

NORWAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS: A JOURNALIST'S VIEWPOINT FRITZ NILSEN

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Ata Jaber should have been bitter, but he wasn't. For the third time his house, outside Hebron on the occupied West Bank, had been wrecked by Israeli soldiers. Whilst he was working in a restaurant in Tel Aviv, the Army had returned. The bulldozer had hit the four pillars of his house, which collapsed.

The house was built illegally, the Israeli officer said. He was right. Ata Jaber owns the land, as has his family for generations. He even has Israeli papers confirming this. But he did not have an Israeli building permit for his house. Three times he had built it, without proper papers. Three times it was destroyed.

Palestinians do very seldom get an Israeli permit to build-even on their own land. Israelis who want to build in occupied areas-the 'territories', as the Israelis call it-have no such problems. Therefore, the Jewish settlements explode on the West Bank and in Gaza. The official Israel policy is part of the forceful removal of the original inhabitants of the area, especially on the West Bank.

An occupying power that the United Nations has deemed illegal, which is breaking the Geneva conventions on the treatment of the inhabitants and using the area in the occupied territories, demands legality from the occupied population. An illegal authority is demanding that the illegally occupied people follow its authority. The world is watching as the years go by. The United States, officially the mediator in negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis, murmurs some words of discontent with the Israeli policy; the rest of the world remains silent.

But Ata Jaber is not bitter. Standing outside the tent where he now lives with his family of four, next to his wrecked house, he describes the hopes he and his friends had when the first Oslo Agreement was signed on the lawn in front of the White House.

"We danced in the streets. Finally there was a chance for peace, a possibility that our kids could live normally with Israeli children. Now we don't dance any longer. We are frustrated, but I refuse to give up. I still think that the only chance for a normal future life, not for me and my wife, but for our two children, is to come to terms, sign a peace agreement with the Israelis, even if it means giving up some of our land."

Ata Jaber is not a hero in the eyes of Palestinian hard-liners. He could not care less. His job in life is to take care of his family. Now he is struggling to get fit again, after hurting his back fighting Israeli soldiers who hit his wife when she tried to stop them tearing down their house again. At the moment Ata Jaber cannot go to work in the restaurant in Tel Aviv. Since he is a day worker in Israel, he does not get sick pay when he is ill. The family suffers, but he maintains that peace with the Israelis is the only option, the Oslo Agreement is the only alternative.

PEACE CAMPS BREAKING UP

The Ata Jabers on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide represent the hopes for the future of the Oslo Agreement, the hopes that international negotiators are clinging to. But the hopes are dwindling, even after the push forward that the peace process received with the victory of the Israel One coalition in the Israeli elections last May. This has to do with the apparent indecisiveness of the Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, and domestic political forces.

The peace camps are breaking up on both sides of the divide. On the Israeli side the settlers have been able to reassert their strength after seemingly suffering a decisive blow in the elections. According to Israeli standards, Barak had won a decisive victory-54 to 46 per cent in the race for Prime Minister. The conservative extremist with the hopeless coalition, Mr Benjamin Netanyahu, had been thrown on the scrap heap of history. The Israeli voters had given Barak the victory, even without counting the votes of the Israeli Arabs.

Today the settlers are hitting back, first of all in the Israeli-Syrian context. The Golan settlers have their supporters in the government and they are threatening time and again to withdraw their support from Barak's coalition. He could still survive, but he would then have to rely on the Knesset Arab representatives-i.e. challenge the right-wing even more, dividing the voters even more, by demonstrating that a peace agreement can only survive in the Knesset through non-Jewish support.

This basically racist attitude of the Jewish voters is a demonstration of the deep divide in Israeli society, showing that the majority thinks that peace has to be on Jewish terms or not at all.

But Barak has to consider public opinion within Jewish society. He has promised to hold a referendum on the outcome of negotiations with Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians. So far the indications are that he would win such a referendum, but the longer the negotiations take without decisive breakthroughs, the more strength the opponents of peace on fair grounds are gaining.

