



# LOSE YOUR PRIVILEGES OR GAIN A HOMELAND?

*By Mohamed Gameel*

*Hassan Asfour, senior Oslo-era negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization, discusses why the Oslo Accords were doomed and the next step: declaring an independent Palestinian nation*

**A**s a leading Palestinian agitator and communist, Hassan Asfour, 69, has a history of political activism that eventually landed him a principal role at Oslo's secret talks in 1993. Because of his Communist Party affiliations, Asfour moved from one Arab country to another. He left Jordan in 1969 for Iraq. He was expelled in 1975 to Syria, where he was arrested and spent sixteen months in jail. In 1977, Asfour was deported to Lebanon where he resided until the 1982 Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut.

He eventually landed in Tunisia and became active in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). First Asfour was assigned by the Palestinian Communist Party in 1984 to coordinate the communists' relationship with the PLO's main political party, Fatah. Then, in 1987, Asfour was assigned to manage an organizational branch of the PLO. He became part of Yasser Arafat's inner circle and was handed the job of coordinating the Palestinian delegation's Madrid conference visit in 1991. Following Madrid, Asfour became one of only two PLO leaders to be selected as the Palestinians' principal negotiator in crafting the Oslo Accords. Asfour next joined the post-Oslo Israeli-Palestinian talks as Secretary of Negotiations, a post he held from 1998 until he resigned in 2005.

Despite the success of being part of the PLO negotiation team which gained significant concessions from the "enemy" (Israel), Asfour cannot ignore the mishaps that he feels caused Oslo's "clinical death." Seeing no future for the peace process and faulting the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) leadership, Asfour is an open critic of the PNA, and its incumbent president Mahmoud Abbas. Today, he runs and edits a Palestinian opposition website from Cairo, Amad Media, where he writes a regular opinion column.

► Hassan Asfour, Cairo, Jan. 14, 2019. *Mohamed Gameel* spoke with Asfour on January 14, 2019.



**CR:** *What do you remember from Oslo's negotiations? How did they start?*

**HA:** It was our enemy negotiating with us—an enemy who believed itself to be superior to the Palestine Liberation Organization. Israelis thought they were dealing with a besieged organization and wanted to take advantage of that to impose their own designs on the Palestinian Occupied Territories. Conversely, we dealt with Israel as an occupier that was required to negotiate with an organization it could not defeat or demolish. Consequently, we knew our position was a strong one. Eventually, the negotiations led to many agreements that were redrafted and renegotiated by PLO members. The PLO became an officially recognized signatory in peace agreements. Another milestone was Israel's recognition of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as Palestinian, both in terms of land and identity. This was a radical shift from the initial plan [of previous Palestinian delegations] that aimed to give these territories only an administrative status.

I believe that the Oslo Agreement killed the Biblical Zionist theory surrounding Judea and Samaria, and this was one of the main reasons behind Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. Until today, people do not understand what it means for Israelis or Jews to recognize the West Bank and Gaza Strip as Palestinian land. Rightist Israelis' Biblical dream of modern-day Israel is based on the premise that their origins lay in the lands of Judea and Samaria. Well, when someone, as our negotiating team did, comes along and takes Judea and Samaria from them, their historical dream is over. The whole Biblical Zionist project reached its end at Oslo. Unfortunately, a

lot of powers did not want this agreement to happen. Not because they did not want to find a solution with Israel, but because they did not want the PLO to be part of any agreement.

**CR:** *Why?*

**HA:** There were many on the ground in Palestine and Israel who wanted to sabotage the process. There were parties that did not support Oslo—either rejected the agreement, did not grasp it, or even conspired against it. We faced all three. The Arab countries were the same. They had the same logic. All parties attempted to fail Oslo, and finally, the Zionist movement succeeded in taking down Oslo by assassinating Yitzhak Rabin.

