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The Rise of the Israeli Peace Camp

The Israeli Peace Camp:
Rise, Heyday and Decline
(1967-2000)

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While peace initiatives have always been part of Israel's political landscape, they have varied widely in the form and intensity of their dynamics, significance for the public debate and impact over the years. Diverse movements, networks, groups and alliances have been created to nurture Israeli-Palestinian relations as part of an effort to bring an end to the conflict and putting a stop to the enmity, violence and injustices it entails. This broad assortment of initiatives has come to be loosely known as the Israeli peace camp.^[1] In the past few decades, this camp has attained notable achievements yet also faced considerable setbacks. This essay reviews the history of the peace camp in the period 1967-2000.

The Israeli peace camp first emerged on Israel's social and political fringes after the 1967 war. Advocates of peace gained massive traction after the first Intifada broke out in 1987, and officially

became a political bloc at this time. After the implementation of the Oslo Accords began in the mid-1990s, the camp gradually declined following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who championed the peace negotiations with the Palestinians, and the consequent victory of the right-wing Likud party in the general election soon after. I argue that these shifts were driven by a changing political context that led to an adjustment of goals and methods, and by varying levels of public receptivity to pro-peace messages.^[2]

The conclusion is that to succeed, peace activism must identify sociopolitical currents and consequent opportunities, strategize to navigate pitfalls, and work to not only gain public support but also maintain it. The interplay between political context, activist methods and public mood helps account for the periods of growth and decline in Israel's peace camp.

1967-1987: Emergence of the Israeli Peace Camp

Israel's peace camp gradually emerged in the first two decades after Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. With the initially heady atmosphere that followed this swift victory, later replaced by shock when the 1973 war nearly ended in calamity, Israel mostly centered inwards in this period. Internationally, stronger ties with the US provided the country with strategic backing at crucial moments but left Israel marginalized in an arena increasingly populated by non-western players and oil-producing countries in the global south. Domestically, the primacy of the old elite – mostly Ashkenazi, urban, educated Labor voters – was challenged and eventually overturned when Menachem Begin won the 1977 elections thanks to right-wing ideologues, politically-marginalized Mizrahi Jews and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Confronted with growing social and economic challenges, as well as ongoing external threats – especially after the 1982 Lebanese escapade – most Israelis were not interested in peace or in the implications of not actively promoting it.

During much of this period, the only steps taken to nurture Israel's relations with its immediate neighbors were sporadic and marginal. They were spearheaded by leftwing activists such as Uri Avnery, editor of the weekly news magazine Ha'olam Hazeh ("This World"); Matityahu Peled, a retired general turned peace activist; Lyova Eliav, former secretary-general of the Labor Party; Dr. Ya'acov Arnon, former governor of the Bank of Israel; and a small group of intellectuals, writers, academics and journalists.^[3] In the late 1970s, these activists gained minor representation in the Knesset through the short-lived Ha'olam

Hazeh list and the Moked and Sheli parties, which later either disbanded or merged with Shulamit Aloni's civil rights and peace list, Ratz, in the early 1980s.

The main umbrella organization of this small political bloc, the Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, joined the grassroots Committee for Solidarity with Birzeit University and individual activists in articulating the first demands to withdraw from the Occupied Territories and create a Palestinian state alongside Israel. These were considered fringe ideas with exceedingly limited appeal (for example, they were barely addressed by the large moderate peace group that emerged in 1978, Peace Now, which focused on advancing a peace treaty with Egypt and later – somewhat belatedly – on protesting the Israeli incursion into Lebanon in the summer of 1982).

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The early advocates of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue worked mostly to forge ties with Palestinian counterparts (including meetings abroad brokered by third parties) and to build up domestic support. At first, they met with scant success. Contact with PLO moderates – most notably Dr. Issam Sartawi – expanded through the good offices of academics at Harvard and elsewhere, and progressive Jewish leaders (such as Nahum Goldman) were recruited to the cause. However, dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian opinion-shapers remained minimal (the leaders of Peace Now refused to meet with PLO representatives until the mid-1980s, although some of its women activists met with prominent Palestinian women at the UN Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1995).

