadership's adoption of "internationally pleasing and acceptable" paradigms, instead of being locally rooted and oriented. In other words, international legitimacy suppresses local legitimacy. Institutionally, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) became only nominally present, while the effective institutional weight shifted to the PA, its ministries, and fundamentally to its security establishment (Tartir 2017; Al-Shabaka 2018). This was in line with the dictates of the Oslo Accords' security arrangements, which mandated the PA leadership to adopt "cooperation and collaboration" with the occupier/coloniser—especially in the security domain—as a "sacred doctrine". The PA President, Mahmoud Abbas, famously declared in 2014 that "security coordination is sacred, is sacred. And we'll continue it whether we disagree or agree over policy" (Abunimah 2014; Tartir 2019).

Unpacking the Oslo Accords through a security lens reveals at least *eight* elements that could explain why the Oslo Accords framework is merely a securitised arrangement that violates Palestinian rights—including to security—and reinforces the multi-layered system of subjugation and repression that Palestinian have to live within and under.

First, ensuring the security of Israel through the complex structures that the Oslo Accords created—including through the mechanisms of security coordination between the PA and Israel's security establishment—was a defining feature of the arrangement/agreement. In other words, Israel's security-first approach was adopted even if that meant parallel Palestinian insecurity. Therefore, the security of one group was favoured over the security of another group,

which only sustained a distorted imbalance of power between the occupied and the occupier and heavily contributed to the entrenchment of Israeli “security phobia”. Under the pretext of ensuring Israeli security, the structures, institutions, and mechanisms of the Israeli military occupation over the West Bank and Gaza Strip were protected and sustained instead of being held accountable or dismantled. Furthermore, this Israeli security-first approach allowed Israel to expand and exponentially increase its illegal settlements in the West Bank, and to take all measures it deemed necessary to ensure the security of its settlers. Per the Oslo Accords’ clauses and arrangements, Israel provided security to its settlements and settlers either directly, or indirectly through the PA’s security establishment. On the other hand, Palestinian security was not only residual, but was violated and denied as part of the process of ensuring Israeli security.

Second, although the Oslo Accords were meant to serve a “transitional” role that would eventually tackle the “final status issues” such as refugees and borders, effectively it only constituted a framework that sustained the status quo. The status quo, however, is equivalent to the status of sustaining and solidifying the Israeli occupation, instead of addressing the root causes of its perpetuation. That meant that the key reason for Palestinian insecurity, the Israeli occupation, is left unaddressed.

Third, to ensure the perseverance of the aforementioned two elements (protection of the occupier and sustainability of the status quo), the international community insisted on launching and sponsoring a “peace negotiation process”. Those negotiations were held largely for the sake of negotiation (*the emphasis is on the process*), and not necessarily to reach a meaningful agreement to ensure peace or even to induce a Palestinian state. That said, this “peace negotiation process” succeeded in creating an obsession with the idea of statehood, to the extent the PA leadership believed that a Palestinian state exists “in all but name”—although in reality that state basically remains a mere mirage and hallucination. Therefore, instead of investing in building accountable and inclusive political structures and effective styles of governance, the Palestinian negotiating elite opted for an approach that deepened trust gaps, creating further disconnects between the governed people and the governing authorities. That, in turn, did not only weaken their position as negotiators, but also translated into further insecurities for the Palestine people. This illustrates that the “peace negotiation process” was successful in removing the Palestinian negotiating elite from the lived realities of the Palestinian people; instead of addressing people’s needs, they contributed to the denial of their inherent rights and human security.

