

How Israelis and Palestinians Negotiate

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*A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the
Oslo Peace Process*

Edited by Tamara Cofman Wittes



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Foreword

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has probably generated more published studies than any other ongoing international dispute. In the few years since the Oslo peace process collapsed in violence in September 2000, the postmortems have been legion from participants and observers alike. What can one more analysis of the Oslo years add to our understanding of this intractable conflict?

The answer, in the case of this compact but uncommonly insightful volume, is a surprising amount. This refreshing and revealing collection of essays provides a new lens through which to view the much-discussed failures of Oslo. Culture, according to Tamara Cofman Wittes and her co-authors, did not cause the Oslo breakdown, but it did play an influential, intervening role at several levels: coloring the preferences and strategies of political leaders, shaping the domestic politics that constrained the talks, and molding each side's perceptions of the other's intentions and behavior.

The cultural lens, it turns out, helps us understand much that was mystifying about the outcome of the Oslo peace process. How did an incremental process designed to facilitate gradual confidence building instead produce a downward spiral of mistrust and stalled implementation? This volume provides an explanation rooted in the unfortunate interaction between Israel's national-security-oriented negotiators and the weak, disempowered, and risk-averse Palestinian team. What was the source of the extreme passivity evident in the Palestinian negotiating style, which American mediators found so maddening and which led President Clinton to later blame Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for the breakdown of talks at Camp David in July 2000? Omar Dajani, in his groundbreaking contribution to

this volume, explains the cultural, historical, and political roots of the PLO's dysfunctional negotiating behavior. But, as Aharon Klieman makes clear, the fault did not lie entirely on one side of the negotiating table. In a critique that is as sophisticated as it is iconoclastic, Klieman delineates two subcultures among Israeli negotiators, a diplomatic- and a security-oriented subculture. He argues that Ehud Barak's attempt to embrace both approaches simultaneously fueled Palestinian suspicions and proved profoundly inept.

Framing the contributions from Dajani and Klieman are an introductory chapter by Wittes that details the purposes, and limitations, of a cultural analysis of negotiations; a succinct overview by William Quandt of the Oslo years and the multiple factors in the domestic, regional, and international environments that shaped the talks, not least the role of American mediation; and a conclusion in which Wittes brings together the stories of the two sides, revealing how Israeli and Palestinian negotiating styles interacted in ways that were particularly, and tragically, counterproductive. She then draws lessons for future negotiators and mediators, focusing on how leaders must work together to overcome the deleterious effects that cultural baggage can bring to peace negotiations. In discussing the role of ethnic identity in the Oslo negotiations and highlighting some parallels between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other identity conflicts, Wittes broadens the relevance of this study beyond Middle East specialists to encompass the broader community of scholars and practitioners in the field of negotiation, particularly those dealing with entrenched ethnic conflicts.

This book is the seventh in a series of volumes published by the United States Institute of Peace about the negotiating styles of different countries. Previous volumes in the series have explored Chinese, Russian, North Korean, Japanese, French, and German negotiating behavior. These books reflect the Institute's conviction that negotiating approaches to international conflict resolution, as well as less adversarial diplomatic or business encounters, will achieve greater success when negotiators from different nations and cultures better "read" the intentions of their counterparts over a green baize table. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this volume's contributors note, the primary difficulty in intercultural understanding is not cultural ignorance but the ironies of cultural interactions—the ways in which each side's prior history, and their shared history of conflict, shapes their interactions across the negotiating table.

This volume represents a slight departure from the Institute's cross-cultural negotiation series in that it is the first to examine in detail the negotiating behavior on both sides of an international conflict. This dyadic approach provides a richer portrait of the Oslo process than would be provided by a focus on a single side, and also shows how national negotiating styles can play out differently with different interlocutors.

The volume also integrates cultural analysis into the broader canvas of the negotiating environment by treating culture as an intervening variable, one that filters the varying effects of bureaucratic jockeying, international mediation, domestic party politics, and the influence of public opinion. Placing culture in this intermediary role advances the theoretical understanding of culture's role in conflict resolution, a core goal of the Institute's cross-cultural negotiation project. In so doing, the present volume not only adds breadth to our canvas of national negotiating styles but also builds on two previous conceptual works published by the Institute: Raymond Cohen's *Negotiating across Cultures* and Kevin Avruch's *Culture and Conflict Resolution*.

Culture, of course, is not the primary determinant of a country's negotiating behavior, and in many cases its influence may be marginal relative to other factors. The Institute's intent has been to draw attention to, but not to exaggerate, culture's role in shaping international negotiations. But, as this volume's innovative approach reveals, culture's influence is pervasive, and may be evident less in independent effects than in the coloring of other principal dimensions of negotiating behavior. Because of this interweaving of culture's impact into all aspects of the negotiating environment, negotiators often ascribe to ill will or incompatible preferences decisions that may instead be explained by cultural miscues.

In its inventive analysis of the ill-fated Oslo peace process, this volume will help negotiators, mediators, and analysts better understand the process's failings, and thereby will help to improve the chances of success in the next round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Richard H. Solomon, President
UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

Acknowledgments

I am lucky to have attracted to this project three stellar contributors, William Quandt, Omar Dajani, and Aharon Klieman. For each of them in different ways, this project represented a departure from their usual modes of thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I am grateful for their willingness to stretch in new directions, and for allowing me to benefit from and build upon their endeavors.

This book is only one small manifestation of the immeasurable contribution made by the United States Institute of Peace to the understanding and amelioration of international conflict. I am deeply grateful for the sponsorship and support of the Institute and its president, Richard H. Solomon, whose leadership has enabled continuous and considerable growth in research into culture and conflict resolution. To the Institute's director of Research and Studies, Paul Stares, I owe thanks for giving me the freedom to pursue this project during my tenure at the Institute, and for invaluable professional mentoring throughout. My successor at the Institute, Scott Lasensky, cheerfully picked up the project and shepherded it to completion. Elise Murphy handled administration and logistics with aplomb. The Institute's able Publications Department greased all wheels to get the book to press in record time. The incomparable Nigel Quinney, virtual custodian of the Institute's book series on cross-cultural negotiations, was my sounding board, guide, and adjutant at every stage. The book's arguments were greatly improved by the constructive comments of Raymond Cohen, Samuel Lewis, Shibley Telhami, Marc Ross, Ed Abington, David Makovsky, Rob Malley, Philip Mattar, and Michael Barnett, as well as the anonymous

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Contributors

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