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Peace Historiography and the Competing Narratives of the 1993 Oslo Channel

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Executive Summary

The historiographic debate surrounding the Oslo negotiation channel and the 1993 agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) reflects competing narratives and changes in the "public memory" of peace negotiations and agreements. As such it provides a useful case study for the examination of peace historiography. The production of the play (2016) and the film (2021) *Oslo* signaled another stage in the evolution of this ongoing debate. This Policy Brief uses the case of Oslo as a platform to discuss "history wars" in a peace process, and in particular the dispute over the roles of different channels and initiatives, whether official "Track One" or unofficial "Track Two," and actors, domestic or external, in the historiography and collective memory of peace agreements. It reviews the competing narratives surrounding the initiation of the Oslo channel, the internal historiographic disputes on each side (Israel and the PLO), the debate over the role of the Norwegians in Oslo, the way this role is reflected in the play and the film, and the Oslo narrative that developed within the Track Two community. The Policy Brief seeks to draw a connection between the field of peace studies in general, and Track Two diplomacy in particular, and the field of historiography and memory studies.

Everyone likes a good mystery story, and the Oslo agreement had all the ingredients of a great yarn.
—Nusseibeh, 2007: 372

Policy Recommendations

⇒ This Policy Brief encourages peace scholars to incorporate the peace historiography framework into their work. They should acknowledge and analyze the complexity, and the developments, in the process of writing peace history, and should be aware of competing narratives and the struggle over credit for these processes. Peace scholarship should aim to outline the full, complex picture of peace processes, while identifying the role of various actors (official and unofficial), channels, and initiatives, at different stages, and should avoid simplistic, linear stories and ego struggles. This quest for an accurate and multi-layered analysis is crucial because it affects the lessons and conclusions drawn for future processes.

⇒ Recommendations for Track Two practitioners are twofold. On the one hand, they should recognize the importance of historical memory and be aware of this dimension throughout their work. The Track Two community needs to maintain historical records for future scholars and practitioners, as state institutions are expected to do with regard to official, Track One diplomacy. On the other hand, confidentiality and deniability are often key, or even vital, factors in Track Two projects, and practitioners should keep in mind that premature publicity for public credit, can jeopardize the entire process and endanger future efforts. Such publicity might also cause decision-makers to mistrust or refrain from using informal diplomacy.

⇒ The case of the 1993 Oslo negotiation channel, and consequent agreement, illustrates how informal diplomacy – with unofficial actors and platforms – can play an important role in achieving diplomatic breakthroughs in peace processes. Scholars and practitioners should examine and learn from this case, so as to draw lessons and identify policy implications. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the unique elements of Oslo, its divergence from the classic Track Two model, and its limitations. Likewise, any efforts to duplicate the Oslo model or draw generalizations to other cases, with a very different structure and context, should be approached with extreme caution.

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Introduction

It is well acknowledged that the end of a war signals the beginning of a long struggle over its historiography[1] and collective memory: who won, who lost, which side is the oppressor and which is the victim, why the war started, and who the heroes are (Winter, 2006). But a lesser known fact is that peace processes also give rise to a struggle over historiography and the "public memory" (Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, 2010) of peace negotiations or agreements. In both cases—war and peace—historiography and memory is a dynamic process with changes and turning points; it is affected by events, the revelation of new sources, historical perspective, and the production of cultural representations (Landsberg, 2004).

The Policy Brief suggests a new analytical prism of peace historiography and, as a case study, examines the historiographic struggle over the negotiation process that led to the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, known as the Oslo I Accord, signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) on 13 September 1993. The Oslo agreement was a historic and diplomatic breakthrough in the long-intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it led to a very complex and emotional historiographic debate as well as a "Rashomon effect" among various actors with clashing narratives. (The "Rashomon effect" refers to a phenomenon in which the same situation is seen and described very differently by different actors or parties. The term derives from the 1950 film *Rashomon* directed by Akira Kurosawa (see Jervis, 2017: 6, 144-145). The origin of the Oslo channel as an unofficial track outside of the formal traditional diplomatic system, with the involvement of private actors, made this process even more complicated and multifaceted.

The historiographic debate surrounding Oslo took place between politicians, historians, and journalists in various fora, including memoirs, interviews, academic and popular books, and the media and political discourse. It involved many layers and dimensions and diverse actors—Israelis, Palestinians, Norwegians, Americans, and others, official and unofficial actors varying in rank and affiliation. And it was influenced by political and personal rivalries, ideological agendas, and historical developments. In 2016 this debate was revived thanks to the production of a play titled *Oslo*, written by the American playwright J.T. Rogers. The play marks a new stage in this long historiographic discussion and reflects the role of cultural memory in this process. It received the 2017 Tony Award for Best Play, and an Israeli version of the play was performed at Beit Lessin Theater. This was followed by the production of the film *Oslo* (2021), which is based on the play.

This Policy Brief seeks to draw a connection between the field of peace studies in general, and Track Two diplomacy, and the field of historiography and memory studies. It contributes a new dimension to the scholarship on the impact and "transfer" (Jones, 2015; Cuhadar and Paffenholz, 2020) of Track Two, pointing to the historical credit that unofficial channels are due in peace historiography.