Fourth, Palestinian sovereignty and self-reliance are two core issues that Israel, as a colonial and occupying power, cannot allow the colonised to nourish and enjoy. Sustaining the existing status of dependency, economic asymmetric containment, and the dynamics of the matrix of control, are some of the tools that Israel uses. Importantly, they were institutionalised as part of the Oslo Accords

through the skewed custom union (Paris Economic Protocol), the territorial fragmentation of the oPt (Areas A, B, and C in the West Bank for instance), and the paradigm of security coordination/collaboration that reduced the role of the PA's security forces—explicitly and implicitly—to that of a sub-contractor of the Israeli occupation and an additional tool to outsourcing repression (Tartir 2017). These institutional elements of the Oslo Accords, in addition to their inherent reliance on international aid, constitute crucial pillars in sustaining the status of dependency. Dependency has transformed over decades from a short-term status that may accompany the transitional period (1994-1999), into a long-term entrenched feature that describes the dominant reality in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Fifth, the internationally-driven creation and sponsorship of a Palestinian national bureaucracy to govern the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip constituted a dramatic change in the relationship between the Palestinian people and the institutions that serve and represent them, and indeed lead their national liberation project. Over time, a dysfunctional and inflated bureaucracy (the Palestinian Authority) took over, co-opted, and side-lined the PLO. This, in turn, transformed—or more precisely, shifted and altered—the nature of the Palestinian struggle and the tools it utilises. This strategic— but miscalculated—shift not only created a heavy bureaucratic institutional setting employing nearly 160,000 people (almost half of them in the security sector) with a major financial burden on the Palestinian struggle for self-determination; it was also built on a fundamentally flawed basis characterised by an inherent and self-enforcing system of corruption, personalised styles of governance in the absence of effective accountability mechanisms, and neopatrimonialism and patronage practices within a patron-clientelism setting (Dana 2015; Fatafta 2018). This dysfunctional and inflated bureaucracy was tasked to lead a state-building process as a means to realise self-determination and freedom. However, this state-building venture not only failed, but it also disempowered the people/nation as a core element of any state, instead empowering the “wrong national institutions” under the colonial condition. In particular, it empowered security structures and institutions to solidify the existing matrices of control, instead of expanding the already narrow margin for freedom or expanding the Palestinian capacity and capabilities to realise freedom (Tartir 2020).

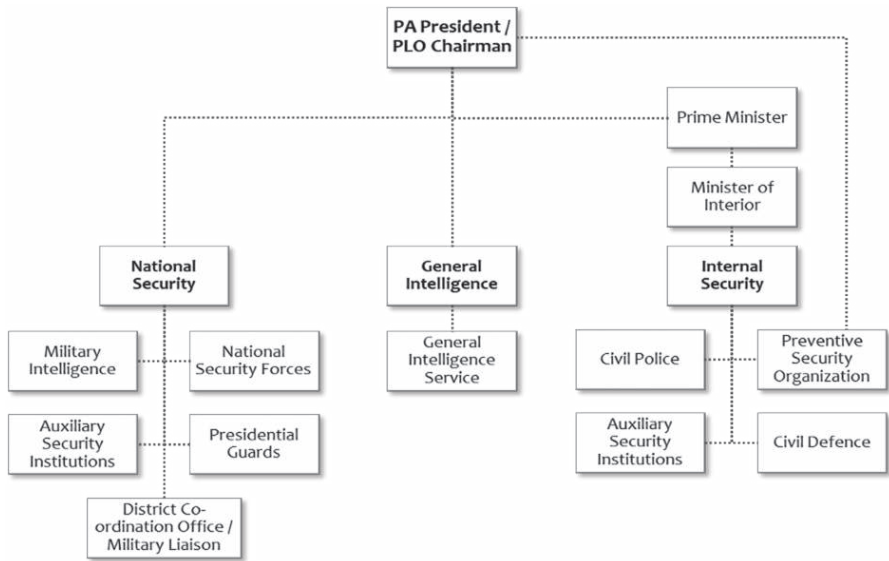
More concretely on the empowerment of the “wrong national institutions”, the Palestinian security sector currently comprises about 83,000 individuals (65,000 receive a salary from the Palestinian Authority and 18,000 are paid by the Hamas authorities in Gaza Strip). This figure includes about 310 brigadier-generals, of whom about 230 report to the Palestinian Authority and 80 to Hamas (DCAF 2016). The security sector, which employs around 44 percent of all civil servants, accounts for nearly US\$1 billion of the Palestinian Authority's budget, and absorbs around 30 percent of total international aid disbursed to Palestinians (see figure 1). The security sector, with its multiple institutions and bodies (see figure 2), consumes more of the Palestinian Authority's budget

than the education and agriculture sectors combined. The ratio of security personnel to the population is estimated to be as high as 1 to 48, among the highest in the world (Tartir 2019). All this, however, fail to translate into better security provision for the Palestinian people, especially from the main cause of their insecurity, the Israeli occupation, due to the inherent structural limitation of the Oslo Accords-driven PA security paradigm.

