**False hopes**

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Between October 30 and November 1, 1991, a so-called ‘peace conference’ sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union was held in Madrid to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In attendance were delegates from Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as well as the two sponsors and the host, Spain. It was the first time the Palestinians and

Israelis would be involved in direct negotiations.

The conference was supposed to be the preliminary step in peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine and it paved the way for the Oslo Accords which were signed two years later. It effectively laid the foundations for the purported ‘peace process’ -- the dominating paradigm for conflict resolution between Israelis and Palestinians. Thirty years on, we can say quite confidently that this paradigm has not brought Palestinians any closer to self-determination; rather it has allowed Israel to consolidate its domination over them.

Although the Palestinians and Israelis were supposed to negotiate on an equal footing in Madrid, they were far from treated as equals. The Palestinians were patronised and humiliated from the start. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was leading the Palestinian struggle from exile in Tunisia, was officially barred from attending, upon the insistence Israel and the US. Instead, the Palestinian delegates were part of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation.

To add insult to injury, two of the unofficial advisors that had accompanied the Palestinian delegation, Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi, were barred from the negotiating room because they were Jerusalemites. For the Israelis, their inclusion meant recognition that Palestinians had a rightful claim to Jerusalem. This demeaning treatment of Palestinians would continue to feature prominently in all ‘peace talks’ that followed.

It was also reflected in the agreement on mutual recognition between the two parties that came during the negotiations in Oslo. While the Palestinians recognised Israel within the 1967 borders, the Israelis only ever recognised the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people but not the right to Palestinian sovereignty. Indeed, throughout the ‘peace process’, Israel and its foreign backers deliberately disassociated the Palestinian people from their territory by omitting the word ‘Palestine’ from their lexicon.

During the Madrid conference, the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people were put aside, which would continue to happen throughout the so-called ‘peace process’. For example, discussions about the status of Jerusalem and the right of return for Palestinian refugees were postponed indefinitely, as they were considered too challenging to tackle. These issues, of course, are at the heart of the Palestinians struggle.

Despite the concessions mentioned above made by the Palestinians, Israel still managed to skilfully manipulate the narrative so that the Palestinian side was blamed for the eventual failure of the peace process. Israeli officials like to often repeat the words of Israeli diplomat Abba Eban, who claimed that the Palestinians “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity”. Many buy into this anti-Palestinian rhetoric, ignoring the fact that the Israeli regime has been the biggest obstacle to peace.

Take for example the fact that Israel has never stopped building illegal settlements in the West Bank since 1967 -- not even as a demonstration of good faith. It has also never stopped its campaign of forced expulsions of Palestinians from their homes and land in Jerusalem. The ‘peace process’ has simply been a rather convenient way for the Israeli regime to detract from any accountability measures.

Today, 30 years after the Madrid conference, the Palestinians are no better off than they were back then. In his opening address to the Madrid conference, Dr Haidar Abdel Shafi, the head of the Palestinian delegation described the situation in Palestine in these words:

“We come to you from a tortured land and a proud, though captive, people, having been asked to negotiate with our occupiers, but leaving behind the children of the Intifada, and a people under occupation and under curfew, who enjoined us not to surrender or forget. As we speak, thousands of our brothers and sisters are languishing in Israeli prisons and detention camps, most detained without evidence, charge, or trial, many cruelly mistreated and tortured in interrogation, guilty only of seeking freedom or daring to defy the occupation.”

From Madrid to Oslo and the various other attempts at ‘peace’ ever since, what is abundantly clear is that any ‘peace process’ that does not recognise the fundamental Palestinian rights as a starting point and does not acknowledge the Israeli regime’s systematic denial of these rights, is not a process aimed at delivering peace.

Excerpted: ‘Thirty years of sham ‘peace process’

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