On the Palestinian side the Ata Jabers still have the majority. The hopes have dwindled, but no one can challenge Yassir Arafat for the leadership position. His status is diminished amongst the Palestinians; they don't really believe in him any longer, but as one of the two surviving members of the club of old Revolutionaries (the other one is Fidel Castro), he is a living legend among his people. No one can replace him, no one has his status, especially on the international arena. The one who could, Mrs Hannan Ashrawi, despite having gained the most votes from Jerusalem Palestinians in the elections for the Legislative Assembly, seems to have no chance, being a woman in the traditional male dominated Palestinian population.

But Arafat is growing old. He is 70, but has still not fulfilled his desperate dream of proclaiming the independent state of Palestine. Spokesmen for the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) have hinted that the official proclamation will come in September 2000-the date when the Israelis and Palestinians say that a final agreement should be ready-even if the Final Status is not ready. These suggestions should be taken with fist-fulls of salt, given the May 1999 postponement of the same proclamation and the strong international pressures that will bear upon the Palestinians in such a situation. Many Palestinians fear that Arafat will give up too much to fulfil his dream.

ARAFAT'S AUTOCRATIC RULE

In the meantime the PNA-and, thereby, Arafat-is constantly losing support amongst the Palestinians, partly because of the negative human rights trends within Palestinian society. Arafat is developing into a traditional Arab leader, controlling everything on a personal basis, trusting no one to share his powers and not following through on recommendations from the popularly elected Palestinian Legislative Assembly. Up to eleven different intelligence services are working in the self-rule areas, all reporting directly to Arafat; political opponents are jailed without proper legal procedures (300 political prisoners were held as of 1 January 2000, whereof 250 had not been charged or put on trial); and twenty-two inmates of Palestinian prisons have died after being tortured by their own since the establishment of the PNA. The Palestinians are afraid to speak openly, the press is under pressure and the comment, "It is at least as bad as when the Israelis ruled us," is commonly heard. Corruption is rife, and Arafat is protecting ministers accused of dipping their hands in the public till.

At the same time the Palestinian economy suffers. After some improvement in 1999, especially in the construction business, unemployment is still rife, amounting to about 15 per cent of the population in the PNA areas. Additionally a high percentage is underemployed. For the average Palestinian family the economic situation has deteriorated since the Israelis withdrew from six of the seven cities on the West Bank and because today there are more Israeli closures of the Palestinian areas after suicide attacks or threatened extremist actions against Israel proper. From a Palestinian point of view, the only results of the peace process are more unemployment and smaller incomes. As in most conflicts, money for everyday living counts more for the average citizen than the principle of freedom.

The lack of progress in the peace process combined with the unpopular and anti-democratic developments within Palestinian society, have opened the field for Hamas and other Islamic organisations. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the charismatic founder of Hamas, has settled for a sound tactic. He is repeatedly saying that he will never attack the PNA-only the Israeli will benefit from that, he says-but he is constantly reminding the Palestinians that the Israelis are not interested in peace on equal terms, and winning steadily more influence as facts confirm his statements.

At the same time, Israeli-Syrian negotiations undermine the bargaining position of the Palestinians. Should these talks end in an agreement, the Palestinians will be left alone, without any real support in the Arab world.

AMERICAN INTERESTS

President Hafiz al-Assad shows time and again that he is voicing support for the Palestinian cause only as long as his own country may benefit from it. Should Syria, therefore, regain the whole of the Golan Heights, indications are that the Syrian president will make peace with Israel, leaving the Palestinians dangling. Even the Egyptians, the self-proclaimed protectors of the Palestinians, seem to support an independent Syrian-Israeli peace accord whatever happens to Arafat and his people.

