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 Rodr-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.


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