With very few exceptions, Israeli society, immersed as it was in economic difficulties, growing social rifts and constant security concerns, was largely complacent about the Palestinian issue.

that point on, the peace camp turned its attention almost exclusively to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, expanding significantly and becoming much more active.

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Most Israelis were neither aware of these early overtures nor open to them. The political leaders, locked in a general diplomatic stalemate, purposely sidestepped the divisive Palestinian issue (for example, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir’s dismissal of a possible pact with Jordan aimed at finding a “peaceful solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict and the Palestinian problem in all its aspects”, which was concluded by Shimon Peres and the late King Hussein in London in early 1987).

With virtually no public support and very little access to the establishment, the fledgling peace camp had a negligible influence over Israeli policy and decision-makers. Its most important achievements in these formative years were introducing the demand to end the occupation by articulating the vision of two states for two peoples, and nurturing personal connections between Palestinians and Israelis – which set the stage for much more substantial dialogue just several years later.

1987-1993: Heyday

Relations with the Palestinians abruptly became a national issue when Palestinian demonstrations began in Gaza in December 1987 and spread rapidly to the West Bank, growing into a widespread, (at first) locally-driven uprising known as the Intifada. From

The first Israeli organizations defending the human rights of Palestinians were established (B’Tselem, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, The Israeli Committee against Torture, and HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual). Groups representing specific constituencies were formed, such as East for Peace, Oz v’Shalom, Professors against the Occupation, and Osim Shalom – Social Workers for Peace. Women’s peace groups first emerged (e.g., Women in Black and Reshet: The Israeli Women’s Peace Net) and grassroots activism increased (e.g. Year 21).[4] Think tanks and various outlets were established to promote pro-peace views (New Outlook, the International Center for Peace in the Middle East, the Alternative Information Center and Yossi Beilin’s Economic Cooperation Foundation – ECF).

Every initiative had its specific agenda and target audience, yet they all shared a single goal: to facilitate direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians in order to reach a lasting resolution to the conflict.

This new array of associations promoted a variety of political agendas, ranging from calls to end the occupation and establish a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders to ambiguous demands, posed for example by Peace Now, to end the violence based on the vague notion of “territories for peace”. Every initiative had its specific agenda and target audience, yet they all shared a

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It is hardly surprising that this heterogeneous group differed in its choice of focus: some groups highlighted humanitarian concerns, others furthered dialogue, several worked on education, and a powerful handful – mostly at the national level – concentrated on drafting more detailed plans for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Together, they all came together in protesting the ongoing repression of Palestinian resistance and in demanding direct talks between Israel and the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people (the preferred euphemism at the time for the Palestine Liberation Organization – PLO – with which contact was legally prohibited in 1986). They organized vigils, symposia, demonstrations, petitions, conferences, appeals and a growing number of public campaigns to promote this aim.

These efforts were given a tremendous boost by massive changes in context in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The fall of the Berlin wall, the demise of the Soviet Union, the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the beginning of the third wave of democratization heralded a period of significant international change. At home, dissatisfaction with official foot-dragging was reinforced by disillusionment with political corruption and led to a growing demand for domestic reform, especially given the mass immigration to Israel once the floodgates of Eastern Europe opened. Popular momentum for change was set in motion, and for the first time this included the Palestinian issue.

During this time, Israeli and Palestinians leaders held a series of clandestine and public meetings both locally and abroad (often under the auspices of Western governments, international bodies, leading

think tanks and major governmental institutions). Dozens of such gatherings helped overcome deep-seated mutual stereotypes within the Israeli and Palestinian communities, create meaningful bonds between potential negotiators, and air ideas in anticipation of possible peace talks. This burgeoning dialogue began to penetrate the political establishment, and more and more members of Knesset joined the chorus calling for direct negotiations.