The goal of this Policy Brief is to analyze the historiographical debate and struggle underway since the Oslo agreement (1993), taking into account different dimensions and actors.[2] The Policy Brief opens with a theoretical background, proposing an analytical framework for analyzing peace historiography. It then analyzes the competing narratives on the initiation and early stages of the Oslo channel, and the internal historiographic differences on the Israeli and the Palestinian sides. Finally, it outlines the historiographic discussions on the role of the Norwegians in Oslo, the way this role is reflected in the play and the film, and the Oslo narrative that developed within the Track Two community. It ends with conclusions and recommendations.

The "History Wars" over Peace

Jan Assmann (1997: 8-9) coined the term "mnemohistory," which according to him is "concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered" and regards history as an "ongoing work of reconstructive imagination." Scholars in the field of memory studies have argued that collective memory is a social and dynamic phenomenon (Olick, Vinitzky, and Levy, 2011), influenced and reproduced by "memory work" (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994) and "memory entrepreneurship" (Olick and Robbins, 1998).

Diplomacy in general, and peace negotiations in particular, take place behind closed doors, away from the public and the media. This is especially true in cases of backchannel diplomacy between adversaries (Wanis- St. John, 2011), which is conducted in full confidentiality behind the scenes. Therefore, the collapse of a negotiation process, or a peace conference, usually leads to a *Rashomon effect*, with contested and contradictory narratives regarding the "true story" and the reason for failure, as occurred after the collapse of the 2000-01 Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations (Kacowicz, 2005). But even when negotiations generate a historical peace agreement, there emerge contested narratives and versions, although in this case the competition is of a different sort, focusing on peace heroism, on which actor, or which channel or initiative, played the most significant role in the process and deserves the credit for the achievement.

The construction of the mnemohistory of peace processes can be shaped and affected by various developments, agents, and mechanisms, such as the media discourse, published memoirs by figures who participated in the negotiations, political and diplomatic developments related to the peace agreement, and the declassification of documents from the negotiation process. In addition, cultural representations, such as films, plays, and television programs, can have a substantial impact on the collective memory of peace processes. Key examples include the

[1] The field of historiography deals with "the history of historical writings" (see Berger, Feldner, and Passmore, 2020).

[2] The Policy Brief does not deal with the substance of the agreement, nor with the results and implications of the agreement and the Oslo process.

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following films: *The Agreement* (2014), about the 2011 Serbia-Kosovo negotiations; *The Journey* (2016), about the 2006 St Andrews Agreement negotiations in the context of the Northern Ireland peace process; and *The Human Factor* (2019), about the Middle East peace process from the American mediators' perspective. Another important "theater of memory" (Winter, 2006) in peace historiography is the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, following a decision of the Norwegian Nobel Committee as to who will receive the prize for a successfully negotiated peace agreement, which has a remarkable influence on the public memory of the agreement, both local and international.

The diverse mechanisms and practices that generate memories operate in various ways to produce historiographical peace narratives and reach different audiences. While it is difficult to measure the exact scope of influence, it is safe to assume that even though politicians' memoirs are usually read by a limited circle of people, with special interest in the field, memoirs published while the peace negotiations and agreements were still a matter of public interest might receive extensive media attention. Thus, these publications' main themes and narratives can spread to the general public through the political and media discourses. Politicians and negotiators often publish their memoirs in the local language, in order to reach domestic audiences, but on many occasions they also release versions in other languages, in order to bring their story to external audiences. These memoirs can also have a long-term influence as prime resources for scholars and students. Cultural representations, however, can at times reach wider audiences than memoirs or scholarly books. It is generally acknowledged that popular movies or television series inspired by real historical events can shape the general public's memory and historical narratives of these events (for example, *Titanic*, *The Crown*, and *The Imitation Game*). But their influence depends on the scope of their circulation. In the case of *Oslo*, as a play it was a successful production on Broadway and in London, but it had limited performances in Israel, and as a movie it had limited appeal and relatively few screenings, both in Israel and around the world.

In examining the *Rashomon effect* and contested narratives in peace historiography, we can identify three main lines of competition. The first is a competition among various channels and initiatives. Peace processes usually comprise multiple, and often simultaneous initiatives, peace plans, and negotiation channels. After an agreement is reached, there emerges a competition for credit as to the "real" platform in which the breakthrough occurred. The contest might be between parallel efforts that took place during the negotiation process leading to the agreement, or it might refer to earlier stages of the process and a dispute over who paved the way.