Figure 1: Palestinian Security Sector Personnel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip¹



¹ Source: PalVision (2017) Based on the work of Tartir (2016) and DCAF (2016)

Figure 2: Palestinian Authority Security Forces²

Sixth, the domination of the “wrong national institutions” under the colonial condition, translated into a more authoritarian and further securitised context. The adopted, implemented, and internationally sponsored security reform processes—which have been the lynchpin of the PA’s post-2007 state building project—resulted in the professionalisation of Palestinian authoritarianism and repression. In other words, structural authoritarianism became part and parcel of the Palestinian political system as the dominance of the Palestinian security establishment extended to political circles, making them even more undemocratic in nature. Under the statehood project pretext, a total synchronisation between political and security leadership has emerged where political leaders justify the actions of the security agencies, while the security agencies protect the political leadership.

This dominance has, in turn, superimposed another level of policing on the Palestinian people that literally affected many aspects of their daily lives. “After 2007, public gatherings are only allowed for weddings, funerals, or prison gatherings”, a refugee from Balata refugee camp in the West Bank told me. Even if this account is taken with some level of exaggeration, it illustrates the authoritarian transformations that have taken place in Palestine over the years as a result of the growing dominance of the security forces and their entrenchment

² Source: Tartir, Alaa. 2020. “Palestine.” In *Intelligence Communities and Cultures in Asia and the Middle East: A Comprehensive Reference*, edited by Bob de Graaff. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

in almost every aspect of life, including the ability to be employed, open a bank account, engage in political activism at the universities, post a Facebook status, or pray or drink at a bar freely (Tartir 2020). Therefore, the rise of authoritarian governance structures, the absence of democratic participatory political processes, and the perceived success—by the “glocal” élite —of the PA’s security sector reform project and its security doctrine that sought to ensure the “state” monopoly over the use of violence in Palestinian society, contributed to the denial of Palestinian rights, including the rights to human security and sovereign statehood.

These ramifications and consequences meant that the post-2007 security reform agenda has undermined Palestinian resistance and security and has subverted the very functioning of Palestinian politics. This meant that a major outcome of the security sector reform project was to tame resistance and silence opposition to Israel’s occupation and colonial domination (and to the PA approach in leading the Palestinian struggle) by criminalising resistance and stripping it of its basic infrastructure. To do so, the PA and its security forces used harassment, marginalisation, arrest, detention, and torture against those engaged in resisting Israel. They also dismantled the structures supporting such resistance through the conduct of aggressive security campaigns within the occupied West Bank’s most militant spaces.

