The Goodness Regime

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In 2013, we completed The Goodness Regime, an experimental documentary examining how the image of goodness has been constructed in Norway, and the way it has enabled the country to become a “humanitarian superpower,” often involved in conflict resolution and peace-making in developing countries such as Palestine. Early on in our research, we came across Norwegian historian and Middle East scholar Hilde Henriksen Waage’s essay “Postscript to Oslo: The Mystery of Norway’s Missing Files,” which reveals that the entirety of the files from the process’s backchannel negotiations had gone missing from the Norwegian government archives. First published in the Journal of Palestine Studies, the essay criticizes the ideology that absolved Norway of any responsibility for the results of the Oslo Accords and investigates the dangers of third-party mediation in highly asymmetrical power relations. The missing backchannel papers became key in our conception of the work, prompting us to create a film, an alternative document.

Over the last two decades, the Oslo Accords have lost their status as a shining example of Norway’s peace efforts. With the rise of right-wing politics in Norway, and Europe at large, the understanding of a “Regime of Goodness” has been replaced by a discussion of the tyranny of goodness. In the midst of the recent refugee crisis, the minister of migration and integration, Sylvi Listhaug, proclaimed, “Refugees cannot be carried on a golden throne into Norway.”1 Goodness, as she made clear, is no longer presumed to be an unquestioned national characteristic, but a naive legacy to be confronted on the road to making Norway’s asylum policy “one of the strictest in Europe.”2 For Palestine, the last two decades have brought the continued entrenchment of the settler-colonial project of Israel in the West Bank and Gaza, largely assisted by the legal terms and conditions put in place by the structure of the Accords, which have blocked the possibility for a real and just peace to be achieved.

Following the research we embarked on in making our film, we desired to expand more concretely upon the pitfalls and aftermath of the Accords, which was to take the form of essays by a selection of writers with whom we were in dialogue during the creation of the work. The resulting texts presented here address various issues contingent to The Goodness Regime, such as the contradictions between Norway’s fables of innocence in the humanitarian rights industry abroad and its conservative immigration policies at home; the repercussions of the Oslo Accords on the Palestinian struggle for historical justice and self-determination; and the unsettling parallels between diplomatic work and the practice of contemporary art.

The essays commissioned for this online publication are “Neutralizing History and Memory in Divided Societies: The Case of Making Peace in Palestine/Israel” by Bashir Bashir, “Goodness Me: On Contemporary Art as Critique or Exemplification of a Goodness Regime” by Tirdad Zolghadr, “A Self-Image to Drown In” by Marit Paasche, and “Untangling the Oslo Lines” by Jacob Burns and Nicola Perugini (DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency). We’ve also included the essay by Waage that inspired the project, as well as interviews conducted during the course of our research, including with the late Ron Pundak, one of the Israeli negotiators in the Oslo backchannel talks; Hanan Ashrawi, former spokeswoman of the Palestine Liberation Organization; and Nina Witoszek, a research professor at the University of Oslo and the author of the book The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness”: Remapping the Cultural History of Norway (2011). This collection of texts provides different entry points to understanding some of the changes that have taken place in the political landscapes of the Middle East and Europe since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, as well as an analysis of some of the consequences of the Accords today.
The Oslo Spirit
An Interview with Ron Pundak

On January 21, 1993, the Israeli academics Ron Pundak and Yair Hirschfeld met with members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) at Borregaard Hovedgård in Sarpsborg, outside of Oslo. The event was camouflaged as a seminar on the living conditions in Gaza and the West Bank, hosted by the independent Norwegian research foundation Fafo. This was the starting point of what was later known as the secret backchannel negotiations leading to the signing of the Oslo Accords.

In December 2012, Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle met Pundak in his home in Tel Aviv, to get a firsthand account of his experience and impressions of the backchannel. In this interview, he discusses Norway’s role as a mediator, the “Oslo Spirit,” and the missing documents from the backchannel negotiations.

Our first question to Pundak was directed toward the circumstances prompting this first meeting in Norway.

RP  To begin with, we traveled to Sarpsborg after having had a preparatory meeting between Yair Hirschfeld and Abu Ala in London in December 1992. By chance, Terje Rød-Larsen was in London at this time for the multilateral talks, which was the same reason Abu Ala was in London. Hirschfeld met Rød-Larsen that morning and told him that he was going to meet Abu Ala. Rød-Larsen, with his almost never-ending energy, together with the Norwegian desire, the wish, to do something influential, informed Hirschfeld that if something were to come out of this meeting, the Norwegians, backed by Fafo, would be very happy to host a meeting in Norway. We saw the Norwegians as one option among many, such as, for example, traveling to Tunis, where the PLO was based at the time. Another option was the Dutch connection, or the Danes. The first meeting of the backchannel took place on January 21. At this point, we didn’t know what we were going to do; we merely knew that we wanted to meet the representatives of the PLO to figure out their willingness.

We were not acting as official representatives of the Israeli government. The only one who knew we were participating in this was Yossi Beilin, who then held a seat in the Knesset as an Israeli Labor Party member. Neither Shimon Peres, the former Israeli foreign minister, nor Yitzhak Rabin, the former Israeli prime minister, were aware of what was going on. From our point of view, this was a journey that either could end in Sarpsborg or could be an opening for something larger.

We legitimized our stay under the cover of an academic seminar hosted by Fafo, during which Fafo presented its findings. But I must admit, we didn’t listen. All we wanted was to talk with the Palestinian delegation.

The Norwegian decision to host the talk at Borregaard, a very comfortable and informal spot, far from the city, was an intelligent and correct one. As a rule, the majority of the Norwegian meetings were done with consideration of the atmosphere and its implications. The three meetings in January, February, and March were successful, creating what we first called the “Sarpsborg Spirit” and later, the “Oslo Spirit.”

You were one of the people who wrote the Sarpsborg agreement. Could you say a few words on what it included?

RP  We approached the first meeting as an attempt to find out if this was going anywhere. In the second meeting in Sarpsborg, the Israeli side came with what we called draft zero, a Declaration of Principles (DOP), later referred to as the Sarpsborg I document. From our perspective, this was not an Israeli draft, but rather a joint draft that took the Palestinian side into consideration as well as the standpoint of, let’s say, the Israeli public at large, as well as the government. This document had a number of sections,
an economic plan, a Marshall Plan, and so forth. Unlike the Palestinian delegation, we didn’t see this as a final document for signing an agreement, but rather as a draft, or framework. The way Hirschfeld and I saw it, writing an official document demanded legal expertise, as well as formal information from the Israeli government. What happened thereafter, in June to August, was that the Sarpsborg DOP served as a draft that Yoel Singer used to write the final document that was signed in Oslo, and then in the White House, on September 13, 1993.

The Palestinians were disappointed with the change that happened in the DOP when Yoel Singer and Uri Savir got involved, because the new Declaration of Principles that was being formulated was quite different from the original one drafted in Sarpsborg.

RP  Nothing essential changed from the Sarpsborg DOP to the final draft, in terms of the perspective, framework, and structure. The first draft was written by academics—Hirschfeld and I—who were aware of politics and involved in diplomacy, but had never written a formal document between two official bodies. What Singer did was change a document that was based on perspectives and ideas into an official, legal document, in which each word is carefully considered and understood. It was done to avoid a situation in which a document with many ambiguities was signed. What the Palestinians feared was that Singer changed the areas in which certain words could be interpreted differently by both sides into something final and concrete. The Palestinians felt that there was a type of murder of the first draft.

There were certain things the Palestinians were not happy about in the new document. Abu Ala felt he had already finished his battle when he had convinced the Palestinian leadership to agree to the first draft, and now suddenly there appeared a new document that he had to justify once again to the same leadership. Moreover, from that moment on, Rabin entered the picture. He had new input that was intelligent, but also difficult for the Palestinians to digest and sell to the PLO.

Was there also a lawyer on the Palestinian side?

RP  For a long period, the Palestinians did not have a lawyer. At a later stage, they consulted someone who was the adviser of the Egyptian foreign minister and the adviser of Camp David I. Toward the end of the negotiations, on August 20, the day before we signed the agreement in Oslo, the Palestinian team invited the same adviser to look over the document and approve it before it was signed. So they did not have a lawyer throughout the negotiations, but knew to seek and receive legal advice when needed.

In 2001, Hilde Henriksen Waage was commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to carry out a study looking into Norway's role in the Middle East and to examine how its political past in the region had influenced its peace efforts. While conducting a comprehensive study on the Oslo Accords, she discovered that there was not a single document to be found from the nine-month backchannel in the National Archives of Norway. What do you think may be the reasons for their absence?

RP  I don’t exactly know the inner politics of Norway, that is, who is in charge of what. I was not aware of the fact that there is a void in the Norwegian national archive from this period. All of us know that right after Oslo, a number of tensions in the team escalated. Terje Rød-Larsen and Mona Juul on one side, Johan Jørgen Holst and Marianne Heiberg on the other, and Jan Egeland stuck somewhere in the middle. So this might be part of the reason, but also the fact that each person wants to write his or her own memoirs might have influenced where materials were placed. But I have no idea what happened.
According to Waage, it is not so much due to the personal differences among the mediating team as it is to the notion that neutrality might be put to question if these documents are revealed.

RP I did not feel, in any way, that there was even a fraction of bias toward Israel from the Norwegian side. From my perspective, the Norwegians were a totally unbiased, neutral mediator. It is true that personal relationships developed. I suppose that relations between Rød-Larsen and Savir were stronger than the relations between Rød-Larsen and Abu Ala. But this is on the personal plane, and it could have also been the other way around.

Nevertheless, I don’t think this impacted the Norwegian position. Throughout the negotiations, the Norwegian role was one that could rarely impact the substance of the talks. What Norway mainly did—on the highest level that one could imagine, and in the most sensitive and intelligent way at one and the same time—is what I call facilitation. They worked to create a reality that could allow us to give and take, to negotiate, in the best fashion possible. In a few situations, we asked the Norwegians to, or they chose to, intervene as a go-between. Only once or twice with ideas of their own. I suppose that if here there was an active interference from Norway, or one of the players, through removing documents from the archives, it was done for internal Norwegian reasons, not as an Israeli request, in my opinion. But anything is possible.

I think that sometimes when we academics enter deeply into something, we try and are able to discover things that were previously unseen. Sometimes we discover things that are irrelevant, or exaggerate things that exist, but at times you can overexpose them and think they are influential when, in fact, they are not. I do not want to criticize the research that was done, but I would rather like to speak as one of the actors engaged. From my perspective, there is no connection between the role Norway played in Oslo and the history of the very long relationship Norway and Israel share between their labor parties. From my perspective, Norway played the same role that the Italians, the Belgians, the Swiss, the Danes, the Brits could have played—what I call professional diplomacy. Norway played an honest broker.

Waage’s main conclusion is not that Norway was biased toward Israel because of their many years of friendship. Her real conclusion was that Norway was a weak state, without the position to put pressure on any side. So when Israel laid down the lines, Norway had to comply. Norway was first and foremost interested in seeing the negotiations succeed, for its own sense of agency in the world. Her conclusion was not that Norway was favoring the Israelis. Rather, Waage claims that Norway did not, or could not, challenge the fact that Israel was the stronger party and thereby prevent Israel from tailoring the agreement to its benefit.

RP I think the Norwegian intervention rarely got involved in issues that would impact one side to accept the stance of the other. Along the way, my impression was that the Norwegians did not even need power games, like the Americans in Camp David. The Norwegians’ purpose was twofold: First, in a hidden intention, they wanted success, whatever the price, to a certain extent of course. Secondly, they wanted an agreement that would be a fair one. Again, I did not feel that they, at any point, tried to impose their influence through any system of pressure. I would be careful in reaching any conclusions about the Norwegian ability to influence the content of the negotiations.

Translated from Hebrew by Jumana Manna.

Employees of the Occupation
An Interview with Hanan Ashrawi

Hanan Ashrawi is a Palestinian legislator, activist, and scholar. She is the current head of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) Department of Information and Culture, and one of the most prominent spokespeople for the Palestine cause. Ashrawi was part of the official Madrid-Washington negotiation teams to the United States in 1991–93, which begun what is referred to as the “peace process.” By 1993, talks were reaching a stalemate in Washington, and a third team had begun in secrecy in Norway. Neither Ashrawi nor her fellow negotiators knew of the existence of the backchannel negotiations in Oslo until they were revealed to the public.

Jumana Manna met Ashrawi in Ramallah in January 2012 to hear what, in her opinion, were the essential shortcomings of the Oslo Accords, as well as her reflections on Norway’s role.

HA There are essential shortcomings in the Declaration of Principles (DOP) of the Oslo Accords. First, they adopted administrative and functional procedures instead of focusing on the territorial issues. We call it the functional approach versus the territorial approach. Our whole mission was to end the occupation, not to accept jobs and responsibilities in service of the occupation. In 1980, the military governor of the West Bank, Menahem Milson, invited us to take control, while still under occupation, of the thirty-five missions for self-administration, and we refused. Our intention is not to be employees of the occupation, but rather to end it. Our intention is freedom. Adopting this administrative approach sabotaged the territorial issue of bringing an end to the occupation.

Second, the essential issues of the conflict that we were dealing with and negotiating—the territories, the borders, the settlements, Jerusalem—were delayed. There weren’t any guarantees or involvement of a third party, which means these issues were left for Israel to decide upon as they wished, and to inflict injustice. This is in fact what happened.

Third, there was no obligatory system established that would interfere or monitor Israel to uphold the agreement, in a gradual manner. We should not begin with the easier issues and then graduate to the more difficult issues. Not just Jericho and Gaza, or through a categorizing of territories to A, B, and C. Rather, we should treat all the territories as one. It should not have been an open-ended, gradual approach, because there was an imbalance of power in the way that the process was decided and agreed upon. This open-ended approach was the biggest mistake of Oslo. This allowed Israel to turn a temporary solution into a permanent one. It allowed Israel to take advantage of its power and to continue and expand the occupation, to build settlements, and to continue the ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem, without accountability or interference.

Why do you think Norway played this mediating role?

HA The fact that Norway was outside of the EU and the United States gave it the potential to act differently. Also there was trust, because there were no special interests. The fact that Norway has no colonial history also played a role, and there were individuals with whom we had strong personal relationships.
It has been revealed that the documents of the Oslo backchannel were missing from the National Archives of Norway. Most of the documents were in the hands of Terje Rød-Larsen, the former head of Fafo and initiator of the backchannel, who has refused to hand them over to the national archive. In a sense, the documents have been privatized. Different explanations have been given for the possible reasons behind this behavior. Are you aware of this?

HA  This is unacceptable. This is not a personal matter at all. Those documents are for the ownership of history and should remain in the Norwegian archive, and be available to Palestinians, too. Dealing with them as personal property, as if there are secrets that should not be revealed, contradicts notions of transparency and accountability.

What do you think these documents could have revealed?

HA  I have not seen these documents, but have heard much about the meetings. Firstly, there were issues that were ignored, as if there were oral "gentleman's agreements" made. I said this is not a way of negotiation. Everything should be written clearly on paper. It is wrong to informally negotiate with an enemy that has enslaved your people for decades.

The personal relationships between the backchannel participants became a factor in the negotiations, and this is something I do not find acceptable. Negotiations are not a matter of friendships, or acceptance of the others, but rather putting an end to an occupation.

The Norwegian historian Hilde Henriksen Waage has emphasized that the Oslo Accords were a personality-driven process, and remain so by maintaining the secrecy of the talks ...