An interesting dimension in this dynamic is the role of Track Two diplomacy and unofficial channels in the process. Unofficial and Track Two actors often have fewer resources and platforms by which to claim historical credit, especially when the influence of their informal activity is harder to identify. On the other hand, these actors might also overestimate their own contribution to the process. There is a greater likelihood that the role of unofficial actors will be acknowledged in public memory if official leaders publicly recognize their contribution, or if scholars, or the unofficial actors themselves, publish their story. Cultural memory representations, such as films, can also shed light on the historical role of unofficial channels conducted behind the scenes. Such was the case with the documentary film *The Secret Peacemaker* (2008) about the role of Brendan Duddy as a "private peace entrepreneur" (Lehrs, 2016) in the Northern Ireland conflict, or the fictional film *Endgame* (2009), based on the story of secret, unofficial talks that took place in England in the late 1980s, in the context of the apartheid-era conflict in South Africa, led by Professor Willie Esterhuyse and African National Congress leader Thabo Mbeki, and brokered by British businessman Michael Young.

The second line of competition relates to the role of the disputing parties themselves, versus the role of the mediator, in terms of peace heroism. In a number of notable cases following the achievement of peace agreements, it was the mediators who received most of the glory and a place in the international collective memory of the diplomatic achievement. Such was the case, for example, with the role of US mediator Richard Holbrooke in brokering the 1995 Dayton Agreement ending the war in Bosnia. There were cases in which mediators, rather than the parties' leaders, received the Nobel Peace Prize. One such example is United Nations mediator Ralph Bunche, who was awarded the prize in 1950 for his role as mediator in the 1949 Israeli-Arab armistice agreements. In other cases, the role of mediators might be sidelined relative to the role of the parties' peacemakers, and sometimes there are contested narratives regarding the mediators' contribution.

The third sphere of competition reflects an internal struggle within each party to the conflict, which takes place between various key political figures who played a part in the peacemaking process. This competition combines political and historiographical aspects that may be used for political campaigns, or might be reflected in these politicians' memoirs or in subsequent efforts by memory entrepreneurs (either their followers or institutes that are dedicated to their legacy).

The Starting Point of Oslo: The Contested Narratives

One of the pivotal questions in the historiographic debate surrounding Oslo centers on the starting point of the channel: how it started, and who deserves the credit for the initiation. There are three main identifiable three narratives: the "Norwegian narrative," the "two professors' narrative," and the "official Oslo narrative."

The first narrative ("the Norwegian narrative") points to April 29, 1992, as a cornerstone of the process. On that date a meeting took place between Terje Rød-Larsen, director of the Norwegian Fafo Research Foundation, and Yossi Beilin, an Israeli Knesset member from the Labor party. As they discussed the stalemate in the official Israeli-Palestinian negotiation channel in Washington, Larsen raised the hypothetical option of hosting a secret Israeli-Palestinian backchannel in Oslo. This narrative

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draws a direct link between that meeting and the establishment of the Oslo channel in 1993, after Labor won the election in June 1992 and Beilin was appointed deputy foreign minister. It emphasizes Larsen's and Beilin's roles in creating the process. This is the version that appears in Beilin's book (1997), who opened the section on Oslo by describing this meeting: "I could have not imagined that this meet-and-greet would lead to a move that would influence Israel, the region, and the whole world" (Beilin, 1997: 63).[3] Likewise, "memory works" that focus on the Norwegian role, such as a book by British journalist Corbin (1994) and the play *Oslo* (Rogers, 2017), adopted the Norwegian narrative. They also described it as an extension of Larsen's activity, in cooperation with his wife Mona Juul from the Norwegian foreign office, in the Israeli-Palestinian context (Corbin, 1994: 10–20; Rogers, 2017: 18–20).

The idea Larsen posited at that meeting was that Beilin meet in Oslo with East Jerusalem's Palestinian leader, Faisel Husseini, one of the prominent "internal PLO" leaders in the West Bank (as opposed to the "external PLO" leadership in Tunis). Husseini agreed, but very soon Beilin learned that this would be impossible and the negotiation channel was never established. A different turn of events was needed for Oslo to come to life.

The second narrative ("the two professors' narrative" or the "unofficial Oslo narrative") tells a different historical story. According to this version, the crucial date was November 30, 1992. On that date, two Israeli academics—Dr. Yair Hirschfeld and Dr. Ron Pundak—had a meeting in Ramallah with Hanan Ashrawi, the spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation to the Washington talks and one of the "internal PLO" leaders. It was not an exceptional meeting; Hirschfeld had a long history of contact and meetings with the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank, since the 1980s, and in 1992 Pundak joined him. Hirschfeld was close to Beilin and together they established the Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF), a nongovernmental policy think tank.

Hirschfeld and Pundak had such meetings in Ramallah on a weekly basis, but this one particular meeting became a historical event because on that occasion Ashrawi suggested that Hirschfeld use the opportunity of a visit to London to meet the PLO "minister of finance" Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), who would be there at the same time. Hirschfeld agreed, even though Israeli law at the time prohibited meetings with PLO officials (the law was rescinded on January 19, 1993), and he did not mention this upcoming meeting to any Israeli official, including Beilin. Ashrawi contacted Tunis and her proposal received a green light from PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. After many years of close acquaintance with the "two professors," as the Palestinians called Hirschfeld and Pundak, she and Husseini were able to vouch for them regarding their "advocacy of the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue" (Qurie, 2006: 39–40) and to recommend such a meeting. Hirschfeld and Qurie (as well as Afif Safieh, another PLO official) met on December 4, 1992, marking the first meeting in what would later be called the Oslo channel.