**CR:** *Do you think that Oslo ended with Rabin's assassination?*

**HA:** Theoretically, no. Practically, yes. Whoever killed Rabin could not make peace and could not accept the Oslo Agreement. However, theoretically, the agreement lasted until Camp David [in 2000]. Camp David II marked Oslo's end. Afterward, the Second Intifada broke out. There was no peace then. Two countries with a peace agreement can't fight each other for four years and still say they have an agreement. Then [in 2004] Israel killed Yasser Arafat to bring to power another person who was allied to them. Clearly, in this case, there is no chance for a peace agreement.

**CR:** *To back up a bit, did Yasser Arafat act alone in deciding to go to Oslo or was it the PLO's decision?*

**HA:** No, it was Yasser Arafat's decision.

Only a small group of people knew about it: Arafat himself, Mahmoud Abbas, Ahmed Qurei, Yasser Abed Rabbo, Mohsen Ibrahim, and myself. I describe the group as the five-plus-Mohsen, meaning five Palestinians plus one Lebanese member.

*CR: How did the 1982 Lebanese War and then the 1987 Palestinian Intifada shape the decision to go to Oslo?*

**HA:** The 1982 siege of Beirut that lasted around three months, from June to September, caused the PLO to relocate to Tunis. I believe that the war played a pivotal role in making the PLO leaders more pragmatic than before. But the major event that contributed to entering the Oslo negotiations was the 1987 intifada. Before the intifada, Hamas had emerged as a PLO rival, an alternative representative of Palestinians. Along the same lines, during the Madrid [Peace] Conference, Israel tried to bypass the PLO. The Israelis worked to take advantage of the PLO's alliance with Saddam Hussein and Iraqis' subsequent defeat in the First Gulf War and deal with the PLO as part of the defeated. The Israeli intent was to lay siege to the PLO.

Yet, Arafat knew how to process and defeat these Israeli maneuverings. For Israelis, names and ideological affiliations were not the problem. Yasser Arafat was. As long as Arafat maintained his position as leader of the Palestinians, he was able to break Israeli designs at toppling the Palestinian freedom movement. Of course, the 1987 intifada played a huge role in this.

*CR: How were roles divided during negotiations? What was your role?*

**HA:** There was no division of roles. Our

Palestinian negotiation team was only made up of two persons and a translator, so three in total. Qurei was a leader in the Fatah party, and I was the secretary of the PLO's negotiating committee. I am not a member of Fatah, and this was in essence a secret mission. Although in situations like this, it was hard to engage members outside Fatah, selecting me was based on the fact that I was keeping track of all the day-to-day updates on negotiations.

*CR: What were the points that gave you pause during the negotiations?*

**HA:** The entire way the Israelis viewed us was shocking. We were negotiating with a team that was denying our very existence—Israel believed in eliminating our identity and dealing with us merely as a demographic. Therefore, it was vital to reinforce all the basic concepts: that we were negotiating for Palestinian land; that Israel is an occupier; that we are a nation; that we have a leadership which fights for us and a leadership that is able to gain more international recognition than Israel.

These were our cards. Although our overall circumstances appeared weak, we had tremendous strength. Our only real weakness was our lack of pan-Arab support. In general, Arabs were not entirely on our side. Yet had all Arab nations been 100 percent behind us, then we would have had enormous power.

*CR: Was there any role or contribution from Egypt?*

**HA:** No, but toward the end of the negotiations, we asked Egypt to provide us with a legal advisor just to review the text of the agreement. Someone was

sent to us from the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who had worked with the Egyptian negotiators on Camp David. The legal advisor revised the text's language to make it more in line with legal wording, only in the last round of the negotiations. Other than that, the Egyptians were not involved.

