

## **Between Hope and Fear: A Dialogue on the Peace Process in the Middle East and the Polarized Israeli Society**

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*The restarting of the peace process in the Middle East in 1993 raised the hopes of many in Israel for progress toward resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet the Oslo agreements raised not only hope but also fears. The latter triggered a deep schism and polarization within the Israeli society. These led to a delegitimization campaign by those opposing the peace process that was directed both against the rationale underlying the change of policies and its architects Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The escalation of polarization saw the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin and the seeming paradox of an election victory for the political rightist parties' candidate, Binyamin Netanyahu. Two Israeli social scientists present in dialogue form alternative psychopolitical perspectives and interpretations of the evolution of these critical events.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Oslo agreements; acceptability; polarization; Rabin's assassination, Israeli domestic politics; Middle East peace process

We would like to thank Stanley Renshon for inviting us to share our views with the readers of the journal. Following Stanley Renshon's invitation, we met in late August 1996 in Jerusalem for a long taped session in which we debated a set of agreed-upon questions. On each of the questions both of us presented first our positions, and then engaged in two or three rounds of comments and responses to each other's arguments. Based on the transcripts of this first face-to-face dialogue, we further continued to debate our views and refine our positions in two rounds of written exchanges. The result constitutes this final format.

## INTRODUCTION

The political landscape in the Middle East changes rapidly as events are moving fast and sometimes unexpectedly. Thus, by the time this dialogue will be published and become available to readers of *Political Psychology*, the political situation may be different from the one that prevailed when we met on August 26, 1996, for this dialogue. Yet we believe that the two points of view presented here concerning the origins and consequences of the domestic-international nexus between the peace process and the polarization of the Israeli society will be relevant and useful to readers in comprehending the current intense and lively political debate in Israel. The dialogue is anchored in two questions concerning two central events that have shaped the domestic political arena:

- (1) What were the origins and causes of the polarizing tensions in Israeli society, prior to the murder of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995? And how has the peace process been affected?
- (2) What were the causes that brought to power Binyamin Netanyahu in the elections on May 29, 1996?

We decided to focus our analyses on psychopolitical factors in Israeli society, which are directly related to the peace process and domestic political developments, leaving out, largely, the discussion of other salient intrasocietal factors. We were aware that we could not do justice to the complex issues we were raising, or indeed provide a full and detailed analysis of the events. All we aim for in publishing this dialogue is to highlight two divergent perspectives on how the search for a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is desired by most Israelis, has aggravated a societal schism with unintended political consequences.

## A BRIEF FACTUAL BACKGROUND

In June 1992, the Labor Party led by Yitzhak Rabin won the elections and a dovish coalition was formed to govern Israel, following 17 years of Likud rule, including a six-year period (1984–1990) of national unity government with Labor's participation. The ascendance to power of the Labor party did not come easily. The results of the 1992 elections demonstrated once again the extent to which Israeli society had become polarized on the question of how to manage and resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict—an issue that has dominated election campaigns at least since 1981. Broadly speaking, the division on this issue is between “doves” and “hawks.” At the center of disagreements between doves and hawks stand the territories, which were occupied by the Israeli army during the 1967 Six Day War. Doves hold the “land for peace” principle according to which Israel should withdraw from all or most of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights in exchange for full

peaceful relations, which will guarantee its security. Hawks, however, believe that holding on to or even annexing most of the occupied territories is a necessary condition for maintaining security. In their view peace can be achieved and maintained only from a position of strength that will confront the Arabs with the realization that they cannot impose their terms on Israel by violent means, and that peace therefore is in their own, as much as it is in Israel's, interest.

Obviously, the polarization of attitudes is not sharply dichotomous, with most Israelis located on a dovish-hawkish continuum rather than at the two extreme poles. The disagreement between doves and hawks is broad and touches on myriad issues, including Jewish settlement of the occupied territories, the extent of advisable withdrawal from those territories, attitudes toward the PLO, the nature of the permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the status of Jerusalem. Generally speaking, however, public opinion during the last 25 years has consistently moved, albeit slowly and cautiously, toward the dovish end of the spectrum. The majority of the public, it seems, has been adopting more moderate and compromising views regarding the resolution of the various issues underlying the Israeli-Arab conflict. Both regional and global developments can be mentioned among the main reasons for changes in Israeli public opinion. They include the 1977 visit of Egypt's President Anwar Sadat in Jerusalem and the peace agreement with his country that followed, the war in Lebanon in 1982, the Algiers resolutions of the Palestinian National Council of 1988 that implicitly recognized Israel, the Palestinian Intifada (the Palestinian uprising), the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, the Gulf war and the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in 1991. In that context of cautious attitude change, the question of why the Israeli public has reacted as it did to the dramatic change that took place since 1993, to relations between Israel and the Palestinians, to the attendant agreements concerning Gaza and the West Bank, and to peace talks with Syria is still contested among observers.

### **First Question:**

**What were the origins and causes of the polarizing tensions in Israeli society, prior to the murder of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995? And how has the peace process been affected?**

**Daniel Bar-Tal:** Polarization and tension in Israeli society is not a new phenomenon. The polarization on the essence of the Israeli-Arab conflict and how to resolve it has grown steadily through the last two decades, with dovish attitudes becoming considerably more widespread in Israeli society. This tension somewhat abated during the national unity government of 1984–1990 and flared up again with the rise of a Likud—extreme hawkish coalition under the leadership of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir (1990–1992). Although the events of the Gulf War and the Intifada (the Palestinian uprising), together with U.S. pressure, brought Israel to the Madrid

Conference, the government continued its hawkish policies as reflected, for example, in settling the occupied territories, rejection of the PLO as a partner for negotiation, and the refusal to accept the “land for peace” principle—policies which were strongly and actively opposed by a considerable segment of the Israeli society. The tension however rose when in 1992 a dovish coalition came to power. It is thus important to find out why, during the ruling of the dovish government under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, the tension peaked, culminating in the murder of the prime minister.

The dovish coalition led by the Labor Party which ascended to power in June 1992 brought a new approach to the resolution of the Middle East conflict. It had the sincere intention to conduct serious negotiations on the basis of the land-for-peace principle, believing that only peace could strengthen the security of Israel and assure its existence. Yitzhak Rabin, the new prime minister, made changes in Israel’s negotiations teams with the Syrians and the Palestinians and gave them new briefs.

The time was ripe for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to lead Israel with a new approach on a renewed attempt to move the peace process in the Middle East, which began in 1977 with the visit of the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in Jerusalem. Both experienced statesmen, with extensive security backgrounds and who had themselves been moderate hawks in the past, now perceived the windows of opportunity for peace with a new solid basis for security.

First of all, I’ll mention only briefly the strategic constellation, which changed dramatically at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, and provided a facilitating context for the peace process. The U.S.S.R., unconditional supporter of the Arab cause and main supplier of weapons, disintegrated. In contrast, the influence of the U.S., now sole superpower and ally of Israel, peaked. Finally the Gulf War dramatically changed the situation in the Middle East as major Arab states allied with the United States against Iraq. The PLO, on the other hand, by supporting Iraq, found itself isolated and in a significantly weakened position in the world in general, and especially among the Arab states, including the Gulf states hitherto a main source of economic support. Also, the PLO’s 1988 strategic decision in Algiers should be mentioned, which provided the basis for negotiation about the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

I would like to reflect here about the psychological climate which served as a background to the new peace policies of the dovish government. First, in the eyes of the Israeli public, the negotiations led by the dovish Rabin government continued those of the former hawkish government. There was no sudden or dramatic change of policies. It has to be remembered that at the time of the shift of power, direct bilateral negotiations between Israel and Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestinians already were going on in Washington for about half a year, following the Madrid conference. In addition, multilateral negotiations on specific problems were in progress. However, these negotiations dragged on without significant progress. The

hawkish Prime Minister Shamir (who even voted against the Camp David agreement), by his own confession, had meant to protract fruitless negotiations for years. His maximalist position tied with a "Greater Israel" ideology, claiming the Jews' sole and inalienable right to the "Land of Israel" including the occupied territories, was very far removed from even the most minimalist expectations of the Arab delegations.

Second, of special significance if we want to understand the psychological climate on the eve of the new peace process, is the fact that public opinion held a significantly more dovish position than that of the hawkish government of Shamir. Even the committed voters of Likud were more dovishly oriented than their leaders. The Palestinian uprising (Intifada) and the Gulf War showed, to at least part of the Israeli public, that it was impossible to break the Palestinian will for self-determination and that territory, in an era of missile wars, was of less importance than peaceful relations with surrounding nations. Also, the Intifada bore out further the price that Israelis, too, must pay for the occupation. At the same time, there were social and economical consequences of the government's settling policies in the occupied territories, where a disproportionately large amount of money was spent on a very small number of settlers, at the expense of other segments of the Israeli population.

At the beginning of the new Rabin government's peace process in the summer of 1992, more than 55% of the Jewish population in Israel favored solutions that involved returning at least part of the territories in exchange for peace. Twenty-nine percent thought that Israel should definitely "agree" and "probably agree" to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as part of a peace agreement. More than 55% agreed to solutions ranging between Palestinian autonomy and a Palestinian state. Twenty-nine percent were willing to return "a part" or "the entire" Golan Heights in exchange for peace. Of special importance was the finding that in the summer of 1992, 45% of the Jewish population thought that Israel should conduct peace negotiations directly with the PLO and an additional 28% thought that Israel should negotiate with the PLO, if that organization announced recognition of Israel and gave up terrorist activities. Only a minority of 27% of Israel's Jews objected to any negotiations with the PLO. We should remember that these percentages reflect the opinions of Israeli Jews only. When we add the attitudes of Israeli Palestinians, who are citizens of Israel, the support for dovish policies increased further.