These developments serve American interests, always being in favour of Israel. With an American election campaign firming up, there is even less room than usual for unbiased support for the negotiating process. The strong and well financed US Jewish lobby has its thumb screws on American presidential candidates and parties, forcing them to be even more openly pro-Israeli in their statements and actions. The only thing working against their interests is President Bill Clinton's wish to be remembered in the history books, not because

of his affair with the 'Jewish temptress', as some Arab newspapers have duped Miss Monica Lewinsky, but as the man who brought peace to the Middle East. Clinton is, however, a lame duck, and even promises of huge military and financial assistance to the Israelis (and the Syrians) do not seem to be enough to tempt Barak and al-Assad to act against their local political interests.

'RED LINES'

Why this negative assessment, especially on the Israeli-Palestinian track? What has happened since the euphoria created by the election of Barak? First of all, the euphoria was based on a wrong evaluation of Barak. All commentators seemed to have forgotten that he was the only Labour member of the Knesset that did not vote for the Oslo Agreement-officially on a technicality. Also, his military background indicated that he would not give in easily to pressures. His close associates hint that Barak does not easily listen to advice. He is used to giving orders, not to working in a team. The problem with this is that his arguments in favour of the peace process do not reach the public, which is at the moment more accessible to the opponents of a settlement.

Barak's actions speak volumes against his peace promises. Whilst negotiating with the Syrians, he has given permission for the building of more Jewish housing on the occupied Golan Heights. Whilst speaking to the Palestinians, he has approved the building of about 5,000 new housing units on the West Bank. The settlements actually expand faster than during the rule of the internationally distrusted former Prime Minister. American attempts to secure an Israeli 'time out' from building in the occupied territories during negotiations, have been rejected, Barak using the same arguments as Netanyahu: we are not building new settlements, only naturally expanding existing ones.

During the night of 17 May, in his acceptance speech, Barak gave the first indications that his approach to the peace process would not differ much from that of Netanyahu. He talked about the 'red lines' that he was not willing to cross. He would expropriate large parts of the West Bank to Israel, including all of Jerusalem and the areas next to the city; he would incorporate most of the settlements into Israel proper; he would not withdraw to the borders of 1967; and he would not accept what he called a foreign military power on the West Bank of the Jordan River. These views were more or less in accordance with the 'red lines' from the basic political paper of the Netanyahu government, but international society in its euphoria seemed to forget these warning signals. Also, there is no change in the practise of official Israeli policy as to the human rights of the Palestinians. According to the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, 80 per cent of the Palestinians arrested are subjected to torture, Israel being the only state that officially accepts torture. The forceful removal of the original population in the occupied territories, including Jerusalem, continues. Israeli death squads not only still operate in the territories, but also within the borders of the Palestinian self-rule area. Barak has promised changes in these policies, but so far there are no actual changes. Add to this his treatment of the Israeli Palestinians (those with Israeli citizenship); they are still considered second class citizens with less public facilities in their villages than Jews, worse schools, health services and wages.

ISRAELI EXTREMISM

The original basic difference between Barak and Netanyahu is disappearing. Netanyahu disliked the Oslo Agreement, but was forced to follow-through since it was signed on a state

basis. He did, however, delay all steps as much as possible. Basically, Netanyahu shared the view of his right-wing coalition partners that Israel should keep as much as possible of the occupied territories, based on what some Israelis see as the Promised Land of the Torah, the Old Testament of the Bible.

Mr. Shimon Peres, and to a lesser degree Barak, and the Labour Party had a different approach. They wanted to stop being the rulers of another nation, bring an end to Israel's status as an occupying power. They did not accept old prophets as the key to decisions in the year 2000. But also Labour wanted to keep as much as possible of the occupied territories for 'security reasons', but based on agreements with the Palestinians, thereby getting rid of the United Nations's condemnations. Today, we see that this fundamental difference of approach is disappearing. Barak's coalition includes the National Religious Party, Shas, and the Immigrants Party of Mr. Nathan Scharansky-all of which have close relations with the settlers and have threatened to leave the coalition on various pretexts, including the giving up of the Golan Heights and further withdrawals from the West Bank. Barak is still assured of a majority in the Knesset for any peace proposals, but only when counting the votes of the Israeli Arabs, which he is still unwilling to do. This has to do with the fact that the Israelis are not, in reality, recognising that it is a state of several nations. The attitude is demonstrated by the fact that the Israelis, 51 years after the founding of the state, has not been able to agree on a constitution, not being able to settle whether Israel shall be a state for all its people or only for the Jews.