**CR:** *At what point during the negotiations did you feel you and the Israelis would reach an agreement?*

**HA:** It was in July 1993. We started the negotiations in January 1993, but I felt something would happen when we heard mention of a mutual recognition between the PLO and the state of Israel. Mainly, we began the Oslo negotiations to support the Madrid-Washington delegation in 1991 after the Gulf War. In principle, when the negotiations kicked off, we had agreed to negotiate on behalf of the PLO because the PLO was not an official party at the time. At some point, this changed. It became acceptable for Israel to negotiate with the PLO on the status of a new Palestinian state, not just as a Palestinian delegation. At that point, I had an inkling that something was about to happen and that there was a possibility that the PLO would win the right to become a signatory and that the agreement would happen.

**CR:** *In retrospect, what do you believe went wrong with the Oslo Accords and what could have been corrected—a strategic or tactical mistake?*

**HA:** People think about the accords without distinguishing between the two separate Oslo agreements. In 1993, in Oslo I, we agreed on a Declaration of

Principles. I believe, it was the best-possible deal we could get considering the balance of power between the PLO and Israel. However, it was possible for us to get more. For example, Israel offered us Gaza without settlements, meaning that it would have been possible for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip in the first stage of the agreement. Unfortunately, some of us refused. Later, we paid a high price for this rebuff. If we had gotten Gaza without settlements, we could've limited the presence of the Israeli military there. Had we taken the Israelis up on their Gaza offer it would have been entirely possible to get the Gaza Strip almost free from Israeli forces.

The survival of settlements made Israelis focus on security dimensions during the later 1994 Cairo Agreement concerning border crossings. Consequently, the Gaza Strip was divided and Israel acquired the Gaza valley. Israel remained in the Gaza Strip until their withdrawal in 2005. In my view, all of this was a strategic mistake. The withdrawal could have happened in 1993. And the fact that it didn't occur in the Cairo Agreement, I consider a political crime.

The second mistake was that a clear formula had not been reached regarding how the PLO leadership should deal with the new PNA.

**CR:** *After the Oslo Agreement, how did the PLO and later the Palestinian National Authority deal with opposition to Oslo inside and outside Palestine?*

**HA:** Opposition in Palestine is part and parcel of the Palestinian political movement. There is always opposition—



that's permanent. The opposition will always remain sharp and controversial, and sometimes, the minority accuses the PNA leadership of betraying the Palestinian people. Sometimes, the opposition divides Palestinians. Yet, after Oslo, there was no split between the Palestinian leadership and the opposition. Earlier, however, splits had occurred, more than once.

In 1974, for example, a semi-split took place when a rejectionist group called Al-Raffd Front opposed any form of negotiation with Israel. Later, in 1982 and 1983, there was a split within the Fatah party and a divide within the Palestinian arena in general. Another subdivision happened during the convening of a parliamentary session of the Palestine National Council in Amman in 1984.

But again, at the time of Oslo there was no split; there was only opposition with some parties such as Hamas dismissing the agreement. For example, [suicide] operations that were carried out by Hamas aimed to badly affect Palestinian negotiations. In one way or another, the Hamas attacks succeeded because some countries were backing them up such as Iran, Syria, and Jordan. Additionally, the Israeli right wing was facilitating these attacks. The Israeli right had an interest in assisting Hamas's military operations to use them as an excuse to say that the Oslo Agreement provoked security threats against Israel. Before the agreement, there were no such suicide missions. Palestinians blowing themselves and Israelis up all started after Oslo. They were intentionally carried out by the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters, such as Hamas. All of those who were against Oslo supported those operations.

**CR:** *Is it right to say that the Oslo Accords failed?*

**HA:** Yes, they failed because Israel did not want them. Specifically, the Israeli right wing did not want them. The message was made clear by Rabin's assassination. Then, when [Benjamin] Netanyahu was elected, it was made even more clear to us. If a nation elects the person who refused the agreement and assassinated Rabin, how could it implement the Oslo Accords?