The peace policies of Rabin and Peres did nevertheless meet with opposition. Opposition to the withdrawal from the Golan Heights, prerequisite for peace with Syria, outdid (with a higher percentage among a more heterogeneous population, including Labor party supporters) opposition to concessions necessary for reaching an agreement with the Palestinians. First, I'll discuss the reasons for the opposition to withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

After his election Rabin changed his opinion on withdrawal from the Golan and as a result lost his credibility on the issue. Whereas during his election

campaign he proclaimed that holding on to the Golan was essential for Israel's security, when he began negotiating with the Syrians, it became quite clear that he would agree to withdraw, with the "extent of withdrawal" being proportional to the "extent of peace." Part of the public did not like this change and saw it as a breach of the voters' trust. There were other reasons that fueled opposition to the withdrawal from the Golan:

1. The Golan Heights are perceived as supremely important strategically for the security of Israel because of their topographical position. They are positioned about 600 meters above Israel's 1967 border, which is difficult to defend.
2. Israelis hold very negative perceptions of the Syrians and have powerful collective memories of hostile Syrian acts against Israel, including the former nation's attempts to disrupt the water supply to Israel; the bombardment of civilian settlements during the years preceding the Six Day War and the heavy battle for the Golan Heights; the Syrian surprise attack on October 6, 1973, in which they almost retook the Heights; and Israel's recapture of the Heights with very heavy losses. Also, the Syrians had been stereotyped by the Israeli media and government as the country's most cruel and vicious enemy.
3. The Israeli public identified with the Jewish settlers of the Golan Heights who initiated and organized the opposition against the withdrawal from the Golan. Their secular and political background, in contrast to that of the West Bank settlers, was similar to Israel's mainstream, and they were perceived by the public as pioneers who settled the Golan as part of the nation's mission to secure Israel's border.
4. The Golan has been perceived by many Israelis to be part of the country, since in 1989 the Israeli parliament (Knesset), with an overwhelming majority, passed a law which put it under Israel's legal jurisdiction.
5. Israelis have formed an emotional attachment to the Golan because it has become one of the country's favorite tourist regions, and therefore they have had inhibitions about giving it back to the Syrians.
6. The Druze population of the Golan Heights did not actively oppose the Israeli occupation, nor did the Syrians initiate any violent action on the border. Therefore, the Israelis did not perceive the Golan Heights as a problematic region that might ignite violence.
7. The Golan is considered by the supporters of the Greater Israel ideology to be part of the land to which the Jewish people have a historical and religious right.
8. There are water sources in the Golan which are essential for the Israeli water supply.

The Israeli opposition to an agreement with the Palestinians also has several sources:

1. The West Bank is considered part of the biblical Promised Land, and the heritage of the forefathers of the ancient Jewish Kingdom, where Jews lived through generations, especially in Hebron. Many Jews feel a certain historical attachment, but only a fraction consider the West Bank as an integral part of Israel, to which Jewish people have the sole rights.
2. There is a widespread belief that the Israeli presence in at least part of the West Bank is necessary to protect Israel from possible military attacks and to prevent terrorist acts.
3. Since the PLO and its leader, Yasir Arafat, were officially delegitimized throughout the years as a violent and unreliable terrorist organization whose aim is to destroy Israel and perpetrate acts of violence on the Jewish people, part of the public objected to any contact with the PLO.
4. There is a fear that an agreement with the Palestinians may jeopardize the security of more than 100,000 settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, who view the occupied territories as their homeland.
5. There is a fear that an agreement with the Palestinians may lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state, to which the majority of Israelis object.

Although opposition to a withdrawal from the Golan was wider, no violence has so far been used in the confrontation with the government, as in the case of the agreement with the PLO. This difference is partly due to the fact that the negotiations with the Syrians have not, so far, reached a final agreement. In contrast the negotiations with the Palestinians led to the historical breakthrough which yielded the Oslo agreements in 1993 and 1995. These two agreements, "Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, September 13, 1993 (Oslo I)" and the "Israel-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza, September 28, 1995 (Oslo II)," changed the nature of the relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The intermediate agreements established the autonomous rule of the Palestinian Authority over the most densely populated Palestinian areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and set the framework and the timetable for negotiation of the final settlement of the conflict. The agreements also opened a new phase in Israeli-Arab relations and allowed an extension of the peace process to other Arab countries. In 1995 Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel, and the Gulf states, as well as some of the Arab countries in North Africa, established various types of peaceful relations with Israel.

Though the agreements have their weaknesses and strengths for both the Israelis and the Palestinians alike, they were a real achievement after many months of intensive negotiations. The majority of Israelis and Palestinians supported the Oslo I agreement. Polls showed that 53% of Israeli Jews supported the Oslo I

agreement when it was first announced in August, 1993, and 61% supported it a few weeks later when it was officially signed in Washington.

On both sides strong oppositions arose as well. On the Palestinian side, Hamas, the religious fundamentalists, together with other rejectionist groups, formed an active opposition front which called for the continuation of the struggle against Israel and initiated terrorist acts against Israeli soldiers and civilians. On the Israeli side, the political parties which supported the Greater Israel ideology initiated a campaign against Yitzhak Rabin, against his peace policies, and against the dovish government. Only a very small fraction of Israelis (mostly West Bank settlers and radical religious-nationalist groups) took an active part in the campaign. But it was vicious, verbally violent, and agitating. As the campaign continued and its viciousness increased, the schism between the government and the opposition rose. These divergent views could not be reconciled. The opposition objected to recognition of the PLO, to any withdrawal from occupied territories, to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority with its own armed police, and to government policies aimed at stopping the extension of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The opposition understood that since the great majority of the Israelis did not support the idea of a Greater Israel and the majority supported the peace process, the only issue on which they might have a chance to swing public opinion in their favor was security. The argument was raised that the Oslo agreements were jeopardizing the security of the country and especially the personal safety of its citizens. The opposition argued that the PLO, a terrorist organization responsible for the murder of many Israelis, and Yasir Arafat, its leader, should not be partners in negotiations. Nor should their intentions be trusted since their ultimate goal remained the destruction of Israel. It also argued that Israel should maintain security control over the Palestinians and should not create conditions which might endanger the lives of the Israelis. As terrorist acts by Palestinian groups opposed to the Oslo agreements increased, the leaders of the opposition in Israel made a connection between the Oslo agreements and the terror, and they succeeded in affecting public opinion. The campaign against the agreement intensified and support for the government diminished.

The opposition campaign against the government used tactics and methods that went beyond the acceptable in a democratic system. Not only emotional appeals to enhance fears and hatred of the Palestinians were used, but the campaign attempted to delegitimize Prime Minister Rabin as a traitor, nonpatriot, and quisling; his government's policy was portrayed as a surrender to the Arabs, a sellout of personal and national security. It was claimed that the government had no mandate for entering upon the agreement and that it relied on support of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Certain religious groups added a religious edge to the campaign by claiming that the agreement with the Palestinians violated holy injunctions, and there were rumors that a few rabbis had pronounced a religious ruling permitting the murder of Prime Minister Rabin in order to save the land of

Israel and Jewish life. Demonstrations including frequent confrontations with the police and verbal abuse and agitation created a climate of violence, one of whose climaxes occurred when the leaders of the opposition, including Binyamin Netanyahu, participated in a rally against the government, during which a poster of Rabin dressed in Gestapo uniform was on display. The snowball of agitation was set into motion, and to some it was no surprise when a nationalist-religious extremist murdered Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995, at the end of a rally in support of his peace policy.

In retrospect it is possible to suggest several reasons why Yitzhak Rabin did not succeed in maintaining a firm majority of convinced supporters in Israel who could serve as a basis for his struggle with the minority, the dogmatic ideological opposition, whose position he did not have any chance to change.

The belief that the Oslo agreements jeopardized the personal security of the Israelis was probably the main reason for the hesitancy of the Israeli public to support overwhelmingly and unequivocally the peace process with the Palestinians. This belief, propagated by the opposition and used as the main argument against the government, eroded the support for the Oslo agreements.

I would like to make it very clear that the loss of many innocent lives through acts of terrorism strongly affected the public. I also would like to say, from the present perspective, that the Palestinian Authority probably did not do enough to prevent the terrorist attacks during 1994 and 1995. But I want to shed a psychological light on this issue. In my opinion Yitzhak Rabin made a fatal error by presenting security as the only criterion for evaluating the benefits of the peace process. First, in doing so, he created an unrealistic criterion since it is well-known that terror is likely to increase in the first period following a peace agreement by groups that try to prevent it. Second, since there is no way that Israel, or any other country, can fully prevent the occurrence of terrorism, Rabin did not have full control over the declared criterion. Third, by using security as the main criterion, Rabin neither prepared the Israeli public for nor inoculated them against the possible occurrence of terrorist acts. In fact, by focusing on security as the main fruit of peace, Rabin played into the hands of the opposition leaders who exploited every opportunity to convince the unprepared public that the agreement with the PLO actually endangered citizens' personal security. Finally, by using the security criterion, he provided a challenge to Palestinian rejectionist groups to stop the process with relatively little effort.

The error is even graver when we realize that feelings of insecurity depend on the subjective perception of possible danger and the subjective appraisal of ability to cope with it. These perceptions, in turn, are determined by received information and past knowledge which allows the interpretation of this information. Influential sources of information may influence the extent of insecurity feelings, especially of the Israeli public, which is particularly sensitive to potential situations of insecurity because of its past experiences and history. Indeed, after the suicide bombings, part of the Israeli public was persuaded not only that the country's

security was rapidly collapsing, but also that Rabin's peace policy was responsible for this situation.

The events demonstrated how difficult it is to initiate and conduct a peace process in a society that was socialized for generations with the ethos of intractable conflict, an ethos which focused exclusively on the justness of one's own goals, delegitimized the opponent, perpetuated a self-view as victim, and sharpened the concern for security. It is very difficult to change such an ethos of conflict in the short term, especially when the violence continued. The culture and collective memories which were mobilized through generations to cope with the conflict now were detrimental to the peace process. Part of the public still looked at the events through the prism of the ethos of conflict and could not grasp and adapt to the changes that took place.