HA  There is no problem with individuals initiating, but who are these individuals, what are their standings, what are their motivations, and are they capable of producing results, which will later become official? There were hundreds of Track IIs, conferences, and preparatory meetings. That's fine, the individuals can play, but they shouldn't think that they own the process. They shouldn't feel that they can control it and subject it to their own agendas, because these are national and not personal matters. Moreover, once the process moves to the official level, they should be with people who have credibility and can deliver an outcome. We have engaged in many talks, even when it was unofficial or illegal. But the issue is once the talks are serious, binding and official, they should have credibility.

Do you feel that Norway had any say in the outcome of the talks?

HA  This you should ask those who were involved. In my opinion, even the method of negotiation was wrong. They should not have been negotiating without competencies and without legal professionals—especially because they were not living here, under occupation. It is not a theoretical issue; we know what occupation is.

Norway’s role has been portrayed as just bringing the two sides together without interfering and trying to overcome obstacles. I think that there was interference from the Norwegian side, but I have no proof of this. If there is a third party with credibility, it is not wrong for them to come with suggestions that bridge the gap between the two sides; that is, if this third party is not siding with one party against the other, or pressing the weaker side to make concessions in favor of the strong, something the UN often does.
One of the things that we as artists have been particularly interested in exploring are the images that the Oslo process generated. It seems like in the process of peacemaking, creating an image of peace is as important as creating a sustainable agreement. The ritualistic ceremony with hands being shaken in front of the White House was an important creation of an image that could show there was a moment of hope for a peaceful resolution. But, as you have pointed out, the Declaration of Principles that was created had major holes and left the Palestinians at a disadvantage.

HA It was a spectacle at the White House in service of political relations. The president of the United States, Bill Clinton, wanted to give the impression of having had played a role in the peace process, when we know he hadn’t. He was never present in the backchannel talks. Even the Noble Peace Prize was a kind of trick. They gave it to two Israelis and one Palestinian, as if it were a kind of appeasement prize, in the same way that they gave Barack Obama the prize just as he was elected president, and then, afterward, he quickly retreated on all his stances regarding his Middle East policy.

The creation of this public image harms the peace operation, because it’s at the expense of the victim. Israel took advantage of this image. The international community allowed Israel to continue its oppressive politics, because this image that was created gave the impression there was a peace process when in fact there was not. This image has prevented any real possibility for a Palestinian state to emerge. This spectacle and general feeling left a false impression. We must be extremely careful of these kinds of experiments in public relations, and rather engage in what are guaranteed peace processes.

The method by which Oslo took place was undeniably inappropriate. We did not engage in talks to organize our personal lives under the occupation. One must first negotiate the essential issues: the end of the occupation, the issues of settlements, Jerusalem, water. One does not go to negotiations for personal requests and achievements.

Is Oslo dead? Is the two-state solution still an option?

HA Oslo actually never spoke about a two-state solution. Parts of Oslo are still alive: the PLO returned to live in the territories, the building of institutions. And we are still paying the price for parts of Oslo. Israel says we are still in the transition phase. The aspects that are in favor of Israel are still alive, and those that were in favor of us are dead.

Translated from Arabic by Jumana Manna.

The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness”
An Interview with Nina Witoszek

In November 2012, Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle met with the Polish Norwegian academic and fiction writer Nina Witoszek at her home in Oslo. Witoszek’s book The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness”, which remaps the cultural history of modern Norway, as well as the paradoxes and successes of the “Norwegian model” today, provided a helpful guide in the making of our project The Goodness Regime (2013).

This interview focuses on the hazards and possible future scenarios of the Regime of Goodness, its blind spots, and Witoszek’s understanding of this regime, not as a facade, but as a deeply felt tradition in Norway based on the imperative of “being good.” We began by asking Witoszek to define the “Regime of Goodness.”

NW Ironically, it’s more difficult to define the “Regime of Goodness” positively than to unmask it. There is always a thrill and almost triumphalism in the unmasking, deconstructing, and destroying of what seems to be the achieved utopia of the world. This achieved utopia represents, in fact, the ideals of the left: justice, equality, social welfare. It seems to me that unmasking this “goodness” as mere window dressing is unfair for two reasons. The first reason is that it offends and insults some 70 percent of the Norwegians who really try to practice and think goodness with great conviction. Secondly, I would say, it falls into a postmodern trap where all distinctions disappear. That is to say, there is no longer any distinction between so-called good and evil, fair and unfair, equal and unequal.

Now, it has been said that the Regime of Goodness is just a cynical manipulation of the ruling elites who try to sell this image abroad and, at home, the image of Norwegians as better than anybody else. But it seems to me that there is also a deeply felt sense of identity based on goodness, on a shared perception of the imperative of “being good.” Not necessarily better than others—but simply decent, responsible, and fair. I think most Norwegians are convinced that performing good deeds and practicing them—both at home and abroad—is a genuine national feature.

The project of goodness arrived in Norway in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the period I’ve called the “Norwegian Christian Enlightenment.” This is the founding tradition that constitutes the national identity of not just Norway, but of Scandinavia in general. There once were Enlightenment priests who preached Christian ideals based on goodness. And there was a population that practiced them without constraints from the outside, or from some “Other” challenging from the inside. This was a benign Christianity whose essence was “be good to your fellow neighbor” and “turn the other cheek” rather than fight and kill. Equality in its comprehensive sense, justice, and goodness—plus the belief in reason and common sense—are the three basics of what can be called a Christian Enlightenment.

These ideals have not been disturbed in Norway; they were not challenged by some Nietzschean ideals of the Übermensch. Norway was a peasant society, and its ethical code was very much based on peasant Christianity until the 1970s. The basic ideals of goodness, which go back to this pastoral Enlightenment steered by Lutheran priests, were reinforced in the work of the national poet Henrik Wergeland, who is sort of the founder of modern Norway in artistic and ethical terms. These values were then reinterpreted and revised by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who is another shining national hero. Finally they become secularized in the thought and practice of the greatest Norwegian humanitarian, Fridtjof Nansen, a “secular” Christian who saved millions of people from misery, homelessness, and starvation. That being said, we also find goodness propagated in children’s education. The motto-song from the favorite children’s story about Kardemomme By is “Du skal ikke skade andre. Du skal være grei og snill. Og forøvrig kan du gjøre hva du vil.” Translated into English, it goes: “You should not harm others. You should be sweet and kind. Apart from that, you can do whatever you want.”
What do you think of Norway taking on the role of an international peace broker?

NW We need a good sheriff in the world. We’re all brought up on American westerns! There is always a good sheriff that protects the disempowered and sets a good example. I think it’s very uplifting to have Norwegians supporting the good causes of the world, even if there is an occasional double agenda behind this project. No country is perfect. Every country has developed a set of comforting myths about itself. Norway is a bit of an anomaly on the moral map of Europe, because it’s an outsider and yet it’s also an insider. It gives the Nobel Peace Prize to people who do “good.” Norway is also an international anomaly in the sense that it has the greatest number of voluntary workers in the world. Both at home and abroad, Norway recognizes organizations supporting and financing peace and international aid. It’s said that the United Nations’ international aid to countries in trouble is practically financed by Scandinavian countries: they give more than the US. And I think it’s not just about buying yourself a good conscience; it’s a deeply felt project in the national community. The imperative of being a peaceful nation is beaten into the Norwegian soul.

Of course, it’s easy for Norway to be a peace nation. Norway has had very little war and trauma; it has had relatively little experience of human barbarism at its worst. It’s almost like a virgin without much experience. Norway is also an outsider, everywhere, but it is a noble outsider—and it’s easier for an outsider to be a negotiating or navigating agent between all kinds of conflicting parties. Norway is known for relative “decency” and impartiality, so it makes sense for Norway to be a peace nation. Of course, this has its hazards.

What would those dangers be?

NW National complacency and megalomania—we are better than the others—are obvious ones. But I would say there is one danger that no one talks about, namely that goodness is not very sexy. Today it’s much easier to sell evil, to sell the horrors of the US, earthquakes, tsunamis, and ethnic violence. This is what sells. Quentin Tarantino movies and violent crime stories sell because evil fascinates people. Goodness is boring. The Good Christian ideals are a bit of a drag, so to speak.

Secondly, I think, goodness, peace, and ideals of equality are postulations that are always risky, because we are trained to think that most people are selfish at heart. So being good must be some cover-up. Not to mention that if you believe, truly, that you represent all these beautiful things—and, on top of it, you are rich—you do easily fall into a trap. You lose imagination. You can easily become a narcissistic philanthropist who thinks: Why aren’t all people like us? So there is a hidden sense of superiority in talking to the “Other,” who is not as good, successful, equal, or rich as Norway. Out there are the horrors of Africa and Afghanistan, or the misery of poor Poles and Albanians, those who haven’t yet grown into this Norwegian fantastic utopia. Sometimes I think that this idea of being a peace-and-nature community has made Norwegians into some sort of extraterrestrial beings.

The third danger is rooted in the phrase “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Unfortunately, here we must remember that the project of trying to achieve the impossible, the utopian, the good, the super-duper good, in the ’70s and ’80s was on the verge of turning Norway into a communist utopia! There was a real plan conceived by the intellectual elites from the Leninist and Maoist circles to install an authoritarian communist regime in Norway. I’ve read they even had a list of people they would assassinate, including the king. So here we have these problems with the unachievable project: what you create is a Rousseauist “dictatorship of virtue,” and it never turns out well.

One of the last two problems I see—perhaps because I’m an outsider—is the excessive trust in the state. In all the countries I’ve lived in—England, Ireland, Italy, France, the US—nobody ever trusted the state or the newspapers as much as the Norwegians. Other societies always try to read between the lines. In Norway, it seems to me that the average person’s trust toward the state borders on self-destructive...
INTERVIEW Nina Witoszek

Naiveté. It’s amazing to see people who are intelligent citizens think in terms of “the state is usually right” and “what newspapers write is more or less true.”

How do you see the relationship between foreign aid and immigration in Norway?

NW It has been rightly pointed out by the Norwegian academic Terje Tvedt that Norway has had too little debate in regard to its foreign aid. Critically reviewing the effects of Norwegian international aid to developing countries has been almost taboo in the public domain, though recently it has loosened up a bit. This is disturbing because there is growing evidence that the large sums Norway donates to developing countries more often than not land in the pockets of dictators or are simply wasted away.

The situation is tragicomic: researchers go to these poor countries, do their fieldwork, and prove the Norwegian blunders, but their reports are hardly ever read in the ministries. In short: the ministry orders these reports, but then, in a kind of Buddhist act of transcendence—based on the conviction that we are beyond all problems—we are actually immune to the criticisms they contain. We don’t need to read the negative reports, for we are immune to them.

Let us go back to the debate on multiculturalism, minorities, and perceptions of the Other. As we know, Norway used to be one of the most “monologic” cultures in the history of Europe: monologic in the sense that there were no competing cultures clashing with the Norwegian master narrative. The Norwegians largely talked to themselves, and to the trees, if they talked at all. They were doers rather than talkers. Norway had been ensconced on the margins of the “real world.” Even today, when you have a psychological problem, you don’t go to the psychiatrist—first you go to the forest.

Norway wasn’t very urbanized until the true metropolis emerged in the 1980s. A “village mentality” surfaced as a result of this delay—a local village that didn’t like the urban center. It has been called “distrikt-Norge.” In the ’80s, things started changing: all of a sudden, minority populations—Pakistanis, Africans, Eastern Europeans, and so forth—challenged the native codes. And suddenly you have a new ethnic theater with all kinds of smells, signs, sounds, modes of behaviors, which must have disturbed the homogenous population. This confusion was already manifest in Henrik Ibsen’s dramas, in which the urban population, or borgerskapet, is perceived as an alien element. There is a constant unmasking of the borgertlig løgn—the urban lie—in Ibsen’s bourgeois interiors. In the ’80s and ’90s, and now in the twenty-first century, Norway has been struck by the new foreign organism within its body, confronted and challenged by the Other. This process has a lot of positive sides. Norway has stopped being an undersocialized, largely peasant community with no manners, which is what irritated me when I first came here in the ’80s as a former member of the chatty Krakowian intelligentsia. Now, Norwegians have developed a taste for debate: Oslo debates about everything—it’s there every time you turn on the radio, or when you go to Litteraturhuset and see queues for the debates. Public argument is “the” thing today. I think it’s inspiring; we need minorities to not just come and force Norwegians to innovate and become more flexible, more European, but also to force a culture of dialogue, of talking to—and understanding—the Other. It’s a process, and I think that Norwegians are only just learning. Norway is much behind Britain, which has been forced to innovate as a result of its own colonial legacy. I think Britain is an example of how a culture can become color-blind in a positive sense. I don’t think Norway is there yet. The natives are still trying to find a modus vivendi with the Other.

How has oil infused this image, or allowed it to come into being?

NW I should say it is empowering the Regime of Goodness in an interesting way. First of all, if your identity is founded on goodness, and you are wealthy, you have this extra confidence that can boost the goodness—or stain it. Goodness that springs from religious imperatives, from the fact that you have no other choice but to be virtuous, has its problems. In Norway, good gestures coexist with wealth, which I think is a bit
of a moral anomaly. When you are filthy rich, you are supposed to be mad or bad or greedy. Further, oil has made Norway petroholic, and has very much increased the double-mindedness, the double-speak, the double-think. We know that this oil money was invested in, for example, the deeply problematic tar sands project in Canada and in Nigeria.

But goodness enters even into the talk of the oil tycoons. In their famous advertisement of Norwegian oil success, they use a fairy-tale adventure inspired by the national folktale hero Askeladden, who is the embodiment of goodness. In their charming ad, a father sits by the bedside of his daughter, telling her a story about a treasure that is going to ensure her bright and brilliant future. She is of course very happy and delighted, and follows her father on a magical journey to exploit the wealth that lies at the bottom of the sea. This is the new, super-rich tale of Askeladden, in which nature doesn’t suffer; instead it fosters the joys of exploiting and polluting resources. Fairy tales like this create a national schizophrenia. The old set of fairy tales told us of the Askeladden who helps the old and needy and listens to nature. The new Askeladden doesn’t listen to the environment: he sees it instrumentally, as a resource and as the beginning of a new fairy tale.

Askeladden, the central figure in Norwegian fairy tales, is very much about goodness, but his main attribute is his luck: “Jeg fant! Jeg fant!”

NW  Askeladden bumps into opportunities—he doesn’t try too hard, he doesn’t strain, he believes in his good luck. There is a self-fulfilling prophecy in this belief. Word becomes flesh. We have Norwegians who discovered oil, and after oil they’ll discover diamonds.

There is a certain sense of contentment, an overaccumulation of wealth in Norway today. So, what now?

NW  The next step could be a creation of a rentier society, if there is no apocalypse that makes it all go to hell. Everyone gets a slice of the pie. You can stop working or keep working—do whatever you like. Go to the Canary Islands, fish in the morning, and do hobby carpentry in the afternoon. You live in the Qatar of Europe, where slave labor from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia is running around, serving you around the clock. This is one decadent version of the future Norway. But there is another version—the country that tries to live up to its idea of being an icon of goodness, setting a good example for others while at the same time critically exploring its goodness to make it less sterile and ossified.

It seems to me that there is one particular challenge in this other scenario, which is the challenge of not betraying the legacy of Nansen, Bjørnson, Wergeland, and the Christian pastors. This would be the way forward for Norway and for a “fair society.” It seems to me that there are enough forces in this society, enough innovative youth, to maybe grab the chance to lead Norway in this other direction. In many ways, Norway is a laboratory of the future, in terms of trying to achieve the best possible society. It’s a Herculean challenge, and I’m not sure if Norway is up to it. But I think Norway has the premises for it at least. Maybe it is the only country in the world that can fulfill this vision?