**CR:** *Why did Rabin accept the agreement in the first place?*

**HA:** A set of factors made him accept. Rabin reached a belief that Israel could not continue occupying another nation. He believed that it was not possible to preserve Israel while Israelis occupied and killed another people. Additionally, the 1987 intifada made a positive difference in the world. An image of Palestine started to form in people's minds globally. I remember during Oslo's negotiations, one of the Israeli negotiators told us that before the First Intifada half of Israelis did not know that Israel occupied the West Bank; they thought it was theirs. They could not conceive how Israel could occupy another nation.

The intifada raised Palestine's profile even further; bones cracking and children suffering were just a few examples that caused a perception change around the globe, and most importantly, inside Israel. The first intifada, then, was a victorious moment for Palestinians, which lasted until the intervention of political Islam and Hamas. Unfortunately, the resulting terrorism connected to political Islam distorted what the Palestinians had

accomplished, and it was a great service to the Israelis.

**CR:** *Why did the League of Arab States or the United Nations not follow up on the implementation of the Oslo Agreement?*

**HA:** Why? Can the Arab League do anything?

**CR:** *Well, what about the United Nations?*

**HA:** The United Nations can't do anything either. The United Nations had the partition resolution in 1947. Then Resolution 194 in 1948. Ultimately, the UN was one of those organizations that conspired against Oslo and Rabin and supported the Israeli right wing. Also, the United States was specifically opposed to Oslo.

**CR:** *Who specifically in the United States administration was opposed to Oslo?*

**HA:** Dennis Ross and his group. Basically, Ross was the main figure in this team. He led the hostilities against Oslo. Warren Christopher was the secretary of state at that time.

**CR:** *Has the absence of a final vision for a possible solution led to the agreement's failure?*

**HA:** We did not have time to fail. Rabin was assassinated in November 1995, just a year and half after we started implementing the agreement.

**CR:** *Was it necessary to have a plan for a lasting solution from the beginning?*

**HA:** A lasting solution! That was

impossible. For a direct solution we needed an entirely different power balance. Even Egypt could not reach a lasting solution with Israelis. According to what I know, until today, the Camp David Accords impose terms and conditions on Egypt.

**CR:** *Well, what is the future of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations?*

**HA:** There is no future for negotiations. I am convinced that there cannot be a political solution unless Palestinians admit that Jerusalem is part of the Jewish narrative and Judea and Samaria are the West Bank. If Palestinians admit that, there will be a settlement, albeit a limited one.

**CR:** *So, is there any hope for a solution in the near future?*

**HA:** No, not for a comprehensive political solution. But some parts could be solved. It is possible to resolve certain matters related to Gaza. Self-governance could be implemented in the West Bank but only if it is divided up geographically. But a Palestinian state in the sense that was agreed on, certainly not. It is an impossibility now.

**CR:** *What is missing for the sides to be able to return to negotiations?*

**HA:** Nothing! Everyone who speaks about resuming negotiations is backing a deceitful slogan such as the two-state solution. Resuming negotiations and seeking a two-state solution are the biggest political hoaxes. Unfortunately, everyone is promoting them without truly understanding what they mean. The facts are that there is an established state—

Israel—that is occupying another nation. Unfortunately, the two-state solution has been offered up by George Bush in 2002 and everyone chanted it. Everyone who mentions the two-state solution is a political parrot for American branding.

From the beginning of the American two-state proposition, I was one of the people to oppose it. I wrote to reject it publicly and was the only Palestinian to refuse it, the only person from the Palestinian National Authority to officially reject Bush's plan.

**CR:** *So, the solution remains unclear.*

**HA:** The solution is clear. There is a Palestinian state [according to] the United Nations. The United Nations has recognized the state of Palestine within the 1967 borders. No more discussion. Why do we have to set out for more negotiations? We should declare our state and consider our land occupied if so. The non-implementation of the United Nations resolution by Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] is only a means to obliterate the Palestinian cause.