Under these conditions it was more difficult to build public support for peace, which is based on hope, than it was to stimulate objection based on fear. While the Rabin government had to rally support on the basis of hope for the uncertain, ambiguous, and abstract fruits of peace, the opposition built its case on concrete and unambiguous terrorist events that fueled a deep-rooted fear in the Jewish collective memory and played upon its siege mentality. Rabin did not succeed in convincing the hesitant part of the Israeli public that peace was in its major interest and that the benefits, in the long term, would be very worthwhile, even if Israel returned occupied territories, so long as this would lead to peace. There is an illusion of asymmetry, and there are Israelis who believe that Israel is yielding too much in return for peace.

Ironically, Israelis who had been very vocal about their desire for peace, became hesitant and skeptical when the opportunity finally came. The complex and less than smooth reality of the peace process disappointed them; they had formed a utopian image of peace through the decades of conflict. Thus it was for the second time that elected leadership faced the Israeli society, offering to lead it toward peace. But while on the first occasion, when Menachem Begin negotiated peace with the Egyptians, the opposition rallied behind the government and provided the needed support, this time the opposition did all it could to obstruct the peace process. The government in both cases however believed that it had the duty and the right to open the new era of peace for the benefit of the state of Israel.

**Yaacov Vertzberger:** While I agree with specific descriptive points that you raised, I am not inclined to accept the overall underlying interpretation of the situation and the general picture that you presented, for a number of reasons. I think that the problems that have been associated with the peace process, practically from its inception, and especially with the Palestinians, run much deeper than the political tactical management mistakes by Rabin that were described by you. From my point of view the issues are much more serious. I believe that Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, the architects of the peace process, misunderstood the psychological environment prevailing in Israeli society and the consequent constraints

operating to set limits of tolerance and to the acceptability of agreements that affected key security issues. In a democratic society the policy of making peace, like making war, requires broad acceptability and legitimacy by the mass public, and must be a bipartisan issue. It is preferable to aim for a modest and less comprehensive peace which is *bipartisan* than for a more comprehensive peace that is partisan. A peace settlement that is partisan may not survive the test of public support. It is, therefore, wiser to aim lower in terms of the peace objectives than to aim higher and create a ticking timebomb ready to go off at the first sign of serious trouble. But the accepted wisdom since 1993 of a single moment in history that was ripe for peace and had to be seized, a window of opportunity that one had to jump through, had become an attractive idea that justified haste and exclusion of important domestic considerations. It seemed to be all-important to “make progress” to “keep the momentum” and to discount doubts. This was supposedly what statesmanship was all about. No wonder that peace-making has been portrayed as an act of courage and bravery involving the taking of risks. This was of course a wrong portrayal. Peace-making involves wisdom, caution, and patience, if the outcomes are to assure stability and security.

In other words, I argue that at the core of the explanation for the divisive-destructive polarizing effects that the peace process has had on the Israeli society was the failure to establish broad acceptability and legitimacy for this highly contested policy. Failing to realize the importance of reaching beyond the natural constituency of supporters for the peace policy, into a large and critical section of the public that was convincible but still skeptical, was a glaring error of judgment. A strategic approach to this issue would have structured the requirements of legitimacy into process management. It should have taken seriously into account, as a “silent partner” in the negotiations, that section of the public that was skeptical and concerned but not ideologically hostile to an agreement. It would have addressed the problem of acceptability proactively and preventively rather than reactively. To do so would give the maintenance of domestic peace as high a priority as that of reaching an agreement with the enemy. Failing to do so eventually backfired and rendered the agreements reached with the Palestinians unstable or unimplementable; that in its turn created the potential for mutual mistrust that would make future agreements between Israelis and Palestinians more difficult to negotiate.

It is therefore ironic that the individual who was an important moving force behind the Oslo process, former Minister Yosi Beilin, who is occupying a Labor Party opposition bench in the Knesset since the May 1996 election defeat of his party, has recently become convinced of the necessity of bipartisanship. He is now involved in an intensive dialogue, with some of the ruling Likud Party members of the Knesset, in search for commonalities that will allow for an agreed-upon program between the two major parties for the forthcoming negotiations over the final status of the occupied territories. It is only regrettable that he did not perceive in a similar fashion the necessity of bipartisanship when his party was in power and

initiated the highly politically controversial Oslo process. A similar approach then would have saved Israeli society much of the domestic antagonism, and would have created broader support for and consensus over the peace process. I shall further elaborate on this issue later in my argument.

Intractable conflicts create and leave a substantial residue of deeply entrenched beliefs and emotions of distrust and fear of the other side's long-term intentions and behavior, which prevail even after the adversaries have started to move toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The party that considers itself, correctly or not, highly vulnerable, yet is required to give up tangible assets that guaranteed a reasonable sense of security, is likely to be particularly suspicious and uncomfortable. The reality is that the beliefs and auto- and heterostereotypes in these types of conflict are extremely difficult to change, and Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Syrian conflicts have not been an exception. Large parts of the Israeli public were caught unaware by the Oslo I agreement and then by the broad range of issues and fast pace of implementation envisaged by Oslo II, and later on by evidence for Israel's agreement in principle to return most or even all of the Golan to Syria. Even among those who were willing to give peace a fighting chance, many did so apprehensively and were ready to resort to their earlier harsh views of the Palestinians or the Syrians and their leaderships at the first sign of trouble. Yet as negotiators from both sides, especially Israelis and Palestinians, spent more time with each other, they developed personal relationships and established a mutual personal interest in not failing. Consequently there emerged a growing natural tendency among the participants to project onto the public at large the personal trust between individuals on the negotiating teams, and they became convinced that the majority of the public was bound to see matters in the same light as they did and would realize that the other side's demonic image was badly misplaced. The peace process became personalized for those negotiating it and accountable for its success. For them to doubt its efficacy or the reliability and credibility of the partner would be equivalent to distrusting their own judgment and acumen. For the individuals directly involved in the negotiations, that would be a direct threat to their self-respect. They had therefore an incentive to discount doubts and doubters, to search for confirming information and conforming individuals. That is where the seeds of an acute gap in the interpretation and definition of the situation between the negotiators and large sections of the public were sown. After a slow start Peres and Rabin were ready and willing to move much faster ahead than many in their constituency were. Yet this anomaly and the consequent dangers were not given due weight by top decision-makers in Israel until it was too late. By then the peace process had become a partisan policy issue, and as such became a loaded political issue that would become so divisive that it could undermine the fledgling peace process and put the cohesiveness of the Israeli society under severe stress. What Peres and Rabin missed at this point of change in their own personal beliefs was that challenging existing central security beliefs of the Israeli society required more time and patience and that the process required pacing. They failed to realize the

extent to which in the Israeli context peace would be perceived as threatening as war, if not for all at least for a significant part of the population. Thus they dissociated themselves from a critical component of the Israeli polity, which might have gone along had it been given more time to adjust.

A related issue, where their judgment left much to be desired, was the analogy with the peace process with Egypt, where bipartisan acceptability and legitimacy were established relatively easily. This probably led them to assume that the public's fears could be overcome by dangling and playing up prospects of economic, social, and political benefits to Israel, and that the public would be carried away with visions of a "new Middle East." What they did not realize was the extent to which the example that was set by the experience with Egypt was irrelevant to the negotiations with the Palestinians and the implications for the psychopolitics of legitimizing the peace process. To explain this point it is important to differentiate peace processes involving other Arab states, Egypt, Jordan, and even Syria, from the peace process with the Palestinians. I would like to mention five such differences. First, I think the public found it very difficult to understand and accept a peace process with the PLO, an entity that is not a state, which has been viewed over many years as a non-nation, and that according to the traditional Israeli position should never be allowed to become a state. Prime Minister Golda Meir had set the terms of the debate many years earlier by saying that there was no Palestinian people. Rabin himself indicated that he would not negotiate with the PLO, in his election campaign, which was one of the reasons probably that he was able, in the 1992 elections that brought him to power, to attract the more security-conscious Israelis who were floating between the two major parties, Likud and Labor. Negotiating with an entity that is not a state, which many viewed as a terrorist entity and therefore undeserving to be treated as an equal and respectable partner to negotiations, was not comparable to dealing with recognized nation-states even if Israel had an intensely conflictual relationship with them over the years.

Second, there is a demarcated psychogeographical line on the map and in people's minds that defines each state's territorial identity and separates Israel from Egypt, Israel from Jordan, and Israel from Syria. The nature of territorial disagreements, deep as they may run, is well-defined. But there is no clear line on the map that defines the contested territorial areas in negotiations with a non-state entity such as the Palestinian entity, and therefore there is a stronger sense of fear and apprehension that concessions are just a first step with much broader territorial and political implications than indicated in the language of the agreement. Not having a well-defined territorial identity means that the demarcation of the Palestinian entity's territory remained open-ended. In that context, the Palestinians' demands have been perceived as part of a process rather than an end-state, while Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian demands were considered as end-states even if not necessarily acceptable to Israel.

Third, in the cases of Israel's peace negotiations with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, the other side was viewed as a unitary actor, with a single leader with whom Israel

could negotiate; an agreement reached with that particular leader and his government, would then be enforced. The Palestinian entity was considered as highly fragmented, Arafat's leadership contested, and his future uncertain. Therefore, skeptical Israelis believed that the agreements reached were not necessarily impossible on all Palestinian factions and organizations. And therefore a common image of negotiations with the Palestinians has been that they require painful concessions, made with an entity that is not really fully in control over all its components. Major concessions seem consequently a risk unworthy of taking.

Fourth, the central authority figures, in the cases of Jordan and Egypt, were perceived as reasonable, sensible, respectable leaders. Sadat, and especially King Hussein, for whom Israelis had a soft spot for many years, were considered trustworthy. It was believed that agreements signed with them would be kept even if not all disagreements were resolved. On the other hand, Arafat was systematically portrayed as a cunning, crafty terrorist, who had a reputation for being manipulative and a pathological liar. Whether this is correct or not is unimportant, it is the image that really counts. Even as recently as late October 1996 after years of direct negotiation with him, a public opinion survey showed that 62% of the Israelis surveyed did not trust him, and only 25% believe that he could be trusted.