Barak's government has taken a few steps against the Jewish extremists, inter alia by removing the grave of Baruch Goldstein, the man who killed 29 Palestinians praying inside Abraham's gravesite in Hebron. But the Israeli Prime Minister has done nothing to stop the continuous take-over of new buildings by settlers inside that divided city, condemning the city centre to an economic void and an eternal battleground. Also Jewish settlers have got permission to continue running their formerly illegal radio station and they may still carry their guns outside their settlements and in occupied Jerusalem. Promises have been made to stop confiscation of Palestinian property in Jerusalem, but the practise continues.

CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

Also, Barak seems unwilling to give up on some of the fundamental issues in the Middle East, including water. Indications are that Israel in eventual settlements with the Syrians and Palestinians wants to keep the water rights, avoid a fair distribution and thereby continue reducing the Palestinian chances of developing agriculture in the self-rule areas. Today about 60 per cent of the water used in Jerusalem comes from the occupied West Bank, whilst the majority Palestinian population there do not have enough drinking water. The water problem will be easier to solve with the Syrians, because water is more plentiful on the Golan Heights.

It is of crucial importance to the Palestinians that the area they will control in future state has continuity, that it is not criss-crossed by Israeli checkpoints and that the Palestinian population may move freely between their towns and villages. The repeated Israeli delays in following up on the Wye River Agreement, including the two withdrawals envisaged therein, indicates that Barak has no intention of providing the Palestinians with a viable state territory, whatever its size. Also only one of the two 'safe roads' for the Palestinians, envisaged in the Sharm el-Sheikh Agreement, has been opened and with more Israeli security control than the Palestinians hoped for.

Another basic difference that has provoked anger between the negotiators lately, is the future of the 3.8 million Palestinians living in exile or in refugee camps. The Palestinians demand the right of return, as envisaged in United Nations resolutions, or compensation for lost property should some of them refuse to go back. The Israelis have so far indicated that only a few may return, but then only to the Palestinian self-rule areas, none whatsoever to what is today Israel proper. Members of the negotiating team of the Palestinians are considering giving up on this demand, which means eternal exile for a large part of the Palestinian population. The chances are that when someone goes public with this position, there will be serious problems in the Palestinian refugee camps, especially in Lebanon, where the Palestinians are disliked by the local population. If the final settlement does not seriously consider and attempt to solve the situation of the refugees, there may be unrest that threatens once again the stability of Lebanon, maybe also Jordan. As the Palestinian authorities have moved from Tunisia and established themselves in Gaza, the situation for the Palestinian refugees has deteriorated. UNWRA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, is struggling with diminishing economic support from donor countries. Schools and health care are being reduced since most donors tend to concentrate their efforts on the building of the new state apparatus in Gaza and the West Bank. Therefore, the anger of the Palestinians in the camps is directed at the Oslo Agreement and the attempts to bring peace since it seems to them to be peace at their expense.

This includes the Palestinians living inside the Gaza camps. They are not getting any benefits from the PNA since that would change their status from refugees to citizens of the self-rule territory, and this would again indicate that they have given up on their demand for return or compensation.

When all the withdrawals of the Wye River agreement are fulfilled, the Palestinians will control about 40 per cent of the West Bank. This includes territory under dual control, where the Israelis maintain security and border controls. The size of the rest of the territory shall be decided in the negotiations for a final settlement, indicating that what the Palestinians will get will be a far cry from United Nations resolutions demanding that the Israelis give up all the occupied territory and return to the pre-1967 borders.

EXTERNAL PRESSURES

In this situation, the possibility of external pressures is limited. As mentioned the American presidency will try to push gently for a negotiated settlement, but will only succeed as long as it serves Israeli interests.