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Israel’s (rather reluctant) participation in the international conference on peace in the Middle East held in Madrid in November 1991 was an important turning point for the peace camp; in fact, it effectively launched the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process and helped consolidate the momentum for change that brought Yitzhak Rabin to power in 1992. Key leaders of the peace camp became ministers or were elected for Knesset; others found their access to the new Labor-Meretz coalition vastly broadened. In this new political environment, with a public mood conducive to leaving the diplomatic deadlock behind, achieving peace became a real possibility.^[5]

As of 1992, Prime Minister Rabin’s newly formed government pursued this goal in two separate channels. Officially, working committees were set up in Madrid; unofficially, politicians undertook private initiatives in collaboration with civil society. For example, the discussions held under Norwegian auspices between the ECF and the PLO were spearheaded by Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin and initially led by ECF academics Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak. The talks were later formally sanctioned by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and, after



← Opening of the Madrid Conference with speech of US President George Bush, October 30, 1991 Knesset- Source: [Knesset](#)

detailed documents were drafted, by Prime Minister Rabin. This culminated in the first agreement between Israel and the PLO in the summer of 1993 – the Declaration of Principles, which launched what came to be known as the Oslo process.

by civil society groups, the solid backing of global actors, and an overall climate that encouraged openness to peaceful conflict resolution. However, the auspicious convergence of circumstances proved difficult to sustain over time.

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The peace camp provided the impetus for multiple Israeli-Palestinian interchanges during the late 1980s and early 1990s. These could not have taken place without a favorable local and global context; without Israeli and Palestinian leaders willing to take the first steps in this direction; and without a public unusually receptive to change. This rare combination of context and agency was encouraged by the modest goals set

1993-2000: Institutionalization and Decline

The dynamic that led to the signing of the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993, was, in retrospect, the apex of the peace camp's achievements. The euphoria created by the breakthrough in negotiations was quickly displaced by growing complications and frustrations, exacerbated by the general confusion that followed the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and Benjamin Netanyahu's subsequent rise to power in the 1996 elections. The once-vibrant peace camp began to disintegrate and lose touch with its goals. By the time the Camp David talks collapsed in 2000, the camp was divided over its vision of peace and could not convincingly address the concerns of its own constituency, let alone those of large parts of Israeli society traumatized by the

violence around them, and the uncertainty about the course the country should take.

In the mid-1990s, right after the Oslo Accords were signed, the peace camp expanded enormously. It had penetrated formal politics and some of its leading activists were now directly involved in negotiations (such as Beilin, Aloni, Sarid and Burg, along with veterans Peres and Rabin). Informally, a host of peace-oriented groups flourished (including Rabbis for Human Rights and the Council for Peace and Security), as well as many Israeli-Palestinian ventures enthusiastically backed by Western governments and institutions, such as the Jerusalem Link (a joint initiative of Bat Shalom and the Jerusalem Center for Women), The Palestine-Israel Journal, Bitterlemons, Seeds for Peace, and many local grassroots initiatives.^[6] These were supplemented by the efforts of mainstream organizations such as Hadassah, the Joint Distribution Committee, Na'amat, and most academic institutions in Israel.

Yet this bevy of pro-peace activities was not accompanied by a clearer reworking of shared goals. Apart from the joint hope for an abstract peace, disagreements emerged

almost immediately over the aims of the Oslo process (a two-state solution or a more amorphous political design), its framework (a step-by-step approach or a comprehensive agreement), its protracted five-year timetable, and almost all the details of a permanent settlement – ranging from the future of Jerusalem and the settlements to security arrangements and borders.

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Ultimately, the peace camp did not reach internal agreement over the wisdom and viability of its basic assumptions. Generally speaking, moderates rallied around the idea of a cautious, incremental formal framework, while a growing number of skeptics – including many progressive founders of the peace camp – voiced concerns not only with the process itself, but also some of its ramifications (such as settlement expansion, the treatment of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, and the inadequacy of provisions for a long-term reconciliation).



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Yitzhak Rabin
with President
Clinton and
Yasser Arafat
during the
signing of the
Oslo I Accord in
1993. Source:
[Flickr](#)

Without clear objectives, the heterogeneous peace camp employed a wide range of strategies and tactics. Some groups engaged in dialogue to build up inter-community trust, while others engaged with the myriad human rights issues involved in the occupation. Some specialists proposed innovative designs for peace education, while other initiatives delved into the details of a political solution with an eye to influencing official talks.