Fifth, Israeli first-hand contacts with the Jordanian and Egyptian societies were very limited before the signing of the peace agreements, and still remain almost nonexistent with Syria. On the other hand, the Israeli contacts with the Palestinian society have been very extensive and intimate since 1967. The impressions acquired supported prior negative images of a society divided, corrupt, and backward—in sum everything that most Israelis would not accept within their own society. These views generated a set of negative beliefs and attitudes whose basis was not only cognitive but had a very strong affective element of distrust, rejection, and unacceptability of the Palestinians. This could not but have an adverse role on the public's expectations from the future relationships between the Palestinians and Israel.

Collectively these differences contributed to a distinctively different mindset toward an accommodation with the Palestinians than the one prevailing toward Egypt, Jordan, or even Syria. In the short run there was no pressing urge for settlement with the Palestinians because of the absence of an immediate security threat to the status quo while Israel controlled the West Bank and Gaza, especially in light of the decline in the PLO's international position following the Gulf War. At the same time an attempt to resolve the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was bound to touch on many Israelis' deepest long-term fears for physical personal security, in which Israeli public's attitudes toward the PLO and the Palestinian people were nested, and thus highly resistant to substantial change. The extent to which this was the case was badly misjudged by Peres and Rabin. Although both of them recognized this issue as a problem to be addressed, they did not realize the extent to which it was necessary to systematically prepare the public

for the major reversal of long-held attitudes, beliefs, and election campaign promises their leaders were about to initiate.

The adverse implications of this situation are clearly expressed in a number of consequent blunders that only aggravated the legitimacy problem that was inherent in the situation. At the outset of the process, both Peres and Rabin were aware that the public was still not ready for a dramatic change of policy toward negotiation with and recognition of the PLO. Their chosen remedy was secret diplomacy by two Israeli academics with PLO contacts who were later joined by some of Peres's people, and that group eventually concluded the Oslo I Agreement. The problem with such an approach was that the secrecy of the negotiations, once revealed, created an understandable sense of suspicion concerning what actually transpired. The lack of transparency was aggravated by the fact that it was Peres and a hand-picked Peres team who conducted the negotiations. Peres had a long-standing and serious credibility problem and was perceived as a manipulative, self-serving politician. The fact that he was the driving force behind the whole process, and then sprang it as a surprise on the Israeli public, actually worked against the legitimacy of this agreement in the eyes of those who were skeptical about the process. What Peres and Rabin described as a major breakthrough and presented as a source of optimism and the beginning of a new era for Israel was greeted with very mixed feelings by a security-conscious and politically suspicious public that was puzzled by the sudden turn of events and the process that followed which was poorly understood by many citizens. That meant that the peace process was from the start highly vulnerable to disruption through withdrawal of public support.

To establish acceptability and legitimacy for such a process required three levels of legitimacy. First, it required legitimacy for the setting of peace as a prime national objective and priority, and here I do agree with my co-debater that there was a continuous albeit slow process of "dovization," in the sense that a majority in the Israeli society has accepted the fact that peace is an absolute necessity worth paying a substantial price for. In fact since the 1970s, surveys regularly show that a large majority of those surveyed express support for peace. The second level of legitimacy consisted of broad societal agreement on the strategy that would inform the path to peace and the price worth paying for peace. On that the Israeli society has remained deeply divided, a phenomenon which is closely correlated with the division over the question of whether the Arabs want true peace. Dovization has affected substantially less views concerning the specific terms of peace than it affected the general support for the idea of peace as a high-priority objective. In the absence of a cost-of-peace frame of reference acceptable to a majority of the Israeli society, the terms of any agreement were bound to be contested and viewed by the opposing skeptics, not as an achievement but at best as inadequate and at worst a betrayal of vital national interests. Thus the progress of negotiations did not substantially increase the size of the constituency that viewed the process as inherently positive, only the number of those who accepted it as a *fait accompli*, and gave it only their reluctant and conditional support, which did not involve a

change in their beliefs and distrust toward the PLO and its leadership. Consequently the gap between the Israeli leadership and a sizable component of their constituency concerning the meaning of the peace process was not bridged, leaving an increasingly troublesome legitimacy problem unattended.

At the third level, and especially for those who reluctantly accepted the utility of the peace process, acceptability and legitimacy depended on the conviction that the other side was carrying out its share to the letter, considering the lack of trust. This was considered a cue as to whether it was worthwhile to proceed with the process, and whether the agreement was one that was implementable. Moreover compliance reliability, or lack of it, by the Palestinians, would serve as a credibility test for Peres's and Rabin's negotiation skills and credentials if they were to gain the confidence of those still apprehensive. But continuous violations of the agreements by the Palestinians contributed to the failure to put to rest doubts, and convince those who were not dead set against accommodation with the Palestinians but still had reservations. This would be the segment in the population to which Netanyahu appealed and offered the principle of reciprocity as a key negotiation rule and a test for the credibility of the agreements. It was that segment that in 1996 turned against Peres and caused his and his party's defeat. This segment of the public remained deeply concerned about security at the personal and national level. They found confirmation for their doubts in the increase of the death toll from a horrendous wave of terror, which the PLO had obviously not done what it could to prevent. Whatever interpretation and excuses were given, the damage was done. Rabin and Peres, who were hailed abroad as great, farsighted statesmen, found themselves on the defensive at home, their judgment regularly questioned by a large and increasingly angry section of the public. Under pressure they committed the ultimate blunder. Rather than show empathy for the legitimate security concerns of those doubting their policy, as Begin had done with the Sinai settlers in the context of the peace treaty with Egypt, Rabin and Peres turned on them, ridiculing them and implying that they were warmongers. With that turn of events, the chance that the peace policy would gain bipartisan acceptability and legitimacy practically disappeared.

In this atmosphere of distrust toward the prime minister and foreign minister on the part of the public, their management style in the negotiations was now construed as confirming suspicion of both leaders as having a self-serving agenda. The secrecy surrounding the negotiations, the surprise revelation of Oslo I, and the vagueness of the Declaration of Principles were now interpreted in perspective as peace by conspiracy. These views were reinforced by the mistakes made in the composition of the negotiation team, first in Oslo I and then in Oslo II. The team for Oslo I was hand-picked by Peres. Yet all the participants on the Israeli team were in national terms at best secondary figures. None was a confidence-inspiring figure. None of the Oslo I team had relevant military experience. It would be preposterous to expect that those in the public already ambiguous about the wisdom of the Oslo I negotiation, and surprised at the turnabout in Rabin's government's

policy, would have confidence in a critical agreement negotiated mostly by officials whose common attribute was being loyal members of the Peres court, and who were mostly perceived as his coattail-riders. This point is further illuminated by the fact that following the Rabin assassination, when Peres became prime minister, he immediately appointed one of his loyalists who had no reputation as a Syria expert to head the team negotiating with the Syrians, in place of Professor Ithamar Rabinovich, the Israeli ambassador to Washington and a leading expert on Syria, who was appointed by Rabin to head the delegation. To understand the adversarial implications this type of parochialism had for legitimacy, it will be useful to compare this team with the team chosen by Menachem Begin for the much less controversial peace process negotiations with Egypt, which was led by Moshe Dayan, a major national figure, charismatic and recognized for both his political and military acumen. Begin understood that *who* negotiates had critical symbolic value for inspiring confidence in the outcomes. At no point until late in the Oslo II negotiations (when General Ilan Biran, commander of the Central Command in charge of the West Bank and a known skeptic about the Oslo process, was brought on board) was it recognized that fielding a low-prestige team, made up of people mostly known for being of the same dovish ideological convictions, undermines confidence in negotiated outcomes.

The negotiations with Syria further demonstrated how far out of touch with domestic realities were Israel's key negotiators; how unrealistic they were in evaluating their own competencies and capacities; and how intellectually and emotionally unrealistic was their assessment of the situation. Originally Rabin supported a "Syria first" approach, preferring to leave negotiations with the Palestinians for last. But in the absence of progress on the Syrian negotiations and with the opening of a window of opportunity with the Palestinians, Rabin shifted his position toward a "Palestinian first" stance. By the time the Syrians agreed to enter serious negotiations, the Oslo process was already facing serious domestic opposition. The opening of talks with the Syrians and the investment of time and effort in trying to keep them alive in light of President Hafez Assad's maximalist position (return of all of the Golan for less than a full peace) not only taxed the limited resources of key decision-makers already facing a heavy workload, high stress, and uncertain public support, but could not serve any useful purpose. Even the remote chance of an agreement that would require full, or almost full, withdrawal from the Golan opened the way for a coalition between those opposing withdrawal from the Golan with those objecting to the Oslo agreements, and further reduced the numbers of those who were willing to place their confidence in the Labor leadership. The idea of using the negotiations with the Syrians as a threat over the Palestinians and vice versa was quickly proven as resting on wishful thinking rather than on realistic premises. In the Syrians the Israeli negotiators found a tough, uncompromising party that was unwilling to concede much. Still the Israeli negotiators would not give up and continued to waste time and attention on negotiations where progress could come only at the cost of concessions that would further deepen the schism

within the Israeli society, including within the Labor Party (surveys since 1987 showed that support for full withdrawal from the Golan was never higher than 6%–7% of those polled). Yet both Peres and Rabin seemed incapable of realizing how few and uncertain were the benefits from negotiating with Syria at that particular time and under those circumstances. To a large extent this misjudgment was embedded in a driving need for an achievement that would overshadow the Likud's peace treaty with Egypt, for long a sore point with the Labor leadership. The Annie Oakley Syndrome ("Anything you can do I can do better") blindly drove them to ignore the attrition effects and the risk of losing badly needed domestic support for the Oslo agreements, without gaining much in the Syrian negotiations. The dysfunctional linkage between the Oslo process and the Syrian negotiations became critical after the Rabin assassination, as the leading margin that Peres held over Netanyahu was closing. What is remarkable is that since Assad's unreasonable positions provided Israel with ample opportunities to freeze negotiations without losing the moral highground, and thus avoid further aggravation of domestic polarization, the continued downslope ride can only support an explanation focused on severe cognitive closure and rigidity.

