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## **"Norwegians? Who needs Norwegians?"**

### **Explaining the Oslo Back Channel: Norway's Political Past in the Middle East**

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Responsibility for the contents and presentation of findings and recommendations rests with the author. The views and opinions expressed in the report do not necessarily correspond with the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## **Preface**

In September 1998, I was commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to carry out a preliminary study looking into Norway's role in the Middle East. According to the agreement with the Ministry, the study should focus on the years prior to 1993 and examine whether Norway's political past in the Middle East – and, not least, the mediating and confidence-building efforts of Norwegians prior to the opening of the secret Oslo Back Channel – had had any influence on the process that followed. The study should also try to answer the question 'Why Norway?' – that is, what had made Norway, of all countries, suitable for such an extraordinary task? The work on the study started on 15 September 1998. The date of submission was stipulated as 15 April 2000. This was achieved.

The following report is based on recently declassified and partly still classified documents (to which I was granted access) at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the verbatim records of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, records of government proceedings and the Norwegian Parliament, Labour Party Archives, documents from the US State Department and the Socialist International – to mention the most important. In addition, Norwegian newspapers have been examined; a large number of interviews have been conducted with leading players in Norway, Sweden, the USA and the Middle East; and a considerable amount of literature, especially on the peace process in the Middle East, has been reviewed. I would like to thank all interviewees for being so accommodating and for generously giving so much of their valuable time. I would also like to thank the Planning and Evaluation Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which appreciated the importance of collecting all this information and which provided the economic basis for doing so.

Last, but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to Martin Halvorsen – conscientious objector and research assistant during this project – who, with his historical insight and positive disposition, proved an invaluable assistant. He worked hard and systematically to find and procure relevant literature and documentation. Throughout the process, he has provided useful comments and helped maintain an overview in a complex stream of information. Professor Helge Pharo and Professor Rolf Tamnes have read and commented on the whole manuscript. Drawing on their extensive knowledge in the field of post-war Norwegian foreign policy, their comments have been most useful and highly appreciated. However, responsibility for the end result of the project – this final report – lies solely with the author.

Hilde Henriksen Waage

Oslo, 31 October 2000

## **Introduction**

13 September 1993, Washington D.C. Norway's Foreign Minister was among the prominent international actors, strolling in the sun on the White House lawn. The world had witnessed an extraordinary breakthrough in the apparently insoluble Middle East conflict. Through a series of secret talks held in and around Oslo, representatives of the Israeli and Palestinian leaders had managed to agree on a Declaration

of Principles that paved the way for the establishment of the Palestinian Self-Government Authority and mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). A major turning point had been reached in Palestinian–Israeli relations.<sup>1</sup>

Norway had contributed decisively to this, one of the most serious attempts at peace in that strife-torn region since May 1948, when the state of Israel was created. Rarely had the Middle East witnessed such a moment of hope as on that bright September day. The Oslo Agreement was to be signed by Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, and Yassir Arafat, leader of the PLO. The President of the United States, Bill Clinton, was present as a witness – together with engrossed audiences throughout the world, watching this major event on their television sets.

Few parties had ever been enmeshed in a more vicious spiral of hostilities than the Israelis and their Palestinian neighbours. Countless previous efforts by individuals, organizations, and large and small states to open up direct channels of dialogue between Israel and the PLO had all ended in failure.<sup>2</sup> And then, through secret diplomacy and by playing a role far out of proportion to the size of their country, the Norwegians had succeeded where all others had failed, managing to get the old enemies to agree to both gradual Israeli withdrawal from some of the Occupied Territories, and to local Palestinian self-determination. What had made Norway, of all countries, suitable for such an extraordinary task?

Before the 'why Norway' question can be discussed, it is necessary to analyse the main preconditions and causes that led to the establishment of what became known as the Oslo Back Channel. The proper framework and the proper context must first be established, and several important questions answered. Why did the Israelis and the Palestinians go to Oslo in 1993? What motivated them to sign the historic peace agreement in Washington that autumn day in 1993? And, most important of all: how did the Middle East conflict become 'ripe for resolution'? What is meant by 'ripeness'? When is a conflict 'ripe'?

The opening up of the Oslo Back Channel was not Norway's first peace effort in the Middle East, nor was Norway alone in trying. In addition to many individuals, organizations, and large and small states, the major superpower in the region – the USA – had been attempting for years to stop the fighting over the lands both parties claimed were theirs and theirs alone. The Middle East conflict was definitely ripe for mediation. Israeli and Palestinian leaders needed and wanted peace; they saw their interests best served by a peaceful solution. This attitude was triggered by fundamental changes internationally, regionally and nationally, and constituted the basis for making the Oslo Back Channel possible. However, this ripeness does not explain why it was Norway, and not some other, and perhaps, more powerful actor, that succeeded in bringing the two parties together.

In September 1992, the Norwegian State Secretary, Jan Egeland, visited Israel. The Israeli Labour Party had just won the election. The old warrior, Yitzhak Rabin, had realised that Israel needed peace. So had his longtime rival, Shimon Peres, whom Rabin had appointed Foreign Minister. His Deputy Foreign Minister, Yossi Beilin, was considered both idealistic and controversial by the Israelis. For years he had claimed that Israel would have to enter into a dialogue with the PLO, but he had been met with little sympathy. Earlier in 1992, Beilin had got to know Terje Rød Larsen, the director of the Norwegian Institute for Applied Social Science, Fafo. Rød Larsen had been in the Middle East because his wife, the diplomat Mona Juul, was posted at the Norwegian Embassy in Cairo. During 1991- 92, Rød Larsen was involved in setting up a research project in Gaza and on the West Bank, a project aimed at examining the Palestinians' living conditions.<sup>3</sup>

The Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister, Yossi Beilin, explained to Rød Larsen that he wanted to give a push to the slow peace process in Washington. Rød Larsen, full of enthusiasm, suggested that Norway could establish an alternative track to the Washington process, led by the USA. By the time State Secretary Jan Egeland arrived in Israel in September 1992, Norway's role had already been cleared with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thorvald Stoltenberg. During his visit, Egeland was to try to find out whether there was any possibility of secret negotiations.

For Beilin it would have been political suicide – as well as contravening Israeli law – to become directly involved in any kind of direct contact with the PLO. Instead he suggested two Israeli academics, Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak, as suitable for the mediation task. These two were already in frequent contact with Palestinians. They could easily talk with the PLO. And, if anything happened to get leaked or if the negotiations should break down, they could deny the whole mission.

On 20 January 1993, the two Israelis met with a Palestinian delegation, headed by one of PLO's finance experts, Abu Ala, in the little Norwegian town of Sarpsborg. With Fafo as host and the Norwegian Foreign Ministry paying the bill, a modest start was made.

Several books and articles have already been published on Norway and the special Norwegian participants who managed to start the secret back channel and to help negotiate this serious attempt at peace. Myths have also been created. As in fairy tales, there is a strong focus on the role of the players, followed by personality-centred explanations: Terje Rød Larsen was the clever, self-confident and charming diplomatic man of action. He created the 'magic' during the process. His pleasant and elegant wife, Mona Juul, represented the specialist, working with Middle East questions in the Foreign Ministry. Jan Egeland, handsome, result-oriented and idealistic by nature, had written a thesis in political science about how small states could create results in international politics that were unattainable for the superpowers. Now he wanted to test his theory in practice. What happened next, according to some of the books and articles, was that the so-called 'Oslo spirit' simply descended upon the Israeli 'peaceniks', the PLO terrorists, and a few carefully chosen Norwegians.

This unique chemistry between the Oslo participants was an important part of the Norwegian channel. A special relation of trust and confidence existed; they were all linked together by a kind of common fate. Other factors are also cited to explain the success: for example, the many family connections within the governing Norwegian Labour Party, and the close personal ties between the academic and political environment. Fafo's research project created the perfect cover for the operations. If it became necessary, the parties could deny that negotiations had taken place. In addition, no one following the peace talks in Washington would ever suspect that a peripheral country like Norway could have any role, whatsoever, to play in the Middle East.

However, the explanations normally given of the Oslo Back Channel and the superficial sketch set out here must be put into a broader framework. In all that has been written, surprisingly little emphasis has been put on the very special relationship between Norway and the Middle East conflict throughout the post-war period. Recent research has shown that a very special relationship did indeed exist between Norway and Israel, long before the exciting days of the secret Norwegian back channel.<sup>4</sup>

Is this political past insignificant when it comes to understanding and explaining the Oslo Back Channel? Or is it decisive in explaining how Norway could play such an important role? If these important research questions are to be answered in any meaningful way, the political past first has to be unearthed, elaborated and explained. How did Norway become one of Israel's best friends? The crucial beginnings, the decisive formative years of the Norwegian–Israeli relationship in the 1940s and 1950s, of utmost importance for the understanding of the whole post-war period, will be looked into. Then, the significance of the change in the Norwegian Middle East policy from the 1970s and onwards will be discussed. Was there a gradual change in Norwegian Middle East policy from the 1970s? Did Norway manage to maintain the old friendship with Israel while, at the same time, establishing close contacts with the Palestinians? Or was there merely a rhetorical shift? Was Norway in fact still Israel's best friend? How may this specific political past explain Norway's creation of and role in the Oslo Back Channel?

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this report, 'Norwegians? Who needs Norwegians?', is a quotation from Uri Savir's 1998 book, *The Process. 1,100 Days That Changed The Middle East*, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Bercovitch 1997, p. 221.

<sup>3</sup> This sequence of events will be discussed in much greater detail later in this report. Here, I present only a very condensed and superficial overview, based on how Norway's involvement in the peace process is normally presented in the literature. Several books and articles have already been written on the secret Norwegian channel. See, for example, Jane Corbin, *Gaza first - the secret Norway channel to peace between Israel and the PLO* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), which has an introduction by the three leading Norwegian players, Jan Egeland, Mona Juul and Terje Rød Larsen, in the Norwegian edition; David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO. The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord* (Washington: Westview Press, 1996); Shimon Peres, *Battling for Peace* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995); Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), *Through Secret Channels* (London: Garnet Publishing, 1995); Amos Elon, 'The Peacemakers', *The New Yorker*, December 1993; Connie Bruck, 'The Wounds of Peace', *The New Yorker*, October 1996; more scholarly articles include Øyvind Østerud, 'Veien til Jerico. Streiflys over norsk utenrikspolitikk' [The Road to Jerico. Perspectives on Norwegian Foreign Policy], *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, nos 3–4, 1994; Karin Aggestam, 'Two-Track Diplomacy: Negotiations Between Israel and the PLO Through Open and Secret Channels', *Davis Papers on Israel's Foreign Policy*, no. 53, 1996, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In addition, as will be shown later, many of the most important actors themselves have recently given their own versions in newly published books.

<sup>4</sup> This is based on two books I have published in Norwegian: *Da staten Israel ble til. Et stridsspørsmål i norsk politikk 1945(49)* [When the State of Israel was born. A Matter of Political Conflict in Norwegian Policy 1945(49)] in 1989, and my doctoral thesis, *Norge (Israels beste venn. Norsk Midtøsten-politikk 1949-56)* [Norway (Israel's Best Friend. Norwegian Middle East Policy 1949(56)] from 1996. Both of these works were based on recently declassified and still partly classified documents (to which I was granted access) at the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, the verbatim records of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, Labour Party Archives, documents from the US State Department and the British Foreign Office – to mention the most important. In addition, two English articles based on these two books have been published: 'Norway and a Major International Crisis: Suez – The Very Difficult Case', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1998; 'How Norway Became One of Israel's Best Friends', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2000.

# 1 Part I: The road to Oslo

Ideally, mediation takes place when the implicated parties find that the costs of continued confrontation are too high. An intractable conflict like that in the Middle East has over the years attracted many attempts at mediation. In the all too recent past, they have failed. Neither the conflict nor the timing have been ripe. The important parties had not been sufficiently willing to search for a peaceful settlement.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.1 The ripeness of a conflict

What is meant by 'ripeness'? When is a conflict 'ripe'? Unlike the ripening of a fruit, the development of ripe moments in a conflict is neither a predictable nor a smooth process. In a conflict, ripe moments can come and go quickly if not spotted and acted upon. All parties involved need to be open to the idea of a peaceful solution and see their interests served by such a solution. The perceptions and the dispositions of the parties are of utmost importance. In the Middle East conflict, potential mediators have tried for years to convince the parties that a peaceful solution was both desirable and possible. But as long as the parties themselves did not share this perception, such exhortations were to no avail.<sup>6</sup>

In the literature on mediation and negotiation in general and the Oslo Back Channel in particular, 'ripeness theory' has been the subject of considerable debate. The ripeness of a conflict, it has been claimed, is one of the most significant factors behind a successful mediation process. Indeed, it has been held to be even more significant than the status or identity of the mediator, in this case Norway. However, ripeness theory mainly explains why the parties are willing to enter into negotiations, not the negotiation process in itself or its outcome.<sup>7</sup>

Ripeness is commonly defined as a situation characterized by a *mutually hurting stalemate* in which both parties realize that they have reached 'the point where they can no longer escalate their way to victory and the sunk costs plus the countering efforts of the other side make for a costly deadlock'.<sup>8</sup> Such ripeness is increased if there is also a recent, narrowly avoided or impending *catastrophe* that further dramatizes the cost of the conflict. Occasionally, ripeness derives instead from a *mutually enticing opportunity* in which 'the parties perceive an opportunity ... to gain a favorable outcome'.<sup>9</sup> Two additional elements are essential for the development of a ripe moment: a perceived *way out* (a way of resolving the conflict that does not require sacrificing the parties' basic objectives) and *valid spokesmen* on both sides (persons who can commit both sides to a negotiated agreement).

There is disagreement as to whether such a *mutually hurting stalemate* existed prior to the opening of the Oslo Back Channel, and consequently whether it can be used to explain the outcome. It has been argued that both sides had been experiencing a hurting stalemate.<sup>10</sup> But most scholars and analysts seem to think that there was no specific hurting stalemate to trigger the Oslo process. As will be shown below, Israel was not 'hurting' much, except from the pressure put to bear on it by the USA, the burden of occupation, and the threat from fundamentalist Islamic groups inside the Occupied Territories and the Middle East in general. By contrast, the PLO and the Palestinians were 'hurting' a good deal, but they were extremely weak on almost every issue and found themselves stalemated. True, the Arab states had narrowly averted a catastrophe in the Gulf War. This might have been a component of a ripe moment, but it was not associated with a particularly painful deadlock.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, it is argued that there existed a *mutually enticing opportunity*. The Madrid peace process had originally begun on the basis of such a contrived ripeness, but then the whole Madrid/Washington process had dried up completely.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the Oslo Back Channel can be seen as emanating from a *mutually hurting stalemate* within the Madrid process. 'It is relatively clear, even if hard to prove, that absent such manipulation, the Madrid process would never had taken hold, and absent such a stalemate at Washington, the Oslo channel would never have been opened', I. William Zartman claims in his article 'Explaining Oslo'.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the *motivational ripeness* – the desire to end the conflict – had been growing on both sides in the period prior to the opening of the negotiations. According to this argument, ripeness of a conflict comes close to being identified with the parties' motivation to seek a compromise, with their willingness to search for a peaceful solution. The conflict seemed ripe for a settlement, a historic compromise that ultimately would result in partition and a two-state solution. If this interpretation is correct, it is important to determine the short and long-term interests and developments that worked to create the necessary ripeness.<sup>14</sup>

The international, regional and national changes that created the conditions associated with ripeness provide a good point of departure. Oslo was a successful experience precisely because it took place just

when changes in political circumstances, nationally and globally, made perceptions of gains, losses and risks so very different from what they had been for more than thirty years.<sup>15</sup>

## 1.2 Unsuccessful attempts in the past

The opening up of the Oslo Back Channel was not Norway's first peace effort in the Middle East, nor was Norway alone in trying. In addition to many individuals, organizations, and large and small states, the major superpower active in the region – the USA – had for years attempted to stop the fighting over the lands both parties claimed were theirs and theirs alone.

A major turning point in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict came with the Six Day War in 1967. It set in motion a gradually evolving process over more than two decades that ultimately led to the Oslo accord. This process can be described as the 'Palestinianization' of the Arab–Israeli conflict.<sup>16</sup> The war provided Israel with greater strategic depth and more defensible borders, but it also made Israel responsible for the security and well-being of the more than 1,000,000 Palestinian inhabitants of the Occupied Territories and created another 200,000 refugees, in addition to the approximately 600,000–800,000 Palestinians who had already fled in 1948.<sup>17</sup>

The war also sparked off a spate of international efforts to end the conflict. The famous UN Resolution 242, unanimously adopted by the Security Council on 22 November 1967, became an important instrument in every negotiation and mediation attempt that was to follow. This resolution was short, simple, succinct and crucially ambiguous; it called for 'withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories'. However, the ambiguities in the text of the resolution, necessary to get all the parties to accept it, led to the Israelis using Resolution 242 to oppose withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. The simple addition of the word 'the' or 'all' (territories) would have given the resolution a more precise meaning. In addition, the resolution made no mention of the political rights of the Palestinians. The international community did not regard them as party to the conflict in their own right. They had no recognized representative of their own to advocate their case internationally.<sup>18</sup>

After 1967, the Israelis found themselves faced with the new Palestinian nationalist movement characterized by a growing self-awareness. The Palestinians refused to be regarded only as refugees: they wanted to prove to the world that they were a people with legitimate rights, demanding recognition of their losses and their nation. Reacting to this, Israel's Prime Minister, Golda Meir, claimed in 1969 that the Palestinians 'did not exist ... there was no such thing as a Palestinian people.... It was not as though there was a Palestinian people considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them.'<sup>19</sup>

Not only did the Israeli Government insist that there were no Palestinian people with legitimate rights but it also claimed that the same people did not possess any homeland that belonged to them – that land belonged to the State of Israel. After the Six Day War, the Jewish State began an ambitious programme of settlement construction in selected areas to strengthen its control over the Occupied Territories. As early as in July 1967, the Minister of Labour Yigal Allon presented a plan which secured the areas of most strategic importance for Israel, especially the Jordan Valley, the Judean desert – and, of course, Jerusalem. The rest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, heavily populated by Palestinians, was, according to the Allon plan, to become part of a future Jordanian- Palestinian state. Though this was never formally presented as a peace plan, successive Labour governments based their policies in the Occupied Territories on Allon's visions.<sup>20</sup>

For the Arab states the Six-Day War marked their third military defeat. Again the Israelis had proven themselves unbeatable; once again military failure had discredited the Arab governments. Between 1948 and 1967, Palestinian nationalism had remained basically dormant, and the struggle for Palestine had been left in the hands of the Arab states. But after the war in June 1967, the Palestinians began to fight their way back to centre stage. Many Palestinians, observing the military failures of the Arab states, concluded that they could not rely on them to liberate Palestine and decided to take over their own struggle. The occupation by Israel of the West Bank and Gaza – meaning that Israel controlled the whole of the planned Palestinian state (according to the UN's partition plan) – created an additional grievance which bolstered nationalist sentiments.<sup>21</sup>

The result of the Six Day War helped PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat to gradually release the PLO from the control of the Arab states, who were not at all willing to wholeheartedly join their Palestinian brethren in the liberation fight against Israel. Under Arafat's leadership, the PLO gradually came to adopt the idea of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, alongside Israel, as its political goal. This 'Palestinianization' of the conflict created a strong interest in finding a suitable compromise solution. In effect, the parties rediscovered the UN partition solution, which had been vigorously but unsuccessfully pursued before 1948.

Although it was becoming increasingly clear to many Israelis and Palestinians that such a compromise would serve their respective interests, the political obstacles remained formidable.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, Palestinians increased their military attacks on targets in Israel and the West Bank from bases in Jordan. The growing power of the PLO and harsh Israeli retaliation threatened the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom. In September 1970 King Hussein, in a ruthless and bloody military action, ordered his army to take control over the PLO bases, many situated inside the Palestinian refugee camps. Thousands of Palestinians were killed or wounded. As a consequence of this bloody civil war, King Hussein re-established firm control over the eastern part of Jordan. The PLO was driven out and moved their headquarters to Beirut. The presence of the PLO in Lebanon, together with the thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war already there, created a strong new base for PLO operations against Israel.<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, efforts by US Secretary of State William Rogers to mediate peace between Israel and Egypt, on the basis of Resolution 242 (Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories and the Arab states entering peace negotiations with Israel), proved unsuccessful. Neither the Arab states nor the Israelis had any trust in the mediating role of the USA: the Arabs because they thought the Americans were biased and Israel's best friend; the Israelis because they wanted direct negotiations with the Arab states. Instead the Middle East was drifting towards another war. Since 1967, the Palestinians and the Arab states had watched how Israel had systematically strengthened its control over the Occupied Territories. Egypt's President, Anwar Sadat, especially wanted to create a new and more favourable basis for negotiations with Israel. In October 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel – the Yom Kippur War. Egypt reconquered the East Bank of the Suez Canal, and Syria parts of the Golan Heights. It was for both a major psychological victory. Though the Israelis eventually regained the advantage on the battlefield, the war showed up Israel's vulnerability, especially if the Arab states managed to coordinate their efforts, both in times of peace as well as war.<sup>24</sup>

The 1973 war brought the United States and the Soviet Union close to conflict themselves, through the USA supporting Israel and the Soviet Union the Arab states. Washington, convinced that the Middle East conflict needed to be solved by peaceful means, and not on the battlefield, proposed a multilateral peace conference, in Geneva in December 1973. However, the most important input in the US attempt to mediate peace was not made in Geneva, but was carried out bilaterally by the powerful Henry Kissinger, a Jewish immigrant from Germany and US National Security Advisor from 1969–75 and Secretary of State from 1973–77. In a step-by-step process, where the most acute and concrete problems were handled in the first round, and the more fundamental questions put aside for later, Kissinger travelled around the Middle East trying to solve the most pressing questions, talking to one party at a time. Kissinger used negotiations on military disengagement as the basis for his approach to the conflict. In this way he improved the relationship between Israel and Egypt – and, as a consequence, between the United States and Egypt. Kissinger's diplomacy and his approach to the conflict in the Middle East laid the groundwork for the Camp David agreements some years later. On 18 January 1974 Israel and Egypt signed the Sinai I Agreement and on 4 September 1975 Sinai II. Kissinger also managed to mediate a Syrian–Israeli disengagement deal 31 May 1974. Kissinger's attempts were, however, unsuccessful on the Jordanian–Israeli side.<sup>25</sup>

Henry Kissinger was increasingly faced with many obstacles, and the US mediation attempts gradually failed. A major reason for the lack of success was the US insistence on viewing the Middle East conflict from a Cold War angle: Israel was regarded as an ally, whereas the progress of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, with its allies, the Arab states, had to be stopped. The Americans had problems in recognizing the core of the conflict: the Palestinian question. That issue, however, could not be ignored forever. As would be the case in every diplomatic initiative until Oslo, no PLO representatives were present at the top-level negotiations. The Palestinians were consistently kept outside the diplomatic and political scene which was so decisive for their future. To the extent they were represented, it was by someone else, and the PLO was still not recognized as a party to the conflict. In October 1974 the Arab League declared that the PLO was the 'sole legitimate representative' of the Palestinian people. The following month the PLO Chairman was allowed to address the UN General Assembly. The USA and Israel would neither recognize nor negotiate with the PLO unless the organization first accepted UN Security Council Resolution 242 and Israel's right to exist.<sup>26</sup>