This narrative highlights the role of Hirschfeld and Pundak in establishing the channel. According to Hirschfeld, the meeting was coordinated directly by himself and the PLO: he gave Ashrawi the phone number of his cousin's house in London, and Safieh called him to coordinate the meeting (Hirschfeld, 2000: 92). This narrative appears in Hirschfeld's (2000) and Pundak's (2013) books.[4] It is also the narrative in a book by Ashrawi, in which she recounts that when she learned about the Oslo agreement for the first time, Arafat's adviser told her, "You are the one responsible. It was the channel you had set up" between Hirschfeld and Qurie (Ashrawi, 1995: 260). The documentary film *Oslo Diaries* (2018) embraced this narrative as well, opening the story with Hirschfeld and Pundak.

Pundak was critical of the Norwegian narrative: "The Norwegians are selling a story… that they initiated the whole process—it was nothing of the kind." He noted that they were trying to base their claim on the future Beilin-Husseini talks in Oslo, but this was only a general idea that never came to be. "Without Yair's and my activities," he said, "it would not have happened the way it happened" (Nisiyahu, Stiglitz, and Tamir, 1994: 37, 43-44). This version is reinforced by the fact that Hirschfeld and Beilin had already been involved in establishing contact with the PLO for some years before Larsen stepped in. They participated, for example, in proximity talks with the PLO in the Netherlands in 1989 (Pundak, 2013: 39–40; Beilin, 37–40; Ashrawi, 1995: 220).

The play *Oslo* highlights some of the conflicting aspects of the narratives. One such example relates to the meeting in London. The play portrays the Larsen couple as initiating and facilitating this meeting (Rogers, 2017: 24–25). The audience sees Larsen escorting Qurie to the meeting, while his wife Mona is escorting Hirschfeld. In addition to coordinating the meeting, the couple in the play take measures to calm both Qurie and Hirschfeld. According to the two professors' narrative, however, that meeting occurred without Larsen's involvement, and in fact Hirschfeld only told Larsen about this planned meeting two hours before it took place (Hirschfeld, 2000: 92–93). In addition, Hirschfeld is presented in the play as Beilin's proxy, an unkempt—and a little bit clueless—professor of economics (in reality his field was Middle East studies) who had come to the meeting only because Beilin sent him. Yet according to the contesting narrative, Hirschfeld's participation in the channel was also based on his rich history of activity and dialogue over the years, not only on his relations with Beilin. Hirschfeld claimed in an interview that "the play portrays the Oslo process as beginning in 1992 when the Norwegians arrived on the scene…. [But] my role in the process started in February 1979' (Hirschfeld, 2017).

The third narrative ("the official Oslo narrative") identifies the "real" starting point of the channel with the moment it became an official channel, in May–June 1993. The important date is May 13, 1993, when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres decided to transform the informal Track Two (or "track one and a half" (Nan, 2005)

[3] All translations from resources in Hebrew are mine.

[4] Pundak's book was based on a diary he wrote at the time.

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channel into an official negotiation channel between Israel and the PLO. At this moment, Rabin and Peres decided to add an official Israeli negotiator: first they sent Uri Savir, director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in the next round they added Yoel Singer, who had served for many years in the Military Advocate General Corps.

This version emphasizes the role of the Israeli officials—decision makers and negotiators—and the importance of the historical decision to launch official negotiations with the PLO after so many years of Israeli policy forbidding any dialogue with the PLO. An argument reinforcing this narrative is that since the 1970s there had been many unofficial channels between Israelis and the PLO. In all of these cases the Israeli government rejected the talks (and in 1986 it even outlawed this form of dialogue).[5] There were also a few Norwegian attempts to promote such a channel, but Israel consistently rejected these suggestions (Waage, 2004: 223; Makovsky, 1996: 15–16). This was the first time that such an unofficial channel had received official government backing, and from this point on, Rabin and Peres, on one side, and Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas, on the other, guided the process closely. We find this narrative in the historical versions written by Peres (1993), Savir (1998), and Singer (1998).

The transformation from an unofficial to official channel can be seen as a point of conflict between the "two professors' narrative" and "the official Oslo narrative." One sticking point concerns the condition of the draft document at that stage. Singer described this original draft as a "blob of a raw mush" (Savir, 1998: 27). He was concerned that he would not be able to start the negotiations from scratch and would have to use the draft as a premise (Singer, 1998). Singer compared it to an appendectomy performed by someone who is not a doctor who, in the middle, turns the operation over to someone else, who now has to "work around things" (Makovsky, 1996: 52). Pundak's reply was that their document enabled the breakthrough, which would not have happened if Singer had led the negotiations from the beginning (Pundak, 2009). Hirschfeld claimed that their document was better than the eventual agreement, and that some of the changes made by the officials were wrong and laid the foundations for later problems (Hirschfeld, 2009).

