



**Ghassan Khatib**

**Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process: Consensus and Competition in the Palestinian Negotiating Team**

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After two decades of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and peace process; sustainable peace seems to be unattainable. The (compromised) hopes of the Palestinian people to establish their future independent state on merely twenty two per cent of the historical Palestine area, seem to evaporate with the failure of the peace process, the expansion of the Israeli settler-colonial occupation and the entrenchment of the apartheid status. The signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993 was supposed to conclude in 1999 with the emergence of an independent Palestinian state by tackling the final status issues; however as of today neither a Palestinian state nor a peace process do exist. Understanding, analysing and exploring the reasons for the failure of the peace process has always fascinated scholars and researchers alike.

This failure of the peace process was due to various reasons such as; the asymmetry of power between both sides; the weak Palestinian negotiation performance; the division between the inside and outside leaderships; the Israeli inflexibility and lack of interest in sustainable peace; the involved actors' different readings and interpretations of the agreements clauses; the limitations of the third parties problematic involvement; the bias of the United States in favour of Israel and its exclusive domination on the process; and finally the expansion of the Jewish settlements/colonies in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In light of this set of failure reasoning, it remains relevant to ask: Was the peace process from the early beginnings doomed to fail? What went wrong, why and by whom? How did the intra-Palestinian politics and styles of governance interact with the peace process and affected its progress and outcomes? And what lesson can be learnt from two decades of negotiations and failed peace settlement?

These are the set of questions to which Ghassan Khatib has provided interesting, detailed and historically embedded answers in his recent book, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process: Consensus and Competition in the Palestinian Negotiating Team*. The task of this book "is to provide a more nuanced and corrective understanding of the Palestinian leadership" through tackling the relationship between the inside and outside leaderships and how they interact with the structural and environmental defects of the peace process.<sup>1</sup> Building on his direct experience as a member of the Palestinian delegation to the peace negotiation, the author examines to what extent did the composition and behaviour of the Palestinian negotiating team or leadership have an impact on the process and outcomes of the negotiations with Israel from Madrid to Oslo II, between 1991 to 1997. In doing so, Khatib provides a background deliberation through the lenses of the leadership role and the structure and outcome of the peace process; examines the emergence and nature of the Palestinian leadership since 1949 and analyses and discusses the Palestinian participation in the peace process, in particular the Madrid conference and the Washington negotiations. The author also examines the performance of the Palestinian delegation in the negotiation

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1. Khatib p.23.

towards the 1993 Oslo agreement through the inside-outside leadership dichotomy. The author ends his analysis by reflecting on the implementation of the Declaration of Principles, the emergence of the new Palestinian élite and the consequences of the peace process failure.

Khatib argues that “there was no significant political difference between the inside and outside as distinct groups during the peace process from Madrid till the Interim Agreement in 1996.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the relationship between the Palestinian inside and outside leaderships was complementary: the inside needed the legitimacy and political access of the outside, and the outside needed the unity and representation of the inside.<sup>3</sup> This complementary role is the major argument and main thrust of the book which makes it almost distinctive from other scholarly work in this field. However, he also argues that the contrasting realities out of which these two leaderships were born, led them to subsequently employ different approaches and priorities.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the book makes it clear that the structure and open-ended nature of the process and its effect on the behaviours of the leadership; the vagueness of the terms of reference; the restriction on Palestinian representation; and the partial role of the sponsor all contributed to the weakness of the Palestinian leadership, and its negotiation performance.<sup>5</sup> This in turn, led to an increase in violence and strengthened the opposition, reducing the leadership’s popularity and allowing it to be further exploited in negotiations.<sup>6</sup>

While the composition of and behaviour of the Palestinian leadership were not the only factors that had an impact on the process and outcome of negotiations, however, the overall conclusion of this book is that the continuous changes made by the leadership in the composition of its negotiating teams, in particularly the marginalization of the internal leadership (and later its exclusion), displaced previously complementary relations and led to subsequently poor negotiating performance and ultimately flawed agreements. These, in turn (and bearing in mind a continuously hostile negotiating environment) led to a still poorer performance in the on-going negotiations.<sup>7</sup>

The strength of this book is that it is inspired by the participation in the peace negotiations and the author being in the Palestinian ‘political kitchen’ until today with the wealth of insider insights and unique access. Additionally, through the historical analysis, the author manages to take the reader into a journey in the details of the early beginnings of the peace process which allow the observers to link the old events with the current trajectories. Hence, the book serves an alert duty and is an eye-opener to a better understanding of the deteriorating conditions of today due to the disastrous decisions that had been taken in the past.

On the other hand, this book suffers from a few drawbacks despite the larger contribution it offers. The reader can notice various repetitions throughout the book, particularly in the first half, in addition to the various introductory statements which sometime harm the flow of

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2. Ibid p.22.  
3. Ibid p.167.  
4. Ibid p.169.  
5. Ibid p.170.  
6. Ibid p.172.  
7. Ibid p.4.



argumentation. To some extent tackling and judging the existent literature was through the lenses of the dichotomy which is 'right' and which is 'wrong' which can be problematic and subjective. Also, despite the high expectations at the beginnings that the reader will enjoy a wealth of first-hand ground-breaking new insights, information, and argumentation, this was slightly exaggerated. Furthermore and arguably, the reader can feel some contradictions in the very major argument of the book concerning the complementarity role between the Palestinian outside and inside leaderships. The contradictions weakened the argument on a few occasions through the provided and discussed empirical evidence and the trajectories of the processes. Finally, a substantial part of the book serves as a historical and contextual background, which allows less space for further analysis, discussions and reflections.

However, overall this book adds a significant and distinctive contribution to the scholarly work on Palestine and provides various hints and insights to what went wrong over the last two decades in the Middle East peace process and what can be learnt so as to avoid the mistakes in the future. At the end of the day it remains an inspiring book for an uninspiring peace process.

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