Jimmy Carter's presidency meant an end to Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy. For the first time the USA had an administration that was outspoken about the rights of the Palestinians. In public, the newly elected President spoke of the need for a Palestinian 'homeland', Palestinian 'legitimate rights' and the Palestinian need 'to participate in the determination of their own future', even offering US support for a Palestinian homeland.<sup>27</sup> Carter did not mention the PLO by name, but his speech in May 1977, created a firestorm in Israel as well as strong reactions in the USA, especially within the influential Jewish lobby. Two months later, a 30-year monopoly of Labour governments ended in Israel, with Menachem Begin, former leader of the Jewish terrorist organization *Irgun*, acceding to power. Likud did not support Labour's vision of a

territorial compromise with Jordan. Instead the Israeli right-wing party, strongly supported by the various religious groupings, claimed all of the West Bank and Gaza as Israel's 'biblical patrimony'. Eventually, Likud hoped to annex all or most of the West Bank. To achieve this, Likud encouraged massive Jewish settlement, spread all over the Occupied Territories (not only in more strategic areas, as envisaged by Labour), making territorial compromises far more difficult to achieve.<sup>28</sup>

But again, new dramatic and unexpected events in the Middle East changed the mediation scene. After secret meetings between senior Israeli and Egyptian envoys during the autumn of 1977, Egypt's President Anwar Sadat made a sensational announcement: he would do anything to achieve peace with Israel, he declared, even go to Jerusalem. After being formally invited by the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, President Sadat made his historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977. The trip was a symbolic gesture meant to demonstrate that Sadat was willing to risk his and Egypt's position in the Arab world in order to make peace with Israel. In the secret meetings prior to the trip, Egypt had promised to sign a separate peace treaty with Israel in exchange for gradual but complete Israeli withdrawal from Sinai.<sup>29</sup>

Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem marked the beginning of a whole series of Egyptian–Israeli meetings, where the USA, under the auspices of Jimmy Carter himself, acted as mediator. After 13 days of mediation at the US presidential retreat Camp David in Maryland, Sadat, Begin and Carter managed to reach two agreements on 17 September 1978. These accords were a foundation for a separate peace between Israel and Egypt, and were at least meant to serve as a basis for a peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The parties agreed on a framework for a deal on the West Bank and Gaza and for the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, where Israel would return the whole of Sinai to Egypt.<sup>30</sup>

However, Sadat needed to show some progress on the Palestinian track. He foresaw that he would easily be criticized for having sold out the Palestinians by reaching a separate deal with Israel. He therefore suggested the idea of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza. Surprisingly, Menachem Begin endorsed the idea, as did also the USA. According to the plan, there would first be an interim phase of power-sharing, to be followed by negotiations between Israel and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation on the final disposition of the territories. The concept was expanded and incorporated into the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt that was signed on the White House lawn on 26 March 1979.<sup>31</sup>

However, while the Egyptian–Israeli agreement was fulfilled, the Palestinian aspect of the Camp David Accord remained stuck from the beginning. Sadat was widely hailed outside the Middle East and was, together with Begin, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. But since the Palestinians had not been invited to the negotiations, Chairman Arafat described the accords as a 'dirty deal'. Sadat was regarded as a traitor (and was assassinated in October 1982 by militant Islamic soldiers). This judgement was widely shared, not only among the Palestinians, but also throughout the Arab world in general. Because of the strong Palestinian rejection of Camp David, the USA was never tested as regards how far the traditional friend of Israel might have been willing to go in pushing for the Palestinian case. It was a missed opportunity to gain US favour at Israel's expense. To achieve peace with Egypt, Israel had been forced to offer major concessions to the Palestinian side. For the first time, in an official document, Israel had been forced to acknowledge 'the legitimate right of the Palestinian people', and even accepted the term 'West Bank' instead of 'Judea and Samaria'. However, the difficult questions were either not incorporated in the deal or they were referred to in very general ways. There was no mention of the final status of Jerusalem or the Golan Heights; the solution to the Palestinian refugee problem and the practical implementation of Palestinian self-rule remained very vague.<sup>32</sup>

After being driven out of Jordan in 1970, the Palestinians began launching rocket attacks and raids on northern Israel from southern Lebanon. Israel reacted strongly, and responded with air attacks and at times military actions on the ground. Likud leaders like Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, a right-wing hard-liner with a military and intelligence background, believed that eliminating the PLO bases in Lebanon would force the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories to reach an agreement with Israel. Consequently, the most important thing to do was to get rid of the most powerful expression of the Palestinians' claims against Israel, the PLO. In addition, the PLO, with increasing international recognition, was also in Israel regarded as the main threat to the Israeli claims to all of Palestine.<sup>33</sup>

In June 1982 Israel launched a full-scale war against Lebanon to crush the PLO once and for all and at the same time destroy the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon. The invading Israeli army easily swept over the weak Lebanese state. Thousands were killed – but the Palestinian refugees remained. They had become stronger after King Hussein had thrown them out of Jordan in 1970–71. But Arafat and his men were forced out, this time driven into exile in Tunis, more remote from Palestine than ever before. The Reagan Plan, coming in the wake of the Israeli invasion, offered a new vision of Palestinian autonomy, but was quickly rejected – by Israel, by the Palestinians, and by the Arab states.<sup>34</sup>

The PLO had never been so far away from Palestine as during the organization's exile in Tunis. The war in Lebanon had proved costly and divisive. The PLO was now weakened. In February 1985 Arafat signed an agreement with King Hussein, acknowledging a Jordanian role in the peace process. The PLO wanted to participate in a joint peace delegation with Jordan, but the king's price for inclusion was acceptance of Resolution 242, renunciation of terrorism, and explicit recognition of Israel's right to exist. Arafat backed out.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of the Israeli election in 1984, Labour and Likud agreed to share power. In April 1987 the dovish leader of the Labour Party, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, managed to reach an agreement with King Hussein. Meeting secretly in London, Peres and Hussein agreed to an international conference which was to serve as an umbrella for bilateral talks between Israel and the Arab states. As so many times before, the Israeli government, headed by Likud's warrior Yitzhak Shamir, rejected any kind of multilateral negotiations. He favoured a setting where the superpowers would play an important role and where King Hussein should be the basis for direct negotiations between Jordan and Israel. King Hussein, however, did not approve the idea of bilateral talks, and the whole agreement faded away. Once again, the Palestinian issue seemed to vanish from the agenda, not least with the Arab world increasingly preoccupied with the Iran–Iraq War.<sup>36</sup>

For once in the turbulent history of the Middle East, it was the local Palestinians, those actually living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and in Gaza, who took matters into their own hands and permanently changed the conflict with Israel. In December 1987, a series of riots quickly erupted into a general uprising that spread from Gaza to the West Bank. In the beginning, the Israelis thought that the disturbance was only one more in the series of violent clashes that occurred from time to time. Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin ordered harsh treatment of the Palestinian youngsters, who mainly threw stones at the Israeli soldiers. But to his big surprise – and that of Israelis in general – these military methods did not calm down the rebels. This time, the Israelis had fundamentally misjudged the depth of Palestinian anger and desperation.<sup>37</sup>

The *Intifada*, as the Palestinian uprising came to be called, challenged the legitimacy of Israel's occupation and drew attention to its cost, both morally and financially. With help from television, which broadcast worldwide how Israeli soldiers retaliated against stone-throwing Palestinian youngsters, a new international focus was put on the fate of the Palestinian people. It became evident to the whole world that Palestinian nationalism could neither be ignored nor characterized as merely a consequence of PLO propaganda.<sup>38</sup>

Again it was the USA that entered the mediation scene. This time in the shape of the Secretary of State, George Shultz, who proposed a modified version of the Camp David Agreements, the so-called Shultz initiative. This differed from Camp David on one major point: According to the Camp David Agreements, negotiations on the final status of the Occupied Territories were to begin after a three-year period of Palestinian autonomy. The Israelis had been extremely reluctant to accept this from the start; for them Camp David meant that they were to negotiate simultaneously to hand over the entire West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians. They were not ready to do so. The Palestinians, for their part, were worried that Israel would be able to postpone the final status talks by delaying implementation of the autonomy period. In contrast, the Shultz initiative proposed that final status talks would begin shortly after an autonomy agreement, regardless of whether it had been fully implemented.<sup>39</sup>

As expected, Yitzhak Shamir rejected the new US proposal. More surprisingly, so did also the PLO. The *Intifada* still dominated the Palestinian areas, and there were no signs of progress on the diplomatic front. In July 1988, the political aspirations of the PLO received an unexpected boost when King Hussein renounced Jordan's claim to the West Bank, effectively removing himself as a competitor to Arafat. However, the PLO leaders understood that the organization had to do something active to get more support from the international community, in particular from the USA. The Americans and the Israelis could not ignore them forever.<sup>40</sup>

The compromise solution was obvious – and had been so for a long time: the Israelis and the Palestinians would have to share the lands of ancient Palestine between them. Just like Israel, the PLO would also have to drop its claim to the whole country. This self-evident two-state solution did not, however, become official Palestinian policy until the end of 1988. In November that year, the PLO took its first step towards recognizing Israel. The Palestine National Council (PNC), the parliament of the PLO, declared an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with Jerusalem as its capital and Arafat as its president. It also accepted the two important UN Resolutions 181 and 242. The acceptance of the Resolution 181, the famous partition resolution from 1947, implied for the first time Palestinian recognition of a Jewish state in Palestine. Support to Resolution 242 implied *de facto* recognition of Israel within the 1949 borders. The acceptance of these two resolutions created a totally new legal and political basis for PLO diplomacy.<sup>41</sup>

As a part of this new international activity to get the peace process on the track, Yassir Arafat was invited to give a speech in the UN General Assembly. However, a humiliated Arafat, as an official UN guest, was refused a visa to the USA by Secretary of State George Shultz – whereupon the General Assembly took the unexpected step of moving to Geneva for an extraordinary session. On 13 December 1988 Arafat condemned terrorism and pleaded for peace, but the US State Department was not satisfied. Arafat had not mentioned Israel explicitly, and the State Department again insisted that he had failed to address US conditions ‘clearly, squarely [and] without ambiguity’.<sup>42</sup> The next day, at a Geneva press conference, Yassir Arafat met the test set by the USA, and was rewarded with a public dialogue with the USA. Behind the scenes, Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Andersson and his team had played an important mediatory role, both in initiating a peace process and in helping the dialogue between the Americans and the Palestinians, which culminated in the US recognition in Geneva.<sup>43</sup>

The election in Israel in 1988 resulted once again in a coalition between the two major parties Likud and Labour. However, this time Likud had strengthened its position. Likud held the positions of both prime minister and foreign minister. The hawkish Labour politician Yitzhak Rabin remained Defence Minister and Shimon Peres became Minister of Finance. Attempts to bring a peace process back on track were consistently ruined by Shamir’s categorical refusal even to talk to any representative of the PLO. Then, on a visit to Washington in April 1989, Prime Minister Shamir announced that he preferred elections in the West Bank and Gaza in order to choose a Palestinian delegation to negotiate an autonomy arrangement with Israel. The negotiations, he said, should be based on the autonomy scheme drawn up in the Camp David Accords, an agreement Shamir himself had voted against.<sup>44</sup>

In January 1989, Ronald Reagan’s period as President and George Shultz’s as Secretary of State came to an end. George Bush took up residence in the White House and James Baker III headed the State Department. From the day they entered office, the new Bush Administration and in particular the new Secretary of State showed more courage when it came to handling the Middle East conflict. The parties were told very clearly that if peace was to be achieved, they would have to limit their ambitions. To the Israelis’ surprise, used as they were to soft treatment from the Americans, Secretary of State Baker underlined that Israel would have to abandon its dreams of a ‘Greater Israel’.<sup>45</sup>

Egypt, which had been treated as an outcast in the Arab world since the signing of the Camp David agreements, had during the 1980s, gradually regained its former importance in Middle Eastern affairs, and by 1989 it was in many ways best suited to mediate peace between Israel and the PLO. Egypt had gradually built up good relationships with both the PLO leadership and Israeli Labour politicians, especially Shimon Peres and his closest advisors. They all understood that if there were to be any peace process at all, the PLO would have to participate. But they were all faced with the strong resistance of Prime Minister Shamir. He wanted to stick to his own plan – which, among other things, favoured elections in the Occupied Territories to choose a Palestinian negotiating team. Shamir had deliberately formulated his plan to ensure that the PLO was kept out of the process. So when the PLO wanted to test the seriousness of Israel’s intentions and demanded to be included in the on-going ‘Cairo Dialogue’, this was immediately rejected by Shamir. To the Bush Administration, however, this only confirmed a long-held view that Yitzhak Shamir was not serious – either about his own plan or about peace.<sup>46</sup>

By the beginning of the new decade, things started to change in the explosive Middle East region, changes that came to have major implications for the development of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In March 1990, Shimon Peres withdrew Labour from the coalition government, ending an uneasy partnership with Likud that had lasted for six years. Three months later, Washington suspended its dialogue with the PLO. The Palestinian organization had refused to condemn a terrorist attack on a beach near Tel Aviv (in which no Israelis had been injured) or to punish Mohammed Abbas, the member of the PLO Executive Committee who was behind the terrorist operation. In fact, talks between the PLO and the Reagan and Bush Administrations, following the US acceptance of the PLO after the Geneva UN meeting in mid-December 1988, had been narrowly restricted by Secretary of State Shultz and had showed no progress at all. The terrorist attack, and Washington’s response to it in June 1990, seemed to continue to undermine PLO’s long-cherished hopes of a role in the peace process.<sup>47</sup>

### **1.3 The changing world**

The past had thus seen many attempts to negotiate peace and just as many failures. However, at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, major changes in the international, regional and national situations provided a totally new opening for fundamentally new mediation efforts. It was this new situation, this new context, that paved the way for Norway’s mediation role and the breakthrough in the Oslo Channel.

### **1.4 The international context**

After 1945, the international situation was dominated by the rivalry between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA. The situation in the Middle East and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict were also heavily influenced by the Cold War, which had been a major obstacle to any genuine peace process. Ever since Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser received his first deliveries of military equipment from Czechoslovakia in 1955 (having tried the Americans first but not been taken seriously), the USA imposed a Cold War perspective on the regional conflict. As Washington saw it, the Soviet Union and the fight against Communism lay at the core of the conflict. This perception led the USA not only to misjudge and misunderstand Arab nationalism in general, but also to misinterpret the Palestinians' fight to regain their homeland. On the other side, Washington saw Israel as its sole faithful and strategic ally in the region. Consequently, Israel had to be provided with huge amounts of US economic, military and diplomatic aid so that the Jewish State was strengthened against its potentially Communist Arab neighbours. The Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, for their part, backed the Arab–Palestinian cause. Politically, the Arab states received strong support for the war against Israel. In the United Nations, for instance, the Soviet bloc was the faithful ally of the Arab world. Militarily, the Soviet Union supplied the Arab states with the equipment needed to enable them to fight against Israel.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the forty-five years of the Cold War, US–Soviet rivalry in the Middle East often made it impossible to undertake a genuine peace process. The Soviet Union's backing of the Arab states and the US commitment to Israel encouraged the continuation of the regional rivalry, which in turn gave both the Arabs and Israelis enough manoeuvring space to intensify the conflict every so often. Global competition was not conducive to regional conflict management, fuelling many regional conflicts, including the one in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup>

Then, in 1989, the Cold War was over. Two years later, the Soviet Union and its empire had collapsed. The Russians were confronted with huge internal problems and lacked the resources to continue the rivalry game in the Middle East – as in other regions. Their efforts had to be used to consolidate their internal affairs. The United States, as the sole remaining superpower, felt that it could play an important diplomatic role.

With the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall, new opportunities had come for East–West cooperation over the conflict in the Middle East. Coping with conflicts and initiating conflict management of any form requires co-operation and leadership at the international level. This had been barely possible in the bipolar, competitive world of the Cold War. The new world order, however, allowed the great powers to co-ordinate their efforts in order to mitigate or resolve regional conflicts in a different way than they had been used to in the past.<sup>50</sup>

## 1.5 The regional context

On 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and on 9 August Kuwait was formally proclaimed the 19th Province of Iraq. The subsequent escalation of the crisis and the Gulf War had profound effects on all the actors in the Middle East, fundamentally altering the political landscape of the Middle East and making peace a genuine possibility.<sup>51</sup>

The Gulf War crippled Iraq – one of Israel's most implacable enemies. It also forced Israel to redefine its security concerns in terms of long-range missile threats from Iraq or Iran. The fact that Scud missiles from Iraq had reached Israeli territory terrified the Israeli people and their leaders. All at once, the PLO just did not seem to be the enemy it once had been. The Gulf War also shattered the comforting myth of Arab unity. The majority of the Arab states supported the US-led war against Iraq. This coalition pattern was a completely new one; suddenly the majority of the Arab states found themselves in an alliance not only with the USA, but also with Israel, their longstanding enemy. The PLO, however, did not belong to this mixed majority group. The PLO's support for Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly one of Yassir Arafat's greatest mistakes. It provoked harsh international criticism, even among PLO's traditional friends. The PLO was cut off from the financial and political backing it had enjoyed from the Gulf States.<sup>52</sup>

More than 300,000 Palestinians were expelled from Kuwait, and both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait stopped their payments to the PLO, virtually cutting the PLO's budget in half. The financial crisis, in turn, triggered a process of disintegration through the whole organization. PLO staff was drastically cut; its missions abroad were closed. Perhaps most important, educational welfare and social services for Palestinian refugees were suspended. Its support for Iraq proved devastating for the Palestinian organization. The PLO found itself in an extremely weak position, both towards the West and towards most of the Arab states. Since the Cold War was now over, the Palestinian organization had already lost the protection and support traditionally provided by the Soviet Union. After the Gulf War it faced bankruptcy and had scant political room to manoeuvre. From such a position of weakness, the PLO was necessarily ready to explore any diplomatic initiative that would include a Palestinian delegation.<sup>53</sup>

## 1.6 The national context

These international and regional changes would not in themselves have created a context ripe for mediation, had not two other important events taken place in the same period. The first decisive development concerned the relationship between the PLO and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The second event was related to internal political changes in Israel.<sup>54</sup>

## 1.7 Internal Palestinian conditions

After the Lebanese War of 1982, the PLO leadership found itself in exile in Tunis. This did not only lead to the marginalization of the PLO leadership. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza felt abandoned, left to their own devices, with their leaders far away and they themselves living under the heavy burden of Israeli occupation. Increasingly frustrated, the Palestinians felt that they had to do something themselves instead of relying on the distant PLO leadership. Originally occasioned by a traffic accident in the northern part of Gaza, the Palestinian uprising, the *Intifada*, began in December 1987, initiated and sustained by local Palestinians. Over the years, a totally new Palestinian elite had gradually emerged, not incorporating the traditional old notables or the PLO leadership-in-exile. The creation of a new leadership on the Palestinian side also explains why the Palestinians, who had endured Israeli occupation for twenty years, made significant headway. The new elite, drawn mainly from small villages, refugee camps, or small towns and with a background from Palestinian universities, was more extensive than the old one. They succeeded in drawing attention to the plight of the Palestinians. Gradually, the belief took hold both among the Israelis and the Americans: self-rule could be negotiated with local Palestinians, and it could go on to become the focus of Palestinian identity, relegating the PLO leadership to a marginal role. If Yassir Arafat and the official PLO leadership wanted to continue to maintain their authority, after the outbreak of the *Intifada*, 'they simply had to get involved in any negotiations or be swept aside by the growing self-confidence of the local Palestinians'.<sup>55</sup>

The *Intifada* also made an important impact on Israeli political reasoning. Many Israelis questioned the wisdom of trying to maintain full control over the West Bank and Gaza. Both the Israelis and the PLO felt the growing threat from the rise of militant Islam in general. Hamas – the Islamic Social Movement with the acronym *HaMaS* meaning 'ardour, excitement, mobilization' – had an implacable approach to the conflict with Israel, and support for this fundamentalist organization was rapidly growing among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Hamas had begun to challenge the PLO as the sole leader of the Palestinians – a source of particular concern for Chairman Arafat himself. Also the Israeli political leadership feared this development. The possibility that a fundamentalist Palestinian leadership could have a common cause against Israel with Iraq or Iran, producing an even greater military threat to Israel, was cause for deep concern, not least to the Israeli Defence Minister, and, from 1992, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. These worries about future developments helped to give the two sides common cause. Arafat's political life was at stake, and he became 'dependent on Israel to recognize him as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians and to help him fulfil his goals of liberating Palestine'.<sup>56</sup> The Israelis needed a stable, friendly government on the West Bank. They felt that only Arafat could give them such a regime, the other options being so much worse.<sup>57</sup>

## 1.8 Internal Israeli conditions

23 June 1992, the rightist government of Yitzhak Shamir lost the elections, ending fifteen stormy and expansionist years under the rule of Likud. Likud was replaced by the Labour Party, headed by Yitzhak Rabin, and on 13 July Rabin and his government assumed power. The hawkish Labour leader had campaigned on a political platform that included negotiating a Palestinian autonomy plan within nine months. These were profound changes in Israeli politics, and they helped to create an environment which made the Oslo experience possible.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike his predecessor, Rabin was seen both by the Bush Administration and by the media as a leader the USA could get along with. His election campaign for peace within a limited period of time also made expectations high. On the other hand, the new prime minister was a former general, well-known for his commitment to Israeli security. When the *Intifada* broke out, Rabin had been defence minister and responsible for getting the situation in the Palestinian areas under control. The harsher the measures he ordered, the stronger the resistance grew. However, his brutal and unsuccessful attempts at crushing the Palestinian *Intifada* had also made him realize that a shift in course was necessary.<sup>59</sup>

Rabin included more dovish advisors in his governing team. Shimon Peres became Foreign Minister and Yossi Beilin his Deputy in the Foreign Ministry. They had been working for a long time towards accepting a peace settlement with the PLO.<sup>60</sup>

Among the lessons of the Gulf War was the realization that the USA no longer regarded Israel as the 'strategic asset' in the region. The Cold War was over, and the USA now felt free to broaden its regional alliances in the Arab world. The traditional 'special relationship' between the USA and Israel seemed to be crumbling. Indeed, Shamir's defeat at the polls seems to have been precipitated by the fact that the Israeli public saw him as unwilling to make progress with the peace negotiations, thereby allowing the relationship to the USA to deteriorate. By contrast, the new prime minister felt that recent international and regional changes offered Israel a short-term opportunity, with the possibility of solving, once and for all, the conflict between Israel, the Palestinians and the neighbouring Arab countries. In addition, the rise of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Occupied Territories was seen as a powerful manifestation of the coming threat of Islam. This has been adduced as a major reason that convinced Rabin personally about the importance of a peace process in general, and the Oslo opportunity in particular.<sup>61</sup>