Another example relates to the role of the two professors during the official stage. The play suggested that after Singer joined the channel, Hirschfeld and Pundak were excluded from the negotiations and Larsen even blocked their entry to the negotiations room (Rogers, 2017: 83). In fact, however, Hirschfeld and Pundak continued to participate in the negotiations until the agreement was reached. According to Pundak, it was clear that Singer and Savir led the discussions, but he and Hirschfeld were still prominent actors (Pundak, 2009). Indeed, in August Peres send Hirschfeld to a special meeting with Qurie, in light of a crisis in the *Oslo* talks (Hirschfeld, 2000: 141). Notably, this part of the story was revised during the adaptation of the play, so that in the film version of *Oslo* Hirschfeld and Pundak remained participants in the talks.

Two points conclude this section. First, the three narratives can be seen as three separate processes on different levels, and only their combination could have started the process. The importance of Beilin's role lay in the fact that he provided the link between the three processes and had the ability to integrate the different parts. Beilin played the role of a "mentor" - a political actor who serves as "a chaperon of the talks" (Agha et al. 2004: 4). Second, all three narratives rely on the fact that at that stage the PLO leadership wanted to open a direct, official negotiation channel with Israel in place of the Washington talks.

"Gog and Magog": The Historiographic Struggle on the Israeli Side

Almost immediately after the Oslo agreement was exposed, a historiographic war started on the Israeli side. Hirschfeld described it as "a *Gog and Magog* war" – a reference to end-of-the-world biblical prophecy (Hirschfeld, 2009). The first signs were apparent at the signing ceremony in Washington. The original plan was that Peres and Abbas would participate in the ceremony in Washington, and Peres was furious when at the last minute Rabin decided to go (Bar-Zohar, 2016: 634–636).

Peres felt that Rabin, on the one hand, and Beilin and the "two professors," on the other, were stealing his credit. Peres told Beilin that the version he (Beilin) and the professors were presenting made it seem that they had done all the work while Peres himself was just the postman (Hirschfeld, 2009). Hirschfeld and Pundak were not invited to join the official Israeli delegation to the ceremony (they found an alternative way to attend the ceremony) and their role was left out of the book Peres published after the agreement (Peres, 1993).[6] When Peres was asked why Hirschfeld and Pundak were not invited to be part of the delegation, he explained that "nurses and midwives have not been invited" (Pundak, 2013: 378; Elon, 1993: 85). Pundak wrote, "It was a weird feeling; we, who had started the process and led it half of the way … were standing in the queue, afraid we would be left out" (Pundak, 2013: 379).

The Nobel Peace Prize is an important symbol in the struggle over credit. It was expected that the two leaders—Rabin and Arafat—would receive it, just as Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat had in 1978 or Nelson Mandela and Frederik Willem de Klerk in 1993. But pressure on the Nobel Prize committee led to the decision to award the prize to Peres as well for his contribution.

The complex dynamic interplay and relations between Rabin and Peres during the Oslo negotiation process are important elements in the Israeli historiographical debate on Oslo (see Rabinovich, 2017; Bar-Zohar, 2016). This debate should be

[5] Exemptions for this were secret contacts established between Shlomo Gazit and Ephraim Sneh with the PLO during the 1980s, with approval from Peres and Rabin.

[6] The version in Peres (1995) was different.

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examined in light of Rabin and Peres's long and very emotional political and personal rivalry over the years. After Rabin was elected in 1992, he assumed responsibility for all the bilateral negotiation tracks, pushing Peres aside and only allowing him to be in charge of multilateral working groups. But when Peres informed him of the unofficial channel in Oslo,[7] Rabin gave a green light for it to continue and later agreed to upgrade it to an official channel, eventually approving the agreement that emerged. The historiographic debate intensified after Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli right-wing extremist on November 4, 1995, which propelled the Oslo agreement to the center of the Israeli public discourse surrounding Rabin's assassination and legacy.

On the one hand, there were attempts to minimize Rabin's role, portraying it as if he had not been fully committed to the process and was directed toward Oslo by "Peres's people" (Raz, 2012).[8] Interestingly, this line was advanced both by "memory entrepreneurs" from the Peres camp (Gil, 2018) and by Israeli right-wingers (Segal, 2018). On the other hand, an opposing narrative stressed that ultimately the Oslo agreement was Rabin's decision: during the election campaign he promised an agreement on Palestinian autonomy within six to nine months, and he was already open to the idea of talks with the PLO a few years earlier (Sneh, 2017). Though initially ambivalent about the Oslo negotiation channel, Rabin gradually became convinced that the Washington talks were hopeless, and he received negative indications of the likelihood of a breakthrough in the Syrian track. He was also encouraged by the reports he received from Oslo and messages he received from the PLO through other channels (Rabinovich, 2017: 189–198; Makovsky, 1996: 49–51, 66). Pundak argued, "All the people who claim today that Rabin received a piece of cheese full of holes and was forced to accept and sign it are speaking nonsense. Rabin was behind this move … and behind every word in each sentence" (Nisiyahu, Stiglitz, and Tamir, 1994: 43). Beilin argued that eventually Rabin "was the 'Oslo hero,' not because he initiated it or because he was enthusiastic about it … [but] because eventually he bore the responsibility for this decision and everything that came afterward" (Beilin, 1997: 161–163).