Neither the tangible diplomatic and economic benefits, such as the substantial extension of diplomatic and quasidiplomatic relations in the Arab and Muslim world and the economic gains from a peace economy that attracted growing interests from investors in North America, Europe and Asia, nor the shock effects of the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin were enough to save Peres from a humiliating election defeat. Within a short time he went from leading Netanyahu by 19 percentage points after the assassination to losing the elections. Most notable is the fact that although the majority margin for Netanyahu was small overall (about 0.5 percentage point), Peres actually lost by a significant 11 percentage points in the race for the Jewish population's vote, which shows how broad was the level of distrust toward the architect and initiator of the Oslo process.

It is puzzling how two seasoned politicians, Rabin and Peres, showed so little sensitivity to the requirements of establishing broad and sustainable legitimacy for a critical peace process that was known in advance to have the potential of being highly divisive and fraught with policy and political risks. Whatever one might think about the essence of the Oslo agreements, it is obvious the policy-makers' performance left much to be desired. They missed the opportunity to build bridges to the section of the public that was not fully convinced of the policy's wisdom but would have been willing to give the policy a chance, had more attention been given to building mainstream acceptability and legitimacy for the policy, even if the price would have been moving forward at a walking pace rather than the adopting a policy of running improvisations and legalistic papering over problematic issues that were bound to come apart rather sooner than later, as was demonstrated in the difficult negotiations of Israel's withdrawal from Hebron in 1997, and that further reduced the skeptics trust in the agreements and their architects. An emphasis on delegitimizing those who expressed doubts, rather than on legitimization of the

peace process, has divided the country right down the middle and provided the hard-liners of the right with allies from among the floating-vote skeptics rather than isolating the hard-liners as an out-of-the-mainstream small minority. The heady atmosphere of international admiration for the new innovative peace policy and its innovators, on the one hand, and the thought-stifling groupthink atmosphere that prevailed in the immediate environment of the two key decision-makers, Rabin and Peres, both contributed to their confidence that they could not go wrong, and blinded them to important policy and political fallacies. These also resulted in agreements with too many problematic ambiguities, that in the absence of trust between the negotiating parties, were bound to become in the longer-run sources of the peace process discreditation, and they did. The cost of these errors in judgment for the Israeli society, the Labor Party, and its leadership has been high, and the fallout from these errors will affect the peace process for a long time to come. In the final account in a democratic society, the ultimate test of policy is its acceptability. To the extent that a policy is highly devious, even the most commendable policy is ineffective and society crippling.

To summarize briefly the main theme of my arguments, the Oslo agreements had such a deeply divisive effect on the Israeli society because they lacked some important attributes. Leaders in democratic societies that engage in innovative policy initiatives, that are highly sensitive and contested, should be concerned first and foremost with policy acceptability. The chances that such policies will encounter minimum domestic opposition will be better the more the policy in question is *bipartisan* in content and does not offend blatantly mainstream components of the polity. Form is also important. The policy process should be *transparent* and clearly convey *professional competence* rather than political manipulation. The Oslo agreements lacked all three support enhancing attributes.

Obviously one of the most damaging consequences of the lack of bipartisan legitimacy was the heated atmosphere within which the domestic political debate—or rather the dialogue of the deaf—took place. Public discourse has acquired a deeply emotional, hateful tilt, especially on the part of the extreme political right. Yet vicious discourse was not an unknown phenomenon in Israeli society, as was for example the case during the Lebanon intervention in 1982, which represents another case of lost legitimacy, when the political left viciously attacked and criticized the Begin government for its responsibility for the war. The escalating intensity of that hateful discourse compares with the intensity of the debate over the Oslo agreements.

Was the loaded atmosphere directly responsible for the assassination? This question is important and deserves a cool reassessment of the widespread received wisdom that has given an unequivocal positive response to that question. But on second thought, the answer may be more complex. As a general rule an atmosphere of hatred, incitement, and vicious personal attacks may lay the groundwork for physical attacks on the subjects of this hate campaign, by intentionally or unintentionally legitimizing violence against opponents, as was

the case in Israel in November 1995. But was it indeed the case that the loaded political atmosphere can be identified as the sole causal agent driving the behavior of a specific single person? That is where the evidence is less convincing. It could be argued that although the political atmosphere was intense with hostility, the assassin's behavior in *this* case did not necessarily flow from the social environment and its inducement, but can be interpreted as an idiosyncratic event.

To support this argument I would make the following points. Incitement could indeed lead to violent acts, but there is no practical way to positively prove a direct relationship between a specific violent act and the general atmosphere in society, for a number of reasons. First, this is not the first time that violent discourse was used in policy debates. As already mentioned, during the years of the Lebanon intervention, similarly vile discourse was used against Prime Minister Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon. They were both called by the opposition "murderers." Yet this did not lead to an assassination. Had the security measures succeeded to prevent the Rabin assassination in 1995, our views of the potency of the same discourse might have been milder. Second, observers' responses to the Rabin assassination indicate the robustness of a well-known bias, that of "I knew it all the time." Outcome knowledge substantially affects our causal interpretation of events. Because we know that the assassination happened, we tend to attribute the assassination to what seems the most immediate likely candidate reason for assassination, the public atmosphere in the society; this is also the most accessible causal factor which comes easily to mind and creates an image of an inevitable cause-outcome nexus. Yet a close look at the vile personality of the assassin as was revealed before, during, and since his trial indicates a personality that was obsessively driven from the inside rather than from the outside, by the assassin's own fanatic beliefs and values. He did not need external inducements from society. In fact he stated that he planned to kill Rabin three years earlier but was stopped by his brother from doing so. It is not unreasonable to assume that this same person would have tried to commit murder even if the nature of societal discourse would have been a lot milder. If that is a correct interpretation of the assassination, then this particular event does not predict that political assassinations will become a more common phenomenon in Israel. The probability of assassinations did not increase just because one particular person driven by his own zeal acted within a particular context and took advantage of a lapse of security. It will also be dangerous to assume, on the other hand, that in the absence of hate discourse political violence has negligible chances of occurring. Within a society where extreme fringes operate and have strong ideological motivations, the *absence* of hate discourse within the mainstream does not exclude the risk of violence from those associated and active in these fringe groups, irrespective of the nature of the discourse.

## Comments

**Daniel Bar-Tal:** I agree with parts of your analysis that complement some of the points I made earlier. Here you have pinpointed some of the challenges that Israeli leaders faced trying to make peace after a long, intractable conflict with the Palestinians. But the major difference between us lies in the evaluation of whether it is possible to make peace now. You suggest waiting and postponing the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict until there will be a consensus within the Israeli society regarding the lines which will allow the peace-making. I do not believe that the majority of the opposition leaders could have changed their views because they have been ideologically committed to the idea of a Greater Israel and have been captives of the conflictual culture. They have viewed the West Bank as part of the Land of Israel, to which only Israel has full historical, religious, and national rights. They believe that the West Bank and to a lesser extent the Gaza Strip and Golan Heights are places where the Jewish nation was born, where Jews lived, and thus they must be an inseparable part of Israel. They hold negative views of Arabs in general and especially of Palestinians, focusing on their acts of violence and terrorism. They believe that Palestinians will never relinquish their long-term goal to destroy Israel and that agreement over the West Bank and Gaza Strip is only tactical. They refused to recognize the PLO and continued to view it as a terrorist organization. They delegitimized its chairman, Yasir Arafat, and refused to meet with him. They were prepared to continue the conflict for generations, viewing it as intractable, and they perceived any attempts of compromise as weakness and a sell-out. The ideological opposition did not consider the option of real conflict resolution which could bring peace, as Yitzhak Shamir demonstrated some years ago. In contrast, the great majority of Israelis, including many Likud voters, do not accept the noncompromising ideology of Greater Israel, and a majority support the principle of "land for peace."

With regard to the outcome of the Oslo negotiations, I would like to suggest an opposite thesis. The extreme internal opposition to the agreement with the PLO facilitated achieving a better deal for the Israeli team. On the one hand, the government had to show the Israeli public that it was conducting determined and uncompromising negotiations in order to legitimize the agreement. On the other hand, the government could argue with the negotiating Palestinians that there was a resistance to the agreement and that therefore they had to bring to the people an acceptable deal. Support for this line of reasoning is not only found in the reality of intergroup negotiations, but also in simulated bargaining situations which show that opposing teams composed of moderates alone, with extremists following their negotiations, paradoxically resulted in a rigid pattern of negotiations and adherence to starting positions.

You also assume that the Palestinians would have settled for lesser concessions. But, as you saw, Shamir did not succeed in moving the negotiations with the

Palestinians even an inch, and after the Oslo agreements a powerful Palestinian opposition to the agreements argued that Arafat's achievements were far from satisfactory. It seems that the Oslo agreements satisfied the minimal goals of the Palestinians. Moreover, one should not forget that lasting agreements cannot be imposed. Thus, the basic question that should have been posed by Rabin's government should not have been whether or not there should be negotiations and agreements with the PLO, but how to manage the peace process under conditions of a forceful hardline minority opposition from home and continuous terrorist attacks that were likely to undermine public support for the peace process.

Leaders are supposed to have a vision, and they are supposed to establish goals and lead, even in the absence of agreement from the opposition. Leaders in different democratic states have occasionally made dramatic decisions. An example is De Gaulle's decision to end the Algerian war by negotiating with the FLN. Rabin and Peres understood that the time was ripe and circumstances advantageous to negotiate with the PLO and to begin the historic breakthrough in the conflicting relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians, moving them onto a peaceful track. Moreover, it was clear that the agreement with the PLO would be the key to peaceful relations with other Arab countries, to ending Israel's isolation in Asia and Africa, to changing the status of Israel in Europe, and to recruiting crucial foreign investment. It is thus of vital importance to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians which forms the core of the Middle East conflict.