The *Intifada* had made a deep impression on Israeli society, and Rabin believed that making peace with the Palestinians would put an end to violence and terrorism by Palestinians against Israelis. By now there was considerable public pressure in Israel for withdrawal – even unilateral withdrawal – from the Gaza Strip, often referred to as the 'Gazan hellhole'. According to Shimon Peres the problem also was that 'nobody wanted Gaza'.<sup>62</sup> Rabin thought, however, that the PLO leadership would be in a much better position to control the Palestinian uprising than would the Israeli army, so that a peace agreement of any kind would relieve Israel of the burden of occupation. Finally, there was the deep-seated wish in Israel to end the country's isolation in the region and its pariah status in the international community. Without the blessing of the Palestinians, opening the Arab markets and normalization would be difficult. The PLO very much controlled Israel's path to peace with its neighbours. Except for Egypt, no Arab government had ever taken the risk of concluding peace with Israel – until the PLO declared itself willing.<sup>63</sup>

## 1.9 The Madrid Conference

The Madrid Conference, which opened 30 October 1991, was in a way the direct outcome of the new international, regional and national situation. The conference was supported by the USA, by this time in reality the sole superpower, and by the now crippled superpower the Soviet Union, which was, however, still an important player. But the Madrid Conference would probably never have seen the light of day had it not been for the efforts of the then US Secretary of State, James Baker, whose achievements were significant for starting the peace process. He invested a great deal of time and energy in bringing the peace message to the parties, all the while making it clear to both of them that if peace, in any form, were to be obtained, their ambitions would have to be scaled down first. Like many others, Baker and his advisors were of the opinion that the time was ripe for direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Under the umbrella of the Jordanian delegation, the Palestinians – for the first time ever in an official international setting – were allowed at the negotiating table, where they could speak for themselves and, not least, speak to the Israelis. The Madrid Conference marked a watershed in the Arab–Israeli conflict, laying the groundwork for the peace process and paving the way for the breakthrough in Oslo in 1993.<sup>64</sup>

The Madrid framework of negotiations established a formal and direct diplomatic link between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The framework of negotiations had two basic elements: a bilateral track and a multilateral track. The bilateral negotiations, which received greatest attention from media, political analysts and scholars alike, were the first ever direct talks between Israel and Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. According to the original framework, the bilateral part was to deal with the basic issues in the conflict, whereas the multilateral component was intended, as James Baker saw it, 'to address those issues that are common to the region ... [through the] concerted effort of the regional parties together with the support of the international community and the resources and expertise that it can provide'.<sup>65</sup> Five working groups were established to deal with the five issues of importance to the whole region: water, the environment, arms control and regional security, refugees, and regional economic development. The conference later moved to Washington, where the basic bilateral issues of the conflict came to dominate the agenda totally. The multilateral part of the conference, from day one living in the shadow of the bilateral track, opened in Moscow in January 1992.<sup>66"/></sup>

Israel and the PLO had entered the Madrid process half-heartedly and for entirely different reasons. For Israel, improving relations with the USA was an important motivation. With the full backing of US President George Bush, Secretary of State Baker brought strong pressure to bear on the vehemently anti-Palestinian Shamir. The Bush Administration withheld loan guarantees in order to drive the Israeli Prime Minister to the negotiating table. Not since the days of Eisenhower had a US administration used the economic weapon against Israel. In addition, Baker openly urged Israel to 'reach out to the Palestinians as neighbors who deserve political rights'.<sup>67</sup> In Baker's view, Shamir's ambitious settlement programme ought to be stopped. Despite strong political pressure, both internally in the USA and from the Israelis, the Bush–Baker team consistently characterized East Jerusalem as belonging to the Occupied Territories. Consequently, Jerusalem was not, as the Israelis and many Americans along with them saw it, Israel's eternal capital. The

US administration made it clear that the final status of Jerusalem was to be defined by negotiations. Consequently, at the Madrid Conference the Israelis had no intention of joining in or adding any momentum to the process, only to register a presence, so as to please the Americans. To underline this hawkish attitude and to ensure a correct and precise presentation of at least Likud's expansionist policies, Shamir decided to represent Israel himself: 'Everybody knows what I represent',<sup>68</sup> he stated, deliberately pouring cold water onto the peace process even before it had started.<sup>69</sup>

For the Palestinians, however, the situation was completely different. Madrid offered a 'golden opportunity for recognition and status improvement'.<sup>70</sup> Formally, the PLO as such was not allowed to join the conference, as the Israelis were still unwilling to talk to what they considered a terrorist organization. The Palestinian delegation consisted only of local Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, individuals who were not formally PLO officials. The delegation was headed by Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi from Gaza, one of the PLO founders. He had a strong and articulate spokeswoman in Hanan Ashrawi, professor of English at Birzeit University on the West Bank. Formally there were no PLO representatives at the Madrid conference. In reality, however, every issue that was raised was referred back to Yassir Arafat and the PLO leadership – even the Israelis were aware that they were negotiating with Arafat 'by fax'.<sup>71</sup> But, unlike Israel's Shamir, the Palestinians did not attend the Madrid Conference merely so that their presence could be registered. The PLO was, at least initially, interested in progressing talks.<sup>72</sup>

For obvious reasons, the Palestinians were not keen to discuss matters of great importance to them while they themselves were present under the guise of being part of the Jordanian delegation, and sought instead ways of talking with the Israelis directly. This meant that, from the very outset, the official diplomatic track was plagued by obstacles. Not only did the Palestinians at Madrid lack a true mandate to negotiate, the intense media scrutiny and recurrent leaks hampered progress within the official framework of the Conference. The negotiation team did not manage to establish the level of mutual trust necessary for reaching a risky compromise. However, strong forces on both sides now wanted a real peace process and did not want to let this rare opportunity pass. A way had to be found out of the deadlocked situation. In Washington, the process had degenerated into a meaningless battle over words. Highly placed individuals, both Israelis and Palestinians, began to express the view that a way had to be found to allow direct contact between the two. 'Israel is neither speaking to the right people nor speaking about the right things', one of Shimon Peres' closest advisors told his boss frankly.<sup>73</sup> Peres and his inner circle considered it pointless to waste time in Washington by pretending that the PLO was not there. The time, or perhaps more precisely the *process*, was definitely ripe for something else.<sup>74</sup>

With the defeat of Likud in the 1992 election, the Madrid talks took a new direction. Both sides searched more for a movement and an outcome. Both became more committed to the process, and both parties felt that their political future was dependent on some kind of result from the ongoing peace process. Too much political prestige had by then been invested to allow things to come to naught. Both parties faced rising pressure from their common enemy, Hamas, increasingly becoming a bigger problem for the PLO in exile. Hamas criticized the PLO both for being involved in the Madrid process, and for not achieving any results there. The Madrid process itself was blocked on the central Israeli–Palestinian front. As long as the PLO was kept out, the PLO would not commit itself firmly. This situation led Arafat to adopt a strategy of blocking or slowing down the official negotiations in Washington. In giving the Palestinian delegation limited, almost impossible instructions and mandates, Arafat hoped to force through direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO. By the beginning of 1993, the Madrid process had run completely dry. The moment was ripe for 'an Oslo' – that is, for secret, direct talks that could produce a breakthrough.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, it was changes at the international, regional and national levels that worked to create an opportune moment for genuine negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. By 1992, both Israel and the PLO had come to realize that the status quo was untenable, and that coercion was not the answer. Reluctantly, the new Israeli government decided to do the previously unthinkable – to talk directly with the PLO.<sup>76</sup>

Before any agreement could be signed, however, the parties would have to be convinced not only that such an agreement was necessary, but also that it was possible. They would have to be persuaded that the other side was also prepared to make the necessary concessions – that there was a reasonable probability that the negotiations would yield an acceptable agreement that would not jeopardise their own national existence. They would have to feel that there was a way out of this seemingly unending conflict. Then a series of developments – on the international, regional and national levels – together with renewed perceptions of the long and short-term interests of the parties acted to create the *ripe moment*, the *willingness* of the parties. And, at this crucial point, the Norwegians, taking advantage of the situation, were able to provide a channel to exploit this ripeness.<sup>77</sup>

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- <sup>5</sup> Bercovitch 1997, pp. 221–223.
- <sup>6</sup> Kleiboer 1994, pp. 109(116).
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.; for an extensive discussion of ripeness theory and the Oslo process, see Bercovitch 1997, pp. 221–223, 232–234; Zartman, 1997, pp. 196–198; Pruitt 1997, pp. 237–240 and 243. This whole issue of *International Negotiation* is devoted to various aspects of the Oslo Back Channel, Norway's role in the negotiations, and the outcome of the mediation effort. I will not discuss the extensive theoretical discussions and disagreements over the fruitfulness of using 'ripeness theory'. I use the terms 'ripeness' and the parties' 'willingness' simply as a means to explain the development of the Middle East conflict and Norway's entrance into the Oslo Back Channel.
- <sup>8</sup> Pruitt 1997, p. 237.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 238; see also Zartman 1997, pp. 196–198.
- <sup>10</sup> Pruitt 1997, p. 243.
- <sup>11</sup> Kelman 1997, pp. 188–189; Zartman 1997, pp. 196–198.
- <sup>12</sup> The Madrid/Washington process will be dealt with in greater detail below.
- <sup>13</sup> Zartman 1997, p. 211.
- <sup>14</sup> Kelman 1997, pp. 184, 188–189; Bercovitch 1997, pp. 221–223; Pruitt 1997, p. 243; Kleiboer 1994, pp. 109(116).
- <sup>15</sup> This approach to the Oslo Back Channel is taken by Bercovitch in his 1997 article; see especially pp. 221–223.
- <sup>16</sup> This term is used by Kelman in his 1997 article in *International Negotiation*; see pp. 184–185.
- <sup>17</sup> Kelman 1997, pp. 183–189; Makovsky 1996, pp. 2–3 (on pages 1–12 Makovsky gives a historical account of past mediation attempts); Butenschøn 1998, pp. 24–33; Neff 1995, pp. 100–103; Persson 1980, pp. 123–125.
- <sup>18</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>19</sup> Neff 1995, pp. 112–113.
- <sup>20</sup> Makovsky 1996, pp. 2–3; Butenschøn 1998, p. 35; Persson 1980, p. 148; Peres 1995, p. 321.
- <sup>21</sup> Kelman 1997, pp. 183–189; Butenschøn 1998, pp. 24–33.
- <sup>22</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>23</sup> Makovsky 1996, p. 3; Persson 1980, pp. 109–110.
- <sup>24</sup> Neff 1995, pp. 141–142; Makovsky 1996, p. 3; Persson 1980, pp. 117–118, 127–129; Butenschøn 1998, p. 29.
- <sup>25</sup> Persson 1980, pp. 133–137; Makovsky 1996, pp. 3–4; Neff 1995, pp. 114–115.
- <sup>26</sup> Makovsky 1996, p. 4; Persson 1980, pp. 133–137; Neff 1995, pp. 114–115.
- <sup>27</sup> Neff 1995, p. 118.
- <sup>28</sup> Neff 1995, pp. 117–119; Makovsky 1996, pp. 4–5; Butenschøn 1998, p. 37; Persson 1980, p. 137; Peres 1995, p. 321.
- <sup>29</sup> Neff 1995, pp. 117–119; Persson 1980, pp. 138–142; Makovsky 1996, p. 5.
- <sup>30</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>31</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>32</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>33</sup> Neff 1995, pp. 120–121; Makovsky 1996, p. 6; Butenschøn 1998, p. 32. According to Makovsky, the USA, fearing an uncontrollable escalation, brokered a ceasefire between Israel and the PLO, the only known agreement between the two parties before Oslo.
- <sup>34</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>35</sup> Makovsky 1996, pp. 6–7.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.; Neff 1995, p. 119; the consequences of the Intifada will be further discussed below.
- <sup>39</sup> Shultz 1993, pp. 1016–1050; Makovsky 1996, p. 8; Peres 1995, pp. 320–321, 339; Savir 1998, pp. 67, 194, 204.
- <sup>40</sup> Shultz 1993, pp. 1016–1050; Makovsky 1996, pp. 8–9; Neff 1995, pp. 124–126.
- <sup>41</sup> Same references as above; Butenschøn 1998, p. 30.
- <sup>42</sup> Neff 1995, p. 125.
- <sup>43</sup> Interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; interview with George Shultz 14 September 1999; Shultz 1993, pp. 1016–1050; Makovsky 1996, pp. 8–9; Neff 1995, pp. 124–126; Butenschøn 1998, p. 30; Palme 1993. Palme's book deals exclusively with the Swedish efforts to mediate peace in the Middle East under Sten Andersson's period as Foreign Minister in Sweden. The role of Sweden will be extensively discussed later in this report.
- <sup>44</sup> Makovsky 1996, pp. 9–10; Neff 1995, pp. 126–127.
- <sup>45</sup> Same references as above; interview with James Baker 9 September 1999; Baker 1995, pp. 115–132, 411–429, 443–469, 487–513, 540–557. In his memoirs, Baker gives an extensive account of his own and the whole Bush administration's involvement in the peace process in the Middle East.
- <sup>46</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>47</sup> Makovsky 1996, p. 10; Neff 1995, pp. 125–126. This Mohammed Abbas should not be confused with Mahmoud Abbas, alias Abu Mazen, a senior PLO official who played an important role in the Oslo negotiations.
- <sup>48</sup> This subject is dealt with in various publications. For a brief overview, see for instance Neff 1995, pp. 114–116; Peres 1995, pp. 318–319.
- <sup>49</sup> Bercovitch 1997, pp. 223–225.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.; Robinson 1997, pp. 174–177; Peres 1995, pp. 319–320; Usher 1997, pp. 1–2.
- <sup>53</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>54</sup> This view is held by Bercovitch 1997, pp. 223–225.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 224; Robinson 1997, pp. ix–xiii, 174–177; Makovsky 1996, pp. 7–8.
- <sup>56</sup> Pruitt 1997, p. 243
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.; Zartman, p. 197
- <sup>58</sup> Beilin 1999, pp. 7(58; Bercovitch 1997, p. 225; Neff 1995, p. 163; Lia 1998, pp. 18–22.
- <sup>59</sup> Same references as above; Baker 1995, pp. 540(557).

- <sup>60</sup> As will be shown later, Yossi Beilin was to become the key Oslo figure on the Israeli side. Peres 1995, pp. 313–316; Beilin 1999, pp. 7–58.
- <sup>61</sup> Aggestam 1996, pp. 14–15; Baker 1995, pp. 115–132, 411–429, 443–469, 487–513, 540–557; Kelman 1997, pp. 184–189; Makovsky 1996, pp. 111–114; Lia 1998, pp. 18–22.
- <sup>62</sup> Peres 1995, p. 322.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 322–324; Lia 1998, pp. 18–22.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with James Baker 9 September 1999; Baker 1995, pp. 115–132, 411–429, 443–469, 487–513, 540–557; Bercovitch 1997, pp. 225–226; Neff 1995, p. 126; Lia 1998, p. 18.
- <sup>65</sup> Brynen 1997, p. 279.
- <sup>66</sup> Baker 1995, pp. 115–132, 411–429, 443–469, 487–513, 540–557; Brynen 1997, pp. 279–280; Bercovitch 1997, p. 226.
- <sup>67</sup> Neff 1995, p. 126.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- <sup>69</sup> Interview with Yitzhak Shamir 21 March 1999; interview with Moshe Arens 16 November 1999; interview with James Baker 9 September 1999; Baker 1995, pp. 115–132, 411–429, 443–469, 487–513, 540–557; Zartman 1997, pp. 196–198; Neff 1995, pp. 126, 146, 159–163.
- <sup>70</sup> Zartman 1997, p. 197.
- <sup>71</sup> Savir 1998, p. 5.
- <sup>72</sup> Interview with Hanan Ashrawi 23 March 1999; interview with Haidar Abdel-Shafi 17 November 1999; Zartman 1997, pp. 196–198; Savir 1998, pp. 3–6; Ashrawi 1995 gives an interesting account from the internal Palestinian side.
- <sup>73</sup> Makovsky 1996, p. 41.
- <sup>74</sup> Interview with Hanan Ashrawi 23 March 1999; interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Shimon Peres 25 March 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 7–58; Ashrawi 1995, pp. 208–246; Makovsky 1996, pp. 38–41; Savir 1998, pp. 3–6; Bercovitch 1997, pp. 225–226; Butenschön 1998, p. 20.
- <sup>75</sup> Ashrawi 1995, pp. 208–246; Zartman 1997, pp. 196–198; Aggestam 1996, p. 28; Lia 1998, pp. 18–22.
- <sup>76</sup> Bercovitch 1997, p. 225.
- <sup>77</sup> Kelman 1997, pp. 188–189; Kleiboer 1994, pp. 109–116.

## 2 Part II: How Norway became one of Israel's best friends

The Middle East conflict was ripe for mediation, one of the most important factors explaining the Oslo Back Channel. But this ripeness does not explain how Norway succeeded in bringing the two parties together. The crucial beginnings, the decisive formative years of the Norwegian- Israeli relationship, are of utmost importance for an understanding of Norway's political past in the Middle East. The special relationship, begun then, constitutes the fundament on which the Oslo Back Channel was later built.

### 2.1 Establishing a very special relationship

After its founding in 1948, Israel became much more than just one of the many states with which Norway was on friendly terms. After Norway's governing Labour Party had gradually and reluctantly given up faith in the non-Zionist solutions of assimilation and overseas colonization, scepticism was quickly replaced by an enormous admiration, bordering almost on a quasi-religious reverence, towards Israel. This phenomenon was not confined to Norway's religious, conservative circles, where such attitudes might have been expected. In fact, it was within the labour movement that this religious 'conversion' was most clearly seen.<sup>78</sup>

Several factors help explain the very special relationship between the two social democratic governments and parties, and the extraordinary admiration for and support lent to the new Jewish State from the whole Norwegian political environment. Of course, as in many European countries after 1945, general feelings of guilt about the fate of the Jewish people during World War II underlay the almost one-sided pro-Israel attitudes then in evidence. In Norway, the Gestapo, with plenty of assistance from a co-operative Norwegian police force, had managed to round up about 700 Jews (out of a total Jewish population of about 2000) who they deported to Hitler's concentration camps. Only twenty-five survived. During the war years little had been done by Norwegians to rescue the Jews. And there was an additional factor: many leading figures in the Labour Party, among them both Prime Minister Einar Gerhardsen and Foreign Minister Halvard Lange, had themselves been interned in concentration camps together with the Jews. All this led to widespread feelings of sympathy for Israel. By supporting the new Jewish State, many Norwegians felt they could atone for sins committed in the all-too-recent past.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, Norway had long been a country where religion, rooted in a conservative Christianity, had traditionally held a firm position. The fact that Norway has a state church – the Evangelical Lutheran Church – has meant that the teaching of Christianity has also had a strong position, both in the public school system and in the more general upbringing of new generations. In the compulsory teaching of Christianity in the schools, emphasis has always been on stories from the Good Book. Generations of Norwegians have been raised on tales about the son of the carpenter of Nazareth, the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night in the hills near Bethlehem, the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee – to mention just a few. In

every classroom there used to hang a map of the 'land of the Jews' – no one would ever think of calling it the 'land of the Arabs'. This deep-seated Biblical foundation, this familiarity with ancient religion and history, was instrumental in creating a positive attitude towards the new and modern Israel. Most Norwegians felt a naturally close – albeit not always clearly defined – relationship with the Jews. In addition, the more religious segments of the Norwegian population saw the creation of Israel as a fulfilment of the prophecies in the Bible. Once the Jewish State stood there as a reality, strong ties were forged between present and past, religion and politics.<sup>80</sup>

Members of the Christian community and socialists in the governing Norwegian Labour Party both tended to view the state of Israel through the glasses of religion. For the more fervent Christians, Israel marked the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. For the labour movement, it was their dream of a socialist paradise come true. Both agreed that a 'land of milk and honey' was being created. They admired how the Jews had stubbornly fought for a state of their own, and, not least, how they had managed to defeat what they saw as aggressive Arabs. For Norwegian Labour Party politicians, the decisive component of their almost religious conversion was their conviction that a socialist community was now being built up from the ground. As in Norway, a social democratic party was in power in Israel. Even more than in Norway, the trade unions had a dominant position and were in charge of a co-operative system which formed the basis for commercial life. The way in which agriculture was organized, in the *moshav* and *kibbutz* system, also appealed strongly to the Norwegian labour movement. What was going on in Israel corresponded, on the whole, to how leading Labour Party politicians felt a model society should be created. In addition, there were many similarities between the two peoples: They both had small countries. They had both recently been seriously threatened by aggressive enemies. They were both in the process of reconstructing. Israel and Norway were two egalitarian societies. The Israeli ethic of hard work, even their negative attitude to the "demon alcohol", had a tremendously positive impact.<sup>81</sup>

There is not much purpose in trying to rank these factors in order of importance. The point is that they all (together with a few more, to be mentioned below) served to form the basis of Norway's one-sided Middle Eastern policy in the late 1940s and 1950s. They played a role in making Norway one of Israel's best friends. Except for the efforts of a few officials in the Foreign Ministry, not a single attempt was made in the 1940s and 1950s to even try to understand the actual complexity of the Middle East conflict, or accept the existence of another party that also had rights in the area.

Leading officials in the Foreign Ministry did not share these views, however. In fact, Norwegian Foreign Ministry officials were critical of Jewish demands for a state of their own. Even when the state was a fact, they remained unwilling to express support and recognize Israel. There is no evidence of anti-Semitic attitudes among them. The reason, it seems, is mainly that officials were preoccupied with how best to conduct and protect Norwegian foreign policy. They were strongly influenced by international law and had on the whole a legalistic attitude to foreign policy formation. They were keenly aware that small states were dependent on broadly accepted rules of state behaviour. From such a perspective, the creation of a Jewish State at the expense of the Palestinians who already lived in the disputed area was problematic indeed. Israel seemed destined for a conflict-filled future. In such an unpredictable situation, it did not seem opportune to rush things and hastily grant diplomatic recognition.<sup>82</sup>

In addition, the Foreign Ministry had to keep Norway's interests in mind, such as its NATO membership; keeping on good terms with its closest allies, Britain and, increasingly, the United States; as well as its big merchant marine fleet – Norway's single most important foreign economic enterprise and an invaluable currency earner. Again and again, these considerations had to be weighed against the possible consequences of an overly Israel-friendly policy. When strong pro-Israel attitudes or activities clashed with other, more vital Norwegian interests, the Foreign Ministry – both Foreign Minister Halvard Lange and ministry officials – strove to moderate the worst outcome, as they saw it.<sup>83</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Norwegians saw the Middle East questions differently. For them, the only country and the only people that counted were Israel and the Israelis. Almost by an irony of fate, it was a tragic air crash – the biggest civilian crash till then in Norway – that acted as a trigger and contributed to the establishment of the first close links between the Israeli and Norwegian labour movements. The plane was carrying twenty-seven Jewish children from North Africa, on their way to a training camp in Norway, and crashed in dense winter fog outside Oslo in late November 1949. Only one little boy survived.<sup>84</sup>

This plane crash marked the beginning of an era of extremely close relations, also on a personal level, between leading Labour politicians in Norway and Israel. In memory of the Jewish children, the powerful and strongly pro-Israel Secretary-General of the Norwegian Labour Party, Haakon Lie, got the idea that the Labour Party should launch a campaign, collect money and build a 'Kibbutz Norway' in Israel. This gift would honour the memory of the dead children in a way that would also help the Israelis. At the same time,

the Norwegian labour movement would be making its own contribution to the Socialist experiment in Israel.<sup>85</sup>

## 2.2 The Palestinian refugee problem

The Middle East picture had a Palestinian side as well. As a consequence of the war in 1948, between 600,000 and 760,000 Palestinians had fled their homes and were living as refugees in the surrounding Arab states. In the United Nations, the Palestinian refugee problem came up for debate year after year. Simply keeping the refugees alive took a lot of money.<sup>86</sup> As a UN member, Norway was forced to have an opinion on both the humanitarian and the political aspects of the refugee problem.