”Opposition to Oslo gained momentum after the 1994 Gaza-Jericho agreement, the return of Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership to the Occupied Territories”

Preoccupied with their own work, activists all too often ignored or belittled the power of the broad anti-Oslo bloc, which consisted of settlers, supporters of Greater Israel throughout the country, and new right-wing NGOs such as Zu Arzenu (This is Our Land – a messianic ultra-rightwing group established by Moshe Feiglin, an extreme right-wing politician). This coalition garnered considerable support from the religious right and among low-income groups wary of the “old elites” that had (temporarily) regained power.

Opposition to Oslo gained momentum after the 1994 Gaza-Jericho agreement, the return of Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership to the Occupied Territories, and the subsequent establishment of the Palestinian Authority. By the summer of 1995, just before the interim agreement between Israel and the PLO was signed (commonly known as Oslo II), Benjamin Netanyahu led the opposition into harsher dissent, initiating increasingly disruptive and vituperative demonstrations, vigils and strikes. The frenzied protest culminated in a large rally held in Jerusalem’s Zion Square, in which demonstrators circulated pictures

of Rabin in an SS uniform and denounced him as a traitor. The peace camp was lax in responding to this spiraling incitement and paid the ultimate price when Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated at the end of a major pro-peace rally on November 4, 1995.

Rabin’s assassination is now recognized as the major turning point in the Oslo process. It sent shockwaves throughout Israel and the entire region, and effectively paralyzed pro-peace activity in the immediate aftermath. Eventually, renewed tension on the Lebanese front heightened security concerns and paved the way for Netanyahu’s victory by a tiny margin over Peres in the 1996 elections.

Ousted from formal power and unsure how to move forward, the peace camp began to tread water. Activities and initiatives continued, but the overall mood changed. The enthusiasm of the early 1990s was replaced by uncertainty, and the initial appeal of negotiations was tempered by disagreements over the shape they should take. Communication with Palestinian counterparts revealed vastly different agendas and perspectives, highlighting the structural inequality between the two communities. Hope for peace was disrupted

The family of PM Yitzhak Rabin at his funeral
- Source: [Flickr - Government Press Office \(GPO\)](#)
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by growing violence. In the late 1990s, the loose bonds that had tied the peace camp together began to come apart institutionally, substantively, strategically and tactically.

Ehud Barak's victory in the 1999 elections – which largely resulted from disagreement within the anti-Oslo bloc – offered a measure of hope, but was hardly greeted with the outpouring of support that accompanied Rabin's return to power in 1992. A certain bewilderment arose in pro-peace quarters, as the new prime minister pursued contradictory policies in the West Bank and Gaza, and Palestinian impatience with the peace process grew as restrictions abounded. Barak's insistence on pursuing a permanent settlement even as his fragile coalition unraveled was almost doomed to failure even before the two sides convened at Camp David in 2000. The collapse of the talks [7] was rapidly followed by Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in late September 2000, which launched the second Intifada.

A last-ditch effort by President Bill Clinton, then already a lame duck, and by Barak to achieve some understanding in Taba just before the special elections that brought Sharon into power in February 2001, left both the official and informal parts of the peace camp severely battered and unsure how to proceed. They had failed to translate the peace process they had set in motion into a detailed, workable agreement.

Part of the reason for this failure lay within the peace camp itself. Its various elements did not rally around a set of defined objectives or agree on a joint strategy. At sensitive junctures, moderate groups tended to back official efforts while more radical movements called for a just resolution to the conflict regardless of the government's position.

This strategic confusion inspired a series of uncoordinated activities that created

a sense of action yet yielded very little forward movement. This was compounded by a growing imbalance between activity at home and abroad. As maintaining the coherence of the peace constituency grew more difficult, efforts were diverted to action abroad (in part at the behest of foreign actors who, eager to play some role in the peace process, backed what became a veritable peace industry favoring larger, bureaucratized organizations over innovative local undertakings, and rewarded Israeli-Palestinian tours abroad – especially after George W. Bush took office in early 2001 – at the expense of painstaking work at home).