The European Union is not popular with the Israelis, having settled for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The European Union will continue being the main economic supporter of the Palestinian National Authority, but have limited political influence.

The United Nations has, against American and Israeli votes, adopted dozens of resolutions on the Israeli-Arab conflict, but the organisation has never been able to follow up on these resolutions. The Arab view, that there is a double standard in the world organisation as to the situation of the Israelis and the Iraqis, may seem exaggerated, but certainly has a point. No one has, or should, organise an armada to kick Israel out of the occupied territories, as happened after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. But there is no consistent moral argument behind this double standard, which continues to anger Arab public opinion. Egypt and other Arab states have pointed to the fact that Israel is the only country in the Middle East

possessing nuclear bombs, at the same time it is not under the same pressures from the US to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty as the Arab states. Given the US's dominant position within the UN, there will probably not be a change in the rich-words-but-no-action attitude of the General Assembly.

During the long rule of King Hussein, Jordan had strong relations with the Israeli government and also with Mossad, the Israeli intelligence organisation for foreign countries. The relations suffered a blow with the attempted murder of a Hamas leader in Amman in September 1997. The situation was diffused when the then Prime Minister, Netanyahu, produced the antidote to the poison injected into the Hamas representative and also released the founder of the organisation, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. But the Jordanians have continued being suspicious of Israeli motives. The new Jordanian King, Abdullah, seems to have inherited this attitude, especially since his country has not seen any of the positive economic developments that the Jordanians had hoped for. King Abdullah will continue pushing for a peace agreement, but he will not be able to establish the same close contacts with Israeli intelligence as those of his father, not having the stature that made King Hussein a hero with his own people, including the majority that is Palestinians.

The Egyptians continue serving as godfathers to the Palestinians, Arafat visiting Cairo almost every week. But the Egyptians are unreliable friends of the Palestinians, very often serving their own interests and their close economic and political friendship with the Americans more than the Palestinian cause. Since the 1979 Camp David Agreement on the normalisation of ties between Egypt and Israel, the Egyptians have received large amounts of dollars from the U.S. in cash or arms. The yearly contribution of \$2.3 billion is being reduced, but the American influence with the Egyptians is evident. Like most Arab states, Egypt does not feel confident with the Palestinians, especially with their formerly outspoken human rights propaganda and democratic ideals. As the revolutionary aspects of Palestinian policy are being muted, the need to keep them at arm's length will diminish and Egyptian policy seems today to embrace the Palestinian leadership in order to control it. The discrimination continues against Palestinian refugees in Egypt.

NORWAY'S REDUCED INFLUENCE

Despite its limited economic and political importance, Norway has played a surprisingly important role in the peace process. Not only was the Oslo Agreement based on the ideas of two minor Norwegian diplomats, Mr Terje Rød Larsen and his wife, Mrs Mona Juul, the pair did a very useful job, with the assistance of the Norwegian government, in providing locations for the talks outside Oslo and convincing the parties to participate in the secret negotiations. Immediately upon the signing of the Agreement, the Americans took over and got the official signing ceremony to the White House lawn.

Since then Larsen and Juul have continued to act as go-betweens in negotiations, but the influence has diminished, especially after the death of Mr. Johan Jørgen Holst, a former Norwegian Foreign Minister. In Norway, it is commonly believed that Holst worked himself to death on the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Norwegian foreign ministers and other dignitaries have continued to travel to the Middle East while, in the autumn of 1999, a summit in Oslo included Clinton, Barak and Arafat. But results have been few and far between. Today Larsen is back as the United Nations's co-ordinator for the Middle East, where he may do an important job as a go-between, knowing

well the parties to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the influence of Norway as such is obviously very much reduced.

For this, the Norwegians have partly themselves to blame. In their eagerness to see the Oslo Agreement implemented, the Norwegian authorities have avoided controversy with the PNA. Criticism of the human rights record of Arafat's authorities has been muted. Understandable as this may be, this attitude of the Norwegian authorities has been strongly criticised by human rights groups within Palestinian society and has been a blemish on the sacrosanct Norwegian demands on others to follow through on human rights.