The fate of the Palestinians was neglected, totally. Prevailing political opinion within both the governing party and the opposition was that Israel could not be blamed. The Palestinians had fled because the surrounding Arab states had told them to do so. The Israelis had asked them to stay. No one, not even officials in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, considered pressuring the Israelis to take back at least some of the Palestinians. Quite to the contrary: the Foreign Ministry, the Government and the political environment as a whole were of the opinion that Israel had more than enough with its own problems. The Arab states would have to take responsibility for their fleeing brothers and sisters. The solution was, in other words, to see all the Palestinians integrated into the Arab countries.<sup>87</sup>

This stance must be seen in light of the massive Norwegian support for Israel. If all the Palestinians were allowed to return to their homes, in what had become Israel, this would undermine the Jewish State. Israel was receiving hundreds of immigrants from all corners of the earth every day. That was Israel's problem, and the new state had set about solving it as best it could. The politicians felt that the Arab states ought to show the same sense of responsibility, and integrate the Palestinians into their midst. The officials, not that pre-occupied with seeing the conflict from the Israeli side, took a more practical approach and saw integration as the only possible solution.<sup>88</sup>

It soon became apparent, however, that the Palestinian refugee problem would not be solved over night. The UN became desperate, and begged for humanitarian help. Norway ought at least to prevent the refugees from starving to death. The government decided that Norway could provide fish. Fish could be bought in Norway – a move which would also provide the Norwegian fishing industry with a chance to get rid of surplus stocks. By giving fish to the refugee settlements, the government could circumvent the need to tap its sparse dollar reserves, still urgently needed for the Norwegian reconstruction effort.<sup>89</sup>

Neither the Foreign Ministry nor the government were interested in hearing the complaints that began to tick in from the United Nations and the Red Cross. They reported that the Norwegian fish was difficult to distribute, the Palestinians would not eat it, the calorie level was too low, and some of the fish was even rotten. It created a huge problem for the refugee work that Norway, and many other countries as well, had sent food they happened to have a surplus of, without considering what the refugees really needed. But Oslo turned a deaf ear, and kept on sending shiploads of fish to the Middle East throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s.<sup>90</sup> When international organizations, helping the Palestinian refugees, tried to buy a small quantity of building materials on a normal commercial basis, the Norwegian Ministry of Trade refused to grant export permission! At exactly the same time, the Norwegian Labour Party was sending shiploads of timber to the "Kibbutz Norway" project.<sup>91</sup>

## 2.3 Norway in the United Nations

That Norway's policy was one-sided was clearly displayed within the United Nations. Despite internal opposition (which was unknown to outsiders) Norway had strongly supported both the partition plan in 1947 and Israeli UN membership in 1949. The Norwegian stance on the Palestinian refugee problem was also based on the premises of Israel. A similarly Israel-supportive position was taken in the discussions on the future of Jerusalem. According to the partition plan, Jerusalem was to be internationalized, but after the war in 1948, the Holy City was divided between Israel and Jordan. A majority in the United Nations still wanted to maintain the original internationalization decision. The Norwegians, however, had changed their minds – now they favoured a division. Although there was a clear element of *Realpolitik* in this approach, official Norwegian policy in the UN once again proved that it supported the solutions that were most acceptable to Israel. In this question Norway also had taken a clear minority position, as the majority of the UN member states still favoured international status for Jerusalem.<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, neither the Norwegian Foreign Ministry nor any political representative criticized Israel for proclaiming Jerusalem as its capital some months later, or for relocating its Foreign Ministry from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 1952. On both occasions, the United States and Britain protested, reacting strongly to what they saw as a demonstrative Israeli policy with a purpose contradictory to compromise and peace in the

Middle East.<sup>93</sup> Later, in negotiating a formal trade agreement with Israel on the premises of the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem in May 1954, Norway, represented by Norwegian diplomats, went much further towards recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's *de facto* capital than the rest of the Western diplomatic corps, who had even refused to set foot inside the Ministry.<sup>94</sup>

Norway's attempt to mediate peace in the Middle East in the autumn of 1952 seemed a further indication of its 'best friend' position. Following an initiative from the Israeli UN ambassador Abba Eban, the Norwegian UN delegation agreed to move the Arab states into direct negotiations with Israel. Since 1948, the Arab states had refused, viewing direct talks as a step towards recognition of the Jewish State – the same reason why the Israelis strongly favoured meeting the leaders of the Arab states face to face. Israel's UN ambassador and its Foreign Ministry managed to convince Norwegian diplomats and Labour Party politicians, both in New York and in the Foreign Ministry in Oslo, that this attitude now had changed, especially with the new Egyptian government. The time, they said, was ripe for direct negotiations.<sup>95</sup>

It seems doubtful whether the Israeli leaders believed this themselves. Most probably, they were motivated by a desire to obtain recognition and put a halt to what they saw as an endless stream of Arab complaints and attacks in UN fora. But the members of the permanent Norwegian UN delegation, led by ambassadors with close Labour Party ties, seized the opportunity for what they saw as 'making peace' in the Middle East. With the Israelis instructing the Norwegian UN diplomats on what to do, and these Norwegians clearing every single mediation step with their Israeli friends – all the while refusing to discuss work on the UN resolution with the other party – the outcome was obvious: the resolution was doomed to defeat, and the Arab states had not moved an inch closer to negotiating with their enemy. Only the Norwegian UN personnel were honestly disappointed. Together with the Israelis, they blamed the Arab states for being opposed to peace.<sup>96</sup> Israel was, for its part, very pleased with the efforts of its Norwegian friends, and praised the Foreign Minister and the UN delegation for the excellent work done in the UN.<sup>97</sup> The Arab states reacted strongly: how could Norway have done something so 'inexpedient'?<sup>98</sup> Some months later, in April 1953, when UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld wanted a Norwegian to head the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO), the soured relationship with the Arabs – as a consequence of this clumsy peace initiative – was the main reason why the Foreign Ministry in Oslo turned down the offer. More clearly than ever, Norway had demonstrated its close friendship with Israel.<sup>99</sup>

## 2.4 Pressure from the Labour Party

Norway's Middle East policy was strongly sympathetic towards Israel. But things could easily have become even more one-sided. The Foreign Ministry was instrumental in maintaining a certain balance in its policy. The Labour Party was willing on its side to do its utmost to rescue what it saw as a Jewish State threatened on all sides by aggressive Arabs. Border incidents, escalating from 1955, were always explained in terms of Israeli responses to Arab aggression. Israel was never criticized, not even when the number of Arab casualties far exceeded Israeli losses. In the eyes of the Norwegian Labour Party, Israel had only good intentions and had to protect itself against aggression – especially now that the UN and the Western powers had abandoned the little state.<sup>100</sup>

Norway's most powerful Israel supporter, Labour Party Secretary Haakon Lie, felt that he had to take immediate action to rescue the Jewish State from being wiped off the map. But what could a small Social Democratic Party in the far North contribute? Lie's plan was to use the Socialist International to set up a campaign that eventually would be international in scope. The Norwegian Labour Party would take the lead and show the way.<sup>101</sup> 14 March 1956; Labour Party, International Committee, letters, Haakon Lie to members of the Norwegian delegation to Israel, 7–9 February 1956."/>

In February 1956 a Norwegian delegation, composed of representatives from the trade unions and the Labour Party press, went to Israel to prepare the campaign. After their return home, they set about launching the campaign 'Let Israel Live'.<sup>102</sup> From March till May a new lead was taken every week or even twice a week. Internal party meetings and public meetings attracted great numbers; lectures were given by the delegates; films were shown; newspapers all over the country ran glowing articles about Israel.<sup>103</sup> The high point of the campaign was reached on 1 May that year: a blue and white banner, with a picture of a young tree cut by a bloody axe, was carried in May Day parades all over Norway. The banner bore the inscription 'Let Israel Live', and symbolized the living state of Israel (the tree) being killed by the Arab states (the bloody axe).<sup>104</sup> Never before had Norway experienced a mass mobilization campaign on an international question that did not even directly affect the country – and, what's more, mounted by the governing Labour Party and orchestrated by the Party Secretary himself.

The campaign was unprecedented – but in fact none of these ideas had originally sprung out of the mind of Haakon Lie himself. It was the Israelis who had taken the initiatives and planted them. From the days of the 'Kibbutz Norway' project in 1949, an extremely close relationship had developed between the Norwegian

and the Israeli Labour parties and, importantly, between the Norwegian Labour Party office and the Israeli embassy in Oslo. Embassy diplomats provided Norwegian Labour Party headquarters with the idea of a trip to Israel in February 1956, intended to spark off an international mass mobilization campaign to be spread by the help of the Socialist International, as well as the symbol-laden May Day banner.<sup>105</sup>

Israel retained an extraordinary influence on the formation of Norway's Middle Eastern policy. Through the Labour Party, the Israeli authorities could work to keep not only the party organization, but the government, the labour and trade movements as well as a sizeable and influential part of public opinion on their side. In the world of international politics there is nothing extraordinary about great powers letting small states – especially those within the 'spheres of influence' of great powers – promote their ideas, opinions and suggestions. In this case, however, there was no great power, nor any position of dependence or sphere of influence – only Israel contriving to get Norway's governing Labour Party to advance its cause. Labour Party politicians reacted with enthusiasm; they were more than willing to help their very dear friend. But all these initiatives should also be seen as emerging from a propaganda campaign that Israel had been waging all over Western Europe.<sup>106</sup> There had been scant success – except in Norway. None of the other social democratic parties in Europe seemed interested, and Haakon Lie's visions of using the Socialist International as a vehicle to promote the Israeli cause were soon dashed.

Norwegian reactions to Israel's Suez War in the autumn of 1956 are further evidence of this strong devotion. On the whole the attack was not criticized by the 'best friends' in the Labour Party nor by the non-socialist opposition in Parliament. On the contrary, it was felt that Egypt and President Nasser were getting what they deserved. Israel's preventive war was defended and understood. On a personal invitation from Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, Haakon Lie went to Israel in December 1956, in order to help Ben Gurion defend his position on the Suez War, following internal criticism from the Israeli labour movement.<sup>107</sup>

Nor did the Suez War in 1956 have any major influence on the pro-Israeli profile of the Norwegian Middle Eastern policy. In the political environment, both within the governing Labour Party and the opposition, support and understanding were as warm as ever. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, civil servants were grumbling over the one-sidedness of Norwegian Middle East policy, as they had been since the 1940s. After 1956, irritation increased even more over Israel's harsh and uncompromising policy. Among the most outspoken critics was the State Secretary, Hans Engen. He regarded most of the Israeli political leadership as militaristic and put the blame, almost exclusively, on Israel for all the militant border clashes. In his eyes, Egypt's President Nasser was an Arab leader in favour of détente. In the political setting, on the whole, Nasser was seen as a Hitler-like figure and a Communist at the same time, in other words, the Devil incarnate. Engen, however, had travelled extensively (together with UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, among others) in the Middle East. He had personally met Nasser several times and had 'a good impression' of him as a person. But Engen and the other officials at the Foreign Ministry were, however, in a minority position. Among the general public as well as within Labour Party circles, there was firm support for Israel and so it continued to be. The tough in-fighting that went on within the confines of the Ministry and higher diplomatic/bureaucratic echelons were unknown outside the Ministry and only had a minor, albeit mitigating, effect on policy.<sup>108</sup>

## 2.5 Weapons and heavy water

The friends of Israel within the Norwegian Labour Party, however, were not satisfied with merely organizing mass mobilization campaigns. The 'Let Israel Live' project also involved providing weapons. The Norwegian government came under heavy pressure from within its own party organization and from the press. They wanted to sell Israel a squadron of 34 outdated 'Vampire' aircraft, a step totally at odds with Norwegian policy on the export of military equipment in general. In the end, there was no deal; all 34 planes were finally scrapped.<sup>109</sup> On the other hand, the whole 'Vampire' discussion is a telling indication of how far Israel's Labour Party fans were willing to go.

Far more complicated than the requests for various military supplies, was the controversial decision to sell Israel 20 tons of heavy water in 1959.<sup>110</sup> In the 1980s, this sale caused major diplomatic frictions and problems between the two best friends.<sup>111</sup> Israel wanted the heavy water to start a nuclear reactor. The Norwegian government was willing to sell it to them, but worried that the Israelis might use it for military purposes as well.<sup>112</sup>

The worries were not, however, followed up when it came to practical policies. Only State Secretary and former Norwegian UN-ambassador Hans Engen seemed actively to try to prevent the sale. He had many good reasons for doing so. First, the transaction might harm the relationship with Norway's closest ally, the United States. Selling heavy water to Israel might undermine American efforts to stop nuclear proliferation. Second, the sale might reduce the Norwegian possibility of exercising a role of mediation in the Middle East. Given Engen's former career in the United Nations (he was one of UN Secretary-General Dag

Hammarskjöld's closest friends and advisors and an active mediator in the Middle East during the Suez crisis), the possible future Norwegian mediator role was important to protect. The Minister of State was convinced that Israel, together with France, planned to develop nuclear arms. As he saw it, Norway was being deliberately misled by Israel, and the control arrangement would never be carried out in a proper way.

In 1959, Foreign Minister Halvard Lange and the Labour government approved the sale. After much bargaining, an agreement was signed, obliging Israel to use the heavy water for civilian purposes only and giving Norway inspection rights. The deal was reached after strong pressure from powerful people in the small Norwegian nuclear research community such as Gunnar Randers, Director of the Norwegian Institute of Atomic Energy, and Jens Chr. Hauge, former leader of the Norwegian Resistance Movement during the Second World War, former Defence Minister and a devoted friend of Israel. They saw the commercial possibilities in selling heavy water to countries in Asia and Africa. Randers, Hauge and others wanted to spread nuclear technology and use it for civilian purposes; Israel's friends in the Labour Party, including Randers and Hauge, wanted to help Israel unconditionally. The decision-making process also supports the assumption that even those in favour of the deal foresaw that the heavy water could be misused: the Norwegian Parliament was only informed after the deal was concluded, and only through the leader of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, the Presidium of the Storting and the Committee on Protocol.<sup>113</sup> The Israeli ambassador was extremely outspoken about Israel's intentions: Israel did not, he claimed in a conversation with Foreign Minister Lange, pay over the odds for the Norwegian heavy water 'for the sake of our "blue eyes"'.<sup>114</sup>

## 2.6 No change until after the Six Day War

This massive Norwegian support for Israel lasted throughout the 1960s. Internationally, and especially within the United Nations, Norway was solidly placed in the pro-Israeli camp, just as in the 1940s and 1950s. The three Scandinavian countries continued to try to build common ground for their approach to the Middle East conflict. But just as before, this was creating problems. Generally, Sweden was less pro-Israel than Norway and Denmark. This had been the situation ever since 1948, when the UN mediator, the Swedish count and member of the royal family, Folke Bernadotte, was murdered by a Jewish terrorist group (Yitzhak Shamir, later Prime Minister, belonged to the leading troika which ordered the murder). Norway, on the other hand, was the country least supportive of the Palestinians. Throughout the 1960s, as in the 1940s and 1950s, the Norwegian grant to UNRWA, the United Nations organization helping the Palestinian refugees, was way below the grants given by Sweden and by Denmark. Among Norwegian politicians and Foreign Ministry officials, there was a definite lack of interest for the Palestinian refugee problem. It was regarded as more or less impossible to solve; the Arab states would not absorb them and Israel refused to take them back. In addition, feelings towards the Palestinians were not helped of course by their antagonism towards Norway's best friend Israel.<sup>115</sup>

The outbreak of the third Middle East war in 1967 demonstrated once again the traditional cleavage in Norway between the political environment and the press which strongly supported Israel and the critical and less supportive Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the pro-Israel camp, Israel's security was the main theme, both before, during, and after the war. On this occasion the Labour Party was not in power: from 1965- 71, a coalition government, consisting of four non-socialist parties, ruled Norway. However, this shift of government did not have any consequences for Norwegian policy towards the Middle East. As usual, the political milieu sided with Israel.<sup>116</sup>

As in 1956, the last time the conflict in the Middle East had been drifting towards war, the Norwegian Labour Party launched a 1967 campaign to rescue the threatened Jewish State. In the leading Labour Party newspaper, *Arbeiderbladet*, both Party Leader Trygve Bratteli and Deputy Leader Reilulf Steen strongly supported Israel on behalf of the whole party. An appeal was signed by 194 public figures in Norway. A committee in support of Israel was established, led by former UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie, who, since 1948, had regarded the establishment of Israel as his personal creation. And in Jerusalem Haakon Lie was *Arbeiderbladet's* special correspondent. In emotional reports from the war, he asked young men and women to voluntarily join the fight to help rescue the little state, fighting for its life.<sup>117</sup>

In the Norwegian Parliament, most representatives thought that Israel's demands for direct negotiations and secure borders were only reasonable. This was a precondition for withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. Israel was still generally regarded as a small, innocent country, threatened by aggressive Arab enemies. Moreover, this security approach showed clearly how Norwegians in general accepted the Israeli version of the conflict.

But, as ever, this was not the case at the Foreign Ministry. When Egypt, just before the outbreak of the war, closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships and other ships delivering strategic goods to Israel, Norway joined in the criticism being levelled at Egypt by the two leading Western shipping nations and NATO allies, the

United States and Great Britain. The principle of free passage should be respected. But when Britain, supported by the US, favoured a military operation, the Foreign Ministry declined to even participate in a consultation about such an option. The Ministry also turned down a suggestion from the Western allies to send in ships, escorted by naval vessels.<sup>118</sup> Norway should not be associated with any use of military power towards Egypt. Internally, there were even disagreements as to whether Egypt really had acted against international law by closing the Straits of Tiran. In addition, the Foreign Ministry did not see a conflict with Egypt's President Nasser as a feasible way to protect Norwegian shipping interests. The Norwegian permanent delegation to the UN, prior to the outbreak of the war, even claimed that it would be unfortunate if the Israeli government received too much support in their uncompromising views towards the Tiran closure because Israel might see such support as an additional argument for attacking Egypt.<sup>119</sup>

Consequently, the Foreign Ministry did not share the worries for Israeli 'security' at all. Through Norway's membership in the UN and through all the diplomatic reports coming in from the Norwegian embassies in the region, the Foreign Ministry had a picture of the conflict in the Middle East that was quite different from that of the commonly held view among politicians, the media and opinion in general. In the UN, Norway supported Resolution 242: The UN could not accept territorial expansion with the use of military power, but recognized at the same time Israel's right to exist and Israel's territorial integrity. The Foreign Ministry became, however, increasingly more critical towards Israel's stance. As time went by, Israel did not withdraw from the territories occupied during the 1967 war. The Foreign Ministry felt that both Egypt and Jordan, for their part, were willing to fulfil the 242 Resolution. Israel's way of taking the law into its own hands conflicted with how the Ministry felt that the Middle East conflict should be solved and was obviously at odds with the Ministry's interpretation of Resolution 242. International law, and not military superiority, was the only legitimate way to maintain peaceful coexistence among nations.<sup>120</sup>

Last, but not least, the Foreign Ministry commonly used its peace argument: Norway had to protect its engagement both in UN peacekeeping operations and in a future peace process. Since 1956, Norway had contributed high-ranking military officers to UNTSO, the United Nations' Truce Supervision Organisation, and, in 1956-67, a battalion of soldiers to UNEF, the United Nations' Emergency Force, to oversee the border between Egypt and Israel. After the 1967 war Sweden became a part of the UN force, overseeing the Suez Canal. Norway was not asked to participate. The Arab states were unwilling to accept military contributions from countries like Norway and Denmark that had voted against unconditional withdrawal. Sweden had abstained. In addition to Sweden's generally less Israel-friendly policy, the Swedish government – from the middle of the 1960s – wanted to highlight its superpower neutrality and its eagerness to contribute to peace negotiations in general.<sup>121</sup>

However, contributions to peace had also been an important aspect of Norwegian foreign policy. For the Foreign Ministry, it was important not to be ruled out of a possible future Norwegian role in a peace process. While Hans Engen had been UN Ambassador (1953-61), Norway had played an important mediating role both in the Middle East and in other conflicts. During the 1960s, Norway had increasingly participated in peace processes around the world, among other things as a secret channel between the US and North Vietnam. The future peace process argument could easily be used as an argument for a less pro-Israel policy. But, unfortunately for the Ministry, the Arab states were not at all willing to accept Norway as a part of any peace process at all. Norwegian Middle East policy was far too biased in support of Israel. By way of contrast, Sweden, Norway's neighbour and, in many ways, rival on the peace scene, was far more successful when it came to conducting a policy that was acceptable to both parties. Among other confidence-building activities, the Swedish diplomat Gunnar Jarring became the UN representative in the Middle East. Norway, so close to Israel, was not seen as suitable for the task.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>78</sup> This part of the report is based on prior research I have done; see footnote 4 in the Introduction.

<sup>79</sup> See Ottosen 1990, p. 214; Johansen 1984.

<sup>80</sup> Sæbø 1976, pp. 121–130; Hagelund 1983.

<sup>81</sup> All of these attitudes are documented in detail in Waage, 1996. It would be far beyond the scope of this report to try to include all possible references, but some illustrative examples can be mentioned: Arbeiderbladet, 26 and 29 November 1949, 9 and 20 December 1949, 8, 11 and 18 May 1951, and 28 July 1951; Gerhardsen 1976, pp. 131–139.

<sup>82</sup> Utenriksdepartementet (hereafter, UD) 34. 8/4, I, memorandum, Peter Anker (head of the political department), 20 May 1948, with supportive comments from all the officials dealing with the Middle East conflict, including Foreign Minister Halvard Lange; Francis Irgens (diplomatic minister, Cairo) to Foreign Ministry, 20, 22 and 25 May 1948; memorandum, Rasmus Skylstad (UD secretary general), 22 May 1948; Per Prebensen (ambassador, London) to Foreign Ministry, 28 May 1948; Finn Moe (UN ambassador) to Foreign Ministry, 25 May 1948; 30. 5/6, II, memorandum, Anker, 3 June 1948; 30. 5/ 10/3, I, Helge Akre (chargé d'affaires, Moscow) to Foreign Ministry, 25 September 1948.

<sup>83</sup> For an analysis, see Waage 1998

<sup>84</sup> Arbeiderbladet, 23 and 26 November 1949; 20 and 28 December 1949; interview with Haakon Lie 4 July 1991.

<sup>85</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>86</sup> See the extensive and detailed treatment in Morris 1987.

