

The Madrid Conference

US and Israeli failure to respond meaningfully to PLO moderation resulted in PLO opposition to the US-led attack on Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War. The PLO did not endorse Iraq's annexation of Kuwait, but it saw Saddam Hussein's challenge to the US and the Gulf oil-exporting nations as a way to alter the regional status quo and focus attention on the question of Palestine. After the war the PLO was diplomatically isolated. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia cut off financial support they had been providing, bringing the PLO to the brink of crisis.

After the Gulf War, the US sought to stabilize its position in the Middle East by promoting a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite their turn against the PLO, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were anxious to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and remove the regional instability it created. The Bush administration felt obligated to its Arab allies, and pressed a reluctant Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir (of the Likud party) to open negotiations with the Palestinians and the Arab states at a multilateral conference convened in Madrid, Spain, in October 1991.⁴ Shamir's conditions, which the US accepted, were that the PLO be excluded from the talks and that Palestinian desires for independence and statehood not be directly addressed.

The Madrid conference was mainly non-substantive, intended only to launch the new peace initiative. The substance came after the conference, in the form of separate 'tracks' of bilateral negotiations. This meant that Israel negotiated separately with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians. In subsequent negotiating sessions held in Washington, D.C., Palestinians were represented not by the PLO but by a delegation from the occupied territories. Participants in this delegation were subject to Israeli approval, and residents of East Jerusalem were barred on the grounds that the city is part of Israel. Although the PLO was formally excluded from these talks, its leaders regularly advised the Palestinian delegation. Although Israeli and Palestinian delegations met many times, little progress was achieved. Later, after leaving office, Prime Minister Shamir publicly announced that his strategy was to drag out the Washington negotiations for ten years, by which time the annexation of the West Bank would be an accomplished fact.

A new Israeli Labor Party government, led by Yitzhak Rabin, assumed office in June 1992 and promised rapid conclusion of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Instead, the Washington negotiations became stalemated after December 1992, when Israel expelled over 400 Palestinian residents of the occupied territories who were accused, but not tried or convicted, of being radical Islamist activists. Human rights conditions in the West Bank and Gaza deteriorated dramatically after Rabin assumed office. This undermined the legitimacy of the Palestinian delegation to the Washington talks, and prompted the resignation of several delegates.⁵

⁴ Because they had voted for his opponent in the previous presidential race, Bush felt relatively free of potential domestic Jewish opposition. Bush's willingness to compel Israeli leaders to the bargaining table, and Clinton's subsequent pro-Israel stance, explains why many in the Arab world supported and applauded the election of Bush's son, president George W. Bush, in 2000.

⁵ Madrid's Israel-Jordan track led to a 1994 peace treaty between the two countries. Talks between Syria and Israel bogged down over when Israel would withdraw from the Golan Heights, and what Syria's 'full peace' would look like. Lebanon's talks with Israel, largely derivative of the Israel-Syria track, also stalled.

Lack of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, and deterioration of the economic and human rights conditions in the West Bank and Gaza, also accelerated the growth and popularity of a radical Islamist challenge to the PLO. Hamas established a military arm, the *Izz al-Din al-Qassam* brigade, committed to the assassination of Israelis and Palestinian collaborators. Violent attacks against Israeli targets by Hamas and Islamic Jihad further increased tensions. Ironically, before the *intifada*, Israeli authorities had funded and facilitated Islamist organizations as a way to divide Palestinians in the occupied territories, and to decrease popular support for the PLO's secular nationalism. As the popularity of Islamists grew and challenged the relative moderation of the PLO, Israeli leaders came to regret their policy of encouraging political Islam. Eventually, Yitzhak Rabin came to believe that Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the broader Islamic movements of which they were a part posed more of a threat to Israel than the PLO.