There is also a growing suspicion in certain circles in the Middle East that the Norwegian authorities are co-operating too closely with the US administration, not seeking independent solutions, but expediting American policies in the area.

The Norwegians may continue to pay a large part of the administration and security apparatus of the Palestinians, but no external powers now have direct influence with the parties, especially not with the Israelis. The time has passed for diplomatic words on papers that may be interpreted differently by the parties. Now the Israelis and the Palestinians are discussing realities on the ground—the borders, the check points, the water rights. They are facing decisions that they, as parties to the Agreement, will have to live with forever or at least for the foreseeable future.

AGREEMENTS WITHOUT PEACE?

In this situation no-one can push Israel, Syria or the Palestinians to act against their national interests. Carrots in the form of huge sums of dollars may help, as can the promise of the political support of the one superpower, but this can only serve as an underpinning of eventual agreements.

Still, one should anticipate that some kind of agreement will be reached, first of all between Israel and Syria. Even in the complex political situation of the Middle East, it is easier to settle disputes between two internationally recognised states. Given that Syria gets back the whole of the Golan Heights, there will be a settlement that includes Lebanon and an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories there. Without a full resolution of the Golan Heights question, there will be no settlement, as demonstrated by the on-off Washington negotiations. The Syrian president who is also old and would like to see all his territories regained in his lifetime, still does not have the leeway to give up a fraction of his territory. Being a traditional Arab dictator, although shrewder than most, his legitimacy rests with his upholding of national rights. Al-Assad may be tempted by American money and his acceptance into the company of righteous Western powers, but he will only discuss security arrangements and Israeli water rights on the Golan, not giving up an inch of Syrian territory.

Palestine exists in reality, but not officially. The state is vying with Israel for a territory that is smaller than most Norwegian provinces with less than 300,000 inhabitants. In Israel of the self-rule Palestinian territories there are now about eight million people. These two facts are the basis for the difficulties in negotiating a final settlement that will include the permanent border between two states.

Also, the religious backdrop to the conflict should not be underestimated. Jerusalem is the home of the Wailing Wall and the Al-Aqsa and Dome-on-the-Rock mosques, and free access

to these sacred sites must be assured. If not, there will be war-probably on a world scale, given the fervour of spreading Islamic feelings.

The Jerusalem problem seems to be on the verge of a solution: Israel will expand the city limits to include some of the outer villages presently on the West Bank (including Abu Dis) and give these areas to the Palestinians. Thereby the Palestinian leadership may claim to have regained part of the Holy City, but whether this will satisfy the Palestinian public is quite another matter. The original UN partition plan, making Jerusalem an internationalised city, seems to be all but forgotten, although some Palestinians not in official positions sometimes voice support for the idea.

Still, one may foresee that the Israeli government and the Palestinian National Authority will arrive at some sort of negotiated agreement. A state-to-state settlement may take place, given Arafat's age and the international pressures on Israel. This will probably not happen by September 2000, as the parties have agreed, but within a few years time.

Given the poor state of Arafat's health, the attitude of the international players and the relative strength of the parties to the conflict, including the military aspects, it is obvious that the Palestinians will be pushed harder and have to give more for an agreement to be reached. Arafat has, however, to balance his longing for the Palestinian state and his willingness to give in with the attitude of the Palestinian population. The support for some sort of agreement with the Israelis has been diminishing, according to Palestinian opinion polls, but Arafat will probably be able to carry the day once an agreement is reached.

Such an agreement does not, however, mean that peace will rule between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Although most people on both sides seem to agree that a settlement is necessary, the wounds are deep. Most families, at least on the Palestinian side, have members that have suffered imprisonment and torture and all have had to pay for the delayed settlement in very reduced incomes or direct poverty. Coming from a country, Norway, that suffered five years of German occupation and remembering the strong anti-German feelings of my parents' generation, I don't see how it will be possible to overcome the enmity in a short time after what the Palestinians consider 50 years of occupation.