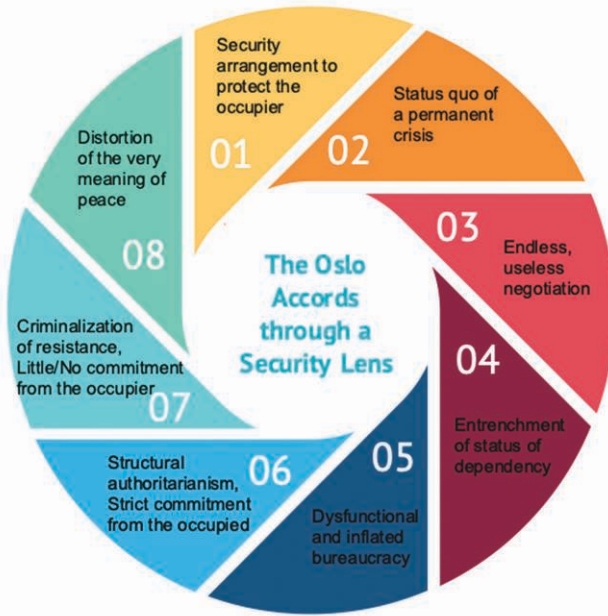
Palestinians in the West Bank wanted protection from their major source of insecurity, namely the Israeli military occupation, yet they had to face the consequences of a paradigm that seeks to criminalise all resistance (not only armed resistance) to that occupation. Thus, this security-driven dynamic induced by the Oslo Accords framework demonstrates that conducting security reform to ensure stability within the context of colonial occupation and without addressing the imbalances of power and revisiting the terms of “peace agreements” can only ever have two outcomes: “better” collaboration with the occupying power and therefore better protection for the occupiers, and violation of security and national rights of the Palestinian people by their own government and national security forces (Tartir 2017).

Seventh, Israel, as an occupying power, showed little to no commitment, while the occupied—the Palestinian Authority and its leadership—showed strict commitment, to the arrangements and agreements put in place. In fact, the absence of the reciprocity element in these arrangements/agreements represents a form of domination. The paradigm of security coordination/collaboration is a case in point. International actors, however, largely (but problematically) view security coordination as a crucial element in the stability, peace, and state building equation/enterprise. Yet, the full adoption of the security collaboration paradigm by the PA leadership translates into actions that criminalise Palestinian resistance, professionalise Palestinian authoritarianism, and by extension, deny the security of the Palestinians while adding more layers of repression and controlling apparatuses to an already highly oppressive context.

As Jan Selby so pithily writes, coordination or cooperation, in this context, is, above all “an internationally pleasing and acceptable signifier which obscures rather than elucidates the nature of Israeli-Palestinian relations” (Selby 2003, 138). In other words, within the reality of colonialism, coordination and cooperation can be only understood as domination. It is no wonder, therefore, that the vast majority of Palestinian people reject the idea, notion, and practice of security coordination because they correctly understand it as a further layer of denial of their basic human, civil, and political rights. However, this realisation by the occupied people, and their desire to free themselves from the shackles of the security coordination paradigm, continue to be met by fierce rejection and repression by the various authorities and actors concerned (Tartir 2019).

Eighth and finally, the elements discussed above meant that the very meaning of peace became highly distorted. The use of the word in the Palestinian-Israeli context became misleading and masks the stark reality of non-peace. Peace became almost equivalent to sustaining the status quo, to compromises, to security concerns and needs, but is hardly ever about accountability or lasting justice and equality. Reclaiming the true meaning of peace in the Palestinian-Israeli context will be as hard as building it.

Figure 3: The Oslo Accords through a Security Lens



Conclusion

This chapter examined the Oslo Accords framework through a security lens and offered an analysis of the ramifications of the security doctrine adopted by the Palestinian Authority. It showed that over the past three decades complex structures, contradicting dynamics, and undemocratic institutions have emerged and solidified in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Moving beyond the path dictated by the Oslo Accords, and its detrimental consequences, requires a serious engagement in a process of fundamental rethinking of the existing, dominant framework that questions, *inter alia*, the institutional utility of the PA and its role in the Palestinian struggle for self-determination—as well as the possibility of reviving, reforming, and reclaiming the PLO as a potentially more representative and inclusive institution to lead their struggle (Fatafta & Tartir 2020).

In sum, addressing and reversing the Oslo Accords' structural transformations and democratic deficiencies is a prerequisite to ensure a prosperous Palestinian future. Palestinians have hefty tasks ahead of them in order to reimagine their future towards justice and freedom. Addressing and reversing the Oslo Accords' structural transformations and deficiencies means adopting an "accountability and people first" paradigm, which requires the Palestinians to reinvent their political and governance system; to rebuild their democratic, representative, legitimate, inclusive, and effective leadership; and finally, to redefine peace so it can first reclaim its true meaning to ensure accountability and lasting justice and equality.

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