**CR:** *Do you think that it is necessary to restructure the Palestinian Authority?*

**HA:** The problem is that there is no authority. Gaza is standing alone. The Palestinian National Authority cannot do anything and has no connection with Gaza. In the West Bank, the authority has limited functionality, which is declining. It has become a police-like authority. Now, the Palestinian Authority does not provide the Palestinian people with national services. It is a disaster on all levels,

functionally, economically, socially. It does not operate on the institutional level: there is no parliament. Rather, there is a president who issues decrees.

**CR:** *Is there any hope for a new election?*

**HA:** No, of course not. At least, for the time being, it is not foreseeable.

**CR:** *Why?*

**HA:** Because Abbas does not want any confrontation with Israel. If he should do anything, it should be to declare the Palestinian state and announce the need for elections. By declaring the state, he would be implementing a United Nations resolution, not taking a one-sided decision. One hundred and sixty-eight countries in the United Nations have recognized Palestine as a legal nation state, more than those who recognize Israel. But if he does declare a Palestinian state, Abu Mazen [Abbas] will lose his privileges with Israel and might even get arrested as a result. I would like to ask an arrested president: lose your privileges or win a homeland?

**CR:** *How can Fatah and Hamas be reconciled?*

**HA:** There is no reconciliation. Reconciliation is not an option. It is an illusion. In Abu Mazen's era, there is no reconciliation. Also, there is no reconciliation after Abu Mazen because there is an occupation. Israel will occupy what remains of the West Bank, create cantons, assign an emir to each canton, and make a union among those cantons, the Union of the Autonomous Emirs! Gaza will be an independent state!



**CR:** *Is the “Deal of the Century” real?*

**HA:** I call it “Trump’s Regional Deal,” and the deal’s outlines are not clear. However, at its core, it is based on a deal struck between Abbas and Ariel Sharon in 1995. The deal consists of full Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, giving Gaza full autonomy. On the other hand, the West Bank will gain a special status that is a bit more than a self-ruling entity and a little less than a state; that is how they described it. There is nothing in between.

**CR:** *Can the United States act as a mediator in future negotiations after moving its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem?*

**HA:** The United States’ role as a mediator is over. In my opinion, any talks about negotiations would be a mistake with the Americans. The only acceptable negotiations are between the states of Palestine and Israel under the United Nations sponsorship to decide on some issues such as the relationship between the two countries, the nature of coexistence, the best possible way to apply the right of return, and a comprehensive peace agreement. All this is possible, but anything without implementing the UN resolution becomes political surrender.

**CR:** *If there is such an agreement, is it possible for other Arab countries to make peace agreements with Israel such as Lebanon or Syria?*

**HA:** They already have agreements; each country in its own way, of course, without diplomatic representation. In one way or another, Syria and Lebanon have agreements with Israel. The Blue Line for example, which is the border

demarcation between Lebanon and Israel, is an agreement. The majority of Arab countries have some sort of agreement with Israel. A Palestinian–Israeli agreement might encourage normalization of relations.

**CR:** *Are other Arab countries willing to expand relations with Israel in case it ends the occupation?*

**HA:** There are Arab countries that already have excellent relations with Israel while it occupies our land, disregards our cause, and Judaizes Jerusalem. Some Arab states do not see any problem with that. Palestine is not the driving engine for the majority of Arab countries and not an incentivizing factor in their decision-making. The biggest lie is that the Palestinian cause is the pulsing heart of Arabism. Maybe it was before 1967, but not after.

**CR:** *Practically, how do you implement the UN resolution?*

**HA:** Just by declaring the state of Palestine, even if the resolution is not enforced. Why does the Palestinian Authority insist on being just an authority? They have to declare a state named Palestine that is occupied by Israel. What else can Palestinian leaders do besides that?

**CR:** *Is it possible to go back to the Oslo Accords after adding or amending some articles?*

**HA:** This is no longer possible—Oslo is over. All of Oslo was a waste of time and a political deception. In my opinion, the only thing we must do is declare the state of Palestine.