<sup>87</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 26 and 27 April 1949; 5 May 1949; 24 June 1949; 20 July 1949; 24 October 1950; 11 May 1951; 15 October 1955; 22 November 1955; 22 December 1956; Universitetsbiblioteket (hereafter, UB), Arne Ordings dagbok, 29 March and 26 April 1949; UD 30. 5/ 10/3, I, press release, Erik Dons (head of division), 26 April 1949; 30. 5/ 10/3, II, Arne Sunde (UN ambassador) to Foreign Ministry, 3 June 1949; *Stortingstidende*, (Parliamentary verbatim records), 20 January 1950, pp. 70–71; National Archives (hereafter, NA) RG 59 840.04, memorandum of conversation, 30 November 1956.

<sup>88</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>89</sup> UD 30. 5/7 6f, II, memorandum, Ivar Lunde (head of division), 11 January 1949; Proposition to the Storting no. 14, 1949; no. 1, 1950; UD 26. 6/23, I, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 25 May 1950; Ministry of Commerce to Foreign Ministry, 8 July 1950; Ministry of Fisheries to Foreign Ministry, 10 July and 24 August 1950; 26. 6/23, II, Ministry of Fisheries to Foreign Ministry, 7 May 1951; UNRWA to Foreign Ministry, 29 May 1951; 26. 6/23, III, Foreign Ministry to Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, 26 March 1952.

<sup>90</sup> UD 30. 5/7 6f, II, memorandum, Lunde, 11 January 1949; Proposition to the Storting no. 14, 1949; no. 1, 1950; UD 26. 6/23, I, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 25 May 1950; Ministry of Commerce to Foreign Ministry, 8 July 1950; Ministry of Fisheries to Foreign Ministry, 10 July and 24 August 1950; 26. 6/23, II, Ministry of Fisheries to Foreign Ministry, 7 May 1951; UNRWA to Foreign Ministry, 29 May 1951; 26. 6/23, III, Foreign Ministry to Parliamentary foreign affairs committee, 26 March 1952; 30. 5/7. 6f, II, Norwegian Red Cross to Foreign Ministry, 6 May 1949; Arnold Rørholt (leave of absence from Norwegian Red Cross, working for UNRWA in Jordan) to Foreign Ministry, 23 September 1949; 26. 6/23, IV, UNRWA to Foreign Ministry, 3 February 1953; Foreign Ministry to Ministry of Fisheries, 13 February 1953; Ministry of Fisheries to Foreign Ministry, 6 March 1953; Foreign Ministry to UNRWA, 10 March 1953.

<sup>91</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 21 and 24 March 1950; 20, 21, 22, 26 and 28 April 1950; 5 May 1950; UD 26. 6/23, I, Rørholt to Skylstad, 3 December 1950; Foreign Ministry to Ministry of Commerce, 19 December 1950.

<sup>92</sup> UD 30. 5/9, UN delegation, minutes, 24 November 1948; 24, 25 and 30 November 1949; 6 December 1950; white paper, no. 32, 1949; no. 12, 1950; *Stortingstidende*, 20 January 1950, pp. 70–71; *Arbeiderbladet*, 12, 19, and 24 December 1949.

<sup>93</sup> *Stortingstidende*, 20 January 1950, pp. 70–71; *Arbeiderbladet*, 9 September 1950; UD 34. 8/4, II, Fridtjof Jacobsen (first secretary, London) to Foreign Ministry, 29 April 1950; 26. 6/22, I, Irgens to Foreign Ministry, 28 June 1952; Skylstad to Irgens, 7 July 1952; 25. 4/87, II, Ernst Hougen (chargé d'affaires, Athens, also responsible for Israel) to Foreign Ministry, 1 August 1952; 25. 4/87, III, Hougen to Foreign Ministry, 5 December 1953; memorandum, Helge Leikvang (head of division), 15 February 1954; see also Neff 1981, pp. 43–44.

<sup>94</sup> UD 25. 4/87, III, Hougen to Foreign Ministry, 5 December 1953 and 19 May 1954.

<sup>95</sup> UD 26. 6/21, IV, memorandum, 27 August 1952; Hougen to Foreign Ministry, 3 September 1952; Hans Engen (UN ambassador) to Foreign Ministry, 16 September 1952; 26. 6/21, V, Engen to Foreign Ministry, 13 October 1952, enclosed memorandum, 10 October 1952; message, legation, Athens to Foreign Ministry, 14 November 1952; Hougen to Foreign Ministry, 15 November 1952; Engen to Foreign Ministry, 27 November and 11 December, 1952; 26. 5/2, UN delegation, minutes, 24 and 25 November 1952; White Paper no. 12, 1953.

<sup>96</sup> Same references as above; UD 26. 5/2, UN delegation, minutes, 1, 9 and 10 December 1952; 26. 6/21, V, cable, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 8, 10 and 11 December 1952.

<sup>97</sup> UD 26. 6/21, V, Dons to Foreign Ministry, 29 December 1952, enclosed, letter, Abba Eban (UN ambassador, Israel) to Engen, 22 December 1952; Israeli legation to Foreign Ministry, 2 February 1953, enclosed, letter, Moshe Sharett (Foreign Minister, Israel) to Lange, 18 January 1953.

<sup>98</sup> UD 26. 6/21, V, Ernest Krogh-Hansen (diplomatic minister, Ankara) to Foreign Ministry, 5 January 1953.

<sup>99</sup> UD 26. 6/21, V, Engen to Foreign Ministry, 28 April 1953; cable, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 11 and 12 May 1953; cable, Foreign Ministry to UN delegation, 20 May 1953.

<sup>100</sup> Almost every single border incident received in-depth coverage and comments; see e.g. *Arbeiderbladet*, 6, 7, 9, and 11 April 1951; 17, 20, 22 and 26 October 1953; 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 March 1955.

<sup>101</sup> NA RG 59 757.00, Bruce H. Millen (Labour attaché, US Embassy, Oslo) to State Department, 10 February 1956; *Arbeiderbevegelsens arkiv*, Labour Party, Executive Board, minutes, 13 February and

<sup>102</sup> Same references as above; *Arbeiderbladet*, 17 March 1956; NA RG 59 657.84A, Harold Aisley (US Embassy, Oslo) to State Department, 12 April 1956.

<sup>103</sup> Again, only a few of the references and examples can be mentioned here; *Arbeiderbladet*, 13 and 18 February 1956; 3 and 22 March 1956; 6, 7, 12, 20, and 23 April 1956; *Arbeiderbevegelsens arkiv*, Labour Party, International Committee, Aake Anker Ording (International Secretary, Labour Party) to members of the Norwegian delegation to Israel, 26 March 1956; Aake Anker Ording, papers, box 54 'Israel'; NA RG 59 757.00 (W), Corrin Strong (US ambassador, Oslo) to State Department, 23 March 1956; Hayden Raynor (US chargé d'affaires, Oslo) to State Department, 13 April 1956; 657.84A, Aisley to State Department 12 April 1956; Lie 1983, pp. 121–122.

<sup>104</sup> Same references as above; interview with Haakon Lie 4 July 1991; *Arbeiderbevegelsens arkiv*, Aake Anker Ording, papers, box 54 'Israel'; Labour Party, International Committee, Kim Taylor to Labour Party, 25 September 1957; Haakon Lie to Amstutz & Herdeg, 27 September 1957.

<sup>105</sup> Same references as above; NA RG 59 757.00, Millen to State Department, 10 February 1956.

<sup>106</sup> At least, this is how it seems from the information given to the Norwegians working closely with this issue; UD 25. 11/19, IV, Engen to Lange, 11 February 1956. However, judging from the information given by Peter Hahn, (1998, pp. 509–532), such a campaign might also have been conducted by Israelis in the US.

<sup>107</sup> Waage 1996, pp. 317–367, esp. 366–367; Waage 1998; UD 25. 4/87, IV, Hougen to Foreign Ministry, 12 December 1956, enclosed *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 December 1956; interview with Haakon Lie 4 July 1991; Lie 1983, pp. 120–123.

<sup>108</sup> Waage, 1996, pp. 317–367, esp. 366–367; Eriksen and Pharo 1997, p. 389.

<sup>109</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 27 March 1956; 12, 13, and 14 April 1956; Riksarkivet (hereafter, RA), Cabinet Papers, 15 November 1955; 11 April 1956; Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, verbatim records, 17 November 1955; 16 April 1956; NA RG 59 657.84A, Aisley to State Department, 12 April 1956; 757.5622, Raynor to State Department, 19 February 1957; 757.00 (W), Raynor to State Department, 21 February 1957; Arheim, Hafsten et al. 1984, p. 52; Johnson 1996, pp. 91–

92.

<sup>110</sup> Eriksen and Pharo claim that the only major military equipment sold to Israel was in 1963 when six, unarmed torpedo-boats were delivered. In spite of worries, both in the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the delivery was carried through, after pressure from the industry and pro-Israeli groups in the Labour Party and the non-socialist opposition (1997, pp. 385–392, esp. pp. 390–391).

<sup>111</sup> See part IV.

<sup>112</sup> This account is not based on research that I have done myself. When I was working on my doctoral thesis, I was not given access to the classified heavy water files. In the meantime, the files have been opened for the researchers working on the project *Norsk utenrikspolitikks historie* [The History of Norwegian Foreign Policy]. This account is based on Eriksen and Pharo 1997 (pp. 390–392). Although it is a journalistic account with several weaknesses, much new information is also given by Odd Karsten Tveit in his 1996 publication *Alt for Israel* [Everything for Israel] (especially pp. 256–296); see also Njølstad 1999, pp. 140–146.

<sup>113</sup> The only inspection attempt made by the Norwegians before the heavy water sale became a political problem in the 1980s was done by Jens Chr. Hauge in 1961. In a rather ambiguous report, he concluded that the heavy water was still not being used by the Israelis (Eriksen and Pharo 1997, p. 392).

<sup>114</sup> The quotation is from Eriksen and Pharo 1997, p. 391: 'Landet [Israel] betalte ikke overpris for norsk tungtvann for våre

<sup>115</sup> This section is based on Heidi Olsen, 'Seksdagerskrigen – et vendepunkt? Norge og Midtøsten-konflikten på 1960-tallet' [The Six Day War – A Turning Point? Norway and the Middle East Conflict in the 1960s], unpublished MA thesis in history, University of Oslo, 1998.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> See also Anniken Haugen Jebesen, 'Why Norway? Norway's involvement in the Middle East prior to the secret Oslo Channel 1948–1993', unpublished dissertation, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1997, pp. 12–13; Tveit 1996, 326–393.

<sup>118</sup> This episode has many parallels to similar plans during the Suez War in 1956, see Waage 1996, pp. 298–304.

<sup>119</sup> In addition to Olsen 1998, this paragraph is based on Tamnes 1997, especially p. 377.

<sup>120</sup> During the war, the Norwegian UN ambassador claimed that Israel wanted to buy time so that the country could occupy as much territory as possible (Olsen 1998 p. 127).

<sup>121</sup> Olsen 1998, pp. 89–94, 128; Tamnes 1997, pp. 341, 355; Waage 1996, pp. 338–340.

<sup>122</sup> Same references as above.

### 3 Part III: Norway discovers the palestinians

In the first two decades after the end of World War II, the Foreign Ministry had been virtually alone in Norway in advocating views critical of Israel and in putting forward more 'balanced' views on the conflict in the Middle East. These views were almost unknown beyond the walls of the Ministry. They were not for public consumption and were normally set out only in classified documents. Foreign policy-oriented politicians, and others, who had regular contact with the Ministry, were – of course – aware of the prevailing attitudes among the officials. But outside these small groups, the Foreign Ministry remained the sole bastion of voices critical of Israel and in favour of a more 'balanced' view.<sup>123</sup>

This picture changed slowly as a consequence of the Six Day War in 1967. The effect of this war contributed to a new attitude: the fate of the Palestinians was seen in a new and different light; gradually it was understood that there could be no political solution to the problems in the Middle East unless the rights of the Palestinians were included. Another important precondition for the establishment of the Oslo Back Channel was in place.

#### 3.1 Who was David – and who was Goliath?

Prior to 1967, Israel had been regarded as the weak, threatened party in the Middle East. The Arab states, in turn, had been viewed as strong and aggressive, with only one goal – to destroy the little Jewish State. But the massive Israeli victory in the Six Day War in 1967 triggered a re-evaluation process in political circles in particular and among the Norwegian public in general concerning the parties' respective military strength. Who was weak? Who was strong? As a consequence of the war, Israel had occupied the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, the Golan Heights and, not least, the old part of Jerusalem itself. However, although a new and more favourable attitude towards the Palestinians was being forged, there still was a long way to go before it gained broad and common support. In an opinion poll taken immediately after the Six Day War, 74 per cent said that they sympathized with Israel.<sup>124</sup>

The leading figures in the Norwegian Labour Party, as already mentioned, celebrated the Israeli victory. But they had become older, and were in fact on their way out of positions of power. The previously restrained younger generation, now in the process of assuming leading positions, became increasingly critical. They had discovered Israel's military superiority; the occupation of new territory; the fate of the Palestinians and the terrible conditions in the refugee camps; the nationalistic movement among the Palestinians; and the creation of the PLO. This new generation within the Labour Party began to work for justice on behalf of the

Palestinians. They wanted information and contact with the other side in the Middle East conflict. This new stance was a component in the political radicalization of Norwegian society in the 1970s.

Criticism was first expressed, cautiously, by the Socialist People's Party. Their representatives started to view the conflict in a North- South perspective. Seen from that angle, it was not Israel, but the Arab states that deserved sympathy. The Arabs had been exploited by the imperial Western powers.<sup>125</sup>

The fate of the Palestinians became the new big issue on the left. Before 1967, the Palestinians were generally neither called nor regarded as Palestinians. Their fate was referred to as the 'Arab refugee problem'. Among both Norwegian politicians and officials the problem received little attention and was on the whole considered hopelessly insoluble. After the Six Day War, this changed. The 'Arab refugee problem' came to be regarded as a serious *political* problem, rather than merely a *humanitarian* problem. This was explicitly stated within the Foreign Ministry.<sup>126</sup> The many Palestinian liberation organizations were gradually seen as independent power centres in the Middle East. Their actions against Israel – and Israeli retaliation – only made the situation more tense. UNRWA, the United Nations' special organization working among the Palestinian refugees, was now seen as a stabilizing factor. The Norwegian contributions to UNRWA, which had been very modest in the 1940s and 1950s, were increased from 1961 by the symbolic sum of NOK 50,000. However, from 1968 this new concern for the Palestinian cause was also reflected in larger amounts of money.<sup>127</sup>

Having been virtually absent as a foreign policy issue for twenty years, the Palestinian refugee question came up for discussion in Parliament. In 1967, the Socialist People's Party wanted to increase the UNRWA contribution proposed by the Foreign Ministry. The Ministry's proposal was, as usual, a small amount of money, NOK 650,000. The Socialist People's Party wanted to raise the sum by an additional NOK 5 million. Not surprisingly, this highly unrealistic proposal was turned down, but it marked a watershed: it was the first time that anybody in Parliament had taken an initiative to raise the Norwegian contribution to the Palestinian refugees. It would take another six years before such a proposal won a majority vote.<sup>128</sup>

Last, but not least, the people who constituted the 'Arab refugee problem' were now officially referred to as Palestinians. The first person to do this officially was Prime Minister Per Borten, who at the time headed the non-socialist coalition government, in a speech at the United Nations in 1970. Although this was little more than a symbolic gesture, it nonetheless inaugurated a new era. Attitudes like this had hitherto only existed at the Foreign Ministry and among Norwegian UN personnel, either serving in the Middle East or in New York. Peter Anker, who had been appointed Norwegian Ambassador to Egypt from 1966, from 1969 onwards, consistently used the terms 'the Palestinians', 'the Palestinian problem' or 'Palestinian nationalism'.<sup>129</sup> This maturing process, which started after the Six Day War, had now reached the new non-socialist government. Prominent cabinet members, such as Prime Minister Borten and Foreign Minister John Lyng, along with Foreign Ministry officials, saw and stated officially that there could be no political solution to the problems in the Middle East unless the rights of the Palestinians were included in future solutions. But while the old solution - mass integration in the Arab countries - was abandoned, the alternatives were very unclear. In accordance with these new sentiments, John Lyng, as early as the autumn of 1967, issued three principles that were supposed to establish the basis of a Norwegian Middle East policy: it was unacceptable to conquer land by force; all states in the region had the right to live within secure and recognized borders; and a peaceful solution for the refugees must be found. In the autumn of 1971, Foreign Minister Andreas Cappelen from the new Labour government, went a step further in a speech to the UN General Assembly claiming that there would be no justice or political solution to the conflict in the Middle East unless the rights of the Palestinians were taken into consideration.<sup>130</sup>

Most likely, both Borten and Cappelen were reflecting deeper and wider changes in Norwegian society, both with regard to the PLO and Israel. The younger generation was not affected by the Holocaust in the same way as the old one. On the contrary, many of them were shocked by the injustice done to the Palestinians. They were the victims of the Middle East conflict. The new generation, some of whom would take on leading political positions, described the fate of the Palestinians as their parents had described the fate of the Jews. This development was most clearly revealed in 1970- 71, in the Labour Party's youth organization, AUF, causing shock waves in the mother party. To start with, the Oslo branch of the AUF adopted a pro-Palestinian resolution in June 1970, then AUF's Annual Meeting in February 1971 decided to support the goal of the PLO: Israel should cease to exist as a Jewish state and be replaced by a new and democratic state where Jews, Muslims and Christians all had equal rights. But it was not only the present situation of the Palestinians that was viewed differently. Questions were also being asked of the past, of Israel's treatment of the refugees, both during the war in 1948 and in 1967. Israel's new position as an occupying power also weakened the security argument: was Israel's security the only problem in the region?<sup>131"/></sup>

The growing ambiguity which underlay Norwegian attitudes towards the conflict in the Middle East and the increasing intergenerational conflicts, especially within the Labour Party, became even more apparent when the fourth war in the region broke out in 1973. The old friends of Israel, still wielding considerable political influence, rushed once again to the rescue of the small and threatened Jewish State. Having more experience to draw upon, they more or less copied the campaign from 1956, even to the point of reactivating the same slogan. As in 1956, the 1973 'Let Israel Live' campaign aimed at mobilizing the masses. Articles favourable to Israel were distributed to the media. Nothing critical appeared. An appeal, signed by famous Norwegians, reiterated the often-used arguments on Israel as the only democratic country in the Middle East and, in accordance with the 'milk-and-honey' myth, directed attention at the hard-working Israelis who had managed to get the desert to blossom and industry to produce at high speed. As always when Israel was considered to be in utmost peril, Haakon Lie – who now held no formal position in the party - visited the country, to show his Labour comrades that Norway could be relied on in moments of crisis. But Israel did not have as many friends as it used to, a weeping Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir told her old friend Lie. The Norwegian Labour Party was among its few remaining friends.<sup>132</sup>

The Israeli embassy in Oslo, which still had great influence over the shaping of Norwegian Middle East policy through its close contacts with the Labour Party headquarters, was also fully aware that Israel would soon be seriously challenged by the generational change taking place in the leadership of the Labour Party. In June 1970, the Israeli ambassador in Oslo, in a report to Jerusalem, made the following remarks regarding the situation in the Norwegian Labour Party: 'There are frictions between the old and the young generations inside the party and the trade union ... The young are against us ... Haakon Lie has lost much of his influence. Aase Lionæs is getting older. Trygve Bratteli is ill, consequently the biological evolution is working against us. From now on we shall have to rely on the young ones, this will not be easy.'<sup>133"/></sup>

### 3.2 Knut Frydenlund's fatal decision

While Israel was in the process of losing its absolute hold on Norway's opinion, the opposite was happening for the PLO. At the beginning of the 1970s, the PLO began to demonstrate a new will to compromise and a more moderate approach. At the same time, the Palestinian organization improved its international position. The PLO was not yet willing to abandon the military struggle against Israel, including the use of terrorist methods, but simultaneously, it was emitting other signals. In June 1974, for instance, the PLO's National Council for the first time indicated the possibility of a two-state solution, a partition. This was a new point of departure for later negotiations and contacts. The same autumn, the Arab summit in Rabat declared that the PLO was the Palestinians' only legal representative. The United Nations passed a resolution accepting the rights of the Palestinian people. The PLO obtained observer status in the UN and Chairman Yassir Arafat was granted the opportunity to speak to the UN General Assembly in November 1974.<sup>134</sup>

These happenings on the international scene came to have a major impact on the shaping of Norwegian Middle East policy. Labour's new Foreign Minister from October 1973, Knut Frydenlund, was influenced by these developments. He – and Foreign Ministry officials along with him – was of the opinion that representatives of the Palestinians should be included in international organizations such as the United Nations. In 1974, he was ready to accept that the incarnation of terror itself, PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat, should be given the opportunity to address the UN General Assembly. However, he had strong doubts and reservations. Both the Israeli and the Egyptian governments lobbied the Ministry to support their respective views. For the first time, it seems, a representative of the PLO was received by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry by the then head of division, Tom Vraalsen.<sup>135</sup> There were solid arguments for both options and even the Ministry was divided.<sup>136</sup> The head of the political department, Kjeld Vibe, warned against stressing the relationship to Israel and the political consequences in Norway. The State Secretary, Arne Arnesen, favoured a Norwegian acceptance of the PLO's right to speak to the UN General Assembly.<sup>137</sup> The Norwegian Ambassador in Tel Aviv was upset and urged the Ministry to abstain. A vote in support of Arafat would totally devastate Norway's relationship with Israel, he claimed.<sup>138</sup> Frydenlund himself was drifting from one position to another. But when several West European countries signalled that they would support giving Arafat the opportunity to speak, Frydenlund followed the advice of the Norwegian UN ambassador Ole Ålgård: Norway should follow the other Western countries.<sup>139</sup>

By taking this position, the Foreign Ministry would be marking a stronger understanding for the Palestinian cause. This stance was also on the whole in line with Norwegian opinion in general, i.e., that liberation organizations also ought to be heard. In addition, such a performance on behalf of the PLO Chairman could contribute towards making the PLO more responsible, the Foreign Ministry thought.<sup>140</sup>

It turned out, however, that the decision went much further than political circles and most Norwegians were willing to contemplate. This was the first time Norway had voted against Israel and it gave rise to intense reactions throughout Norway in general and in the governing Labour Party in particular. The former Secretary General Haakon Lie expressed a commonly held view when he said that 'the Norwegian

government, the Norwegian Labour Party and the Norwegian people have never been "neutral" towards such a barbarity and have never accepted that terrorist organizations should be able to shoot their way into the UN'.<sup>141</sup> At a dramatic meeting of the Labour Party's parliamentary group, Foreign Minister Frydenlund was attacked as if he were on trial. A barrage of angry protests was aimed at the minister.<sup>142</sup>

The persistent support for Israel within the Labour Party was consequently still a factor to reckon with when shaping Norwegian Middle East policy. Knut Frydenlund had obviously failed to appreciate the level of support and, not least, the newly founded Israel lobby's ability to mobilize. This parliamentary pro-Israel organization was the outcome of an initiative taken by Conservative Party MP Paul Thyness in February 1974. It was known generally under the name of 'Friends of Israel'. The most likely reason for Frydenlund's underestimation of its strength was probably precisely due to its recent establishment. The group, initially comprising as many as 83 of the 150 Members of Parliament, was not regarded as very powerful prior to the Norwegian pro-Arafat vote in October 1974. In close co-operation with the Israeli embassy in Oslo, the 'Friends of Israel' led the storm against Frydenlund. A petition was signed by 200 leading politicians, among them the later Foreign Minister and 'Oslo actor' Johan Jørgen Holst, who even helped formulate the petition. However, the 'Friends of Israel' were so successful in mobilizing fellow parliamentarians and other leading Norwegians in the war against the Foreign Minister that the campaign almost resulted in his political death. The campaign came to abrupt halt when the Labour Party discovered that a majority of its representatives in Parliament had signed the petition. Any more signatures would have guaranteed the resignation of the Foreign Minister.<sup>143</sup>

Although he had initially given Frydenlund the impression that the Arafat decision was acceptable, Prime Minister Trygve Bratteli backed down when temperatures began to rise. In the emotional debate that followed in Parliament, Bratteli said nothing of substance to support his Minister. On the other hand, the leader of the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs, Labour's Tor Oftedal, stood firmly behind Frydenlund as did a handful of other Labour MPs, the Socialist People's Party representatives, one from the Liberal Party and the former Prime Minister, Per Borten. But the rest of Labour and the whole non-socialist bloc condemned him strongly.<sup>144</sup>

The whole episode resulted in a strong political backlash for Knut Frydenlund. Subsequently, Frydenlund claimed that the decision had been 'historically correct, but politically wrong' because it differed too much from the prevailing Norwegian attitudes to the conflict in the Middle East. The episode secured the continued pro-Israel line. That same autumn, the Norwegian UN delegation retreated to the traditional anti-Palestinian position. On 22 November 1974 a huge majority of the member states of the UN decided that the PLO should be given observer status and take part in the sessions of the General Assembly. The resolution also confirmed the Palestinians' right to return to their homes and property, their right to self-determination and to national independence and sovereignty. Moreover, the General Assembly accepted the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. The Norwegian UN delegation was instructed to vote against the resolution, a decision taken by the Cabinet.<sup>145</sup> Eighty-nine countries voted for, 37 abstained. Only eight countries voted against: Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Israel, Iceland, Nicaragua, Norway and the United States. Norway had definitely joined odd company and marked itself out as 'one of the most pro-Israel countries in the world'.<sup>146</sup> The PLO continued to be treated as though it had leprosy. The Israeli Ambassador in Oslo, however, was satisfied with the outcome of the whole episode, knowing that the parliamentary majority was on Israel's side – a fact he never sought to hide.<sup>147</sup>

### 3.3 New perspectives on the Arab countries

However, slowly and in spite of this set-back as regards a more 'balanced' Middle East policy, Norwegian policy became gradually more critical of Israel and more sympathetic to the Palestinian side. The main reasons for this were Israel's newly perceived role as an occupying power, the sudden realization of the injustice done to the Palestinians and the more compromising stance of the PLO. In addition, the members of the younger generation brought with them a more radical approach which contributed decisively to this development.