Postscript to Oslo: The Mystery of Norway’s Missing Files
Hilde Henriksen Waage

In Norway, the secret negotiations culminating in the 1993 Oslo agreement are still seen as a shining moment in the nation’s history, so when the files of the entire process were discovered to be missing from government archives, a minor public scandal erupted. After laying out the Oslo “myth” and its cast of characters, the author recounts the story of the disappearance of the files, new revelations concerning their scope, and the (thus far unsuccessful) quest to recover them. The author concludes by exploring the implications of the backchannel negotiations for the entire Oslo process and its lessons for conflict resolution, particularly third-party mediation in highly asymmetrical conflicts.

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The Oslo Process in the Norwegian National Psyche

Along with fame and prestige, Norway’s “crusader diplomacy” in the Middle East brought tangible benefits. It helped promote the image of a country with something special to offer in terms of political morality and conflict mediation, increasing Norway’s influence on the international peace scene. Norway has long hosted the Nobel Peace Prize; following the 1993 diplomatic breakthrough in the Middle East, Oslo seemed established as the world’s “capital of peace.”1 Peacemaking became one of the country’s chief exports,2 with Norwegians becoming involved in peace processes from Guatemala and Colombia to Sudan, from Sri Lanka to Cyprus and the former Yugoslavia.

Indeed, Norway’s “Oslo achievement,” in the national psyche, is such that any aspersion cast on its role in the process, any assault on the Oslo mystique, generates controversy and hostility. The Oslo myth is well entrenched: a personality-driven explanation of events, the story tells of a small coterie of idealistic and resourceful citizens of tiny Norway who, through perseverance and the “Oslo spirit” they created, succeeded where the superpowers had failed in bringing age-old enemies together to make peace.

More specifically, the story focuses on four indisputably attractive individuals. First and foremost in the public imagination is Terje Rød-Larsen, the charming, self-confident diplomat-of-action who, as head of the Norwegian research institute Fåfo, got the “peace ball” rolling. Next is his elegant wife, Mona Juul, a Middle East specialist at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) who helped create the cozy, homey atmosphere that fostered the breakthrough. State Secretary Jan Egeland, the handsome, results-oriented idealist who welcomed the chance to test the hypothesis of his political science thesis about how small states can create results in international politics unattainable for superpowers, was the third player. Once the process was underway, the trio became a quartet with the addition of Norway’s newly appointed foreign minister, the dynamic Johan Jørgen Holst, whose can-do approach and shrewd mediation overcame eleventh-hour snags to bring the process to its successful conclusion on the White House lawn in Washington, DC.

The legacy is guarded like a national treasure, to such an extent that the discovery in early 2006 that the “Oslo files”—the documents concerning the backchannel negotiations that launched the Oslo Accords—had gone missing, with no trace either in the MFA or in the national archives, became a running topic in national newspapers for almost a year.

In fact, the discovery that the files were missing had actually taken place several years earlier—it just hadn’t hit the press. In 2001, I was commissioned by the Norwegian MFA to conduct a comprehensive study of the Oslo backchannel. In order to carry out the research,
I was granted privileged access to all relevant, still-classified files in the ministry’s archives. Given that the MFA had been at the heart of the process—either directly through the involvement of Egeland, Juul, and Holst, or indirectly as the funder of the backchannel talks initially overseen by Fato’s Rød-Larsen—there seemed no doubt that all the documents I needed would be there.

But when I set to work at the archives, to my surprise, I found not a single scrap of paper for the entire period from January to September 1993—precisely the period of the backchannel talks. I alerted the head of the MFA archive, who was astonished and more than a little puzzled. Surely they had been misplaced, perhaps stored in improperly marked boxes. After an exhaustive search by the archive’s staff, who combed through indexes, storage rooms, and shelves looking for misfiled documents, all doubt was removed: there were no files. Fleeting suggestions that the backchannel process might have been oral, without written record at the request of the participants, were immediately dismissed, not least because excerpts from the missing documents had already been quoted in memoirs by Israeli participants such as then-foreign minister Shimon Peres, then-deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin, and to a lesser extent, chief negotiator Uri Savir. A number of these quotes were from letters written by Foreign Minister Holst, who died in January 1994. Given his key role and his known penchant for writing long memos and detailed analyses, it seemed logical that if his own Oslo writings were not in the MFA archives, they would be found among his private papers. I therefore secured an interview with his widow, Marianne Heiberg, but this, too, proved to be a dead end: Heiberg, herself a researcher and a Middle East specialist, had originally planned to write about the peace process but had been surprised to find no documents relating to her late husband’s involvement in the Oslo backchannel among his private papers. Meanwhile, the MFA contacted Rød-Larsen and Juul on my behalf to ask if they had any information or documents to contribute, but the MFA’s requests, as well as my own, went unanswered.

In the end, I had not a single original Norwegian document to work with. This was an obstacle, to be sure, but not insurmountable. Through scores of interviews with the key players (Norwegian, Israeli, Palestinian, and American), excerpts from key missing documents published elsewhere, and extensive knowledge on Norwegian foreign policy in general, it was possible to put together a comprehensive picture of the backchannel, its pitfalls, and its limitations, focusing on Norway’s role. My book caused a considerable stir when it came out in April 2004. I had challenged the prevailing myth by demonstrating that Norwegian facilitators, anxious to bring the agreement to conclusion, had consistently sided with Israel, shared information with them, and leaned on the Palestinians to give in at crucial moments. In all the backchannel around the book—a controversy augmented by the fact that Rød-Larsen and Juul publicly attacked my conclusions—the reference to the missing files in my introduction was overlooked. Though I tried to generate interest in the mystery by mentioning it to a number of people, including journalists, no one followed up on it, and the issue faded away.

The Scandal Erupts

In October 2005, the well-known journalist Odd Karsten Tveit, for many years Middle East correspondent for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), published _War and Diplomacy: Oslo-Jerusalem 1978–96_. In Norway, where anything on Norway’s role in the peace process receives instant coverage, Tveit’s book, too, created a stir, but for different reasons than my own: while it painted a bleak (and quite accurate) picture of the ultimate outcome of the process, it portrayed the Oslo backchannel itself as a success. More importantly, it left entirely intact the idealized image of the role of the Norwegian actors that continues to be widely embraced by the Norwegian public.

Tveit’s book was actually the second part of a dual project, the first part having been a documentary film of the same title that aired on Norwegian television in May 2004. Rød-Larsen, Juul, and Holst figure prominently in Tveit’s film, much of which comprises extended interviews with Rød-Larsen and Juul intercut
with documentary footage. In 2000, Tveit had received some US$180,000 in funding for the film/book project from the Norwegian MFA, which also granted him privileged access to the ministry’s classified files. When these facts were revealed by the press in September 2000, a controversy ensued, particularly in academic circles, as the funding and access to classified documents for any but the most “scholarly” research was virtually unprecedented in Norway.

Despite the MFA’s grant and unrestricted access to its classified documents, Tveit’s book does not reference any MFA files on the backchannel—not surprisingly, since, as I knew from my own research during the same period, there were no such files. Instead, the two hundred or so documents for this period cited in the book are referenced in a highly unusual manner. In his preface, Tveit explains that to protect his primary sources, he had “deposited” a “supplementary footnote manuscript with references to sources” in Norway’s national archives, marked as classified for twenty-five years. 

Because of my familiarity with the Oslo backchannel, I was able to recognize in the book references to some documents already identified as missing, as well as a substantial number of other internal documents not previously known. Thus, while the book did not offer much that was new by way of content or interpretation of the secret negotiations, what was new and important was that it confirmed the existence of backchannel files still unaccounted for. Moreover, a number of the quotes were more extensive than the meager excerpts already published in other works, demonstrating that Tveit had had access to the actual documents and must have had them, or copies of them, in front of him while he wrote. For those familiar with the case, this was very big news indeed. Media attention surrounding the book was focused elsewhere, however: on the incidental revelation that the wife of the head of a Norwegian NGO had been a Mossad agent. The news about the mysterious classified box and the missing files went entirely unnoticed.

But then, on January 17, 2006, Ny Tid, an old socialist periodical reincarnated as a trendy weekly, appeared on newsstands with a photo of Mona Juul splashed across its glossy cover along with the title of its lead article: “The Documents That Went Missing.” Within days, and continuing over the following weeks, the case of the missing files was extensively covered in segments of the national press, with articles bearing such titles as “Archive Mess to Be Raised with MFA,” “Where Are the Documents?,” and “Clean-up Demanded,” escalating within the next few weeks to “Rød-Larsen and Juul Are Lying” and “Lured by Tveit.”

In the initial round of Norwegian media coverage on the matter, the impression was given that the actual documents were stored in the national archives. By early February, however, the truth was out, and Jon Herstad, head of the national archives (a position of considerable national prestige in Norway), felt called upon to weigh in on the matter. In an op-ed in a leading daily, Dagbladet, Herstad confirmed that his institution did not possess a single document relating to the Oslo backchannel and that the now-famous “Tveit Box” was empty, or at least contained no documents. Instead, the box contained only a CD with the book’s complete footnote manuscript. He added that the national archives had not received a single document upon which Tveit’s account was based and had ordered an investigation into the whereabouts of the documents.

**Searching for the Files**

Following Herstad’s initiative, the MFA publicly acknowledged—though without explanation—that none of the relevant documents had ever been filed with the ministry to begin with. At a meeting between the two government institutions, a plan of action for following up on the missing files was formulated and a division of labor decided: the MFA would approach Mona Juul and Jan Egeland, while the MFA employees at the time of the backchannel talks in 1993, while Herstad would contact Terje Rød-Larsen and the family of the late Johan Jørgen Holst.

The attempts to recover the documents did not get very far. On the MFA side, former state secretary Egeland went through his private papers and sent eight documents to the MFA. Although some of these are important and had been missing—particularly the Sarsborg document and Holst’s statement to the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee—none of them belonged to the most crucial phase (May–August 1993), when Egeland’s involvement had been largely eclipsed by the increasingly central role of Holst. Juul, on the other hand, who had accompanied Holst on his various missions and who was in charge of keeping his documents organized, had little to say. By that time Norway’s deputy head of...
mission to the United Nations in New York, she had already been questioned about the files in early January and affirmed that she had no documents except those that belonged to her. She declined to elaborate.19

Meanwhile, Herstad’s attempts on behalf of the national archives met with even less success. Holst’s widow, Marianne Heiberg, had died in December 2004, having maintained to the end that she had no idea where her husband’s Oslo papers might be; the Holst family had no further information. As for Rød-Larsen—by this time head of the United Nations-affiliated International Peace Academy in New York and simultaneously UN special representative for the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon—he seemed little inclined to share his thoughts. Already confronted with the issue in January 2006, he had insisted that he had only “private” memos and a “private” archive from his engagement in the Oslo negotiations, although both he and his wife noted that Fafo might have the ministry’s missing files. The research institution affirmed, however, that none of the ministry’s files were in its possession.20

The search for the documents reached its ultimate dead end in early May 2006, when Rød-Larsen sent a letter to Herstad on official International Peace Academy stationery making absolutely clear that he had no intention of turning any of the documents in his “extensive private archive” over to the Norwegian state. In his estimation, Norway’s involvement in the Middle East Peace Process was basically a Fafo initiative, and in his capacity as the organization’s director and the leader of its “negotiation project,” he was the one who had liaised between Israelis and Palestinians, arranged the necessary briefings, and coordinated with the MFA. Fafo, he elaborated, had organized the secret negotiations at the request of the Israelis and the Palestinians, who had wanted, among other things, “to avoid the reporting and filing routines which civil servants are bound by.” He wrote that he had noted “with interest” statements from “some Norwegian historians, officials in the MFA, and the head of the national archives himself” regarding the missing files, but claimed that none had attempted to contact him directly. This being the case, according to Rød-Larsen, neither the participants in the public debate nor their alleged lack of communication had “contributed to the relationship of trust that is a necessary precondition when donating a private archive including memos from sensitive conversations with, among others, still-living politicians and diplomats from many countries.” In consequence, he concluded, “I will donate my private archive to an internationally recognized archive abroad.”21

Notwithstanding the definitiveness of Rød-Larsen’s letter, the controversy continued. Several months after the scandal of the Oslo missing files broke, Herstad, commenting on an analogous case involving a government minister who had decided to keep her “private archive” over to the Norwegian state. In his estimation, Norway’s involvement in the Middle East Peace Process was basically a Fafo initiative, and in his capacity as the organization’s director and the leader of its “negotiation project,” he was the one who had liaised between Israelis and Palestinians, arranged the necessary briefings, and coordinated with the MFA. Fafo, he elaborated, had organized the secret negotiations at the request of the Israelis and the Palestinians, who had wanted, among other things, “to avoid the reporting and filing routines which civil servants are bound by.” He wrote that he had noted “with interest” statements from “some Norwegian historians, officials in the MFA, and the head of the national archives himself” regarding the missing files, but claimed that none had attempted to contact him directly. This being the case, according to Rød-Larsen, neither the participants in the public debate nor their alleged lack of communication had “contributed to the relationship of trust that is a necessary precondition when donating a private archive including memos from sensitive conversations with, among others, still-living politicians and diplomats from many countries.” In consequence, he concluded, “I will donate my private archive to an internationally recognized archive abroad.”21

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The Issue Is Dropped

Indeed, it seemed to many observers that the public nature of the Oslo process was beyond dispute. Critics of Rød-Larsen’s approach noted that Norway’s role in 1993 had been cleared by the prime minister and had been closely followed from the outset by Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg and State Secretary Egeland, to say nothing of Juul’s undisputed employment with the MFA. When Holst took over as Norway’s foreign minister in April 1993, he began virtually to run the Oslo process, moving Norway’s involvement from “facilitator” to active “mediator.” Moreover, it was pointed out, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leaders (including Yasir Arafat, as far back as 1979) had tried to interest Norway in mediation between the two parties, and these requests were to the state, not to any individuals.22

Given the wide consensus, at least in academic circles, on the MFA’s right to the Oslo files, there was considerable surprise when, in early 2007, the MFA suddenly appeared wholeheartedly to embrace Rød-Larsen’s views on the ownership of the documents. This was in sharp contrast to its earlier stance. In March 2006, for example, the MFA had emphasized in its correspondence with Juul and Egeland that they were obliged to return all documents in their possession, including all minutes and private notes, and even specified that
Indeed, Tveit’s book is replete with passing allusions to Holst’s compulsive note-taking in the West Bank, Arafat would have a hard time selling the deal.28 to advise the Israelis that if Jericho were not included in the final package as a PLO foothold would not be pinned down). Other issues were apparently also discussed, and Holst was able Israel wanted additional clarification on Arafat’s thinking on this issue (the Palestinian leader formulation “safe passage.” A second meeting was arranged a week later, on July 20, because West Bank and Gaza, with Holst insisting instead on the vague and essentially meaningless insistence on extraterritorial corridors (what Arafat called “kissing points”) between the at the Arafat meeting by Rød-Larsen and Juul. Much of the discussion centered on Arafat’s to convey, and asked him to stop in Israel afterward to brief them. Holst was accompanied their habit, briefed Holst on what questions to raise with Arafat and what Israeli red lines that took place at PLO headquarters on July 13. Prior to the meeting, the Israelis, as was accounts, Holst and the Norwegians were instrumental in getting the talks back on track. refusal to make the compromises and concessions demanded by Israel. According to Israeli when the entire backchannel enterprise seemed on the brink of collapse as the Palestinians refused to make the compromises and concessions demanded by Israel. According to Israeli accounts, Holst and the Norwegians were instrumental in getting the talks back on track. Holst took advantage of an official visit to Tunisia to arrange a personal meeting with Arafat that took place at PLO headquarters on July 13. Prior to the meeting, the Israelis, as was their habit, briefed Holst on what questions to raise with Arafat and what Israeli red lines to convey, and asked him to stop in Israel afterward to brief them. Holst was accompanied at the Arafat meeting by Rød-Larsen and Juul. Much of the discussion centered on Arafat’s 28 See Waage, Peacemaking is a Risky Business, 112–18, and “Norway’s Role,” 12–13.