The Oslo debate has been strongly influenced by historic events and developments, especially following the collapse of the peace process and the eruption of the Second Intifada in September 2000. In parallel to the discourse on the credit for Oslo, in some Israeli right-wing circles there emerged a discourse on the "Oslo criminals." Singer pondered whether the reason that so few books on Oslo were published in Hebrew in the first years following the agreement, especially compared with the number of books written after the peace agreement with Egypt, was because "half of the people hated Oslo and the other half were indifferent" (Singer, 1998). Oslo became one of the most controversial issues in the Israeli political sphere. Thus, a 2013 video clip titled "The Life of Shimon Peres," produced during his tenure as president to mark the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, did not mention the Oslo agreement and only referred in general terms to his struggle for peace and receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. The video shows him signing the Oslo agreement in Washington, but Arafat was cut from the picture.[9]

Washington Channel vs. Oslo Channel: Competing Narratives on the Palestinian Side

The historiographic debate on the Palestinian side stands at the heart of the tension between the external PLO leadership in Tunis and the internal leadership in the West Bank, and between the Oslo channel and the Washington channel (which was the official negotiation track, based on the 1991 Madrid Conference). The Oslo channel emerged behind the backs of the Palestinians' Washington delegation and internal leadership. The Washington delegation members therefore felt betrayed and deceived, particularly given that they had been instructed take a hard line in Washington, whereas in Oslo the positions were softened and important concessions were made (Khatib, 2010: 85–88).

These dynamics point to the difference between the narratives of the two groups. Palestinian figures who were part of the Washington process presented the Oslo negotiations and subsequent agreement in a very critical and negative light. Ashrawi, for example, wrote that she was shocked to see the agreement and her first reaction was that "it's clear that the ones who initiated this agreement have not lived under occupation" (Ashrawi, 1995: 260). Haidar Abdel-Shafi, head of the Washington delegation, presented a similar version, emphasizing that the members of the Washington delegation "are not responsible for the flaws in this agreement; we pointed out the basic issues on which we should stand firm" (Abdel-Shafi, 1993: 18). Participants in the Washington channel narrative argued that the Washington delegation was more representative and accountable, and included members with legal expertise and international experience, whereas those who took part in the Oslo channel were accountable only to Arafat and not to larger official Palestinian bodies. They had no qualified advisers or legal experts and were interested in symbols rather than the fine details (Khatib, 2010: 9, 88, 101; Said and Rabbani, 1995).

In response, the Palestinian participants in Oslo presented a different narrative in an effort to defend Oslo and themselves. They highlighted the advantages of the Oslo channel relative to the Washington track. Abbas (1995: 96) explained in his book that he and his associates supported opening a secret channel because the Washington talks were going nowhere, and Qurie (2006: 290) argued that Oslo succeeded because "it was the free choice of the two partners themselves, in contrast to the negotiations in Madrid and Washington, which were the result

[7] There are different accounts of when Beilin told Peres and Peres then told Rabin: according to Beilin (1997: 87–89), it happened after the second round; according to Peres (1995: 281–283), it was after the first round.

[8] Raz pointed out that the historiographic discussion has been shaped by the fact that most of the Israeli books on Oslo were written by the "Peres camp" (Raz, 2012: 97).

[9] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhpG8w3p0z4&t=156s.

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of international coercion by the United States. In 2006, Qurie published a book with his version of Oslo, explaining that "it is my duty to break my silence and to put an end to speculations and to half-truths" (2006: 1). Qurie's version highlights his struggles during the negotiations and his firm adherence to the main issues, while also emphasizing that he was negotiating under the instructions of Arafat and Abbas and abiding by their decisions even when he disagreed with them (see, for example, Qurie, 2006: 267–269). In addition, like the Israelis, the Palestinians engaged in an internal struggle for credit. Thus, for example, Arafat was bothered when the media emphasized Abbas and Qurie's roles in the process (Qurie, 2006: 260, 274–275, 283–285).

Norway – "The Bulldozer of Oslo" or Just "Serving Sherry"?

Another important element in the historiographic debate concerns the role of the Norwegians. After Oslo, they received a great deal of international attention and scholarly interest (Waage, 2004: 153–157, 240; Corbin, 1994; Egeland, 1994; Aggestam, 2002). The Norwegian role in Oslo became a model for "small state mediation," and Norway became involved as a peacemaker in other conflicts areas, bolstering Oslo's brand as a "capital of peace" (Waage, 2004: 245–245). The Norwegian narrative of Oslo emphasizes the fact that the Washington channel, initiated by a superpower, failed, while the channel organized by a small state succeeded. Scholars have highlighted the Norwegians' historical relations with both sides, provision of secrecy and deniability, and fostering of the "Oslo spirit." Israeli and Palestinian actors in Oslo praised the Norwegian role: Peres (1993: 18) wrote that the Norwegians "were a gift from heaven." Abbas (1997: 103) wrote that "Norway achieved what the giants could not," and Qurie described Larsen as the "bulldozer" of Oslo (Waage, 2004: 62).