Another factor that was to work towards this shift in approach was a round trip to the Middle East taken by the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee it served as a catalyst to many of its members. In January 1977, for the first time, members of all the political parties in Norway travelled to the Arab countries. The trip was an eye-opener and triggered a pro-Palestinian process among many of the politicians, perhaps the best example being the Conservative friend of Israel Kåre Willoch, who was later to become Prime Minister and who has been an important politician and opinion-maker in Norway for more than forty years. Ever since the creation of Israel in 1948, most Norwegian politicians had seen the conflict through the eyes of Jerusalem. If they visited the Middle East, and many did, they went to Israel. If they had any knowledge of the situation in the region, it was about Israel's predicaments, often mixed with a good portion of scriptural understanding. In addition, many of their views were highly emotional. They knew next to nothing about the political,

economic, social and cultural situation in the Arab countries or about the situation of the Palestinians living in the refugee camps in the Arab countries surrounding Israel.<sup>148</sup>

What they saw and experienced on their trip to the Arab countries in the region, came as a surprise to them and consequently had a major influence on and implications for their view of the conflict. In contradiction to their perceptions about who the bad and the good guys were in the Middle East conflict, Arab leaders like King Hussein of Jordan and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt had made a very good impression on the Norwegian parliamentarians. Both had expressed their willingness to negotiate peace with Israel and although the visit to Israel had also been pleasant, as expected, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had showed his less charming side.<sup>149</sup> At the same time, the Israeli ambassador in Oslo –extraordinarily– had attacked the leader of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, Tor Oftedal, for a statement in a Palestinian refugee camp outside Amman. Oftedal had said that ‘no human being, no people or nation would accept such a humiliation which we have witnessed here today’.<sup>150</sup> The impressions and the messages received, both from the newly discovered Arab- Palestinian side and from the Israeli leaders’ expressing their uncompromising position on the Palestinian refugee and border questions, coupled with the episode of the Israeli ambassador’s protestations in Oslo did not go unnoticed: Israel, as well as the Arab states, had to carry the blame for the lack of peace. The members of the Committee of Foreign Affairs were important actors when it came to influencing Norwegian Middle East policy, other parliamentarians and public opinion. The trip to the Middle East had affected even the staunchest friends of Israel on the Committee.<sup>151</sup>

The Norwegian contribution to the United Nation’s peacekeeping force in South Lebanon was another and even more important catalyst underlying the change in the Norwegian outlook. The United Nations’ Interim Forces in Lebanon – UNIFIL – was established in March 1978 as a consequence of the Israeli invasion of their northern neighbour. The Israeli government wanted to remove the Palestinian guerrilla forces who were using Lebanon as a base for attacks. The Christian Major Saad Haddad and his militias worked in tandem with the Israeli soldiers. Haddad, having deserted from the Lebanese Army, saw it as his main task to protect the Christian villages along the Israeli border. Since 1976, Haddad’s militias had received weapons, military equipment and training in Israel. When the Israeli military machine swept over South Lebanon, approximately 200,000 Lebanese refugees, mostly Shia Muslims, left their homes and were pushed further into a Lebanon torn by civil war. The Christian villages, on the other hand, welcomed the Israeli presence.<sup>152</sup>

The United States and especially President Jimmy Carter, who had high ambitions for mediating in the Middle East conflict during his presidency, reacted strongly to Israel’s military operations in South Lebanon. The USA wanted the Israelis out and demanded that their military presence be replaced by a UN peace force. The Israeli government, as always deeply suspicious of the UN, did not want any UN presence on its border. Such a force would restrict the freedom of the Israeli army to operate across the border in South Lebanon. Instead of fighting Palestinian and Lebanese guerrillas, the Israeli army would be faced with UN soldiers, bringing with them a message of peace.<sup>153</sup>

However, UNIFIL never got the opportunity to fulfil the tasks the force was originally destined for. Security Council Resolution 425 mandated the UN force to supervise the Israeli withdrawal to the international border between Israel and Lebanon, re-establish peace and security in South Lebanon and, additionally, help the Lebanese government re-establish its authority in the region. The Israelis did indeed withdraw. But Prime Minister Menachem Begin made it completely clear, also directly to US President Jimmy Carter, that the Israeli government wanted to maintain a so-called ‘security belt’ through their ally, the Christian militias under Israeli control.<sup>154</sup>

During the Easter holiday in March 1978, the Norwegian government decided that 750 Norwegian officers and soldiers would immediately join the UNIFIL force in Lebanon. A week later this figure had risen to 1000.<sup>155</sup> This mission, like the Norwegian contribution to the other UN peacekeeping operations in the region, provided the Norwegians stationed in the Middle East with new experience and knowledge. Those Norwegians who served under the UN banner had almost certainly gone to the Middle East strongly influenced by the massive, pro-Israeli version of the conflict that reverberated through the Norwegian mass media and the population in general. Many of these Norwegians came back with a completely different view. They had begun to realize that the conflict was far more complicated, and that it was not just the Palestinians and the Arab states that were to blame. On the contrary, their experiences with the Israelis served to undermine the received version. The Norwegian UNIFIL force in Lebanon found itself under constant pressure and frequently in clashes with the Israeli armed forces. ‘As 2000 Norwegian youths return every year to Norway with experiences, not all of which are equally pleasant, it obviously has an effect on the Norwegian opinion. A more flexible attitude on the part of the Israelis, less arrogance, more compassion and civility, would have brought about a completely different relationship between these Norwegians and Israelis’, the strictly conservative and Israel-friendly newspaper *Morgenbladet* had to admit in a review of a book written by one of the Norwegian returnees. The stories brought home by the soldiers and which they

told to their friends and relatives, were of importance when it came to widened perspectives and changed perceptions.<sup>156</sup>

Furthermore, the media were suddenly no longer dominated by reports on the Middle East giving the usual Israel angle on the stories. Norwegian journalists moved out of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and started to pay attention to the situation in South Lebanon. As a consequence, a massive increase in reports from refugee camps and coverage of the conflict between the Israeli army and PLO guerrilla groups was evident in the Norwegian media. (As were reports on Beirut nightlife, drunken Norwegian soldiers, hard discipline and low pay.) Moreover, the Norwegians serving in the UNIFIL force did not meet Israeli politicians, Labour Party members or trade union representatives as they were wont to do in the past. In addition to the Palestinian and Lebanese refugees, who they mostly regarded as victims, and consequently felt sorry for, the young Norwegian soldiers were confronted with the tough Israelis. So, on the whole, as a consequence of the contribution to UNIFIL, the Norwegian people were shown a different Middle East reality, a reality that changed their perceptions of the conflict.<sup>157</sup>

This Norwegian involvement in Lebanon also had major implications at the governmental level. Relations between the Norwegian and the Israeli governments started on a downward spiral. If the difficulties continued and immediate improvements failed to materialise, the Norwegian government was going to have to pull their forces out, Labour's Prime Minister Odvar Nordli told his colleague Menachem Begin in December 1978 (on the occasion of Begin's visit to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution to peace in the Middle East).<sup>158</sup> However, the appeal to Begin did not make much of an impact. Looking for help, the Norwegian government turned to their – and Israel's – common friend, the USA. The Americans were asked to use their influence on the uncompromising Israelis. In April 1980, in a letter to Jimmy Carter, Nordli pointed out that Norway could no longer accept 'the continuous harassment and the use of force against UNIFIL'.<sup>159</sup> Nordli asked the US president to take action; in its reply the USA said that it understood the problems of the UNIFIL. President Carter urged that 'Norway's critical contribution to this essential peacekeeping force be maintained'.<sup>160</sup> However, American understanding did not help much on the ground. As a consequence of Israel's brutal invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the problems of the forces once more became acute. Again Norway considered withdrawing. Once again the Norwegian government decided to stay. This time US Secretary of State Alexander Haig begged Norway to stay, and promised to intervene. Again, however, nothing changed on the ground in South Lebanon.<sup>161</sup>

As the traditionally warm relationship with Israel became somewhat tense, the relationship with the PLO improved and gradually expanded. Already before 1974 there had been some informal contacts with the PLO, although they had been irregular and at a low level. But demands for improved contacts were increasing, particularly from Norwegian diplomats stationed in the Middle East. For them, it was almost impossible to get a firm overview of the situation in the region without closer relations with the PLO. They considered it of importance not only to meet with representatives from the PLO on their initiative, but to be able to do so on a Norwegian initiative, when needed, as well. From 1978, this dialogue got a further boost when central Norwegian diplomats met high-ranking PLO representatives.<sup>162</sup> This burgeoning network was greatly extended with the UNIFIL engagement. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry took the initiative primarily to reinforce the safety of the Norwegian soldiers because the UNIFIL engagement demanded this kind of working-level contact, Foreign Minister Knut Frydenlund averred. The contacts were established by Norway's new chargé d'affaires in Beirut from March 1978, Hans Wilhelm Longva, who, in the years to come, was to play a key role in the Norwegian mediation efforts.<sup>163</sup>

It was self-evident that the Norwegian UNIFIL battalion was dependent on having good relations with all parties if it was to function in turbulent South Lebanon. Even though relations with the Israelis deteriorated greatly during the Norwegian mission in the region, the government in Oslo still managed to keep open the long-established channels to Israel. On the Palestinian side, the contacts had to be built from scratch. This relation- and confidence-building process was to be Longva's major task.<sup>164</sup> After some initial resistance on the part of Arafat, the PLO chairman promised the UNIFIL commander-in-chief that he would co-operate.<sup>165</sup> In reality, Arafat only controlled Fatah, the largest section of PLO. From time to time, the more extreme sections conducted other policies and created problems for the UN soldiers. Especially in the eastern part of the area controlled by the Norwegian battalion, the Norwegians were attacked and came under fire.<sup>166</sup>

Longva quickly gained a foothold within Yassir Arafat's office, and soon established a confidential relationship both with Arafat himself and other high-ranking Palestinians.<sup>167</sup> This contact saved many Norwegian lives, according to Bassam Abu Sharif, then member of the PFLP politburo, now one of Arafat's advisors. He used to warn Longva in advance whenever his sources told him of impending attacks. Close links between Longva, Bassam Abu Sharif and various Norwegian NGOs giving humanitarian aid to the Palestinian refugees in the camps in Lebanon were also established. One should not underestimate the role played by the Norwegian humanitarian aid and involved NGOs in building political confidence *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian side.<sup>168</sup>

The UNIFIL presence and the establishment of relations with the PLO led to a stream of Norwegian visitors to the Palestinian organisation. In 1978, representatives of the PLO met Defence Minister Rolf Hansen, Norwegian Commander-in-Chief Sverre Hamre and State Secretaries Johan Jørgen Holst and Thorvald Stoltenberg (Ministry of Defence) and Paul Engstad (Prime Minister's Office). Soon a system evolved whereby officials and state secretaries, but not Norwegian Prime or Foreign Ministers, could meet leaders of the PLO. This practice grew out of the needs created by the UNIFIL involvement, and did not imply any official Norwegian recognition of the PLO.<sup>169</sup>

Nonetheless, this situation came to have new implications for the formation of Norwegian Middle Eastern policy, not only in the short run, but even more so in the long run. For the first time the Defence Ministry became actively involved as the confrontations with the Israelis led to diplomatic friction between the two 'best friends'.<sup>170</sup> Foreign Ministry officials gained important allies among military personnel. New information was flowing into the Foreign and Defence Ministries, and to the Norwegian public in general. Another direct consequence of the UN military involvement were the new Norwegian contacts that were established with the Arab and Palestinian side. The Foreign Ministry could now use considerations for the safety of the Norwegian troops as an additional argument in favour of making Norway's policy less pro-Israeli. And ultimately, further off on the horizon, these developments pointed towards a recognition of the PLO. But there was still a long way to go.

### 3.4 The slippery road to recognition of the PLO

By the end of the 1970s a shift was clearly taking place. Labour Party politicians, high-ranking Norwegian officials and defence leaders had all met with the higher echelons of the PLO. Norwegian-Palestinian contacts were developed with that old bastion of pro-Israeli sentiment, the Federation of Trade Unions, the LO. When a PLO delegation visited Norway in October 1979 – after being invited by the trade union federation – the ice was definitely broken. A new attitude was in the air. As had many others, an increasing number of the trade union members began to feel that it was wrong to 'make good the injustice done to one people by inflicting a new injustice on another'.<sup>171</sup> During the 1970s they had been shocked by Israel's tough and uncompromising line; the disillusionment with Israel's position on the Palestinian question was growing. As the new generation was being absorbed into the Labour Party and the movement as a whole, it brought with it ideas that were different from the old ones.<sup>172</sup>

Although Norway slowly started to move towards a more balanced Middle East policy, it had become clear during the 1970s that Norway was isolated in Europe in its restrictive policy towards the PLO. Since the heated debate over Arafat's UN performance in the autumn of 1974, Foreign Minister Frydenlund had been scared and had learned a lesson when it came to making experiments: changing Norwegian policy in a more pro-Palestinian direction was positively dangerous and should only be done with great caution. And since that moment, almost nothing had happened with official Norwegian policy towards the PLO. In the meantime, major changes had occurred internationally: Israel had become much more isolated. The Jewish State still refused to contemplate negotiations with the PLO or to give up any of the land it had conquered. This intractability was becoming increasingly unacceptable for a growing majority of the world's states.<sup>173</sup>

However, some progress was being made on the track towards peace and reconciliation as a consequence of President Sadat's journey to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the ensuing Camp David negotiations in 1978. For the first time a peace agreement was signed between Israel and Egypt, and Israel agreed to give Sinai back. But the part dealing with the Palestinians and the rest of the Occupied Territories never materialized, and the opinion throughout the world continued to turn against Israel, a development that was particularly noticeable among the majority of the European states. In fact one could almost write off *en masse* the entire European Union as being pro-Israel. Even the Netherlands, traditionally considered a pro-Israeli country, sharply criticized Israel for its line on the Palestinian question and voted against Israel in international forums. For the European countries (and Japan) the oil blockade weapon was more decisive for their change to a more pro-Arab stance than it was for the Americans. In comparison with previously, oil was now regarded as more important than historical responsibility for the Jewish State.<sup>174</sup>

In Norway, these developments among its Western friends and allies were noted, but had little influence on the shaping of its Middle East policy. In spite of the Norwegian UNIFIL engagement and its consequences for Norwegian policy, the PLO was still far from being officially recognized. Knut Frydenlund was nursing his wounds and fearful of the reactions both from within the Labour Party and, increasingly, from the non-socialist opposition. An extremely circumspect Norwegian Foreign Minister indicated in two interviews during the summer of 1979 that the Palestinians and the PLO ought to be a part of the peace negotiations in a more extensive sense. Norway was in the process of becoming increasingly isolated, he pointed out. A decreasing number of countries belonged to the same group as Norway when votes on Middle Eastern questions were cast in the UN. Norway had one of the most restrictive policies towards the PLO in the world.<sup>175</sup>

Frydenlund could have said much more, but – for obvious reasons – refrained from doing so. He could have mentioned that many of Israel's old social democratic friends in the West now had met leading representatives for the PLO. The Austrian Prime Minister Bruno Kreisky had hosted Chairman Arafat in Vienna. West Germany's Chancellor Willy Brandt had met with Arafat on the same occasion. Brandt was heading at the time the Socialist International, at which the PLO had observer status. The Israeli Labour Party, represented by its leader Shimon Peres, was also a member of the Socialist International, although without recognizing the PLO representatives in an official capacity. However, when an international organization like the Socialist International and prominent Labour politicians like Brandt and Kreisky found it opportune to have official contacts with the PLO and its leader, this was a very clear indication of the drift of public opinion in the Western countries. But Norway continued to differ. Neither Frydenlund nor the leader of the Labour Party, Reiulf Steen, were prepared to countenance similar direct contact yet. Even when the PLO's 'Foreign Minister', Farouq al-Kaddoumi, was officially received in many Western capitals as well as by the EU Commission, the Norwegian government declined to meet with PLO on a government level.<sup>176</sup>> The parliamentary opposition reacted strongly to the merest hint of any attempts to soften the traditional staunchly pro-Israel policy. In a comment in response to the interviews that Frydenlund had given in the summer of 1979, the former Prime Minister, parliamentarian and Christian People's Party leader Lars Korvald stated that he saw no reason whatsoever to change the present Norwegian policy. Korvald was also Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee. He was strongly supported by the former (and subsequent) Conservative Party Foreign Minister Sverre Strøm. Strøm could see no reason why Norway should have any contacts at all with an organization still favouring the use of terrorism as a weapon in their struggle to reach its goal. And the leader of the 'Friends of Israel', Paul Thyness, strongly attacked Frydenlund for his comments, adding that there existed no 'objective' reason for changing Norwegian policy.<sup>177</sup>

When Frydenlund addressed the UN General Assembly in September 1979 and later in an interview with the press, he said that Norway felt a strong obligation to support Israel's right to exist within secure and recognized borders, but added that there was increasing sympathy for the cause of the Palestinians and their legitimate rights, the non-socialist opposition went on the attack. Fortunately for the Foreign Minister, the Norwegian government was not required to take a stand, either in the Security Council or in the General Assembly. Norway's voting showed that it was isolated, not only in relation to the Third World, but also to its allies in the West.<sup>178</sup>

Norway's justification for its voting in the UN was perhaps the best indication of its isolated position. In questions where Norway used to vote together with the other Nordic and EU countries, these countries, when explaining their votes, went much further both in recognizing the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and in criticizing Israel's policy. When Israel was heavily attacked for the settlement policy on the West Bank and the bombing of South Lebanon, the Norwegian UN delegation did not even mention Israel by name. Even the Americans went further in their criticism than did Norway. In the UN, Norway took such a cautious stand that one would have been forgiven for asking if Norway had any Middle East policy at all.<sup>179</sup>

Of course, Norway *did* have a Middle East policy. It was still strongly supportive of Israel, overly cautious towards the Palestinians in general and the PLO in particular, and it was coming under increasing pressure. On the one hand, the pro-Israel lobby in Norway still had a firm grip on final outcomes and decisions. On the other, support for the Palestinian cause was steadily increasing, even to the point of demanding acknowledgement of the PLO as *the* representative of the Palestinian people. This issue was forcing its way to the surface.

In a debate in Parliament concerning the rights of the Palestinians 31 October 1979, Foreign Minister Frydenlund went a step further than he had done in the summer: 'no other [Palestinian] organization, group or single person could claim to be more representative than the PLO. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine any real progress in the negotiations about the Palestinians' rights without making the PLO – in one way or another – jointly responsible for the negotiations.'<sup>180</sup>reelle framskritt i forhandlingene."> However, an unalterable demand that was always mentioned at the same time, was that the PLO had to recognize Israel's right to exist. It was in this way that the issue of the PLO's attitude towards Israel was made a decisive factor in the PLO's own participation in future peace negotiations.<sup>181</sup>

In a conversation with Egypt's Foreign Minister Kamal Hassan Ali, Frydenlund admitted that Norway had one of the most restrictive policies in Western Europe regarding the recognition of the PLO. The question was still causing domestic trouble, not least because of the strong opposition in Parliament. Personally, Frydenlund was 'not convinced that Norway's official line in this question was the right one to follow'. However, he added, adjustments were taking place, indicating that a change in attitudes was occurring.<sup>182</sup>

Norwegian recognition of the PLO was not a question of either/or, but more a question of carefully softening the rigid Norwegian position. By the beginning of the 1980s, direct contacts with the PLO on a governmental level were still taboo. But if the PLO were to alter its stance, guaranteeing Israel's right to exist within secure and recognized borders, that would pave the way for a negotiable solution, and might also create a basis for a change in the Norwegian position – thus allowing for contact with the Palestinian organization. This development, popularly known as the 'Longva doctrine', at least meant a more flexible attitude and more room to manoeuvre. Obviously, the man behind it, Longva himself, was personally convinced that the blame for the lack of peace in the Middle East ought to be placed elsewhere. In a critical comment on Israel's policy towards Lebanon, Longva said that 'at the same time, it ought perhaps to be mentioned that official Israeli rhetoric in some areas is even less in touch with reality, and the consequences could be even more critical. In the present circumstances, there exists a greater need than ever to confront Israel's rhetoric on the PLO and Palestinian issues with the realities of the situation'.<sup>183</sup>

Norway's more flexible attitude towards the PLO was linked to the hope for a peaceful solution of the Middle East conflict. But, importantly, in the light of later events, this policy was also linked to a possible future Norwegian role as a bridge-builder and mediator in the Middle East. On 9 October 1979 *Oslo Arbeidersamfund* (one of the oldest and largest sections of the Oslo Labour Party) decided that 'in order to play such a role, Norway should aim at establishing official contacts with the PLO. In addition, by so doing, Norway could contribute to strengthening responsible elements within the PLO and Israel that want to put an end to the violence and work towards a negotiable solution in which both Israel's right to exist and the rights of the Palestinians are ensured'.<sup>184</sup>

<sup>123</sup> This part is generally based on Tamnes 1997, pp. 376–384; Olsen 1998, esp. pp. 129–131; Tveit 1996, pp. 298–702; Jebsen 1997, pp. 14–20; Johansen 1977, 1980. Other interesting accounts are to be found in Hagelund 1983; and Bull 1973, though I have not used them to any great extent here.