The cracks in the peace camp reflected a palpable shift in the public's receptivity to its messages. The flailing diplomatic process hardly raised hopes, more and more Israelis feared for their personal safety, and particularistic groups began to articulate demands that had little to do with the peace process (e.g. Mizrahim, Russian-speakers or the ultra-Orthodox). These identity politics made it more difficult for the peace camp to win over new supporters and undermined its already shaky support in mainstream circles.

Support for negotiations with the Palestinians, which had been lukewarm at best, cooled even further (even though more Israelis expressed basic support for some variation of the two-state solution). Social differences also permeated the peace camp, creating new tensions between Arabs and Jews, religious and secular Jews, and privileged versus underdeveloped communities. These mirrored its already tepid receptivity among key sectors of Israeli society, further hampering the effectiveness of the camp.

The negotiation deadlock, the loss of formal power, and the subsequent shrinking of the

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peace camp's base helped account for the change in its political fortunes. As of 2000, its representatives were sidelined from decision-making in Israel, while rejectionist groups consolidated their power and began to dictate policy. In these circumstances, it is not difficult to grasp how Palestinian-Israeli relations, which seemed on the mend in the early 1990s, were once again on a collision course by the beginning of the new millennium, making the peace camp's task more difficult than before.

This shows that fulfilling the dream of peace requires not only favorable circumstances, but also a delicate balance between vision, courage, social connectivity and extraordinary execution skills. Achieving peace also requires patience, determination and a capacity to learn from past mistakes. This is the challenge that faces the next generation of the Israeli peace camp, as its founders gradually depart.

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Concluding Remarks

The Israeli peace camp, which was initially so instrumental in creating an atmosphere conducive to starting talks with the Palestinians (and to achieving the full-fledged peace accord with Jordan), failed to fulfill its ultimate goal: an Israel living in peace with all its neighbors. The camp was unable to capitalize on its rise to power in the exceptionally favorable climate of the 1990s by making good on the promise of peace. It lost touch with its societal roots and with the sentiments prevalent among its Palestinian counterparts, undermining its own capacities and hence its ability to live up to the expectations it aroused.

Endnotes

[1] The precise boundaries of the “peace camp” are debated. Here I adopt the broad definition of organizations, movements and initiatives dedicated to improving Israeli-Palestinian relations, as part of ongoing efforts to achieve a just and durable accord. See Tamar Hermann, *The Israeli Peace Movement: A Shattered Dream* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 96-97.

[2] This essay further develops my analysis presented in two earlier publications: “Peace Action and Conflict Resolution: An Israeli-Palestinian Exploration,” in Elie Podeh & Asher Kaufmann (eds.), *Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution?* (Eastbourne: Sussex University Press, 2006), pp. 283-316; and “Israeli Peace Movements,” in Joel Peters & David Newman (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 267-277.

[3] For some examples, see Uri Avnery, *My Friend the Enemy* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Everett Mendelsohn, *A Compassionate Peace: A Future for the Middle East* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); and Herbert Kelman, “Contributions of an Unofficial Conflict Resolution Effort to the Israeli-Palestinian Breakthrough,” *Negotiations Journal*, 11 (1995), pp. 19-27.

[4] Naomi Chazan, “Israeli Women and Peace Activism: A View from the Intifada,” in Marilyn Safir and Barbara Swirski (eds.), *Calling the Equality Bluff* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1991), pp. 152-161.

[5] See Mordechai Bar-On, *In Pursuit of Peace: A History of the Israeli Peace Movement* (Washington, D.C.: US Institute for Peace, 1996).

[6] For a comprehensive list, see Edy Kaufman and Walid Salem (eds.), *Searching for Peace* (Utrecht: Center for Conflict Prevention, 2008).

[7] Volumes have been written on why the Camp David talks collapsed by participants, observers and scholars. The framework outlined by Robert Malley and Hussein Agha in “Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors,” *New York Review of Books*, 9 August 2001, stands the test of time well.



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