29 Peres, Battling for Peace, 332–42; Beilin, Touching Peace, 106–10; David Makovsky, Making Peace with the PLO: The Robin Government’s Road to the Oslo Accord (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 60–64.

30 Tveit, War and Diplomacy, 414.

The Missing Files: What Importance?

Why should we bother about missing documents, or care that they are not in government archives? More specifically, what does it matter whether or not the Oslo backchannel files are available for public (or scholarly) scrutiny, especially since the broad outlines of the Oslo story are already known?

Whatever the ultimate fate of the Oslo process, there is no question that it constituted, for better or for worse, a turning point in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This being the case, it is important for the historical record to know how this process unfolded, and particularly why the Palestinian positions progressively crumbled in the course of the backchannel negotiations. Historians cannot rely on excerpts, which are by definition selective; they must have access to documents in their entirety to reach a full and accurate assessment of what happened and why.

The importance of the documents can be illustrated by an episode in July 1993 when the entire backchannel enterprise seemed on the brink of collapse as the Palestinians refused to make the compromises and concessions demanded by Israel. According to Israeli accounts, Holst and the Norwegians were instrumental in getting the talks back on track. Holst took advantage of an official visit to Tunisia to arrange a personal meeting with Arafat that took place at PLO headquarters on July 13. Prior to the meeting, the Israelis, as was their habit, briefed Holst on what questions to raise with Arafat and what Israeli red lines to convey, and asked him to stop in Israel afterward to brief them. Holst was accompanied at the Arafat meeting by Rød-Larsen and Juul. Much of the discussion centered on Arafat’s insistence on extraterritorial corridors (what Arafat called “kissing points”) between the West Bank and Gaza, with Holst insisting instead on the vague and essentially meaningless formulation “safe passage.” A second meeting was arranged a week later, on July 20, because Israel wanted additional clarification on Arafat’s thinking on this issue (the Palestinian leader would not be pinned down). Other issues were apparently also discussed, and Holst was able to advise the Israelis that if Jericho were not included in the final package as a PLO foothold in the West Bank, Arafat would have a hard time selling the deal.28 All this is known not from documents but from interviews with the participants, written accounts, and excerpts (published in Israeli sources)29 From letters Holst wrote to Peres directly after the meetings to recount what had transpired. What we learn from Tveit is that Holst also wrote “long and detailed minutes in English” after the meetings.30 Indeed, Tveit’s book is replete with passing allusions to Holst’s compulsive note-taking.
Throughout the entire four months of his involvement in the process: his aide-mémoires before and after meetings; his memoranda on discussions by telephone or in person with various leaders; his exhaustive draft minutes, often written on airplanes as he traveled from one destination to another—not to mention his letters to various key players. Tveit’s revelation that voluminous documentation by Holst of the Oslo backchannel exists solves a mystery that has long puzzled those familiar with the foreign minister’s habits, to wit: Why had he written so little on a project of such vital interest to his country? (From my own research, I can affirm that the MFA archives are overflowing with copies of his copious writings, often in his own hand, on every issue that concerned him throughout his Foreign Ministry career except the secret Oslo talks.) Given Holst’s exceptional thoroughness, the importance of the missing documentation in providing insights into the workings of the Oslo track cannot be overstated.

It is also not difficult to imagine how precious Holst’s detailed descriptions of his meetings with Arafat would have been for the Israeli negotiators at the time. As we know from Tveit’s book, Red-Larsen and Juul personally delivered Holst’s letter to the Israelis a few days after the first meeting. The Tveit book adds the important detail that the couple also delivered his full minutes of the meeting; unable to come to Israel himself, Holst wrote Peres that he was sending Red-Larsen and Juul as his “special envoys” to brief Peres’s “people” directly. The pair thus met with the entire Israeli team, supplying additional details and answering any questions about the nuances of Arafat’s responses. The advantage to the Israeli side of such prior knowledge of the adversary’s thinking needs no emphasis.

Even without access to primary documents, it had been possible to put together what is increasingly recognized as an accurate picture of what happened in the Oslo backchannel, particularly as concerns the structure of the mediation and its impact on the negotiation results. Had the missing documents (especially the extensive Holst material whose existence has now been confirmed) been accessible at the time of writing, there seems no doubt that the findings of my report would have shown even more starkly the extent to which the Oslo process was conducted on Israel’s premises, with Norway acting as Israel’s helpful errand boy. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the very prospect of making public blow-by-blow descriptions of the mediation could have some bearing on why the files went missing in the first place. Such considerations may even have played a role in the MFA’s decision to renounce its claim to the files and explain the “news blackout” on the subject that followed. It seems clear that important interests both inside and outside government are determined to avoid a critical discussion of Norway’s peacemaking and peace-building efforts, on which billions of dollars are spent.

Given the overwhelming imbalance of power between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Norway probably could not have acted otherwise if it wanted to reach a deal—or even if it wanted to play a role in the process at all. Israel’s red lines were the ones that counted, and if the Palestinians wanted a deal, they would have to accept them, too. Indeed, in third-party mediations between vastly unequal parties by a small state like Norway, the only chance for “success” in reaching an agreement is for the small state “facilitator” (a role that in Norway’s case evolved into that of mediator) to play by the rules of the stronger party, acting on its premises, while using carrots and sticks on the weaker party to persuade or cajole it into making further concessions.

The missing documents would almost certainly show why the Oslo process probably never could have resulted in a sustainable peace. To a great extent, full documentation of the backchannel would explain the disaster that followed Oslo. More broadly, it would shed important light on the limits of third-party mediation by a small state in highly asymmetrical conflicts. In such conflicts, only the international community (if it has the will) or a superpower (if it has the desire and the vision) is capable of imposing on the parties a reasonably fair, and therefore sustainable, agreement.

Without the power to impose solutions, and above all dependent on the stronger party, the weak-state mediator in unequal contests must rely heavily on “process symmetry,” whereby the two sides are treated with absolute equality, provided with exactly the same accommodations, allotted exactly the same amount of time to make their case, and so on. The Norwegians went to great lengths to achieve this symmetry. The problem with process symmetry is that it cannot address the power asymmetry that inevitably distorts the outcome of negotiations. Process symmetry and the entire facilitative exercise can create a sense of equality between adversaries and the illusion of genuine communication, even trust. The Norwegians believed that through dialogue and a gradual building of trust, an irreversible
peace dynamic would be created that could push the process forward to solution. The problem with this entire approach is that the issue is not one of trust, but of power. The facilitative process masks that reality. In the end, the results that can be achieved by a weak third-party facilitator are no more than the strong party will allow. The question to be asked is whether such a model can ever be appropriate.

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Neutralizing History and Memory in Divided Societies: The Case of Making Peace in Palestine/Israel

Bashir Bashir

During a visit to Nazareth on Monday, February 20, 2012, a fascinating exchange took place between a distinguished visitor, high school students from the city, and some educators. The exchange revolved around the past. In replying to students’ and teachers’ questions about why Arab schools do not teach the history of the Palestinian people and why students do not learn much about their past, literature, and poetry, the visitor said, "History isn’t important anymore in our days. Let us move on and forget the past." He went on to claim:

As for the subject of history, it’s not true that it isn’t being taught, but there are some concepts and instructions that are not part of the curricula. As for the subject of the Nakba, I need to clarify that I always was and will remain in support of education and progress, but I guess the subject of history is no longer important in our days. What is important is the future, and I even see a big part of the Jewish youth saying that the past is not important. The world is developing very quickly, and the past is full of pain that causes hatred. So the Jewish and Arab peoples ought to learn to live in peace toward a prosperous future for both and to let them forget the past.

In response to several questions concerning the centrality of the past and history in education, he argued that "we should not teach the new generation much about the past and history, for it generates confusion and brings weird ideas. Take Napoleon’s war, for example. Is it important to teach kids about it? I do not think so." Then one of the educators, Faisal Taha, asked, "But the Holocaust that the Jews experienced during Nazi Germany is still being taught in the schools of the Jewish sector. Is that not part of the past?" The visitor replied, "The issue of the Holocaust is a rare issue that does not happen frequently, and this story ought to be taught to students so these catastrophes do not happen again." He further argued:

In my opinion, what is important is that the new generation learns about the future—how to behave, how to coexist—and not about the past. You learn about the past through a click on the computer to get all the information about it. But if the person wants to know the future, he or she should use his or her imagination. That is what distinguishes humans from other creatures. Only humans can have imagination and can see through their future. You ought to learn and care about academic studies and your own future, and this is what matters most. Some say we need to learn about the past to avoid the same mistakes, but they learn about the past and commit other mistakes. Once again, I repeat, the task of school is not teaching you about the past, for today anyone could, through a computer or an iPhone, learn information about history, etc., and that is easy.1

These claims are those of the former Israeli president Shimon Peres, one of the lead architects and an enthusiastic supporter of the Oslo Accords, who visited the city of Nazareth upon the invitation of its then-mayor Ramiz Jaraisy. The perspective that emerges from Peres’s statements to the Palestinian students and educators on the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is strikingly future oriented and places at its core the demand to “neutralize history.” It is a call to move forward and engage with and prioritize the practical concerns and needs of the present over invoking a contentious, antagonizing, and traumatizing past. A closer reading of the Oslo Accords and a critical analysis of the underlying discourse of what has since become known as the “peace process” demonstrates the prevalence and even dominance of this forward-looking and history-neutralizing approach. Neutralizing history
involves forgetting, breaking with the past, bracketing history from politics, encouraging historical amnesia, focusing on the future, and constructing and promoting reductionist historical narratives, as well as other strategies. These are invoked under the pretext of collective advancement in place of remaining trapped in a traumatizing past that is likely to revive and prolong resentment, anger, and hostility, which may undermine and destabilize an already fragile society. Needless to say, the quest to neutralize history is hardly an apolitical move. It is a political demand par excellence through which asymmetrical power relations are concealed, legitimacy is conferred on past injustices, and the more-powerful continues to enjoy its privileges. The demand to neutralize history often follows the logic of the perpetrators and the victorious.

Shimon Peres is not original in his advice to forget. In his arguments about what constitutes a nation, the French philosopher and religion scholar Ernest Renan claims that besides selective remembering of the past, selective and “strategic” forgetting and even “historical error” are crucial for the formation of a nation. Renan argues that historical inquiry and studies pose a danger to the formation and cohesion of a nation, for these bring to light the divisive deeds of violence that took place at the origin of all political formations.

Another argument advanced by the advocates of forgetting does not place the emphasis on “strategic” grounds, but rather on a revolutionary ontology of selfhood. Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s argument in favor of forgetfulness, some have insisted on the liberating power to willfully forget, to sustain an “as if not” attitude toward transgression, represents the will to power of “noble morality” that seeks action/transformation, happiness, and personal development. He argues that forgetfulness can be a positive and empowering act of the self, representing a sovereign neglect of just deserts. The demand for vengeance, Nietzsche claims, is reactive because it remains shaped by the transgression and limits both the victim and perpetrator to a logic of retribution. Indeed, Nietzsche views forgiveness and punishment as opposites of forgetfulness. Though he continues Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s focus on the master-slave dialectic as engendering identity formation based on negation (that is, recognizing what one is not), Nietzsche comes to different conclusions. He does not accept that teleological progress will lead to synthesis and closure (i.e., the end of history), and thus suspects reconciliation and recognition as a universal morality that is indiscriminately applicable to all human beings. Reconciliation and recognition may well be temporary measures or steps or positions that one takes, but not a total universal mortality. In other words, it is the will to power that is most at work, not Christian and Kantian ideals such as forgiveness, equality, free will, and rationality. Nietzsche does not reject history as such, but warns against becoming mired in what allegedly is a universal morality premised on the equal worth and dignity of each person. He appreciated and respected heroic history (for example, Napoleon, Homer, the Medici family, and the ancient Greeks) that serves as a model for transcendence, renewal, strength, confidence, creativity, and recreation of the self.

One can identify Nietzschean moments in Peres’s speech. The weak, defeated, and massacred European Jew is replaced by an active, empowered, colonial, and powerful new Jew in Palestine. Through actively colonizing Palestine, the victorious Zionist Jew seeks renewal, recreation, and transformation that breaks with and transcends the past in which the Jews were viewed as weak, defeated, and impotent. And yet, and as Peres himself claimed, concerning the centrality and uniqueness of the Holocaust and its memory, this renewal and development demands historical amnesia—not as a universal mode of being but only in the context of the Palestinian Nakba and establishment of Israel. In line with a critique that is also applicable to Nietzsche’s theoretical argument, one could argue that Peres’s demand of forgetting is problematic because it is difficult to demonstrate how not holding Zionism, and later the State of Israel (i.e., victimizers), accountable for the Palestinian Nakba and dispossession results in self-realization for Palestinians (i.e., victims), rather than furthering the harm and injury inflicted upon them. Following Renan’s warning, Peres’s demand that Palestinians forget stems from the worry that historical inquiry will, among other things, likely reveal the brutal violence, dispossession, and colonial practices that took place, and that continue today on a different magnitude, at the foundation of the State of Israel.

Instead of creating war crimes tribunals and truth commissions, forgetting is proposed as a way to come to terms with the past. Forgetting often entails no acknowledgment of pain, loss, and crime, and no compensations, either material or symbolic; sometimes amnesty is offered to perpetrators. It is the demand of forgetting that is the most problematic in reaching historical reconciliation and transitional justice. For it is often suggested that
transitional justice or reconciliation requires “coming to terms with the past.” Coming to terms or reckoning with the past requires investigating and publicizing past abuses and crimes. In some cases, coming to terms with the past may confirm what many already believe happened rather than expose unknown crimes. Indeed, coming to terms with the past and revealing new knowledge about past crimes and abuses may further antagonize conflicting parties rather than mitigate tensions. However, some scholars have argued that revealing and investigating past injustices, combined with other moral imperatives (such as mutual respect, recognition, and legitimacy), in fact promotes reconciliation and the formation of a new and inclusive political order.\(^4\)

Besides very few references to major historical events, such as Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, the text of the Oslo Accords is excessively formalistic and legalistic. It details procedures, processes, governmental and institutional arrangements and settings, shared committees, and distribution of functions and authorities. Briefly, the Accords are mostly concerned with practical and institutional arrangements, and history remains largely silent, buried, and neutralized. The most, and probably the only, “political” paragraph in the Oslo Accords is the opening paragraph of the Oslo I Accord, which states that the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) “agree that it is time to put an end to decades of confrontation and conflict, recognize their mutual legitimate and political rights, and strive to live in peaceful coexistence and mutual dignity and security and achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement and historic reconciliation through the agreed political process.”\(^4\) The ordering of the sought-after aims here is remarkable: achieving a just and lasting peace settlement and historic reconciliation comes last. One could argue that the ranking of aims (from thin/minimal to thick/maximal) is reasonable, because under conditions of political transition from protracted conflict to peace, you start with practical and thin aims—ending confrontation and striving for peaceful coexistence—and gradually move to more ambitious aims like just peace and historical reconciliation.

As I will demonstrate below, the Oslo Accords generated a peacemaking discourse focused on thin aims, while its legalistic terms and conditions structurally and intrinsically undermined—and even blocked—the possibility of accomplishing thick aims. That is, achieving a just and comprehensive peace and historical reconciliation requires engaging with the past, rather than burying and neutralizing it.