<sup>124</sup> Olsen 1998, pp. 70–71; Jebsen 1997, pp. 14–15; Tveit 1996, pp. 394–405. For opinion polls in this period, see Strøm 1971, pp. 169–170.

<sup>125</sup> See, for instance, *Stortingstidende*, 1969–70, p. 2323; Olsen 1998, pp. 112–118, 129–130; Tveit 1996, pp. 394–398, 435–446, 451–459.

<sup>126</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 68, memorandum, Political Department, 18 April 1969; 25. 11/19, 79, memorandum, Political Department, 7 April 1970.

<sup>127</sup> Olsen 1998, pp. 112–118, 129–130.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 65, Anker to Foreign Ministry, 30 January 1969; 25. 11/19, 66, Anker to Foreign Ministry, 13 March 1969.

<sup>130</sup> White Paper no. 41, 1967–68, pp. 140–141; no. 29, 1970–71, p. 179; no. 58, 1971–72, p. 186; Olsen 1998, pp. 91, 112–118, 122–125, 129–130; Johansen 1979, pp. 52–53; Jebsen 1997, p. 17.

<sup>131</sup> Olsen 1998, pp. 111–112; Tamnes 1997, pp. 378–379; Tveit 1996, pp. 451–459; Jebsen 1997, pp. 14–15.

<sup>132</sup> Waage 1996, pp. 163–191; Tveit 1996, pp. 529–530, 544; Jebsen 1997, pp. 15–16.

<sup>133</sup> Tveit 1996, pp. 451–452; Jebsen 1997, p. 15.

<sup>134</sup> Tamnes 1997, pp. 377–378; Tveit 1996, pp. 558.

<sup>135</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 120, memorandum, Sverre Gjellum (UD secretary general), 10 September 1974; Norwegian embassy, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 16 September 1974; Petter Graver (ambassador, Tel Aviv) to Foreign Ministry, 16 September 1974, enclosed, Israeli Aide memoire, 11 September 1974; memorandum, Tom Vraalsen, 18 September 1974; memorandum, Jan G. Jølle (first secretary), 23 September 1974.

<sup>136</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 1, memorandum, Vibe, 4 November 1974.

<sup>137</sup> Johansen 1979, p. 53.

<sup>138</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 1, Graver to Foreign Ministry, 11, 14 and 15 October 1974; Graver to Vibe, 15 October 1974.

<sup>139</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 1, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 1, 8, 10 and 11 October 1974; memorandum, meeting between Sweden's Foreign Minister Sven Andersson and Frydenlund, 9 October 1974; memorandum, Vibe, 4 November 1974; Tamnes 1997, pp. 378; Tveit 1996, pp. 559–575; Johansen 1977, pp. 86–90; Johansen 1979, pp. 53–56; Jebsen 1997, pp. 16–18.

<sup>140</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>141</sup> Quoted from Johansen 1979, p. 54: 'Den norske regjering, Det norske arbeiderparti og det norske folk har aldri stått 'nøytrale' overfor et slikt barbari og har aldri godtatt at terroristorganisasjoner skal kunne skyte seg inn i FN.'

<sup>142</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>143</sup> Same references as above; UD 25. 11/19a, 2, petition to the government, 7 November 1974. The petition neither mentioned the PLO nor the Norwegian vote in the UN. It was vaguely formulated and referred to the necessity of Norway's continued involvement in seeking peace in the Middle East. A peaceful solution could only come after Israel was guaranteed secure borders. Moreover, it stated that the peace process should not be torpedoed by groups which threatened to eliminate Israel, and nor should the Western democracies let themselves be persuaded to desert Israel under threats of new oil blockades.

<sup>144</sup> *Stortingstidende* 19 November 1974, pp. 456–460, 608–614, 1026–1115.

<sup>145</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 122, memorandum, Foreign Minister to the members of the government, 21 November 1974.

<sup>146</sup> This comment was made by Dagbladet's New York correspondent who had been following the proceedings in the UN for years (Johansen 1977, p. 88).

<sup>147</sup> UD 25. 19/11, 123, memorandum, Vibe, 29 November 1974; memorandum, Arnesen, 29 November 1974; Tamnes 1997, p. 378; Tveit 1996, pp. 559–575; Johansen 1977, pp. 86–90; Johansen 1979, pp. 53–56; Jebesen 1997, pp. 16–18; see also Heradstveit 1974, pp. 24–25. Another example of the power of the Israel lobby, was when the chairman of the Labour Party, Reulf Steen, had voiced some criticism against Israel to the press in 1976, he was promptly approached by the Israeli Ambassador telling him that it was he who held the majority in Parliament. The same ambassador pointed out to Norwegian journalists that he only had to take one single telephone call to either Labour Party headquarters, to Labour's group in Parliament or to some of the other political parties in Parliament to get his way (Johansen 1979, p. 55; Jebesen 1997, p. 18).

<sup>148</sup> Tveit 1996, pp. 599–609; Johansen 1977, pp. 84–86; Jebesen 1997, pp. 18–19.

<sup>149</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 138, Tancred Ibsen (ambassador, Cairo) to Foreign Ministry, 17 January 1977, enclosed minutes, Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee's meeting with Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy 8 January 1977, Thomas J. Ronneng (counsellor, Cairo), 14 January 1977 and minutes, Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee's meeting with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat 9 January 1977, Ronneng, 17 January 1977; Ibsen (Damascus p.t. Cairo) to Foreign Ministry, 17 January 1977; Odd Jacobsen (ambassador, Tel Aviv) to Foreign Ministry, 18 January 1977, enclosed minutes, Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee's meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Yigal Allon, Truls Hanevold (first secretary, Tel Aviv); Ibsen (Amman p.t. Cairo) to Foreign Ministry, 19 January 1977.

<sup>150</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 138, Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, 13 January 1977; memorandum, Johan L. Løvald (first secretary), 17 January 1977; Jacobsen to Foreign Ministry, 18 January 1977, enclosed memorandum, Jacobsen, 18 January 1977; quoted from Jebesen 1997, p. 19.

<sup>151</sup> Tveit 1996, pp. 599–609; Johansen 1977, pp. 84–86; Johansen 1979, p. 56; Jebesen 1997, pp. 18–19.

<sup>152</sup> Tveit 1996, pp. 644–654.

<sup>153</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>154</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>155</sup> UD 11. 12/87, 2, memorandum, Bjørnar Utheim (head of division), 26 April 1978; Proposition to the Storting [st.prp.] no. 178, 1977–78; Recommendation to the Storting [innst. S.] no. 366, 1977–78; Stortingstidende 1977–78, pp. 3739–3747.

<sup>156</sup> Quoted from Johansen 1979, p. 64; Tamnes 1997, p. 379; Tveit 1996, pp. 655–687; Heiberg 1984; Jebesen 1997, p. 19.

<sup>157</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>158</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 157, minutes, Prime Minister Odvar Nordli, Foreign Minister Knut Frydenlund and Prime Minister Menachem Begin 11 December 1978, Rolf Trolle Andersen (head of division), 13 December 1978.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted from Tamnes 1997, p. 379.

<sup>160</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 173, Prime Minister's Office to Johan Jørgen Holst (state secretary), 12 May 1980, enclosed letter, Carter to Nordli, 5 May 1980.

<sup>161</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 195, memorandum, Hans Wilhelm Longva (special advisor for questions concerning the Arab areas), 9 June 1982; US President Ronald Reagan to Prime Minister Kåre Willoch, 21 June 1982; 25. 11/19, 196, Willoch to Reagan, 25 June 1982; Tamnes 1997, p. 379.

<sup>162</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 120, memorandum, Jølle, 23 September 1974; 25. 11/19, 138, memorandum, J. E. Nyheim (head of division), 3 November 1976; 25. 11/19, 146, Ibsen to Foreign Ministry, 24 January 1978; memorandum, Utheim, 13 February 1978; 25. 11/19, 149, Beirut to Foreign Ministry, 31 March 1978.

<sup>163</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 149, two cables, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 9 April 1978; Longva to Foreign Ministry, 11 April 1978; memorandum, Utheim, 12 April 1978; Utheim to UN delegation, New York, 14 April 1978; Ole Ålgård (UN ambassador) to Foreign Ministry, 14 April 1978; Foreign Ministry (Utheim) to Beirut/Cairo (Longva/Ibsen), 26 April 1978; 25. 11/19, 153, memorandum, Utheim, 16 August 1978; memorandum, Torbjørn Christiansen (head of department), 18 August 1978; 25. 11/19, 154, memorandum, Andersen, 5 September 1978; 25. 11/19, 155, memorandum, Utheim, 23 October 1978; Tamnes 1997, p. 379; Jebesen 1997, pp. 19–20.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva 24 February 1999.

<sup>165</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 149, two cables, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 9 April 1978; Longva to Foreign Ministry, 11 April 1978.

<sup>166</sup> Tamnes 1997, p. 379; Tveit 1996, pp. 663–671.

<sup>167</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 167, memorandum, Longva, 25 September 1978; 25. 11/19, 176, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 27 August 1980.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva 24 February 1999; interview with Bassam Abu Sharif 23 March 1999. The economic aid given to the Palestinian refugees and the work of various NGO's in the Middle East deserves a much more extensive treatment than is possible here, but, it would be going far beyond the scope of this particular report to do so.

<sup>169</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 152, memorandum, Andersen, 10 July 1978; 25. 11/19, 153, memorandum, Utheim, 16 August 1978; memorandum, Christiansen, 18 August 1978; 25. 11/19, 154, memorandum Andersen, 5 September 1978; 25. 11/19, 165, memorandum, Holst, 21 July 1979; Tamnes 1997, p. 379; Tveit 1996, pp. 685–690.

<sup>170</sup> See for instance, UD 25. 11/19, 135, memorandum, Nyheim, 3 November 1976; 25. 11/19, 157, minutes, Andersen, 12 December 1978; 25. 11/19, 158, memorandum, Christiansen, 31 January 1979.

<sup>171</sup> Quoted from Jebesen 1997, p. 20.

<sup>172</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 168, minutes, meeting between Israel Gatt (Secretary-General, Israeli Labour Party) and Nordli, Prime Minister's Office, 18 October 1979; statement, Oslo Arbeidersamfund [Oslo Labour Society], 9 November 1979; 25. 11/19, 178, travelling report, Middle East journey, LO [trade union] delegation, 30 September 1980; 25. 11/19, 182, Longva to Beirut, 8 April 1981; resolution, Labour Party Annual Meeting, 8 April 1981; 25. 11/19, 185, LO to Foreign Ministry, 24 July 1981; 25. 11/19, 186, LO to unions, 2 August 1982; 25. 11/19, 201, LO to unions, 11 October 1982; Beirut to Foreign Ministry, 18 October 1982; 25. 11/19e, 3, Beirut to Foreign Ministry, 12 November 1979; Johansen 1980, pp. 56–66; Jebesen 1997, pp. 20–23.

<sup>173</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>174</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>175</sup> Aftenposten, 28 July 1979; VG, 30 July 1979; UD 25. 11/19e, 3, Foreign Ministry to Beirut, 30 July 1979; Johansen

1980, pp. 56–62.

<sup>176</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 158, memorandum, Andersen, 6 February 1979; 25. 11/19, 161, Beirut to Foreign Ministry, 11 April 1979; 25. 11/19, 176, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 1 September 1980; 25. 11/19, 192, memorandum, Longva, 1 March 1982.

<sup>177</sup> Aftenposten, 28 July 1979; VG, 30 July 1979; Johansen 1980, pp. 56–62.

<sup>178</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 175, UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 23 July 1980; memorandum, Longva, 25 July 1980; minutes, internal morning meeting, 28 July 1980; UN delegation to Foreign Ministry, 29 July 1980; Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 31 July 1980; Johansen 1980, pp. 56–62.

<sup>179</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>180</sup> Stortingstidende 31 October 1979, p. 395:

<sup>181</sup> Stortingstidende 31 October 1979, pp. 391–408; Johansen 1980, pp. 60–62. In the Foreign Ministry, two drafts were worked out beforehand. Longva stated in his draft to the Foreign Minister that the PLO was the only existing and broadly recognized spokesman for the Palestinian people:

<sup>182</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 181, memorandum, Longva, 31 March 1981:

<sup>183</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 184, memorandum, Longva, 15 June 1981:

<sup>184</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 168, statement, Oslo Arbeidersamfund, 9 November 1979:

## 4 Part IV: Norway as a bridge-builder

Undoubtedly, the role of the Palestinians and the PLO was taking on an increasingly prominent role in the Middle East debate in Europe in the 1970s. At the same time, Norway was isolated, a remote country in this European context - not only geographically - hanging on to its inflexible stand on the Palestinian question. Neither oil blockades nor acts of terrorism persuaded the majority of Norwegians to abandon their pro-Israel position and see the conflict from the Arab- Palestinian side as well. But eventually even Norway inched towards a more 'balanced' Middle East policy, triggered by major regional events as well as particularly Norwegian factors like the UNIFIL engagement from 1978. However ironically it might seem, it was Norway's traditional position as Israel's best friend that made this remote country suitable and attractive as a possible mediating partner. Through the establishment of the Oslo Back Channel, Norway succeeded in bringing representatives for Israel and the PLO together. This effort resulted in the Oslo agreement, a Declaration of Principles that was to pave the way for the establishment of the Palestinian Self-Government Authority and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO.

### 4.1 Small beginnings

Surprisingly enough, at least at first glance, it was neither Norway nor Israel that drew Norway into a mediating position. It was the PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat – at that time still regarded by many as the very incarnation of terrorism - who took the initiative and brought Norway's name forward. Arafat considered Norway an important channel because of its close connections with Israel rather than in spite of them. He saw Norway as a channel that could be used in possible negotiations in the future and felt that Norway was a serious and civilized country that could not be accused of playing along with its own national interests. In addition to the close links to the enemy, Norway also had strong ties with the USA, something that was also definitely needed. In one way or another, the US would have a major role to play in any peace negotiations in the Middle East.<sup>185</sup> Longva, 29 July 1982; interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva 24 February 1999; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–381; Johansen 1980, pp. 62–66; Jebsen 1997, pp. 21–24. More examples will be given below."/>

The idea of Norway's as a fitting mediator was raised seriously for the first time in 1979, but had also been touched upon on several previous occasions. The former UN Ambassador, Hans Engen, had played an important mediating role in the aftermath of the Suez crisis in 1956.<sup>186</sup> In 1965, while Engen was Norway's Ambassador to the USA, he was approached by the Egyptian Ambassador. Egypt's President Nasser wanted to use Norway as a secret tool to improve relations with the US. Through Norway's good offices, Nasser wanted to warn the American government of the dangers of a new war with Israel. At that time, however, neither Engen nor the Foreign Ministry back in Oslo were interested in playing the role of bridge-builder in the Middle East.<sup>187</sup> In addition, at this stage, there were no official contacts with the PLO. However, the new relationship with Arafat and his associates, especially as a consequence of Norway's UNIFIL contribution, gave the 'bridge-builder' notion new credibility: Unlike earlier times, Norwegian authorities were now on speaking terms with the Palestinian side.<sup>188</sup>

Norway's potential role as a mediator was reviewed in greater detail in connection with the 1978 Camp David Agreement, occasioned by the issue of Norwegian oil deliveries to Israel.

In 1978, Israel and Egypt made peace. As a consequence, in 1979, during the negotiations for the second Israeli- Egyptian Disengagement Agreement, Israel was about to relinquish its oil fields in Sinai. Originally, Iran had promised to guarantee the supply of oil to Israel. But after the revolution in Iran, this was no longer

a serious option. The US, on its side, had promised to supply its ally and had a problem. American eyes fell on Norway which had recently discovered oil in its waters. Norway was asked to pledge oil deliveries to Israel, to replace the missing Iranian oil.<sup>189</sup>

In the political infighting over the new Norwegian oil resources, the government basically preferred not to side with anybody at all on the international scene. It sought to maintain a compromising, bridge-building attitude. However, many of the players on the international scene resented this. Several argued that Norway should use its oil resources as a political instrument to either help or to punish countries. It was expected in particular that Norway should take a stand in times of turbulence and disagreements in the oil market.<sup>190</sup>

In this context, the single most difficult issue for Norway was Israel. The question of Norwegian oil to Israel had first been raised with Prime Minister Lars Korvald in 1972, when he was on a private visit to Israel. Korvald had been taken completely by surprise. At this stage, Norway hardly had any oil at all. However, Korvald had told the Israeli Deputy Finance Minister (the one who raised the issue) that an initiative at this early stage would hardly serve any Israeli objectives.<sup>191</sup> In 1976, the Israeli Foreign Minister Yigal Allon again broached the topic, this time with Foreign Minister Frydenlund.<sup>192</sup> On both these occasions - that in 1972 and in 1976 - the oil delivery issue seemed to vanish from the agenda without further mention either by the Israelis or the Norwegians. However, in the autumn of 1978, in the wake of the Camp David Agreement and the crisis in Iran, it was raised again with a greater sense of purpose, first by the Israelis themselves and then by the USA. The Americans were obliged to deliver oil to Israel and, probably for political reasons, the USA regarded Norway as a suitable member of the team.<sup>193</sup>

In Norway, the thought of delivering oil to Israel met with some sympathy, especially within the Christian People's Party and by some Conservatives.<sup>194</sup> Foreign Minister Knut Frydenlund felt that he couldn't refuse, due to a sense of loyalty to the USA. Others, like Minister of Finance Per Kleppe, warned against giving in to what he saw as troublesome American pressure. State Secretary Thorvald Stoltenberg set out a long list of pros and cons and concluded that neither Israel nor the USA had thought through the problems which Norway might have to face. Jens Evensen, an expert in international law, argued that oil deliveries might have dramatic peacekeeping consequences both for Norway's current membership in the Security Council and for the fate of the UNIFIL force.<sup>195</sup>

For the Norwegian government, the American's request for an oil guarantee created several dilemmas. The USA was Norway's closest and most important NATO ally; Israel needed the oil guarantee and still enjoyed strong support from many politicians and a large part of the Norwegian public. However, after discussing the matter, the Norwegians said no. It was claimed that no oil was available. In addition, Israel was not an obvious market. If Norway helped Israel for political reasons, other countries, NATO allies for instance, might be expected to be treated in the same generous way. Another significant cause for concern was the fear of adverse Arab reactions and countermeasures. At the political level, an oil guarantee to Israel could easily be seen as a threat to the new and fragile relationship with the PLO which was of great importance to the Foreign Ministry. One could easily foresee terror attacks directed against Norway, the Foreign Ministry argued, not least against the Norwegian UNIFIL force in South Lebanon, endangering the lives of Norwegian soldiers. (This was, however, a standard Foreign Ministry argument whenever Norwegian policy was likely to get, in one way or another, too pro-Israel, as they saw it.) The Export Council and the Norwegian Ship Owners' Association also warned against boycott actions and loss of markets. The government therefore concluded that while Norway was willing to help, it had to be done within a broader international context. In this particular case, Norway tried to avoid taking a stand on the possible dilemmas.<sup>196</sup>

It was during this internal process of sorting out dilemmas over the US oil guarantee request, that Norway's role as a potential future mediator was raised by Yassir Arafat. The Foreign Ministry had asked the Norwegian chargé d'affaires in Beirut, Hans Wilhelm Longva, to discuss the matter with Arafat and find out whether he was opposed to the idea of a guaranteed deal. It came as a surprise both to Longva and the Foreign Ministry in Oslo that Arafat found the deal unproblematic. As a trade off for his acceptance of a possible Norwegian- Israeli oil deal, Arafat wanted something in return: he wanted to come to Norway if, at some time in the future, he needed a secret back channel to the Israelis. Israel, at this time, was governed by the hawkish Likud and wanted nothing to do with the PLO. Foreign Minister Frydenlund was, not unexpectedly, positive and willing to serve as a possible back channel.<sup>197</sup>

In the coming years this option surfaced on several occasions but the problem of strong Israeli resistance remained. Knut Frydenlund was the driving force in Norway, Longva his local representative. From 1978 until the summer of 1979 Longva was stationed in Beirut. He then returned to Oslo and became what was termed 'advisor on questions concerning the Arab area', a position he held until his appointment as ambassador to Kuwait in 1983. Throughout this time, Longva travelled often to the Middle East and kept

close contact with Arafat and his closest associates. In a conversation between the two in September 1979, Arafat expressed disappointment at the lack of diplomatic progress. As he saw it, the countries in Western Europe were the only ones who could be expected to have any influence on the shaping of the American Middle East policy. Arafat urged Longva to approach the USA either bilaterally or through NATO. A year later, Arafat again underlined the importance with which he viewed Norway. Norway was an important member of NATO. Norway had close relations with the USA. Consequently, Norway could play an 'important role as regards finding a solution in the Middle East'. In July 1981, Arafat, once more and much more specifically, underlined the importance he attached to the relations between Norway and the PLO and the 'role Norway could play in a potential silent diplomacy where Israel and the PLO could be brought together in a negotiating situation'. Longva testified to Frydenlund's 'positive interest' in Arafat's thoughts of a possible Norwegian role. Both Frydenlund and Longva acknowledged that a future solution could only be found in a two-state solution, a partition. However, nothing concrete came out of the Norwegian talks with the PLO.<sup>198</sup>

In 1981, the Labour Party lost power in Norway and a Conservative government took over. In 1983, the Conservative government was broadened by the inclusion of the Christian People's Party and the Centre Party. Contrary to what one might expect, this change of government did not influence the *informal* contact already established with the PLO. Longva and other high-ranking civil servants, even the State Secretary, continued and even extended working relations.<sup>199</sup>