Here too, however, the historiographical debate is multifaceted. One dimension follows from the competition among different Norwegian actors, especially between Larsen and the Norwegian foreign minister, Johan Jørgen Holst. The Larsen-Holst competition reflects the dynamic between the official versus unofficial nature of Norwegian involvement and between Norway's efforts during the first stage versus the second stage. After the agreement in Oslo became public knowledge, international and local media focused mainly on Holst's role, describing him as a master of diplomacy and leader of the Oslo team. The media also praised the role of Holst's wife—who was a Fafo researcher —in the Oslo negotiation process (even though she was not part of the team) and reported (mistakenly) that negotiations took place at their home (Waage, 2004: 155–156; Corbin, 1994: 180). "It seemed," according to Corbin (1994: 180), "that history was being rewritten and that individual egos were replacing the teamwork which had been the trademark of the channel's success." Another influential factor was that the Oslo I Accord was announced toward the end of an election campaign in Norway and Holst was able to present it as an important achievement (Waage, 2004: 147–148).

The Oslo historiography also includes critical voices that challenge the Norwegian narrative. One version argues that the Norwegian narrative overstates Norway's role, which was not as crucial as presented. According to this version, Norway did not play a mediating role along the lines of President Jimmy Carter at Camp David (1978), Ambassador Richard Holbrooke in Dayton (1995), or President Marrti Ahtisaari in The Indonesia-Aceh peace process (2005). The Norwegians were modest facilitators, overseeing the logistical arrangements and financial aspects and "serving sherry" (Waage, 2004: 81). Pundak said, "If we had not been satisfied with the food or with the environment, we would have moved with Abu Ala somewhere else; it is the parties who did this, they did not need the Norwegians. They only needed a quiet and peaceful place" (Waage, 2004: 58). Similarly, Palestinian scholar and former negotiator Ghassan Khatib (2010: 9) claimed that Norway's role "should not be exaggerated…. There were other substantial factors that made the Oslo channel more successful." In fact, Beilin had considered having other countries host the channel (Pundak, 2013: 52–54). Another critical voice claimed that the Norwegians had played an unfair role in the negotiations and that being a "neutral" mediator in asymmetrical negotiations actually means siding with the stronger party (Waage, 2004: 127–133, 232–234, 244–245).

The play *Oslo* adopted the Norwegian narrative, specifically the Larsen couple's version. Rogers (2017: xii–xiv), the playwright, explained that he began working on the play following a meeting with Larsen, and it was clear to him that Larsen and Juul, "who midwifed the entire process," would be at the heart of the play. He argued that using "the Norwegian perspective has the advantage of being a neutral route through an issue to which audiences are likely to bring strong prejudices in either direction" (Lawson, 2017). While the play is "not a textbook or a reenactment" (Rogers, 2017: xiv), in many respects its attempt to highlight and emphasize Larsen and Juul's role evidently comes at the expense of historical accuracy and distorts the truth. Singer argued, "Someone watching the play gets the feeling that they were conducting the negotiations. I can tell you for certain that it wasn't so. Larsen and Juul were a marginal presence" (Handwerker, 2017). Hirschfeld claimed that "the play suggests that Israelis and Palestinians are incapable of making peace, so require Western, enlightened, white-skinned Norwegians to do it" (Hirschfeld, 2017).

The Narrative of Oslo in the Track Two Community

The special interest in the Oslo channel stems not only from general global interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its historical importance and influence. It is also a result of the puzzling aspects and surprising turns of event that characterize this channel, which started as a Track Two/Track One-and-a-half dialogue, with two unofficial academics on the Israeli side and the facilitation of an unofficial Norwegian research institute. Against all odds, however, it eventually led to an official historical agreement between Israel and the PLO.

Consequently, Oslo has become a prime model for Track Two scholars and practitioners, a "success story" they can hold onto as proof of the importance and impact of their ongoing efforts,

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in a field that strives for tangible achievements. Joseph Montville (2006: 19) has argued that "the most famous success of the Track Two dialogue process was the Oslo Accords of 1993." Çuhadar and Dayton (2012: 159) claimed that "the transformation of the unofficial process into an official peace agreement" in the Oslo channel "was considered a major achievement for unofficial peace efforts around the world." In addition, De Vries and Maoz (2013: 66-67) showed that Israeli participants in Track Two meetings with Palestinians, whom they interviewed in their study, pointed to Oslo as a "successful example of Track Two Diplomacy" and an exception to the general limited influence of Track Two meetings.