### Peacemaking:
**Between Conflict Resolution and Historical Reconciliation**

The Madrid Peace Conference of 1991 and the Oslo Accords of 1993 are constitutive components in what has become known as the Middle East Peace Process. This process has been largely premised on a peacemaking discourse, according to which the Palestine/Israel question is one of peacemaking between two equal parties, both of which have symmetrical and equally legitimate interests, needs, claims, and rights. Furthermore, after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) following the Oslo Accords, a new discourse of development concerning the Palestinian economy and society became an integral component of the peacemaking discourse. The pursuit of the development discourse as part of the peace process is directly connected to the formation, on October 1, 1993, of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), chaired by Norway, which was established as a coordination mechanism for aid and assistance to the PA. The development discourse of the AHLC has emphasized that international donor aid to the Palestinian people should be mainly directed toward fostering state-building, transparency and good governance, private sector and trade investment, and economic growth.\(^5\) It aims to create a healthy and enabling environment for sustaining the “peace process.” The peacemaking discourse on Israel/Palestine includes components of economic peace, conflict management, conflict settlement, and conflict resolution, and hence inherited some of their central weaknesses.

Several strategies and approaches have been proposed to settle and solve intractable political conflicts, all with their own limits and weaknesses. These problem-solving approaches include economic development and growth (economic peace), conflict management, conflict settlement, and conflict resolution. *Economic peace* focuses, among other things, on development, economic growth, and good governance. *Conflict management* seeks to maintain the status quo and manage the conflict rather than settle it. *Conflict settlement* seeks to


9 Verdeja, Unchopping a Tree, 20–27.


12 Andrew Schaap, Political Reconciliation (New York: Routledge, 2005), 77–86.

13 Verdeja, Unchopping a Tree, 41–48.


terminate the conflict through reaching a formal agreement representing the existing power relations between governments, where mutual interest is the main motivator of the two parties. Conflict resolution aims to achieve a historical compromise and create a new relationship based on mutual acceptance, cooperation, and the promotion of equality and reciprocity. Thus, conflict resolution aspires to achieve profound changes in the basic structures and policies of the institutions as well as attitudes of societies. A close examination of the peacemaking discourse in Israel/Palestine, which encompasses core elements from the above-mentioned problem-solving approaches, reveals striking flaws. More precisely, the peacemaking discourse is problematic because it sustains the existing conditions by seeking stability (conflict management); it presupposes equality between the two conflicting parties, which are in fact strikingly unequal and embedded in an asymmetrical power relation (conflict settlement); it fails to convincingly address the core issues of the conflict, such as occupation, settlement, Jerusalem, borders, refugees, and natural resources, by bracketing their discussion and focusing instead on economic and security matters (economic peace); and it avoids coming to terms with the historical injustices caused by the conflict (conflict resolution). Several scholars have argued that in the context of intractable conflicts with a legacy of historical grievances, none of the previously listed problem-solving approaches satisfactorily address the historical injustices experienced by the conflict’s parties. Put differently, as I have argued elsewhere, the historical dimension of long-standing legacies of injustices gives rise to a set of distinctive demands that transcend the requirements of economic peace, conflict management, conflict settlement, and conflict resolution. These demands require a politics of reconciliation that goes beyond the familiar requirements of peacemaking and state-building. Reconciliation is not about achieving economic growth, managing conflicts in terms of restoring order and preserving the existing arrangements of power relations, or promoting self-interests and achieving coexistence or mutual acceptance. Historical reconciliation represents a force with the potential to socialize and political changes based on mutual legitimacy, recognition of asymmetries and the coming to terms with past injustices, and the laying of foundations for a more just, inclusive, and equal political order and community. These are precisely the components that are largely missing from the peacemaking discourse of the Oslo Accords.

What are the constitutive elements of historical reconciliation and the alternative and more promising approach that they propose to engage with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? For the past two decades, the politics of reconciliation has received exceptional attention from political theorists who have produced an extensive literature to address the different dimensions of reconciliation. Although reconciliation has various meanings, it is generally agreed that its most fundamental components include confronting past injustices and achieving mutual recognition and legitimacy. In my article “Reconciling Historical Injustices: Deliberative Democracy and the Politics of Reconciliation,” published in the journal Res Publica, I identify the core principles of reconciliation essential for reckoning with past injustices, addressing asymmetry of power relations, and attaining mutual legitimacy. These principles include collective memory of exclusion, acknowledgment, taking responsibility, and offering apology and reparations.

Let us turn to examining some of these principles in the case of Israel/Palestine and their contribution to addressing the weaknesses found in the existing peacemaking discourse. Firstly, the politics of reconciliation requires recognizing the significance of collective memory and the history of oppression. These are important because they often serve as invaluable sources for challenging and questioning the dominant views, stories, narratives, and past and present political arrangements and practices. The hegemonic national account of history either denies or downplays the occurrence of past injustices, effectively absolving the dominant group of responsibility for causing these injustices. In other words, collective memory and history of exclusion operate as counternarratives to the hegemonic and often celebrated account of national history. The significance of these counternarratives is to bring to public attention voices and stories that have been ignored or silenced and inequalities that have been underestimated or denied. Collective memory of oppression, nevertheless, does not necessarily imply uniformity and homogeneity of counterviews. By putting
emphasis on diverse counter-narration, a collective memory of oppression guarantees room for contestation.\textsuperscript{15}

The master narrative that underlies the hegemonic Zionist historiography views the story of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as one of salvation, a return to the patriarchs’ land and the Promised Land, and an adequate answer to years of anti-Semitism and persecution in Europe. The Palestinian national revival after the Nakba posed profound challenges to the Zionist hegemonic narrative. Undoubtedly, the Palestinian collective memory of dispossession has contributed immensely to the revival and development of the Palestinian identity and struggle in the last sixty years. Since the beginning of the “peace process” in the 1990s, Palestinian politics has been expected and encouraged in various ways to set aside or minimize the role of these memories of dispossession and to enter the peace process simply as an equal party to Israel—as Peres’s statements show. The demand to suspend a significant part of Palestinians’ history and present ignores or downplays the defining memories and experiences of dispossession and domination that they have been enduring as a result of the 1948 war. Neutralizing history or suspending parts of it through reducing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to negotiating the political future of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which were occupied by Israel during the 1967 war—as happened in the Oslo Accords—conceals the striking disparities and inequalities between the Israeli and Palestinian parties. Focusing on searching for a solution “now” requires an amnesiac politics that ignores the traumatic and enduring results of the Palestinian national ruin in 1948.\textsuperscript{16} The events of 1948 are the origin of the enduring asymmetries and inequalities between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

The politics of reconciliation provides a more hospitable platform for these memories, stories, and experiences of domination and dispossession to be expressed and voiced. It recognizes their significance in revealing the inequalities, asymmetries, and imbalanced power relations. Voicing these stories of historical injustices is crucial but insufficient, because they also need to be acknowledged. This imperative leads to the second principle of reconciliation: acknowledgment. Reconciliation involves acknowledging the occurrence of historical injustices. As long as these past injustices are denied or portrayed as accidental historical incidents, and not as an integral part of the national narratives, the achievement of historical reconciliation is hardly attainable, if at all, from the perspective of the historically oppressed and excluded groups.

Palestinian memories and experiences of historical injustices not only challenge the mainstream Zionist narrative by insisting on the inequalities and injustices, they also demand acknowledging the Nakba and its ongoing consequences.\textsuperscript{17} Put differently, Palestinians insist that since 1948 they have continuously experienced various forms of injustice. The Zionist movement and later the State of Israel largely denied or ignored the injustices brought upon Palestinians. Even when these injustices were recognized by some Israeli and Zionist quarters, they were either underestimated or portrayed as historical contingency or a catastrophe that the Palestinians brought upon themselves.

The demand of acknowledgment is intimately linked to the third principle of reconciliation: taking responsibility. Responsibility requires not only the acknowledgment of historical injustices but also expects the oppressors to take responsibility for causing these injustices.\textsuperscript{18} The oppressing side taking responsibility for causing injustices does not exempt the oppressed side from having a certain level of responsibility for its undesirable situation, and neither does it justify internal oppression, that is, oppression within the oppressed group itself. Furthermore, it does not legitimize morally inconsistent and unacceptable activities and violence committed by the oppressed against members of the oppressing group. Undoubtedly, the Palestinians view the Zionist movement and the State of Israel as the principal and major reason for their Nakba. Thus, they claim that the Zionist movement and the State of Israel should be held responsible for causing the historical injustices Palestinians have been experiencing until today. How and why can responsibility be taken? What would force the more powerful to face their history and reconcile with the oppressed, and what would make the oppressed also take responsibility for their mistakes and accept or deal with the fear of the oppressor? One should not underestimate these very challenging questions of power relations and social psychology. However, as some
Arab intellectuals in general and the Palestinians in particular have hardly engaged the individual and national rights and identities of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. The dismantling of the colonial structures and privileges, as well as the coming to terms with the relationship between the two parties. Egalitarian recognition and mutual legitimacy entail the organization (PLO) recognized each other, newly reproduced the asymmetrical and colonial September 9, 1993, between Israel and the PLO, according to which a state (Israel) and an entity (Palestine) were to be established. Peacemaking discourse has been criticized because it did not aspire to achieve egalitarian reconciliation. Under conditions of coexistence and mutual acceptance, and despite some changes that are likely to take place, the relationships between the conflicting parties are likely to remain governed by distorted, asymmetrical power relations. A master and a slave can coexist and exchange acceptance. Reconciliation, however, seeks egalitarian recognition and mutual legitimacy that base the interactions between the two conflicting parties on more ambitious grounds, namely on reciprocity, parity, and equality. Mutual denial governed the political discourse of the Palestinian national movement and the Zionist movement for decades. According to this political discourse, both parties attempted to delegitimize each other. With the beginning of the Middle East Peace Process, both parties moved to a more accommodationist approach (signs of this approach already started to emerge in the mid 1970s), according to which some form of coexistence and mutual acceptance has developed mainly on pragmatic grounds. This accommodationist approach of the peacemaking discourse has been criticized because it did not aspire to achieve egalitarian recognition and mutual legitimacy. Rather, the exchange of letters of recognition on September 9, 1993, between Israel and the PLO, according to which a state (Israel) and an organization (PLO) recognized each other, newly reproduced the asymmetrical and colonial relationship between the two parties. Egalitarian recognition and mutual legitimacy entail the dismantling of the colonial structures and privileges, as well as the coming to terms with the individual and national rights and identities of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

Arab intellectuals in general and the Palestinians in particular have hardly engaged with the “Jewish question” and Jewish rights for the past thirty years.22 Apart from the often rehearsed and reasonable views on the colonial and imperialist character of Zionism and the claim that Jews do not qualify as a national group—views that have been discussed and
presented for decades—there have been very few attempts to further explore and revisit these claims or the considerable challenges that emerged from the last seventy years of societal, cultural, and political development of Jewish presence in historic Palestine. From the perspective of a politics of reconciliation, the engagement with the Jewish question and Jewish rights and identities in historic Palestine is a moral and normative requirement and a pressing political necessity. Under conditions of historical reconciliation—in which the Nakba and its past and present consequences and injustices are starting to be acknowledged, addressed, and restored—an engagement with Jewish rights and identities in historical Palestine entails recognizing and respecting collective Jewish national rights, most prominent among these being the right to national self-determination.

Critical, reflective Jewish engagements with the Arab question are also rare. Although one can identify various Zionist postures toward Palestinians (iron wall, confrontation, implied recognition by way of opposition, and ad hoc imposed accommodation), denial or misrecognition of the existence of a Palestinian national identity has been the leading strand within Zionism. More recently, central Zionist strands have moved toward a more accommodationist approach. The Israeli accommodationist approach is largely premised on the parameters that have been guiding the Middle East Peace Process as discussed above. However, this approach falls short of fully recognizing the Palestinian people as an equal and legitimate nation entitled to the same rights. Mainstream Israeli politicians propose either an enhanced national autonomy or a fragmented and territorially discontinuous Palestinian state on less than 22 percent of historic Palestine as the adequate solution to the conflict. Reconciliation demands coming to terms with Palestinian rights, nationalism, the Nakba, and injustices wrought on the Palestinian people by the conflict.

Finally, the peacemaking discourse of the Oslo Accords and the peace process has assumed that territorial partition is the preferred frame within which to resolve the conflict. Put differently, territorial partition and separation between the people are seen as the best mechanisms to realize the competing parties’ interests and rights. The recent overwhelming global consensus on the two-state solution (publicly and frequently endorsed by the majority of states in the world, as well as by leading international players like the UN and similar bodies) is the ultimate manifestation of support of the partition logic. Indeed, historical reconciliation is not by definition incompatible with territorial partition. Territorial partition as it was proposed in Palestine was viewed by Palestinians and others as an imperial and colonial enterprise that privileged the rights, history, and claims of European Zionist Jews over those of the Palestinian Arabs. Within this frame of partition, Palestinian rights, national identity, history, and memory were either underestimated or denied by the British Mandate for Palestine and mainstream Zionism. The discourse of partition (though some Zionist quarters rejected it) in its earlier stages—that is, before and for a few decades after the Nakba—rendered the Palestinians and their rights and history invisible and not worth recognizing and respecting. These strategies of denial and invisibility, though developed over time into more nuanced forms, remain powerful still today. More specifically, during the past four decades the partition discourse has developed a hegemonic paradigm according to which the 1949 armistice line (called the Green Line) is descriptive of the realities in Israel/Palestine. This post-Nakba hegemonic paradigm of partition has additionally led to a dominant, silencing, and imposing epistemology in Israel and elsewhere according to which the constitutive moment of the conflict between Zionism and the Palestinian national movement is 1967, and not around 1948. Thus, within the frame of this recent discourse of partition, Palestine is reduced geographically to the territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the Palestinians politically (in the political sense of citizenship rights) to the residents of these territories.

Therefore, the paradigm of partition and its hegemonic epistemology tend to neutralize history and memory through primarily focusing, as the Oslo Accords and the peace process did, on 1967 as the historical point of reference for framing and settling the conflict. However, this paradigm of partition has largely ignored or underestimated the social, demographic, and political realities of the pre-1948 and post-1967 context, and certainly the increasing intertwining, though asymmetrical and wretched, that have resulted from the colonial expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Therefore, partition as a colonial discourse and enterprise of conflict resolution seeks to neutralize history and memory through privileging the historiography and interests of Zionism while ignoring the requirement of historical reconciliation to seriously address the consequences of the Nakba. The right of Palestinian refugees to return is chief among these consequences that

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23 Early critical Jewish engagements include those of Yizhar Smilansky, who opened the debate that “Palestinian question” is not an “Arab question” but entire a Jewish question, and Yitzhak Epstein, who strongly criticized Zionist leaders for neglecting the existence of another national group that is deeply rooted emotionally and historically in historic Palestine. He referred to the lack of Zionist engagement with the existence of the Arabs of Palestine as “a hidden question,” which is, according to him, weightier than all other questions put together.

24 For more on this point, see, for example, Ian Lustick, “Abandoning the Iron Wall: Israel and ‘The Middle Eastern Muck,’” Middle East Policy 15, no. 3 (2008): 30–56; and David N. Myers, Betrayal of the Promise: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz (Waldam, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008).


26 For more on the centrality of denial and invisibility of Palestinian rights and culture, see Beshara Doumani, “Palestine versus the Palestinians? The Iron Laws and Ironies of a People Defined,” Journal of Palestine Studies 36, no. 4 (2007): 49–64.