In spite of the differences between conducting negotiations with state leaders, on one hand, and with leaders of a nation without a state, on the other, the government reached an agreement with the Palestinians and did not manage to conclude negotiations with Syria. On a number of levels it was easier to negotiate with the Palestinians than with Syria. Contact with Palestinians who live with the Israelis is easy and can be carried out through different channels. Israelis and Palestinians thus can learn about each other, interact with each other, and form relationships. Indeed, throughout the years there has been constant contact with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This type of contact is much more difficult, if not impossible, to have with Arab states which are in conflict with Israel.

In addition, the PLO is recognized, despite the opposition, by the great majority of the Palestinians as the sole representative of the Palestinian nation, and Yasir Arafat is accepted by the Palestinians and the world as the organization's leader. Recent elections legitimized this recognition. For years Israel refused to negotiate with the PLO, postponing a possibility of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians, a possibility which became especially feasible after the PLO defined the boundaries of the envisaged Palestinian state, agreed to recognize the State of Israel, and to abandon terrorism.

Also, it should be remembered that the Oslo I agreement with the PLO in 1993 was not a completely surprising and unpredictable move. Israeli doves had been talking with PLO representatives through the years. Some of these people later became ministers in the Rabin government. They urged recognition of the PLO and

encouraged entering negotiations. Also, as I pointed out earlier, the public understood that in order to reach an agreement with the Palestinian people, there was a need to negotiate with the PLO.

The Oslo agreements were an achievement for both the Palestinians and the Israelis. Neither side could achieve its initial positions. Both sides had to compromise, and it was difficult to implement all the parts of the agreements. Neither side fully fulfilled the agreement. But the accords began the long process of reconciliation. Rabin and Peres understood that the peace process had to be accompanied by the fostering of a new climate of conflict resolution and peace to overcome years of mistrust and animosity. It is always easier to instigate hatred, fear, mistrust, and enmity with nationalistic or religious slogans than to lead a nation to reconciliation and compromise with yesterday's enemy. Unfortunately, people in general are more prone to be influenced in the former direction than in the latter. Tragic events in different parts of the world can serve to illustrate this.

Also, I disagree with your criticism about the way negotiations were conducted. Most, if not all, the negotiations between the Israelis and Arabs were secret. Do not forget that Sadat came to Jerusalem after secret negotiations in Romania and Morocco. The negotiations in Camp David lasted 11 days only, following which the Israelis heard about far-reaching agreements which required the abandonment of all Jewish settlements in the Sinai Peninsula. Likud leaders gave every inch of the occupied Sinai Peninsula back to the Egyptians in return for peace, because Sinai is not considered part of the Promised Land. Also, these same Egyptians had been continuously delegitimized throughout the 50s, 60s, and most of the 70s; they were deeply mistrusted, and Sadat was portrayed often as a Nazi. But the Likud government led negotiations with them, built confidence, established trusting relations, and eventually the Israeli public changed their negative perceptions.

If people do not want to compromise, they will find endless excuses for not beginning serious negotiation. The negotiations with the Palestinians lasted many months, taking different forms, through different channels, in different places, and involving different individuals. There were a number of real crises which threatened the continuation of these negotiations. But both sides were determined to reach an agreement in spite of past animosity, violence, and mistrust. The negotiators understood that successful negotiation requires confidence-building, mutual understanding, personal trustful relations, role-taking abilities, and even sensitivity to the other side's needs. Likud leaders did not agree even to meet with PLO representatives. They declined to abandon their ideological position and accept any kind of compromise which would be feasible for Palestinians, too. But, you are right, Israel's political constellation is such that the Likud can make peace resting assured it will always receive the support of the Labor Party. The Labor Party, in contrast, can only be assured of similar support from the Likud when it makes war.

Finally, I absolutely disagree with your analysis of the causes of Rabin's murder. You ignore what we know about the effects of political climates and disregard numerous analyses of different societies in which a clear relation between

political climate and political murders was established. It is possible to describe the effect of the political climate in Israel with the analogy of waves.

When a group does not accept the well-defined norms of how to fight for a cause in a democratic society, the lines of democratic tolerance are destroyed, opening the way to illegitimate types of struggle. Then one opposition "wave" instigates and legitimizes the appearance of a smaller wave which uses more extreme tactics. The first and the largest wave, in our case, was responsible for the delegitimization of Rabin, his government and peace policy. In this wave Rabin was labeled a traitor, murderer, criminal, or quisling. This delegitimization was carried out widely and continuously by many of the first-row national opposition leaders. The labels they used have clear implications: traitors or murderers are severely punished by society. The second wave, which followed the first, included leaders of radical opposition groups who took the delegitimization one step further. They called for stopping the peace process at any cost, since it could only lead to disaster, and they even threatened to legally sue Rabin for treason. Religious leaders issued proclamations that the Oslo agreements violated religious laws and should therefore be stopped. Not many people joined the third wave, in which calls were heard for the murder of Rabin in order to save Israel. Fliers circulated that called for murder, and there were rumors that fanatically religious circles were actually discussing the possibility of murdering Rabin, and, indeed, a religious edict to that effect had been issued. Even if this third wave embraced only scores of individuals, it is reasonable to assume that one person among them was likely to carry out the mission "for the sake of the people of Israel to avert the grave danger." In this atmosphere, this person could believe that he or she was committing the heroic act of executing the traitor. There will always be individuals with the type of personality that enables them to commit political assassination in a particular political climate on the basis of political ideology and a deep conviction of the necessity of the act. But this climate was created by leaders who did not intend to translate their words into acts. In breaking the rules of the democratic system, they should have realized that there were likely to be some who would take their words literally and would be ready to be instrumental in achieving the implications of these words. Do not forget that Rabin's murder was cheered in various extreme circles, and it is still possible today to find groups who speak out in support of it. So this assassination cannot be seen as an isolated pathological act, as you try to portray it. It was the consequence of a political climate of delegitimization and agitation performed by the opposition.

Israeli society did not learn its lesson: Rabin's murder was not the first time a Jew murdered a fellow-Jew in political violence. In 1983, Emil Grunzweig, a philosophy student and Peace Now activist, was murdered when a person from the hawkish camp threw a hand grenade into a crowd of demonstrators who had come out to protest against the continuation of the war in Lebanon. At that time, agitation against the opposition to the war was delegitimizing peace proponents as collaborators with the enemy. The murder at the time confessed that he had been influenced by hawkish agitation.

It is true that the opposition to the Lebanon War labeled Begin and Sharon “murderers,” especially following the massacre of Palestinians in the West Beirut refugee camps by the Christian militia, who were under the control of the Israeli army. This delegitimization should be condemned, too. But, in my opinion, there are some significant differences between the dovish campaign during the Lebanon War and the hawkish campaign during the recent peace process. First, the two groups have different ideological bases. While hawkish opposition to Rabin’s peace policy was energized by ingroup-directed religious-nationalism, dovish opposition to the war in Lebanon was fueled by a humanist peace orientation. I can only hypothesize at this stage that beliefs based on religious-nationalistic principles on one hand and beliefs based on democratic-peace-oriented principles, on the other, do not only, and obviously, differ in contents but also have different behavioral implications. Those who hold these respective beliefs are likely to subscribe to different types of authority and will have different normative boundaries of legitimate action. The facts speak for themselves. While until today there was no murder of any civilian, whether Jew or Arab, by a dove, extreme nationalist and/or religious persons murdered two Jews as well as dozens of Palestinians, who were not engaged in any violent activities against Jews.

Second, while in the anti-Lebanon campaign the opposition leaders refrained from participation in the delegitimization, in the latter campaign many of the most prominent leaders of all the opposition parties were openly active in creating the delegitimizing climate. This crucially affected the formation of the climate. Of special importance was the participation of the religious leadership, that is, rabbis, who have absolute authority in their communities, and are obeyed blindly by their followers.

**Yaacov Vertzberger:** Let me respond to just a few points. Am I a pessimist? I don’t consider myself a pessimist or an optimist; I consider myself a practical realist. My preference and what I see as realistically pursuable is that, in a choice between a fragile peace which is more comprehensive or a robust peace which is less comprehensive, I am risk-averse and prefer the latter.

Second, with regard to the window of opportunity that opened after the Gulf War, which led to the weakening of the Palestinians’ position and their greater willingness to negotiate, I think that is where expectations in Israel were to some extent responsible for making it difficult to justify the relatively modest accommodations by the Palestinians. The weakness of the Palestinians had created expectations in Israel that the process of negotiations would produce outcomes commensurate with the imbalance of power between the two sides. The moderate achievements of the Israeli negotiators were a source of disaffection, which only grew when it turned out that even the terms of this agreement were not subject to strict compliance, especially when bombs started blowing up buses. You have pointed to the public opinion surveys that show greater willingness to make territorial concessions. It should be noted that the process was slow, and the attitude

change in the matter was distinctly different with regard to the West Bank compared with the Golan. It should also be noted that the polls were taken when the question seemed hypothetical. When major territorial concessions go from a virtual to an actual reality, people may take a lot less risk than they indicated that they were willing to take before.

Whether the social climate was responsible for the assassination is of course not an issue that can be determined with confidence. But I would say only that the assassin was part of a fringe group, but extreme fringe groups are aspects of every modern democratic society in Europe, Asia, or in North America. Fringe groups are not a reflection of society; they are a reflection of what society is *not* rather than what society is, because if they were a reflection of society, they would not be fringe groups but mainstream groups.

