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,2 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.

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2 That is, Track II diplomacy: non-governmental and unofficial contact and activities between private citizens, or “non-state actors.”
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.


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