27 For more on the Green Line as a paradigm of colonial and political trap, see Yehouda Shenhav, Beyond the Two-State Solution: A Jewish Political Essay (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).
cast serious doubts on territorial separation and the Green Line as its ultimate signifier and marker. Stated differently, if coming to terms with the past requires addressing the question of Palestine within the time frame of around 1948 and its consequences, as well as taking into serious account the nascent colonial yet intertwined realities in the West Bank and inside Israel, then historical reconciliation in Israel/Palestine undermines separation, segregation, and neutralizing history and calls for alternatives to partition and to what paradigmatically has become known as the two-state solution.

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Goodness Me:
On Contemporary Art as Critique or Exemplification of a Goodness Regime
Tirdad Zolghadr

I Writing, Showing, Doing

In his 2012 text “Writing and Indifference,” critic and curator Dieter Roelstraete suggests the emergence of a new trend in art writing that comes with “one clause only”:

Please feel free to write anything you want, as long you refrain from writing “about” the work. Indeed, the author is expressly asked, sometimes almost implored, to write “beside the point”: often a mere literary Spielerei will do ... , sometimes a dialogue or play may be considered fit, sometimes a broadly art-historical framing. Anything but a piece that seeks to engage, in varying degrees of directness—this in particular being the great new taboo—the work or the practice itself.1

It’s hard for me to argue with Roelstraete’s delightfully angry prose. Especially since I myself have often engaged in such Spielereien. As a matter of fact, when Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle commissioned me to write this very piece, I responded with a fictional diary of my own. This essay is my second contribution, which came of the late realization that, sadly, the aesthetics of goodness is indeed tied to the politics of declared intentions. After all, the problem with any clear act of “being about” something or other is that it also “brings about” something else, in one fell swoop. Just as any clear act of “showing” is also an act of “doing,” and speaking “about” always already amounts to a speaking “for.”

The one footnote I’d add to Roelstraete’s tirade is that the trend he’s lamenting transcends the acceptability of fiction-as-art-writing or poetry-as-criticism. Even if you stick to plain old prose, open-ended innuendo seems to be the default solution for latter-day art writers. In other words, the rarity of direct engagement, the elusiveness of the “about,” and the reticence to conclusively articulate meaning all point to a broader crisis here.

To be clear, if you’re the historico-scholarly type who pursues empirical accounts of artworks in your texts, then you’re probably grappling with a different type of crisis altogether (a rather more traditional, familiar one: the crisis of boring insignificance). Otherwise, the current crisis of criticism will feel a bit deeper and gnarlier than the many crises that preceded it. Not least because the artists themselves, not to mention their curators, are just as happy to avoid the responsibility of the “about.” Their work “plays upon” and “raises questions.” It points to problems, problematics, bad objects, and good regimes. But it offers no answers. Lest it question the logic that makes it contemporary art in its very essence.

At the end of the day, the issue is one of disidentifying with power, whether of the good or bad variety. The power to assign meaning to art and/or the power of art to shape the world around it. We bestow meaning on art all the time, just as art proactively shapes the world around it, willy-nilly. Cash flows, boycotts, university curricula, working conditions, trends in cinema and advertising, fashion and design, even the very spirit of capitalism as we know it: all these are marked by contemporary art, sometimes deeply, sometimes less so. But rarely is art’s status of indeterminate innocence challenged fundamentally. So art becomes a discourse that interferes without being called to account. In other words, when it comes to transparency, I’ll take a Norwegian over an artist any day.

II Anecdote

It’s March 2005, and I’m a hungry, overconfident man-child recently appointed associate curator of the 7th Sharjah Biennial. Perhaps the most challenging work to get ready on time is Santiago Sierra’s 120 Hours of Continuous Reading of a Telephone Book (2004). The piece...
consists chiefly of pages from Israeli phone books that are reserved for Palestinians. When the piece was originally commissioned, every name was read aloud, and the recording served as the soundtrack to our installation in Sharjah.

Page after page of flimsy phone-book paper is carefully removed, framed, and hung across the high walls, with a grid of glassy rectangular units slowly covering the room. We get this done only hours before the opening. And it’s at this heady moment that Sierra finally shows up. Sunglasses, cowboy boots, and a camera team in tow. He curtly approves of the installation, and immediately suggests we discuss something entirely different.

Which turns out to be a brand new piece for the biennial, about the exploitation of laborers in the UAE. It so happens that the working conditions of guest workers has attracted the attention of another biennial participant, Peter Stoffel. Unfortunately, Stoffel’s work fell prey to subtle delay tactics of the host institution, and the best I could offer as his curator was a painful compromise: a poster dryly featuring a timeline of those very delay tactics. Sierra’s proposal, by contrast, comes only hours before the opening. No research involved. Which is why, anxious about the kind of poor-nography that leaves workers doubly exploited, I decline. And thus, my international career begins with a twin act of censorship: one of them bitter and complicated, the other simple and smug, before the rolling cameras of the BBC.

Looking back, with more experience jostling with host institutions and last-minute artists, I should have encouraged Sierra to join forces with Stoffel. We’d have had a perfect storm on our hands. Then again, within the context of this essay, and the conversation it hopes to spark, there’s something to be said for unapologetically marking the prerogatives of a curator. Although Sierra’s installation was “about” Israeli apartheid, this only partially defined the politics the piece embodied, given that Sierra’s take on Zionist politics of visibility was facilitated by means of selective modes of visibility on behalf of the work itself.

It bears mentioning that Sierra’s was the only contribution, as far as I remember, that was eagerly discussed by museum staff members, whether local or foreign. Its lucky placement within the overall chronology of the exhibition—a bizarrely spacious, conspicuous corner, within an otherwise monotonous corridor trajectory—allowed it to architecturally hold its own. Aesthetically and formally speaking, meanwhile, it was the minimal brunt of the black-and-white phone-book pages, framed and stacked like modernist wallpaper, that set it apart from the colorful attention economy of the rest of the setting.

On the other hand, in order to get the job done, the biennial resorted to a routine mix of staff and volunteers who slaved away day and night under questionable conditions. The fact that Sierra’s work is largely about the labor masked by glossy art commodities bears an irony that wasn’t lost on us. But bewailing the interns is no match for the “critical virtue of art” (Suhail Malik), which allows us to flatter ourselves for our ideological credentials and allows for a bad object (“Zionism”) to be placed safely beyond the confines of the show. Thereby reassuring the audience they are not complicit, let alone responsible.

III About The Goodness Regime

Manna and Storihle’s The Goodness Regime (2013) is about this kind of dynamic precisely. About the dialectics of telling silences and self-important declarations. About fables of innocence. Not to forget the poetics of human rights and the semi-debacle that was the Oslo Accords, as well as the disidentification with power that allows key players of this semi-debacle to get away with blue murder. Like any other artwork, the project is, moreover, a tacit statement on contemporary art at large.

But it’s also about the folding of a complicated and painful history into an unpretentious visual sequence. Formally speaking, the Goodness-Regime-as-video is a confident example of visual sophistication. A confidence that, in combination with the polemical framing of the topic, sits oddly with the rather gentle, underhanded way in which this topic materializes within the film. Most of the takes are hushed in volume, elegiac in tone, panoramic in content. The lush interiors and outdoor landscapes, some majestic, some rugged, convey a subtle sense of disparate locations tightly intertwined. It’s the emptiness of the scenes—or rather, the seductive, evocative beauty of the empty scenes—that forges common denominators here.

This serenity is striking when compared to movies and newsreels of “the conflict,”
where scenes are chock-full of people—“It’s a scramble for the land!” But the fact that it’s an artwork makes it less of a novelty in this regard. In some other essay, drafted by someone more informed than myself, it would be well worth pursuing why artistic representations of Palestine tend to be less claustrophobic by and large (see Emily Jacir, Yazan Khalili, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, et al.). Here, it’s chiefly an uncanny sense of anticipation that dominates.

And then you have the kids. Who are no less serene than the panoramas. Handsome boys and girls, blond and brown, who embody the narrative in a manner that is restrained and pensive, and perhaps a bit glum. It takes a particular effort to make a bunch of brats look as diffident as these little cherubs. But the filmmakers do their job extremely well, to the point where a sense of quiet inevitability permeates the scene. The kids seem not flattered or excited but downright resigned to be the actors here. Actors on set and on the stage of history alike. They move with a childlike befuddlement, which, in a pinch, can result in an overarching sense of helplessness at the hands of world events. After all, if the kids are stand-ins for the historical unfolding of Good Norway, and if the audience watching them identifies—and we must remember that identification is something an audience loves, loves, loves more than anything—then a community of innocents emerges by default. In other words, making the most of Manna and Storihle’s astonishing work hinges upon avoiding “democratic” deferrals to the will of that audience precisely.

What is important is that, although these cherubic faces are figures of depersonalization, that doesn’t mean they’re harmless or unknowing necessarily, let alone good. To depersonalize them merely makes them cogs in a larger apparatus, which is not the same as a community of innocents. A “structural” approach of that kind will point to an overarching machinery without redeeming any of its components. Its cogs and cogwheels, bolts and spark plugs. And goodness is not represented as a perversion of politics or history but as a shockingly productive method of governance. One that encompasses contemporary art as part of its very hardwiring. Within the catalogue or exhibition, and without. This is what allows for a more haunting artwork, a more realistic sense of agency, and a more effective instrument for teaching, producing, and exhibiting contemporary art, in Palestine and Norway alike.

As for the West Bank. This is where the sense of structural stakes, as opposed to individual intentions, is particularly decisive. To be a writer-curator working in Ramallah is to undergo a visceral lesson in the pointlessness of righteous motives. We of the wandering tribe that proffers bad Arabic and good intentions, we cover this place like a fungus. And yet, very few of us are cynical or lazy. Most of us, I would venture, are competent, committed, self-aware, and self-critical. The problem lies not in the individual cases but in a larger organism of self-serving philanthropy, one that is increasingly well documented across the disciplines. What makes this all the more significant is the fact that, urban progressives aside, from the United States Agency for International Development to the Islamic Republic of Iran to even (a particular brand of) settler, there’s no one who doesn’t evoke a rhetoric of human rights and best intentions in some capacity or other.

Still speaking from Ramallah, I’d also argue that the potentials of the film are contingent on how it addresses the prevalent skepticism regarding representation, or regarding testimony as visualization. The long history of rich and complex illustrations of the Palestinian plight has yielded limited results, which has given rise, in turn, to a pervasive sense of scopo-skepticism among artists and scholars, filmmakers and activists alike. It has equally given rise to an appetite for more sustained, layered, embodied proposals, beyond representation per se. For collective dynamics over ambassadorial mouthpieces.

The fact that The Goodness Regime is a partnership between two artists with visibly dissimilar practices already indicates an appetite beyond the standard operating procedures of contemporary art. Surely enough, the artists have decided to extend the collaboration beyond a film alone, into a publication project and perhaps further, which likewise multiplies the conceptual, material, spatial, and discursive options at hand. (The Goodness Regime as graduate seminar, pop-up think tank, political coloring book, kjøttkaker workshop? The sky’s the limit.) After all, what distinguishes a reading of art, as opposed to that of a website, publication, or film, is the possibility of transfiguring the material into three dimensions, to be viewed by bodies moving through space. This is in turn defined by the architectural setup, the thematic context, the curatorial language, the minutiae of the installation. Not to mention the atmosphere and political particularities—and local fungus and flora—of whatever town it’s hosted by.
IV Two or Three Risks

The fork in the road ahead, in sum, amounts to presenting goodness either as a problem pertaining only to the corridors of power (i.e., nothing to do with art) or as part of the apparatus that lends contemporary art the very traction it currently enjoys. The risk of the former is that of repeating the very stuff Manna and Storihle set out to critique. The risk of the latter, meanwhile, is to introduce a sense of fatalistic complacency.

After all, if we’re all cogs to the system, perhaps the best we can do is just helplessly revel in self-irony. Such is not an unlikely interpretation. But the very title of the piece is helpful here. The Goodness Regime is too crushing, in its caustic disdain, to allow for an easy sense of tristesse royale. Imagine an artist, of all people, introducing herself along these lines (“What kind of art do you do?” “Oh, it’s the art of goodness, mostly”). To cut through the muck of sticky sweet benevolence, you’ll need something a little sharper than that.

If given half a chance, the work is indeed as sharp as it needs to be. At the end of the day, Manna and Storihle forcefully represent the Oslo Accords as an exercise in ciphers and rhetoric, emblems and fantasies. As an aesthetic exercise, in other words, one that is equipped with prospective powers of frightful capacity. And if an exercise of the kind can have such impressive consequences, then surely contemporary art can and should, by the same token, be judged by the ciphers and rhetoric, emblems and fantasies of its own making.

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A Self-Image to Drown In
Marit Paasche

I

Norway is a small country with a relatively short history as a sovereign nation, and what happens here generally goes unnoticed in the rest of the world. But in 1993 Norway was at the center of international events. A Norwegian delegation had managed the sensational feat of negotiating an agreement between Israel and the State of Palestine, as represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Yasir Arafat: the so-called Oslo I Accord. The Accord was signed in an elaborate ceremony at the White House, presided by Bill Clinton, Yasir Arafat, and Yitzhak Rabin. Overnight, Norway became an important contributor to world peace, and, in 1994, the Carter-Menil Human Rights Foundation, led by former US president Jimmy Carter, awarded a prize of US$100,000 to the Norwegian facilitators and the Norwegian people. Carter claimed that what the negotiating delegation had accomplished was a manifestation of something genuinely Norwegian and emblematic of Norway as a country.

In the years that followed, the peace process was actively used to create a self-image of Norway as a peace-loving nation of great consequence. When former Norwegian prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik held the traditional New Year’s address on the eve of the year 2000, his praise of the national self-image reached unprecedented heights.1 Norway’s foreign policy would thereafter be based on its role as an altruistic, charitable negotiator of peace. The small and young nation would thus become a humanitarian superpower.

In five years we will celebrate the centennial of our national sovereignty. That is worth celebrating! ... An assessment of our nation’s century of existence reveals clearly positive results: We have attained independence, freedom, and peace. We have attained prosperity and welfare unprecedented in history ... we have many reasons for self-respect, but no cause to be self-righteous. What we have achieved is important, but greatness is measured in what we can do for others. Here we have a legacy to live up to. Norway must be a nation of benevolence and solidarity. Let us follow in the footsteps of Fridtjof Nansen in his dedicated work for refugees and the needy in other countries. ... If Norway is remembered as a nation of solidarity, Norwegians will have reason to be proud. Norway must be a nation of peace: a contributor to conflict resolution and peacemaking initiatives.2

This excerpt of Bondevik’s speech is included in The Goodness Regime, a film completed by Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle in 2013, twenty years after the Oslo I Accord was signed. The film is a parallel account of Norway and Palestine as nations. We move horizontally along a historical timeline, from the Christianization of Norway and the Crusades in the Middle East during the eleventh century; via World War II and the Norwegian resistance, the creation of Israel, and the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948; the Six-Day War in 1967; the Norwegian oil adventure; and the Intifada of the 1980s, until it all culminates in the signing of the Oslo I Accord.3 The film is built around a series of historical tableaux in which children perform the roles. The children act out the parts but do not speak. Instead, Manna and Storihle make extensive use of audio recordings, among them Bondevik’s speech. The children appear to be unaware of what the roles entail and are sometimes awkward; in other words, they don’t engage in the roles but simply perform what they are told to do. This verfremdung, or alienating effect, combined with Manna and Storihle’s deliberately made stage props and the use of audio recordings, allows the tableaux to effectively comment on the ideas and visual elements that the Norwegian foreign-policy identity was rooted in prior to, and in the wake of, the Oslo I Accord.