**Daniel Bar-Tal:** I would like to make three points in response. First, as I said before, the negotiation with the Palestinians began when the time was ripe and circumstances favored Israel. It was high time to begin serious negotiations after decades of bloody conflict which claimed thousands of lives. How many more years in your estimation, would have been necessary for the beginning of the negotiation? How many more dead would we need to convince people that a reasonable peace is necessary? Those who ideologically oppose any compromise with the Palestinians naturally have difficulty in engaging in negotiations with them. I would also like to stress that the negotiations with the Palestinians did not intend to produce a final agreement in the short run. The peace process initiated by the Rabin government is supposed to continue for years. After many months of negotiations, an intermediate agreement emerged which was supposed to be implemented in phases over a period of two years. Rabin and Peres understood that it takes time to adjust to a new reality, to change the conflict climate, to change dominant conceptions, attitudes, and mentalities, to evaluate the achievements and solve unforeseen problems. They were aware that this ground would have to be covered before signing the final treaty. They also decided to postpone discussion of the key issues until the final stage of negotiations (that is, boundaries, Jerusalem, the settlements, the nature of the Palestinians entity, and so on)—knowing that the public was not ready for decisions on these issues.

Second, I believe in the basic principles of conflict resolution: The negotiating sides have to recognize and honor mutual rights and produce an agreement which satisfies the needs of both sides. Agreements that are imposed do not last for a long time. Peres and Rabin understood these principles, while the opposition, counting on Israel's power, intended to impose an agreement which is unacceptable for the Palestinians. Third, one of the basic problems in the present peace process is overcoming the mutual mistrust, animosity, and delegitimization perpetuated by both sides. Israelis, throughout the years, have delegitimized Palestinians, the PLO, and Arafat personally. Begin even compared him to Hitler. The leaders of the opposition continue to maintain these

images, which are extremely difficult to change when they are connected to ideology. It should by now be clear to every Israeli and Palestinian that the violent conflict was never between black-and-white forces or between perpetrators and victims. It was a bloody conflict between two nations over the same land, during which both sides committed all possible sins.

Fourth, it is hard to evaluate the agreements since the evaluation depends on the political views which serve as a foundation for the readiness to compromise. But remember that the Oslo agreement did not remove any Jewish settlements from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and this includes a small settlement on the periphery of Gaza city and a Jewish neighborhood of 400 settlers in the middle of Hebron, a city of 120,000 Palestinian inhabitants. Israel kept the responsibility to guard security, including the right to pursue terrorists in the areas under the official control of the Palestinian Authority. The majority of the Palestinians supported the Oslo agreements, despite the existence of significant groups of Palestinians, especially intellectuals, who, while supporting the peace process itself, rejected the Oslo agreements. There is no agreement that could be accepted by all the Israelis and all the Palestinians. But the Oslo agreements paved the way for the first real attempt at reconciliation with the Palestinians and opening peaceful relations with the Arab nation in general.

Finally, it is of irony that the same Binyamin Netanyahu that, as the opposition's leader used harsh words to criticize the Oslo agreements and viewed them as a disaster for the Israeli Jews, in these days as the prime minister of Israel, heading a hawkish coalition, continues to implement them and sees their framework as the only acceptable process of peace with the Palestinians. The view of the Middle East probably changes from the seat of the prime minister, and Binyamin Netanyahu, with many of the Likud leaders, learned that if they want to continue the peace process, there are no other alternatives than the terms of the Oslo agreements.

### **Second Question:**

**What were the causes that brought Binyamin Netanyahu to power in the May 29, 1996 elections?**

**Yaacov Vertzberger:** You have talked of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement that will satisfy both sides as if there is a well-defined standard of satisfying both sides, and since we know what that is, all that is left to be done is pursue that standard. In reality what will satisfy each party is socially constructed. This social construction draws on assumptions each party has about the rival's determination and skill and how far it can be pushed. Thus to a considerable extent what is perceived to be satisfactory to each party in a process of conflict resolution flows from its estimate concerning what the other side is willing to concede. In that sense what the Palestinians thought they could achieve depended on how weak, vulnerable, or

undetermined they assessed the Israeli side to be. By not taking full advantage of the power differential in Israel's favor, Israel encouraged a situation in which Palestinian aspirations and the definition of what would be satisfactory to them rose. This shaped their position on each specific issue in a manner that made it much more difficult to reach an agreement on terms that would be broadly politically acceptable in Israel. It is no surprise therefore that an important section of the public felt uncomfortable and questioned the manner in which the negotiations were handled, believing that too much was conceded too early in the game, even if they believed in principle that negotiations and concessions were necessary. Even a leading figure in the Labor Party such as former Chief of Staff General Ehud Barak questioned on these grounds the wisdom of the Oslo II agreements. Doubts concerning the necessity of the broad range of concessions made to the Palestinians contributed to a consistent shift in position of part of the public toward the party that promised a tougher negotiations stand. The assassination of Rabin froze this process, but only temporarily. The sympathy effect shifted the balance back in favor of the Labor Party. But the notion that after the assassination the Labor Party cannot lose the elections rested on faulty assumptions.

Why was it wrong? In general the theory of critical moments, that refers to such events such as political assassinations, assumes that the critical moment tends to change people's values, beliefs, and attitudes. Why would an assassination change people's cognitions? One could argue that this had its cause in the basic need to avoid cognitive dissonance. Specifically, Rabin after his assassination was not a threat to anybody any longer. At the same time, people felt deep compassion for the fallen leader, and disgust at the act of assassination, even if they disagreed with Rabin's policy. The adjustment in attitude would involve seeing Rabin in a new light as a far-sighted statesman who moved ahead courageously. This should have led to opinion change over the peace process as a whole, because the peace process was epitomized in two people, Rabin and Peres, and as it progressed it became more closely associated with Rabin as the leader of the process. Well, as it happened, the predictions of critical moment theory were not borne out. In fact a recent study on public opinion toward Olof Palme, the Swedish prime minister who was assassinated in 1986, also shows that immediately after the assassination, even his fiercest opponents changed their views of the former leader in a positive direction. However, by 1988 it was found that all positions were reversed and returned to what they were originally prior to Palme's assassination. This indicates that critical moments would be most likely to have a lasting effect when people have not yet made up their mind and are debating which position they should take. The critical moment is then the final straw that tilts the balance in favor of a particular position. But people that have already established a position which is deeply embedded in a dual anchor of cognitive reasoning and affective attachment are unlikely to change their position. Similarly, in the Israeli case, for Peres to win the elections with the large margin that was predicted at the time, people who already had strong views on the implications of peace with the Palestinians for

security issues would have had to change their opinions. But all the critical moment achieved was short-term change; as the influence of the assassination was wearing off and people were facing the actual task of the choice, they tended to bounce back to their original security-motivated perspectives on the meaning of the peace process, especially in light of continuous bloody terrorist bombings. How did that affect voting attitudes?

Practically every important survey of Israeli attitudes to the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolution indicates the centrality of security/insecurity-related beliefs. Most Israelis believe that there is an acute security threat and that peace in and by itself will not resolve that problem in the short term. Therefore peace agreements without strict, appropriate security measures are not considered a panacea to what is the main concern of a very significant part, probably a majority, of the Israeli public. Accepting an agreement that involves withdrawal from most of the West Bank and/or the Golan implies that the risk is considered acceptable. Yet insecurity beliefs among the public are so predominant that their transformation within a short period of time would be an unrealistic expectation. In the competition between the highly available traditional insecurity beliefs and the new information about the enemy's new peaceful intentions, the latter's dominance was far from being assured. At best the former security concerns were put on hold until validation that the peace risks were worth taking could be confirmed. This delicate balance between old and new beliefs was not helped, as I argued earlier, by the anxiety of the Israeli leadership to move ahead too fast; it was further undermined by violations of the agreement by the Palestinian Authority, and was severely shaken by acts of terrorism directed at innocent civilians.

It could be plausibly argued that in the surveys that have shown a change in position, people were not lying but they were telling how they *felt* at that time. However, if they had had to make a *behavioral commitment* like actually voting, then they would rethink. For those who opposed or had reservations about the Oslo process, it was easier to verbally express a position that under the circumstances was politically correct and then act in accordance with their old security concerns that shaped what they had believed for years. The assassination was not enough to remove the reservations many had about a strategy that did not seem to work as well as promised, and that was particularly vulnerable on the issue of personal security.

Credibility of Labor and its leader was further undermined during the 1996 election campaign by their main coalition partner, the leftist Meretz. Unfortunately for Labor the Meretz leadership could not resist the temptation of taking credit for being the driving force behind the peace policy, and for pushing the Labor leadership much further and faster than it intended to move. In the context of growing skepticism among those constituting the floating vote that would eventually decide the election outcomes, the claims by Meretz did not help to enhance the bipartisan legitimacy of the peace process for those who were highly security-conscious and drove off some of the floating vote from the Labor Party. A set of

terrorist suicide attacks further debunked the argument of security through peace. Netanyahu's adoption of the peace theme and joining it with the security theme, but emphasizing the latter, seemed to many voters more credible than a similar combination of themes by Peres and the Labor Party. In these circumstances the insistence by Peres, after the Rabin assassination, on taking and holding on to the defense portfolio, rather than giving it to the popular and more hawkish General Ehud Barak, the retired IDF Chief of Staff, only exacerbated the problem.

In the final account, although all these causes contributed substantially to the election defeat, the root cause should be traced to the arguments I made earlier concerning failure to establish broad legitimacy for the conduct of the peace process. Arguably, then, the election campaign was lost by the Labor Party long before it took place. It was lost even before the assassination. It was lost because Labor leadership had not realized that on highly contested issues the public's image of process rationality is as important as outcome rationality. The promise of a golden future at the end of the rainbow was powerful, but people were also interested in how they were going to get there, and what it was going to cost them to get to the end of the rainbow, to this desirable future. The salience of the process stems from the fact that people tend to think in short-term increments, and because they think in short-term increments they tend to pay close attention to process and mid-process outcomes, long-term outcomes seem too far off. People then judge the value of goals more by process costs rather than by the promise of final grand outcome benefits. Yet this strategic view and understanding of the requirements of patience and the nurturing of the support of skeptics seemed to evade Shimon Peres even after the assassination, and not only in this case. Peres, Icarus of Israeli politics, never lacked courage and vision but was too often amiss on good judgment, and lacked the second best alternative for personally astute judgment, that is, high integrity and independently minded advisers who would harness his vision and courage to a realistically acceptable policy rather than reinforce his poor judgment with sycophancy. He thus flew too high, too close to the sun, with the inevitable consequences of crashing to the ground once more.

