

**AN ASSESSMENT OF BACK CHANNEL DIPLOMACY:
NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS**

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parties. It has also proven to be a perilous joint venture.

Some scholarly works have attempted to explain the genesis and development of the Oslo peace process. Few analysts, if any, have noticed the inadequacy of current conflict resolution theories to address the dynamics of back channel diplomacy. It is necessary to go beyond the existing schools of conflict resolution research that either focus on indicators of success in international negotiation/mediation or explore contextual factors such as the international political events, the tactical issue of timing of intervention, psychosocial factors inherent in bargaining etc. Recent scholarly work has examined Oslo as if it were just another page in the history of conflict management efforts, and therefore have attempted to fit it uncomfortably into existing frameworks of analysis. However, Oslo's distinctiveness merits special examination where existing theory fails to describe, explain, predict, or even ask relevant questions.

The Opportunities Created by the Overlapping Peace Processes

The PLO and Israel, via the back channel, were clearly able to overcome the impasse reached in their conflict. The secrecy permitted the abandonment of the rhetoric and positional tactics being employed in the front channel negotiations while also enabling the growth of interpersonal trust between the negotiators. The Oslo talks were characterized by frank pursuit of issues and solutions, commitment to outcomes and finally, freedom from the constraints of political patrons and media scrutiny. It therefore was overlooked by national populations and political opposition groups and parties as well as foreign governments. Numerous positive elements were all present in the back channel dynamic, as will be illustrated below. The overlap provided intriguing opportunities for the PLO and Israel to probe each other's intentions and draw each other toward a negotiated settlement (Abbas 1995; Perry 1994).

A Separate Peace

One such opportunity came about when it appeared that Israel would conclude an agreement with Syria before obtaining one with the Palestinians (Perry 1994; Shlaim 1994a; Shlaim 1994b). This provided one compelling motive for PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat to authorize Abu Alaa to make contact with Prof. Yair Hirschfeld. The Madrid Process contemplated separate peace accords between Israel and each, any or all of the other parties: Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian delegation and Jordan. A certain amount of leverage would have been removed from the PLO's grasp should one of the other countries have come to terms with Israel first, since a root cause of their respective conflicts with Israel was the Palestinian question. This would appear to further reduce the importance of Palestinian grievances and might adversely affect any Israeli incentive for disengagement from the West Bank and Gaza. Separate peace also implied that Palestinians believed that the Israeli leadership would have a difficult time sustaining two simultaneous peace accords in which the return of territory was involved.

The tension produced by the prospect of a separate peace with Syria worked on the Israelis as well as the Palestinians (Shlaim 1994a; Shlaim 1994b). Externally, Israel postured that a deal with Syria was imminent just prior to the start of the Oslo talks, in order to exert some pressure on the PLO. Arafat could not be sure that Syria did not have its own back channel and was taking no chances. Internally, Israel contemplated that a deal with Syria, if it came first, might entail a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and total