Via the construction of a Norwegian self-image as an altruistic and peace-loving nature, the government easily claimed compassion as an intrinsic Norwegian trait. To put it bluntly, the result was that all of the emotions and consequences associated with the term “compassion”—such as responsibility, empathy, and solidarity—were assigned to a national self-image. Compassion became a natural extension of the self and thus totally detached
from the behavior that the word requires to have meaning. This was not only an unfortunate strategy with which to approach the rest of the world; it also had a negative effect on the public discourse.

Norway has ended up in a strange position with its foreign-policy image: with roots that go back to the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, it underwent a “makeover” during the 1990s as a political power strategy with missionizing undertones, resulting in what now feels like a stumbling block for the conservative coalition government parties. At the same time, the argumentation of the left seems strangely ineffectual, perhaps because the self-aggrandizing foreign-policy “branding” of Norway makes it difficult to talk about compassion and solidarity without getting a sickening, holier-than-thou taste in the mouth.

II

Although Norway participated in several peacekeeping missions after the Oslo I Accord, in Sri Lanka and Colombia, among other places, it never received the same attention as in 1993. The next time the international media aimed their cameras at Norway was in the summer of 2011, after the Oslo and Utøya terrorist attacks on July 22, to cover the subsequent reactions and the trial against the Norwegian extreme right-wing terrorist Anders Behring Breivik. Three days after the terrorist attack against Regjeringskvartalet, the seat of the government, and the massacre at Utøya, which together took a total of seventy-seven lives, a spontaneous demonstration was organized. For most of the day and far into the evening, the streets of downtown Oslo swarmed with crowds waving red and white roses (the rose is the symbol of the Norwegian Labor Party, the target of Breivik’s terrorist attacks).

The demonstration was originally intended as a march from Rådhusplassen in front of Oslo City Hall, past Parliament, to Youngstorget, but the plan had to be abandoned due to the unprecedented numbers that congregated in the streets.4 In his speech, the then-prime minister from the Labor Party, Jens Stoltenberg, proclaimed: “This evening the people of Norway are writing history. With the most powerful weapons in the world, freedom of expression and democracy, we are setting the course for Norway after July 22, 2011.”5 Crown Prince Haakon Magnus continued in the same vein: “Tonight the streets are filled with love. We have chosen to respond to cruelty with understanding. We have chosen to respond to hate with solidarity. We have chosen to demonstrate what we stand for.”6

Many who participated in the rose procession in Oslo experienced it as an authentic and instinctive reaction to grief. Breivik’s attacks were aimed at a specific target. The Labor Party government was in Oslo, and at Utøya there is a long tradition of organizing annual summer camps for the party’s youth organization. The Labor Party was in power for large portions of the postwar period in Norway and played a decisive role in building the welfare model that the country is founded upon today. Breivik claimed that the Labor Party betrayed Norway by cultivating a political program that promoted both feminism and ethnic diversity. This was his motivation for wanting to kill as many politically active youths as possible, that is, those who would carry on the same program in the future—the budding politicians of the Labor Party. Most of the sixty-nine people shot on the island of Utøya were defenseless teenagers between the ages of fourteen and eighteen.

One can say that Breivik’s attacks were directed at the heart of Norway’s social democracy and the values many feel are an important part of Norwegian society: equality, solidarity, and human dignity. It seemed natural therefore to react to the attack by demonstrating these same values, as with the rose procession. The symbolic acts were repeated when the trial against Breivik commenced, and a large mound of roses accumulated outside the courthouse where the trial was being held. This conciliatory and non-aggressive response to Breivik’s terrorist acts was noticed in the foreign press, and Norway was again inscribed in the annals of history as a nation of compassionate and peace-loving people.

III

The rose procession and the reactions following July 22, 2011, may continue to stand as an example of a society that, under certain circumstances, is capable of mobilizing itself and

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4 Simultaneous rose processions were organized in many other Norwegian cities, such as Trondheim, Bergen, Stavanger, and Tromse.


acting in line with fundamental humanist ideals. But the marketing of Norway’s foreign-policy image as a nation of peace—of which Bondevik has been the foremost exponent—may be seen as hollow and clammy because the words have not been followed up by action. On the contrary, Norway has been a willing contributor and participant in the wars in Afghanistan and Libya. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Norway has been so preoccupied with its neutrality as a peace negotiator that it has avoided taking a stance on fundamental moral and legal issues. For example, Norway continues to be among the hardly commendable minority of countries in the United Nations that have declined to recognize Palestine as a sovereign state. As The Goodness Regime points out so clearly, we are in danger of forgetting the history of our own nation and what compassion means in practice.

Norway adopted its constitution in 1814, but remained in a union with Sweden until 1905, which meant that it did not have an independent foreign policy. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, a heated debate about nationalism erupted, mainly influenced by a particular group of artists, scholars, and cultural personalities: Lysakerkretsen. The group was preoccupied with nation building, including how nations are created through language, culture, and visual symbols. The most dominating personality in Lysakerkretsen, and the person who gained the most influence on foreign policy in the following years, was Fridtjof Nansen, a man whom Kjell Magne Bondevik held up as a political ideal for Norway in his New Year’s address in 2000. Nansen became internationally famous for his research on neurology and oceanography, as a polar explorer, and as a torchbearer for humanitarian assistance.

Nansen was born during a period when there were still unexplored spots on the map, among them the northern regions. After defending his doctoral thesis, The Structure and Combination of Histological Elements of the Central Nervous System (1886), he decided to cross the Greenland interior on skis, something no one had done before. The project was partly motivated by the idea that by pressing human physical performance to its limit, one would discover new knowledge about nature, and thus drive the world forward. Implicit in this idea was its relationship to gender (the task was reserved for “great men”) and to nationhood. In his application to the University of Kristiania (later renamed Oslo) for financial support in November 1887, Nansen wrote that Norway was lagging behind its neighbors Sweden and Denmark in the realm of Arctic expeditions: “Norwegians are indisputably … best suited for Polar research. We have the prerequisites to tolerate the climate better than almost anyone, and the superiority of our skiers is quite significant.”

When Nansen returned to Kristiania after the Greenland expedition in early June 1889, he was greeted by swarms of cheering admirers. Both Nansen and one of his biographers, Roland Huntford, have pointed out that it was not only the exploration of the polar regions they were cheering for, but that Nansen’s “triumph in the snow was a substitute for an absence of political progress.” This was underscored in a letter the writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson sent to Nansen: “What is at issue for us is to free ourselves inwardly from the outward coercion from Sweden. Every achievement such as Yours is a great contribution. It increases the people’s self-esteem and courage.”

A few decades and several polar excursions later, Nansen became instrumental in the League of Nations’ task of repatriating Russian prisoners of war stranded in Germany and in the dissolved Habsburg Monarchy (Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia), in addition to returning approximately a thousand prisoners of war from Siberia. The League of Nations appointed Nansen as special envoy in 1920, and he immediately began the work of financing the repatriations. He intended to collaborate with the Red Cross, but Russia refused to deal with international organizations or institutions, not least the League of Nations; however, they were willing to relate to Nansen as a private individual. By the summer of 1922, the repatriation mission was complete. Over four hundred thousand prisoners of war had been sent home. Among these, approximately half were Russians from prisoner-of-war camps in Germany and other Central European countries.

Nansen was also instrumental in finding help for Belarusian refugees who mostly came from Odessa. In addition, tens of thousands of stateless refugees, mainly in southern Europe, were rescued by identity certificates called “Nansen passports.” It is worth noting that neither before nor since has any single individual had the authority to issue a passport in his or her own name. During the period 1921–23, Nansen led the emergency relief mission for famine victims in Ukraine and the Volga region. In 1922–24, he worked with the wave of refugees that arose out of the war between Greece and Turkey, and during the years 1924–29, he devoted himself indefatigably to securing Armenian refugees from Turkey a future in
The driving force behind Nansen’s dedication to these tasks is clearly expressed in an article he wrote entitled “Compassion,” published in the periodical Samtiden in December 1921:

I see no other salvation for the human race than the rebirth of compassion. It sounds childish. … I can just imagine the politicians shrugging their shoulders. … what we need is Realpolitik. … I am also an adherent of Realpolitik. … I am exclusively … interested in reality. But no Realpolitik is imaginable in a civilized society unless it is based on compassion, — reciprocity, kindness, and trust. … Compassion is Realpolitik.

IV

Today’s humanitarian crises have dimensions that far exceed the circumstances Nansen worked under during the 1920s. And although most of us probably recognize that distribution politics are equivalent to environmental politics, which in turn are a form of Realpolitik, there are very few who act in response to the challenges that we face. To make matters worse, just a few years after The Goodness Regime was produced, the idea of being altruistic or of doing good has been so radically weakened that the basis for Norway’s foreign-policy image is in the process of crumbling.

In 2013, the same year that The Goodness Regime was released, parliamentary elections were held in Norway. Despite the sympathetic reactions following the terror of July 22, 2011, and the disclosure that Breivik was affiliated with extreme right-wing milieus, the Labor Party lost the election and a new conservative coalition government, consisting of the Conservative Party and the right-wing populist Progress Party, was instated.12 Like many of their kindred parties in Europe, the Progress Party cultivates its following via a restrictive immigration policy and by appealing to “original” national values. The new government tightened the country’s immigration policy yet another notch, and the rhetoric has shifted gradually, yet noticeably, over to the financial costs of immigration, humanitarian aid, and foreign policy. A new regime was introduced in this sector and the jargon shifted; two of the key terms are “realism” (in the sense of “not naive”) and “freedom of expression.”

The Norwegian Progress Party’s national convention took place in the midst of the worst (until then) immigration crisis in the Mediterranean. The papers were full of accounts of the gruesome fates of the boat refugees. Against the backdrop of this barrage of media images, and fully aware that the entire Norwegian press corps would be covering the convention, the party’s deputy chairman, Per Sandberg, wore a T-shirt printed with the image of a wave and the message “Good Journey.” This inhuman exhortation is not a sentiment limited to the far right, however.

Leading intellectuals accuse those who wish to help the refugees—no matter what the cost—of being naive and of practicing “virtue ethics.” In their view, we cannot help everyone in any case. The alternative “realistic” solution proposed by one of the world’s richest countries is to help them “where they are” and to crack down on the human-trafficking networks that transport them to Europe. The left remains more or less passive; there are no political gains to be had by showing solidarity toward refugees.
Sandberg’s T-shirt trick has allowed the Progress Party to effectively communicate its message without verbalizing it, thus avoiding being held responsible for it. With the help of this form of sheer doublespeak, the party has sent countless assists to the far more extreme voices: a method that draws the discourse toward the right and subtly normalizes extreme points of view.

To give an example, the well-known Norwegian blogger Fjordman (a.k.a. Peder Nestvold Jensen), who is also Breivik’s ideological and intellectual ideal, posted the following statement on Facebook a few weeks following the convention: “What is happening in the Mediterranean today is not a ‘humanitarian disaster.’ It is an invasion, and should be treated as such.”11 He received a lot of opposition for this statement, and the next day he commented on the response to his post on Facebook:

The Norwegian left is once again going bananas on Twitter because I dare to say that what is happening in the Mediterranean today is an “invasion.” Serious demographers say that there will be 1.4 billion more Africans in the next 35 years alone. This is a continent that already has fundamental problems regarding food and water. In less than three decades Africa will increase in numbers double that of the EU’s entire population. How many of these people can or should Europe let in? The Muslim world also continues to grow drastically in numbers and is experiencing enormous inner unrest, instability and war. Jihadists are already traveling by the thousands between the Middle East and Europe. It is not right of us to open the floodgates to all of the problems in the Islamic world, to import these masses to our streets and dump them on the heads of our children.

Fjordman has a considerable position in the international extremist right-wing milieus on the Internet. He has published regularly on websites and blogs such as Gates of Vienna, The Green Arrow, and Vlad Tepes, where he enjoys considerable recognition. Fjordman has distinguished himself as a strong opponent of Islam and as a spokesman for the Eurabia theory.14

For those who have followed the public debate in Norway in the years since 2011, it is clear that the media have been afraid of accusations of censoring the more skeptical voices against immigration and of claims that these views are not being aired. They have instead maintained—with the “freedom of expression” banner held high—that the views of immigration skeptics burst like trolls in the sun when they are publicly aired and can be refuted by criticism. It appears, on the contrary, that consideration for freedom of expression has replaced the normal guidelines for what is allowed to be uttered in public. Examples of this flourished after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris on January 7, 2015, and on Lars Vilks in Copenhagen just over a month later. These attacks have led to a reexamining of the legal aspects of freedom of expression, in Norway and in other European countries, and in the process paradoxically seem to have contributed to a more infantile public discourse climate: to air a morally reprehensible viewpoint is used as proof that freedom of expression exists.

In addition, a disproportional amount of airtime and column space has been devoted to extreme political views. As already mentioned, this has not necessarily led to a lessening of radical views, but rather to a gradual normalization of racist commentaries and attitudes.15 An interesting example is the Fritt Ord Foundation’s allocation in 2013 of project funding for a book to be written by Fjordman. This book, which has yet to be published, will among other things shed light on the relationship between Fjordman and Breivik. There were many good arguments both for and against the allocation of project funding from the Fritt Ord Foundation. Opponents pointed out that the allocation might be interpreted as legitimization and a form of public recognition of Fjordman’s views and political standpoint. In addition, there was no guarantee about what would appear in print. The reputable and recognized foundation might suddenly find itself to be a contributor to a publication with racist content. Supporters argued, among other things, that Fjordman’s insight and assessments were of public interest, given his role as an intellectual ideal and model for Breivik. A book might amplify a relatively little-known relationship between the perpetrator and the provider of the mindset that the perpetrator felt justified his actions. Others viewed Fjordman as a totally deviant voice, at least in the context of project funding, but felt that it was just this type of mindset that would be of obvious public interest after July 22, 2011. No matter how good these arguments may be, it became difficult to defend the funding allocation after Fjordman suggested that the boat refugees’ presence in the Mediterranean could not be perceived as anything other than an invasion.
Briefly summarized, there has been increasing mobilization among conservative and radical factions in Norway since the terrorist attacks of July 22, 2011, and the tone of the debate has become more crass. When the more recent refugee disaster appeared in the media in May 2015, the divide between those who wish for a tough “realistic policy,” whereby one has to be “hard-handed” in order to eliminate human traffickers who exploit refugees’ situation, and those who believe that human beings in mortal danger must be given assistance no matter what, became solidified. According to the right, the latter position is extremely naive. One can generally say that altruism, or doing good, is not considered lucrative in today’s political reality. The aspiration of being altruistic is not met with recognition but is rather taken as a sign of inferior intelligence.

Things did not turn out as Bondevik had hoped on the eve of the new millennium. Norway failed to become a “nation of solidarity.” We will primarily be remembered for our wealth based on oil and not for our “dedicated work for refugees and the needy in other countries.” The compassion that flooded our country after the terror of July 22, 2011, was genuine, but it was primarily directed at ourselves and in response to the attack on what we perceive as our fundamental values. The work of transforming compassion into a Realpolitik that encompasses everyone remains to be done. Only when this is achieved will we rightly be able to claim we are following in Nansen’s footsteps.

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Translated from Norwegian by Francesca M. Nichols.

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Paasche was curator for the major exhibition We Are Living on a Star (2014) at Henie Onstad Art Center, Høvikodden, together with Tone Hansen. She has also curated exhibitions like The Human Pattern at Kunsthall Oslo (with Will Bradley in 2011), Deadlock Exhibited with Tone Hansen and Anna S. Gudmundsdottir at Kunsthall Exnergasse, Vienna (2008), and The Society of Mind at the National Museum of Art, Oslo (2005).