**Daniel Bar-Tal:** I think that we do not disagree much on this issue. But I believe that in spite of your analysis regarding the dissipation of the critical event's effects (Rabin's murder), Shimon Peres (Labor's candidate for the office of prime minister) could have won the elections either if they would have taken place in January or February, or alternatively in June, had the March terrorist attacks not happened. I believe that Peres's loss of the elections is a major event which will have serious negative consequences for the Middle East.

When someone loses the elections by a margin of only 30,000 votes, we can look for mistakes made during the campaign on both the tactical and strategic levels. But I would like to focus only on five higher-level causes, all of which have psychological aspects.

You talked about the critical moment effect of Rabin's murder: and I believe that the terrorist attacks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv of March 1996 constituted other major critical events. The trauma and shock that the Israeli public experienced as a result was the major force behind the election outcome. The atrocities that happened in the centers of Israel's major cities seriously undermined security feelings. Many Israelis could relate to these central, popular sites (the Dizengoff Center in Tel Aviv—no less than a city bus carrying people to work). The trauma of the terrorist attack countered the trauma of Rabin's murder. It had an influential effect on the elections, serving as a powerful illustration of the opposition's claim that the Labor government had been neglecting the security of Israeli citizens in the Oslo agreements.

The Israeli public wanted a continuation of the peace process. The majority of the Jews supported the continuation of negotiations with both the Palestinians and Syrians. But they wanted them to be carried out differently, with more insistence on security and stronger defense of Israeli interests. This touches on another major reason for Peres's loss. Netanyahu would not have been elected on the basis of the extremely hawkish ideology that he expressed throughout the years. Aware of the public mood, he changed his campaign 180 degrees, a month and a half before the elections, stating his support for the peace process, and accepting the Oslo agreements. His slogan was "peace with security." This campaign blurred the differences between Peres and Netanyahu, pushing Peres to the center of the political map and forcing him to emphasize security, which resulted in the tragic military operation in Lebanon. In contrast, Netanyahu who for years had consistently opposed the peace process of Rabin and Peres, and expressed extreme hawkish views, changed his rhetoric to convince the floating voters that peace was his major objective.

Another major reason for Labor's loss of the elections was a threat to Jewish identity experienced by some Israelis in relation to the peace process. I believe that there were Jews who felt that the peace process, as Peres was conducting it, blurred the boundaries of Jewish identity and threatened the existence of the Jewish nature of the State of Israel. Contributing factors were the talk about the New Middle East and open borders, the growing influence of the Arab citizens of Israel, and the antireligious stance of Labor's coalition ally, the Meretz Party. The opposition, on the other hand, was perceived as caring for Jewish and national causes. In fact, one election slogan used toward the end of the election campaign announced that "Netanyahu is good for Jews." Indeed, the great majority of the religious votes went for Netanyahu, and this contributed to his election victory.

My fourth reason is in line with your evaluation of Peres. Peres did not have the reputation of Rabin. He was not perceived by the public as credible; he was seen as an unrealistic dreamer and unreliable manipulator. His image was also that of a loser who lost four elections while leading the Labor Party. But, most important, Peres did not project an ability to manage and maintain security effectively. The Likud campaign focused on all these liabilities of Peres and built

upon his negative image. He was presented as a leader who did not insist on Israel's interest, whose sole motivation was to achieve an agreement at any cost. Obviously, all this had a negative effect, and it is unfortunate that Shimon Peres, a world-class statesman and a strong leader of the Labor Party, did not succeed to achieve the status of a widely supported national leader.

In the end, Netanyahu also found an issue on which he could successfully distinguish himself from Peres, and which touched on an emotionally charged cord among many Jews. He accused Peres of the intention to divide Jerusalem, a move that he, in contrast, would prevent by all means. It does not matter whether there was any truth in Netanyahu's accusation (Peres tried to refute it), but the campaign about Jerusalem worked and Netanyahu got the votes he needed.

In sum, it should be remembered that the whole of the 1996 election campaign addressed a mere 6–10% of the voters who were not committed to either one of the candidates. The great majority of the voters had a clear preference and the campaign did not affect them. The results of the elections once more reflected the serious schism in Israeli society.

### Comments

**Yaacov Vertzberger:** There are several points on which I would differ in interpretation concerning the issues that you have raised. First, as I understood it, you argue for a “recency effect” over the “critical moment effect,” “recency effect” meaning that the terrorist attacks following the assassination wiped out the effect of the assassination and therefore had the decisive influence over public opinion. In that case the question is, Why was the public unreceptive to the argument that the most effective means for dealing with terrorist attacks is by moving ahead in the peace process faster? So there must be a deeper cause rather than the terrorist attacks in and by themselves in causing a change of attitude. Second, the argument that Netanyahu's victory *was* just a lucky break, as proven by the narrow margin of the winning vote, neglects to take into account that after the assassination he was lagging behind by 19 percentage points. So the real question is, Where did this support for Peres disappear to so fast? Even if events were reversed and Netanyahu had lost by a narrow margin, that question would still be valid. So it is not the winning which is the issue but the fact that the support gap had been bridged.

The argument about the threat to Jewish identity that you raised is an interesting but invalid point. In fact I believe that one has to turn it upside down. The peace process has hardly threatened Jewish identity, but it potentially can undermine Palestinian national identity. In comparing the robustness of Jewish identity with that of Palestinian identity, the difference is obvious and notable. Jewish culture which underlies Jewish identity is thousands of years older, and has passed the test of time, even in the absence of a state in the diaspora millennia, because it could rely on the bonds of a unique language, religion, and history. Jewish identity was never exclusively territory-dependent. Palestinian identity is much more problem-

atic. It has been in existence at the most about a hundred years. Palestinian culture, at least what could be thought of as uniquely Palestinian rather than Arab, is very limited in scope. There is neither a distinct Palestinian language nor religion. Palestinian self-definition depends on, or at least draws heavily on, the myth of struggle against an enemy. Palestinian identity was forged by the conflict with the Jews over the possession of Palestine. If the enemy and the Arab-Israeli conflict disappeared, the major agent of identity formation might disappear. From my point of view, that leads to a very pessimistic conclusion, that Palestinians will have to continue to search for external threats and enemies, at least in the foreseeable future, in order to preserve and reinforce a fragile sense of identity.

**Daniel Bar-Tal:** In response to your arguments I would like to refer again to the two traumatic events of the assassination of Rabin and the terrorist attacks. These events were very different. Rabin's murder had intrasocietal implications. It threatened the democratic nature of society. It showed the consequences of a violent climate; it demonstrated the cost of profound polarization, and it revealed the danger of fanatic forces. It produced shock, guilt, shame, and fear among Israelis. But the murder did not have direct implications on the peace process. Also, the Labor Party did not use this delegitimizing political climate created by the opposition as an issue in the election campaign. The press reported that Labor had found that the floating voters reacted negatively to this issue. They wanted to hear neither about the murder nor about the events that preceded the murder. In contrast, the terrorist attacks did have a direct relation to the peace process and on voting tendencies. They caused distrust, anger and fear of the Palestinians, in general and in particular of the Palestinian Authority, because the opposition claimed insistently that the PLO was collaborating with the Islamic groups. Also, the terrorist attacks caused mistrust of the government and of Peres especially, because they were presented by the opposition as having abandoned Israel's security concerns in their haste to reach an agreement with Arafat, whom they viewed as a terrorist himself.

The public, in contrast to what you say, continued to support the peace process, but wanted to strengthen security and conduct the negotiations with more insistence on Israeli interests. Netanyahu, who during the election campaign changed his position by promising to honor the Oslo agreements and to continue the peace process with a firmer insistence on security, was indeed responding to these primary objectives of the Israeli public: peace and security.

I also disagree with you regarding your comment about identity. My point does not negate yours. I think that enemies and conflicts may fulfill certain functions for any society, irrespective of the length and nature of its history and tradition. I have no doubt that the Israeli-Arab conflict played a crucial role in the formation of Israeli-Jewish society. It fostered unity, solidarity, and patriotism, which not only helped to withstand the enemy but also fostered the formation of a new nation from

refugees and immigrants who came from scores of countries, with one Jewish heritage and religion, but also with different cultures, histories, and languages.

Jewish identity in Israel, as you know, is by no means unproblematic, and constitutes still one of the main polarizing issues. The debate about the nature of Jewish identity and possible ways of preserving it features high on the public agenda. As I explained, the peace process was perceived as somehow undermining Jewish identity, and the objection of the religious sectors to the peace process was partially based also on this perception.

## EPILOGUE

The title of this debate reflects the common thread running through our contending views. Differing perspectives on the balance between hope and fear are at the heart of the disagreements concerning the peace process in the mainstream of Israeli society.

Every intractable conflict creates a set of deeply entrenched emotions and cognitions in each of the adversaries. Consequently, conflict resolution, and in particular peace-making, triggers in each of the adversarial societies a conflicting mixture of the most cherished hopes and worst fears. These affect the domestic debate for and against reconciliation and shape the public's attitude. Because the stakes are high, whether one emphasizes potential gains (hope) or potential losses (fear) will critically affect one's attitudes toward negotiations, peace-making, and the extent of concessions to be made or avoided. Israel's experience of peace-making thus offers insights and lessons about societal coping with these powerful emotions, which we hope readers may find illuminating and significant, too, with regard to similar conflict situations elsewhere in the world.