While scholars in the field discuss the challenges and difficulties of measuring and identifying the impact and the "transfer" of Track Two on the official process (Kelman 2008, Jones, 2019)., Oslo stood out in the Track Two community as a unique example of a clear-cut impact. It exemplified the two forms of transfer that Cuhadar (2009: 643) described: both transfer to the *process* – in establishing the secret channel that produced the Oslo breakthrough – and transfer to the *outcome* – in producing the first drafts that served as a basis for the official Oslo negotiations and agreement. Oslo also served as an anchor for discussions on lessons that can be learned from this "successful" case study, recommendations that can be extended to the field, and comparative analysis with similar efforts (Çuhadar, 2012). It should also be noted that shortly after Oslo, Beilin, Hirschfeld, and Pundak tried to recreate the model, and they established a secret channel in Sweden to draft an Israeli-Palestinian proposal for a final status agreement ("Beilin-Abu Mazen document"). The channel, which operated during 1994–1995, was presented to Prime Minister Peres in November 1995, but he decided not to use it (Beilin, 1997: 167–218).

An important reservation applies, however, when discussing the Track Two narrative of Oslo. The Track Two community happily claimed ownership of Oslo, but in essence the Oslo channel was not a classic Track Two model. Oslo included, for example, PLO officials on the Palestinian side, and the Israeli academics were guided from the beginning by an Israeli official (Beilin). Lieberfeld (2007) termed the Oslo talks "semiofficial talks." Therefore, caution is needed when using Oslo as a model or comparing it to various Track Two projects with very different characteristics and contexts. In addition, the discussion surrounding the relevance and lessons of Oslo for the field of Track Two initiatives has altered in light of developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the collapse of the process in the early 2000s and the ongoing stalemate over the years.

Conclusions

The historiographic debate surrounding the 1993 Oslo negotiation channel provides a useful case study for examining the historiography and mnemohistory of peace negotiations and agreements. Future developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and peace negotiations will probably continue to influence this process. This phenomenon of peace historiography, with clashing narratives, is evident in various peace processes around the world. Combining historical with political, and sometimes cultural, aspects, it can be dynamic and evolve over the years. While "history wars" between contesting narratives in conflict and war historiography are usually conducted between the disputing parties, the above analysis of the Oslo channel case study indicates that in peace historiography the competition centers on other fault lines as well.

The competition between narratives and the rivalry over credit for diplomatic breakthroughs in peace processes are natural phenomena, as evidenced by similar dynamics in other types of political historical events. Such competition can have a direct impact on the peacemaking process itself. Peres, for example, was outraged that the media portrayed Beilin as Oslo's architect and decided to exclude him from certain post-Oslo diplomatic efforts (Gil, 2018: 145, 152). Likewise, Rabin wanted to ensure that the Oslo pattern would not be repeated in peace negotiations with Jordan, and he oversaw the process leading to the 1994 peace agreement by himself, leaving Peres out of the picture and making sure that he received exclusive credit in this case (Gil, 2018: 183). In addition, the desire to receive public credit can endanger the process in real time. If leaders or negotiators, seeking to be publicly identified with the process, reveal information about secret talks too early, they might derail the entire process. In the case of Track Two, secrecy and deniability are essential, and breaking these rules for the sake of publicity might jeopardize any future use of this framework. The historiographical struggle has also influenced scholars and practitioners in the field, shaping the conclusions they draw from these processes. Each narrative can yield different lessons for future processes.

Finally, the history of the Oslo channel is the story of a "winning channel," but at the same time its historiography reveals that there were concurrent channels that constitute "roads not taken." It also points to a historical discussion of previous Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives, whether official or unofficial, that paved the way to Oslo (Kelman, 1995; Agha et al. 2004; Wanis-St. John, 2011; Lehrs, 2020). In a counterfactual scenario, other channels could have led to a breakthrough and the Oslo channel would have remained only a marginal footnote in history.

Recommendations

1. This Policy Brief encourages peace scholars to incorporate the peace historiography framework into their work. They should acknowledge and analyze the complexity, and the developments, in the process of writing peace history, and should be aware of competing narratives and the struggle over credit for these processes. Peace scholarship should aim to outline the full, complex picture of peace processes, while identifying the role of various actors (official and unofficial), channels, and initiatives, at different stages, and should avoid simplistic, linear stories and ego struggles. This quest for an accurate and multi-layered analysis is crucial because it affects the lessons and conclusions drawn for future processes.

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2. Recommendations for Track Two practitioners are twofold. On the one hand, they should recognize the importance of historical memory and be aware of this dimension throughout their work. The Track Two community needs to maintain historical records for future scholars and practitioners, as state institutions are expected to do with regard to official, Track One diplomacy. On the other hand, confidentially and deniability are often key, or even vital, factors in Track Two projects, and practitioners should keep in mind that premature publicity, for public credit, can jeopardize the entire process and endanger future efforts. Such publicity might also cause decision-makers to mistrust or refrain from using informal diplomacy.

3. The case of the 1993 Oslo negotiation channel, and consequent agreement, illustrates how informal diplomacy – with unofficial actors and platforms – can play an important role in achieving diplomatic breakthroughs in peace processes. Scholars and practitioners should examine and learn from this case, so as to draw lessons and identify policy implications. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the unique elements of Oslo, its divergence from the classic Track Two model, and its limitations. Likewise, any efforts to duplicate the Oslo model or draw generalizations to other cases, with a very different structure and context, should be approached with extreme caution.

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About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world.

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