Paasche’s recent publications include Hannah Ryggen: En fri (Pax, 2016), Lives and Videotapes: The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art (Feil Forlag, 2015), and Et annet lerret. Fire historier om film og billedkunst (Feil Forlag, 2013). She is the editor of several books, including We Are Living on Star (Sternberg Press, 2014), A Thousand Eyes: Media Technology, Law, and Aesthetics (Sternberg Press, 2011), and Urban Images: Unruly Desires in Film and Architecture (Sternberg Press, 2011).

Untangling the Oslo Lines
Jacob Burns and Nicola Perugini (DAAR)

This essay is the most recent text in an ongoing investigation and series of interventions that have been taking place at DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency, in Beit Sahour, Palestine, since 2010. Previous research episodes were published in Architecture after Revolution (Sternberg Press, 2014), the London Review of International Law 1, no. 1 (2014), and Limes, Rivista italiana di geopolitica, no. 3 (2011).

What a Palestinian businessman wanted to build in his home village of Battir, close to Bethlehem, was a house that would be testament to years of success abroad. Construction began in 2009, and the outline of a grand villa soon started to take shape—an edifice of impressive white marble towering over the valley below. More than six years on, the house remains unfinished, suspended in a legal limbo, as the project remains mired in a fight against demolition orders from the Israeli Civil Administration. The businessman’s dream has fallen victim to the effects of the Oslo II Accord, a set of measures that were supposed to be commonly negotiated and temporary, but which time has revealed to be neither.

The relationship between cartography, separation, and dispossession in the Middle East has a long genealogy. The most salient example for Israel-Palestine is the UN partition plan of Mandate Palestine in 1947, the process for which the Palestinians had no say in. But it is not the only example in the region: from the Sykes-Picot Agreement to the annexation of Jerusalem to Israel, to name just a few, colonial powers or the international community have repeatedly split Arab countries, often without the consent of their populations.

Most recently, twenty years ago, the Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into zones of differing control in anticipation of a planned, phased transfer to full Palestinian sovereignty. In Areas A and B—roughly 40 percent of the land—the Palestinian Authority (PA) was awarded civil control and empowered to make planning decisions. In Area C, however, the Israeli Civil Administration remained in charge of the planning process. There, building permits for Palestinians are expensive to apply for, take years to process, and are rarely granted. The Israelis therefore view much Palestinian construction as illegal, and the penalty in many of these cases is the demolition of the home.

The Palestinian businessman who wanted to build his dream villa did not think that the plot of land he owned was fully in Area C. The plan provided by the local village council showed where the dividing line bisected the building, with the majority in Area B. As this meant the house would be subject to both Palestinian and Israeli jurisdictions, the owner

1 "In 2014, the Civil Administration demolished the homes of 969 Palestinians—a total of 493 homes and ancillary structures—built without permits, in Area C of the West Bank, which under the Oslo Accords is under exclusive Israeli control." Amira Hass, “UN: Israel Demolished Homes of 1,177 Palestinians in Jerusalem and West Bank in 2014,” Haaretz, February 1, 2015, http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.640147.
submitted a planning application to the village council as well as a request to the Israeli Civil Administration to expand the area of the plot permitted for building. While the former was approved, the latter was denied, and a demolition order soon followed. The order revealed that the Civil Administration placed the line between Areas B and C some seventy meters to the southwest of where the village council placed it. This meant, according to the Civil Administration, that the house was completely in Area C, and therefore subject entirely to Israeli jurisdiction.

How had a line that was jointly agreed upon become a subject of dispute?

Lawless Lines

The cartographic work undertaken during the Oslo peace negotiations was conducted digitally—on computer screens—but the maps, signed by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat, were prepared in hard copy. A one-dimensional line (in Euclidean space, a line has no width) became a two-dimensional surface. Much smaller than a centimeter wide when printed on a cartographic annex, the line when translated to real space acquires a width of a few meters.

Some years ago, the Israeli political scientist Meron Benvenisti famously asked: “Who owns the ‘width of the line?’” He was referring to the 1948 cease-fire lines between Israel and Jordan. The lines were drawn on a 1:20,000-scale map by the two countries’ military commanders, Moshe Dayan and Abdullah al-Tal. Benvenisti’s query applies equally here: Who drew the Oslo lines? And who owns their width? Who governs them?

These banal questions are crucial, for these lines are ubiquitous in the West Bank. Slivers of extraterritorial space, they run at the margins of almost every town and village. The Oslo negotiations collapsed before reaching a settled definition of space, and so the lines remain an open legal and political question, paradoxically challenging the very partition they enact. They run across and through villages and towns, olive groves and orchards, fields, roads, gardens, kindergartens, fences, terraces, houses, public buildings, a football stadium, a mosque, and, more recently, the businessman’s dream villa in the small village of Battir.2

Drawing the Oslo Maps

The terms according to which the Oslo maps were organized, and the tools used to draw them, were mainly Israeli. Given the deleterious effects the maps have gone on to have on the prospects for Palestinian self-determination, one might expect that the different actors involved in the negotiations would have masterminded their drawing with more attention. In reality, the cartographic process—which has gone on to significantly affect the lives of millions of Palestinian through the resultant fragmentary Oslo “Swiss cheese” it created—was rather careless. Despite this carelessness—or indeed, because of it—the freshly drawn map reproduced the existing structural inequalities between the negotiating parties, just as the power differential between colonizer and colonized was transferred to the act of mapping.

Shari Motro, at the time a secretary in the Strategic Planning Division of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and currently a professor at the University of Richmond School of Law in Virginia, wrote as much in a 2005 article for Legal Affairs:

Late one night during the negotiations, my commander took me from the hotel where the talks were taking place to an army base, where he led me to a room with large fluorescent light tables and piles of maps everywhere. He handed me some dried-out markers, unfurled a map I had never seen before, and directed me to trace certain lines and shapes. Just make them clearer, he said. No cartographer was present, no graphic designer weighed in on my choices, and, when I was through, no Gilad Sher [an attorney on the Israeli negotiating team] reviewed my work.3

Further, Motro acknowledges that “the agreement made no mention of a future Palestinian state.” She critiques the lack of care with which the maps were presented, noting that the aesthetic choices of the mapmakers had political ramifications. Had the maps been drawn with different colors, argues Motro, ones that did not make the discontinuity between areas under
Israeli control and those under Palestinian control seem so great, they would have created “a different vision of Israel and Palestine”—a different worldview. She goes on to argue for greater consideration to be taken in the presentation of the maps that were, at the time her article was published, still being drawn as part of the peace process.

However, a conversation with Shaul Arieli, a former IDF officer responsible for producing the maps that would be signed by Arafat and Rabin, and who drew the maps Motro went on to trace, reveals that no amount of aestheticization could have covered-up the structural inequality that marked their drawing. In an interview, he explained:

> The process was very easy. In the agreement signed in ’93, all those areas that would be part of final status agreement—settlements, Jerusalem, etc.—were known. So I took out those areas, along with those roads and infrastructure that were important to Israel in the interim period. It was a new experience for me. I did not have experience of mapmaking before. I of course used many different civilian and military organizations to gather data on the infrastructure, roads, water pipes, etc. I took out what I thought important for Israel ...

Arieli, despite having absolutely no cartographic experience, was able to deploy the state’s bureaucracy to safeguard that which was necessary for the security and comfort of the settlers. As the settlement project had been explicitly designed to break up the Occupied Palestinian Territories, disrupting the contiguity of any future Palestinian state, Arieli’s casual subtractions consigned Palestinians to live in the “unimportant” spaces that remained.

The involvement of the Israeli occupation’s bureaucracy in the process was of no small importance. During an interview, Ahmad Saleh, the head of the Palestinian Authority’s National Spatial Plan, highlighted its reach:

> Before signing, [the Israelis] asked for a period to review the maps. They sent it to all departments in the Civil Administration. Each one of them had their own remarks and their own modifications, and they put their changes on the map, originally prepared by the Israelis. So now the maps are prepared by them, reviewed by them, and modified by them.

Time and again, the Israelis leveraged their access to information, which only the occupiers could have, to produce favorable outcomes in their “negotiations” with the occupied. This pattern has not been limited to the negotiations themselves, but has carried over into the subsequent implementation of the ostensibly joint agreements between the two parties.

### Modern State Power

The central imbalance that marks the Oslo negotiations is that a colonial power was negotiating with the people it had colonized, in order that a state might be brought out of nothing for them. These were not negotiations that necessarily aimed at abstract notions such as peace, reconciliation, or justice, but were rather a technical set of discussions about a political entity that Israel and the US hoped would satisfy—or make less urgent—Palestinian demands for their rights. However, a state is not merely a set of lines on a map or a declaration of names on a piece of paper. As we know from Michel Foucault, the modern state is marked by the shift from “people” to “population.” That is, the modern era introduced the development of a set of techniques to operate disciplinary power through the transformation of discrete people into a singular object that could be known, and therefore operated upon: the population. Modern states have developed a host of institutions through which this connection between power and knowledge is articulated. Israel brought to bear the full weight of all these institutions in the Palestinian territories occupied after 1967, including conducting an exhaustive census, building massive disciplinary and intelligence infrastructures, instituting new regimes of taxation, and surveying in detail the land they had occupied. The Palestinians in the territories occupied after 1967 were colonized not only by the military might of Israel, but by a ravenous state bureaucracy that hungered for information about the land and people it had just conquered—knowledge it used to effect control. When the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israelis came to the negotiating table in the early 1990s, the PLO had none of the civil institutions that the Israelis did, and therefore no information about the
land or people they were returning from exile in order to rule. Edward Said, in 1993, wrote how the PLO negotiating teams face Israeli experts armed with facts, files, and power that have no equivalent on the other side. We have been unable so far even to undertake a census of our own people. We rely on Israel for facts about land and water, and to this day have rarely produced our own sources of reliable information. Is there an accurate and usable Palestinian map of the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem?\textsuperscript{6}

The answer, we know in 2016, was that there was not.

\begin{quote}
\textbf{“It’s Nothing!”}
\end{quote}

The walls of Ahmad Saleh’s office in the Ministry of Planning in Ramallah are lined with detailed maps of the West Bank and Gaza. These maps did not exist at the time of the negotiations in the 1990s. "At that moment actually there was no Palestinian mapping system. The only source for maps was the Israelis," he explained during our 2015 conversation.\textsuperscript{7} The Israeli military produced the maps available at that time, maps that emphasized features of the landscape relevant to war over others more pertinent to the task of planning. In addition to this, the Palestinian geographer Khalil Tafakji told us, the Israeli military maps used at Oslo were made in 1985.\textsuperscript{8} As the Palestinian negotiation team had no access to aerial photography and no maps of their own, there was no way of knowing how the villages, towns, and cities had grown in the eight years that passed before negotiations began. The line between where Palestinians would be able to build and where they would not was drawn without reference to this information. Thus it was that houses that had previously received building permits—had been within village master plans, even—suddenly were rezoned into Area C, where, from that moment on, permission for Palestinians to build or alter houses was given only in a vanishingly small number of cases.

In any case, as Dr. Saleh explained, the Palestinian negotiating team had not been—was not able to be—prepared properly: "The Palestinian team, most of them were not able at that moment to read the maps. If you present a map to someone who cannot read it, then you can present whatever you like."\textsuperscript{9} At the time it was drawn onto the map, Area C was intended to be a temporary cartographic feature, a zone whose sovereignty was to become Palestinian, but that, until 1999, would remain under Israeli control. The planned transfers largely did not happen, and the 1999 deadline for a final status agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians on all the questions left open after Oslo—settlements, Jerusalem, etc.—passed without resolution. Therefore, to this day, Area C remains under full Israeli control, and Palestinian development of the land is more or less completely prohibited.\textsuperscript{10}

The intervening twenty years following the original negotiations have shown that the problem with the Oslo areas is greater than just out-of-date maps. As the case of the businessman’s house makes clear, the failure was in reality twofold. Firstly, no thought was given to the fact that a map never precisely mirrors the territory it represents. Secondly, the systems put in place to implement the maps’ working reveal that the Accords were not considered a common program by Israel, but rather one controlled by Israel.

The seventy meters that separate the village council’s line and the Israeli Civil Administration’s line seem like a lot. However, on a map of 1:50,000—the scale of the signed Oslo maps—that distance is represented on paper by just 0.14 cm. The lines that show the borders of Areas A and B on the maps are thick, and easily swallow much of that seventy meters on the ground. The question then becomes how to interpret the line: Does the border fall at the line’s outside, its center, or its inside? After Oslo, the possibility for divergent interpretations, and the mistakes that accompany all such tasks, increased through the way in which both sides prepared the maps for use.

Only the hard copies of the physically signed maps have legal status. Therefore, in order for the maps to be turned into instruments on whose basis decisions could be made, the paper copies needed to be digitized. Dr. Saleh explained that the Ministry of Planning received the hard copy of the map from the Palestinian president’s office and scanned it. The borders were then traced onto the scanned image using geographic information system (GIS) software. At both the scanning and tracing stages, it is possible for distortions and errors to occur. These might be small on the map, but given that the line represents up to fifty meters


\textsuperscript{7} Saleh, interview with Burns.

\textsuperscript{8} Khalil Tafakji, interview with Jacob Burns, January 2015, occupied East Jerusalem.

\textsuperscript{9} Saleh, interview with Burns.

on the ground, the margin for error quickly comes to represent a wide swath of real territory. "As a boundary for about three hundred to four hundred locations," explained Dr. Saleh, "this fifty meters means you are talking about maybe hundreds of thousands of dunums [1,000 square meters] that you cannot manage. It’s not Area A, it’s not Area B, it’s not Area C: it’s nothing!"¹¹

Compounding this uncertainty is the fact that the Israelis also undertook the same process separately, and that there was no attempt by the Palestinians or the Israelis to cooperate on it. This confused situation means there are two different maps, with two different sets of lines, both of which represent different areas tens of meters wide where control is neither strictly Israeli nor strictly Palestinian. And yet, in court cases where there has been conflict over the path of the line, the judges have ruled that only the commander of the Israel Defense Forces in the West Bank has the ultimate power to decide.¹²

In this zone of indistinction sits the businessman’s house near Bethlehem. It is here that the absurdity of the Oslo maps reaches its zenith. Here, where the line is nowhere, Israel is free to rule by force and fiat, to mobilize its full power as a colonial state, to cast off any pretension of equality or dialogue with the Palestinians.

This is a problem not just with the Oslo maps, but with all maps. However, we at DAAR do not argue for a better map: we have no interest in lobbying for a more precise drawing of where the line lies that separates A from B, B from C. Instead, we want to seize on the potential of this zone of indistinction as a space of political autonomy, unpromising as it seems.

This zone is the space where the colonization of Palestine is at its most nakedly powerful, but it is also the space where it can be undone. It is where it becomes plain that the “rational order” of colonial sovereignty is founded upon a space where legal arbitrariness and uncertainty reach their apex. A space where the power of mapmaking breaks down, becomes contradictory, fades in the face of the territory that it is supposed to represent. This space is an opportunity because it is the aporia where the colonial project can be undone by exposing its inherent inconsistencies.

The thickness of the line has potential because it makes the constitutive aporia of colonial sovereignty visible, and because it contains the potential undoing of that A-B-C spatial-legal organization that the Oslo peace process has made familiar to both colonizer and colonized. Colonial sovereignty cannot work without a lawless space and its lawless lines. It is this counterintuition—whereby perceived solid and clear politographic signs are ultimately unmasked as uncertain spaces—that enables us to understand the foundations and vulnerability of an order. How to utilize those spaces’ untangling potential is the open question that DAAR wrestles with.
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