Although the *official* line towards the PLO remained strongly restrictive, the views on the conflict held by Prime Minister Kåre Willoch, earlier a loyal friend of Israel, had gone through a radical transformation following the Parliamentary visit to the Middle East in 1977. After resuming power, he favoured a softer attitude, but his colleagues in the government and representatives in Parliament were still opposed. The new Foreign Minister, Sverre Strøm, insisted on keeping to the traditional pro-Israeli line. He acknowledged that the Palestinians were in a 'miserable state. But they had mainly themselves to blame. Their approach to the solution of their own problems had been unrealistic.... The Israeli attitude [to the peace negotiations] has hardened. This was the fault of the Palestinians'.<sup>200</sup> Strøm's position received further support when the Christian People's Party joined the government in 1983, especially from the new Oil and Energy Minister, Kåre Kristiansen. He started his career in the government by stating that he would use every possible opportunity to work for Norwegian oil deliveries to Israel. A devoted friend of Israel, Kåre Kristiansen had not cleared the issue with anyone in government and was forced to back down. He was considered to have stepped far outside his own area of jurisdiction.<sup>201</sup>

The idea of establishing a PLO information office in Oslo became a contentious political issue in the 1980s but, to put it mildly, was mostly met with scepticism. The PLO had established such offices in many countries in the 1970s. Some had even been accorded diplomatic status. From 1979 the PLO had repeatedly raised the question informally with Norwegian authorities. However, the PLO always showed great discretion and sensitivity to the strong pro-Israel sentiments in Norway. The PLO was also warned about the negative effects of pressing the issue and was asked not to do so.<sup>202</sup>

But in 1984 the PLO became more impatient. Longva, who had all along been PLO's contact, now warned the government of the consequences of a continued refusal: 'In light of the fact that in those Western countries where the matter has been of any importance, visas and work and residence permits have been issued [for local PLO office representatives], in the opinion of the Embassy, there is little doubt that a Norwegian refusal would not only strain Norway's relations with the PLO, but its relations with the Arab world in general'.<sup>203</sup> But the Norwegian government did not want to give in, despite the fact that it was absolutely clear that this stand would isolate Norway even more.<sup>204</sup> In October 1984, the formal request from the PLO arrived. Although the government felt it could not deny the establishment of an information office, it chose to use another weapon: in January 1985 the proposed leader of the office was denied work and residence permits in Norway.<sup>205</sup> But, in the meantime, the PLO had found a Norwegian citizen to run the office and, in November 1985, Omar Sabri Kitmitto was appointed head of the office. In the autumn of 1986 the PLO office was finally opened. The whole issue had triggered a strongly emotional debate in Norway that lasted for years.<sup>206</sup>

## 4.2 The crucial role of the Norwegian Labour Party

From the beginning of the 1980s, it was the opposition Labour Party that forced through the profound changes in attitudes to the PLO. 'Norway is today one of the most restrictive countries in the world in relation to for instance the Palestinian problem. This is not said as a criticism of others; it is more a criticism of myself ... I believe that neither Israel, Norway nor the Middle East conflict will profit from a continuation of this restrictive line', said Knut Frydenlund from the opposition benches.<sup>207</sup> The Norwegian Labour Party was following in the footsteps of other social democratic parties in Europe, first and foremost in Austria and

Sweden, although there the pro-Palestinian process had been going on for years and was far ahead of the small steps taken in Norway.<sup>208</sup>

It was before – and during – the Congress of the Federation of Trade Unions, the LO, in May 1981, that the changing attitudes within the trade and labour movements could be seen for the first time. In particular, after a visit to Lebanon by LO leaders during the autumn of 1980, outspoken demands from LO members urging support for the PLO and the establishment of contacts with the Palestinian trade union federation had poured into LO headquarters.<sup>209</sup> Temperatures had run high, and Norwegian newspapers published reports with headlines like ‘LO threatened with full PLO war’. It came as a shock to the old Israel friends in the movement when the LO Congress adopted a resolution declaring the necessity of establishing contacts with the Palestinian trade unions. However, the resolution also voiced, wisely enough, support for maintaining traditional Histadrut contacts.<sup>210</sup>

At the Labour Party Conference in April 1981, the new approach to the Middle East conflict was also beginning to surface. The resolution adopted by the Conference had, true to Labour tradition, repeated as its first point that Israel’s right to exist within secure and recognized borders must be ensured. But it also called for a just solution to the Palestinian situation and a recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. It was decided that the Labour Party should broaden its contacts with the PLO and do what it could to ensure that the PLO was included in the peace process in the Middle East. There was, however, a strong consciousness within the Labour Party that the only way to go – if anything was to be achieved in the Middle East -- was to work for good relations with both parties. This meant establishing ties with the PLO while, at the same time, maintaining its traditional close friendship with Israeli Labour politicians. However, reactions from the Israeli Ambassador in Oslo did not bode well for the future of this ploy. At a meeting between Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland and Israeli Ambassador Hava Hareli, Harlem Brundtland told the Israeli Ambassador that she had gone too far and added that she, as Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, was not willing to receive either warnings or be put on trial for decisions taken at the Labour Party Conference.<sup>211</sup>

As a consequence, contacts beyond the level of ‘working contacts’ were established between the Norwegian Labour Party and the PLO from the early 1980s and onwards. The opposition position from the autumn of 1981 made it easier to push forward the reconciliation process. Several Labour Party leaders met with Arafat. Just by meeting the ‘symbol of terrorism’ themselves, they were crossing a threshold. Labour Party Leader from 1975-81, Reiulf Steen, was the first to meet with Arafat. In December 1982 the former chairman of the Labour Party went to Tunis to interview Arafat for the newspaper *Verdens Gang* (VG). The interview appeared on the front page of the newspaper in its 20 December edition. Norway could play a key role in the work for peace in the Middle East, Arafat was quoted as saying to Steen in the interview. Norway was especially qualified to play such a role. The PLO leader emphasized in particular Norway’s close relations with the USA. However, Steen’s journalistic interview was partly a cover. He had been asked by an old friend, Abba Eban, Israel’s UN Ambassador 1948- 59, US Ambassador 1950-- 9, Deputy Prime Minister 1963- 66 and Foreign Minister 1966- 74, to act in his place at a meeting with Yassir Arafat and Issam Sartawi, a moderate Palestinian who represented the PLO at meetings of the Socialist International. With the help of Reiulf Steen, Eban wanted to try to establish a direct channel between himself (Eban) and the PLO chairman. However, nothing concrete came out of Steen’s efforts.<sup>212</sup>

Two weeks later, on New Year’s Eve 1982, an ‘official’ Labour Party delegation (sent to the Middle East after approval by Labour’s Board) visited Arafat in Tunis. The delegation consisted of Knut Frydenlund, his close advisor Bernt Bull, Thorvald Stoltenberg, Parliamentarian Liv Aasen and, from Denmark, the former Foreign Minister Kjeld Olesen and Parliamentarian Lasse Bundtz. Again Arafat raised the question of a Norwegian and/or Scandinavian role in the peace process in the Middle East. As Arafat saw it, Norway and the other Scandinavian countries could help establish contact between the USA and the PLO. But even more important and useful, the Norwegian Labour Party could help in establishing direct contact between the Israeli Labour Party and the PLO. Arafat asked his Norwegian guests to be instrumental in handing this message over to the Israeli Labour Party.<sup>213</sup>

Thorvald Stoltenberg followed up Arafat’s initiative with considerable enthusiasm. He was anxious on behalf of the Norwegian Labour Party to make a Norwegian contribution to getting the peace process in the Middle East unstuck. He saw the building of a personal relationship with Yassir Arafat and the PLO as an important part of the Norwegian peace-building efforts.<sup>214</sup>

Stoltenberg’s and the Labour Party’s main asset was their close friendship with the Israeli Labour Party so this network was the obvious one to use. So Stoltenberg called an acquaintance there, but the response was negative. Looking for alternatives, Stoltenberg, who at the time was International Secretary of the Federation of Trade Unions, thought he might try using the Socialist International as a cover. Arafat himself was also eager to continue the contact established at the meeting on New Year’s Eve 1982. During the

winter of 1983, Stoltenberg received a telephone call from the Palestinian leader: Arafat told Stoltenberg that he wanted to send his close associate, Issam Sartawi, to Oslo to discuss further progress. Like Reulf Steen and several other party members, Stoltenberg had already had contact with the moderate Sartawi, who was also one of PLO's leading advocates for direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO. The plan discussed by Stoltenberg and Arafat was to prepare the ground for secret contact between the PLO and the Israeli Labour Party during a meeting of the Socialist International at Albufeira in Portugal in April 1983.<sup>215</sup>

The ever-optimistic Stoltenberg thought that this was a promising track and that opposition within the Israeli Labour Party could be overcome. However, the meeting never took place. Issam Sartawi was shot down in the hotel lobby the day before the secret meeting was scheduled, in front of terrified participants at the Socialist International Congress, Stoltenberg included. The Palestinian terrorist, Abu Nidal had interfered and demonstrated his way of ending peace efforts in the Middle East. The work of mediation and reconciliation suffered severely for years after this episode. Not only was the incident a serious blow to the Norwegian Labour Party's hopes of setting up a direct channel between the Israelis and the Palestinians but many other of the European social democratic parties also lost one of their most important links to the moderates within the PLO. The incident did not, however, influence the Norwegian Labour Party's goal of normalizing relations with the PLO.<sup>216</sup>

These mediation efforts on the part of Stoltenberg were far from being a one-man show. He was backed by leading Labour Party figures, as was the former Party Leader Reulf Steen, who was concentrating on the Socialist International network. Also other European social democratic leaders such as Bruno Kreisky, Willy Brandt and Shimon Peres were using the same network.<sup>217</sup> In Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, who had become new Party Leader in 1981, was also eager to continue to work on the newly established PLO track.<sup>218</sup> There was, in other words, a broad consensus within the higher echelons of the Labour Party in favour of developing a network of Palestinian contacts. In April 1983, just a few days after the Sartawi murder, Yassir Arafat went to Stockholm to meet the social democratic leaders in Scandinavia. Harlem Brundtland met him for the first time, and was both pleasantly surprised and impressed by the reasoning and knowledge of the moderate politician Arafat. Again the question of a direct Israeli- Palestinian channel was discussed. The social democratic leaders present decided to continue their efforts to find possible openings for such negotiations but, despite many small attempts for promoting peace, there was still no progress.<sup>219</sup>

When the Labour Party regained power in May 1986, Knut Frydenlund again became Foreign Minister but died within a year in February 1987. Thorvald Stoltenberg took over. Back in power, Labour immediately spoke in favour of a more conciliatory approach to the PLO, signalling a turning point in Norwegian Middle East policy. And the climate, even in Norway, had changed. In the years to come, Norwegian policy became more balanced. In addition, Norway's attitude towards Israel became increasingly more complicated. The heavy water dispute, which intensified in 1987 and thereafter, reinforced Norwegian dissatisfaction with its old, best friend.<sup>220</sup>

In the secret deal from 1959, which only became public knowledge in 1979, Israel had guaranteed that the heavy water should be used for peaceful purposes only. Norway had the right to inspect and control that this was the case. The agreement did not, however, give any right to inspect the nuclear reactor. From the moment the deal was publicly known, it was heavily criticized. Many doubted that Israel had only peaceful intentions and reliable sources claimed that the heavy water had been used to develop nuclear weapons. In February 1987, Frydenlund was forced to admit that Norway had not taken the right of inspection seriously enough and, from 1987 to 1990, the heavy water issue became the object of a political tug of war between the two former best friends. The Israelis were hard negotiators and did not want to make any compromises. An agreement made in June 1988, did not get sufficient support in the Foreign Affairs committee in the Norwegian Parliament. In 1991, the Norwegian government finally had to be content with buying back 10.5 tons of the original 21 tons of heavy water sold to Israel over the years. Norway had really made an effort to maintain good relations with the Israelis. With Norwegian peace diplomacy in the region now speeding up, this aspect was more important than ever before. Norway was again involved in mediation work from 1987, which, at this stage, was being led by Sweden.<sup>221</sup>

### **4.3 The important role played by Sweden – the Palestinians' best friend?**

The Middle East conflict had acquired a new dynamic that in many ways opened up for a new approach in 1987. Israel had lost much of its international support. In the Palestinian areas, the *Intifada* almost led to civil war. The PLO appeared increasingly moderate, at least in the eyes of the Western European countries. In 1988, an independent Palestinian state was proclaimed in the West Bank and Gaza. At the same time, the Palestinian National Council (PNC) accepted the three important UN Resolutions 181, 242 and 338, *de facto* recognizing Israel's right to exist and a two-state solution. In addition, the PLO increased its diplomatic

efforts when it came to getting closer to Israel, the USA and, in general, being recognized as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.<sup>222</sup>

In 1988, Sweden – under a Labour Party government, personified by the Foreign Minister Sten Andersson - played an important role mediating in the Middle East conflict. Andersson and his team functioned as silent messengers between the PLO and USA. They finally managed to open up a dialogue between the American government and the PLO, which in itself was a major achievement.

The conflict in the Middle East had been high on the Swedish foreign policy agenda ever since the creation of Israel in 1948. However, Swedish- Israeli relations had got off to a problematic start. In September 1948, the UN mediator, Folke Bernadotte, a count and a member of the Swedish royal family, was assassinated by Jewish terrorists. One could, of course, dismiss this as history from 1948. Why bother about a murder that had happened years ago? The biggest problem was that it had probably been ordered by Yitzhak Shamir, Israel's Foreign Minister 1980- 83, Prime Minister 1983- 84 and 1986- 92. In 1948, he belonged to the Jewish terrorist group Stern and was a part of the leading troika that ordered the Bernadotte assassination. The assassination and, as the Swedes saw it, the Israeli reluctance to investigate and try the perpetrators, stood in the way of a warm and friendly relationship between the two countries. As long as Shamir remained Prime Minister in Israel, it was unthinkable for Sweden's Prime Minister to go on an official visit to Israel or to receive Shamir as Israel's Prime Minister in Sweden.<sup>223</sup>

Although they had been critical of the murder in the past, parts of the Swedish Labour Party and the labour and trade union movements in general had, however, just as in Norway, warm and intimate relations with the Israeli Labour Party. Many party members were strong believers in the socialist experiment in the Middle East. The kibbutz movement was especially regarded as an important political model. But even in the 1940s and 1950s, when this admiration was most apparent in the Scandinavian labour movement as a whole, Norway was conducting a far more pro-Israeli policy, all the time pushing and dragging a reluctant Sweden to support Israel. Sweden, followed by Denmark to some degree, was actually much more concerned with keeping good relations with the Palestinians and the Arab states. This different approach was most conspicuous during the Suez crisis.<sup>224</sup>

After the Six Day War in 1967, when Israel became an occupying power, attitudes changed within the Labour Party in Sweden, paralleling a development in other countries as well. When Olof Palme succeeded Tage Erlander as Prime Minister in 1969 the tone hardened. In May 1967, before the Six Day War, Palme was the first leading Swedish social democrat to officially criticize Israel, sparking a heated debate within the party. This represented not only a shift in personnel and style, but also in generations as well, a shift that marked a new position, not only in Sweden, but in most other European countries too.<sup>225</sup>

Swedish diplomacy under Olof Palme was characterized by an activist approach and a radical spirit.<sup>226</sup> The Swedish Prime Minister had – both on his own and on Sweden's behalf - high ambitions when it came to being the major mediator in international conflicts, especially outside Europe. Swedish neutrality and the frequently outspoken Swedish promotion of international law and moral principles in international policies created respect and gave Sweden confidence. However, many also regarded Sweden as a country flirting with left-wing dictatorships. For instance, leading Swedish social democrats, Olof Palme included, had praised Fidel Castro and Cuba. Palme's Sweden was the leading country in Scandinavia when it came to demonstrating against and criticizing the US war in Vietnam.<sup>227</sup>

The activism of Olof Palme was still alive among Foreign Ministry staff in Stockholm when Sten Andersson took over in October 1985. A majority had been raised on Palme's activist approach, an approach that had shaped Sweden's foreign policy since the end of the 1960s. There were, they thought, possibilities for Swedish involvement in a complicated international scene. The Foreign Ministry had great experience, both when it came to the shaping of opinions and in independent mediation and negotiation efforts.<sup>228</sup>

Under Palme, Sweden had recognized earlier than other countries the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause. He was the first Western leader to meet Yassir Arafat, which he did in 1974. A year later, the PLO was allowed to open an information office in Stockholm. In 1983, Palme – now Prime Minister, but claiming that he was acting in his capacity as Party Leader - invited Arafat to Stockholm to meet the social democratic leaders in Scandinavia. Olof Palme had used the Socialist International framework in particular to push for a recognition of the PLO, co-operating closely with Europe's two other outstanding social democratic figures of the time, Austria's Bruno Kreisky and Germany's Willy Brandt. Both of them had been refugees in Stockholm during World War II and were close friends of Palme.<sup>229</sup>

On 7 March 1988, Sten Andersson set out on a visit to Israel. While this was his first official visit, Andersson had been there before. He had known Foreign Minister Shimon Peres since the beginning of the 1960s. In political circles, especially within the Israeli Labour Party, Andersson was regarded as a loyal friend of

Israel. He had supported the Jewish pioneering spirit in the labour movement and was not burdened with the 'Arafat's-best-friend' reputation which clung to Olof Palme.<sup>230</sup>

However, the Israeli State that Peres represented in the 1980s and 1990s was radically different from the one he had helped to build decades before and which Andersson had so admired. Andersson's visit to Israel in March 1988 was to be a listen-and-learn journey. In addition, the *Intifada* had only strengthened Andersson's desire to contribute to the peace process in the Middle East. In Andersson's view, the occupation policy was a threat to the democratic state he had had such big hopes for. 'Finally my eyes were opened to the injustice committed against the Palestinians', Andersson wrote to Arafat in 1988. To him, Israel had become a disappointment and he became driven by a strong desire to replace violence between the two parties with a political dialogue in order to achieve peace. However, seen from the Swedish point of view, the idea of an official visit to Israel was not incontrovertible. On the contrary, it still was a problematic issue. The Prime Minister, Ingvar Carlsson, also had a standing invitation to visit Israel, but had refused as long as Shamir remained Prime Minister.<sup>231</sup>

Andersson had with mounting concern observed the increasing brutality of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. The Palestinians were being treated as second rate citizens, and the distrust between the two was steadily increasing. As a result, Foreign Minister Andersson delivered an extraordinarily harsh attack on the Jewish State during his visit. Peres was tough back and attacked the PLO and especially Sweden's attitude towards the Palestinian terrorist organization, as he and most Israelis saw it.<sup>232</sup>

During Andersson's visit, Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin revealed that a growing number of people in the Labour Party wanted to open direct peace talks with the PLO. Andersson was surprised by Beilin's frankness. Also of importance for Sweden's future role was a meeting Sten Andersson had with a group of local Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, among them the subsequent leader of the Palestinian delegation to Washington, Haidar Abdel Shafi. The Palestinians wanted the Swedish Foreign Minister to help them make PLO acceptable for the Americans. If the USA recognized the PLO, the PLO might recognize Israel's right to exist. It was thought that Sweden should try to influence the USA to do so.<sup>233"/></sup>

During a visit to the USA in April 1988, Andersson met with his counterpart in the Reagan administration, Secretary of State George Shultz. Andersson unveiled for Schultz his plans to arrange a meeting between a group of prominent American Jews and representatives for the PLO, stating that the aim should be to undertake an Israeli- PLO dialogue. The main item to be discussed should be recognition of Israel. Shultz listened carefully, but did not answer. Sten Andersson interpreted his silence as a 'yes'.<sup>234</sup>

Not every member of the Swedish government shared the opinion of the USA as regards the PLO. The Swedish Foreign Ministry knew that the Palestinians had been divided over the issue of terrorism as a method of fighting Israel since the beginning of the 1970s. Olof Palme, and later Sten Andersson, thought, as opposed to the USA, that the international community should support the moderate, compromise-minded forces among the Palestinians. According to prevailing Swedish opinion, Arafat belonged to the moderate group. Sweden wanted to have a close relationship and an ongoing dialogue with the PLO, also making it possible to offer 'constructive criticism'. Sweden's aim was to invest Arafat with increased legitimacy in order to strengthen the moderate elements within the PLO. As to their view of Israel, the inner circle of the Middle East group (called the 'Studiegruppen') at the Foreign Ministry was convinced that Israel would be unwilling to make any compromises. The Israeli government would use all available methods to crush the Palestinian uprising. Consequently, the PLO had to be the one to take the first step to break out of the vicious spiral of escalating violence. In the spring and summer of 1988, the Middle East group surrounding Sten Andersson had decided to give priority to the work of broadening Sweden's contacts inside the PLO and by so doing, try to build up a close relationship with the PLO leadership in Tunis. Andersson knew that Sweden had a good reputation among the Palestinians, as a consequence of the work done by Palme. But it was not good enough. To influence the PLO and to get the Palestinian organization to change course, he himself had to be fully trusted.<sup>235</sup>

US Middle East policy since 1975 had been to 'freeze out' Arafat, and force him and the PLO to recognize Israel's right to exist in compliance with UN Resolution 242 and renounce terrorism. Until these demands were met, the USA would neither recognize nor negotiate with the PLO. In the early autumn of 1988, the PLO began an international campaign to show the new face of the Palestinian organization. When Arafat spoke to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 12 September 1988, the PLO leader for the first time officially mentioned Israel by name. He also declared that the PLO was now prepared to recognise Israel as a state in the region, on the condition that Israel gave the Palestinians the same recognition. Arafat hoped that these new signals would 'go home' in Europe, and that the European Union would put pressure on the USA to start talks with the PLO.<sup>236</sup>

Four days later, on 16 September 1988, Secretary of State Shultz commented on the speech by Arafat. He declared that the USA was not willing to recognize a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, but he promised that the USA would support the Palestinians' right to raise the question about a state of their own in peace talks with Israel, as soon as the PLO had recognized Israel's right to exist. During the PNC meeting in Algiers, Arafat accepted the UN resolutions 181, 242 and 338, on 15 November thus accepting a two-state solution and Israel's *de facto* right to exist. The Palestinians believed that they now had fulfilled USA demands for recognition, but this was not the case. Although the USA regarded the move as a positive step in the right direction, it was not sufficient to get US recognition of the PLO. The Algiers declaration had to be more precise.<sup>237</sup>

In Stockholm, the first meeting of prominent American Jews and Palestinians took place 21 November. What was later to be known as the 'Stockholm document', a 'chairman's summary' of the positions taken by the two parties, was duly signed and placed in a safe at the Foreign Ministry. The Stockholm document was, in fact, a more precise wording of the PNC resolution. For the first time, the PLO had explicitly recognized Israel as a state in the region, in addition to renouncing terrorism.<sup>238</sup> However, at the same time, developments in the USA were taking quite another direction: Yassir Arafat had been invited to speak at the UN General Assembly but then, before an astonished world, Shultz denied him a visa to the USA.<sup>239</sup>

The Stockholm document had been discussed with Shultz on 25 November. The American Secretary of State had been positive, saying that he regarded the contents of the document as a step in the right direction, but he felt that it was still not meeting the US conditions for a dialogue with the PLO. At the same time, the Swedish Foreign Ministry was informed that Arafat himself, after some reluctance, would come to Stockholm to meet the prominent American Jews. According to the schedule, the Stockholm meeting would be held on 6- 7 December. The UN Assembly, which following Shultz's decision to refuse Arafat a visa had moved from New York to Geneva to enable Arafat to participate, was scheduled for December 13. The Swedish diplomats hoped that it would be in Stockholm that the PLO leader would say the 'magic words' acceptable for the USA.<sup>240</sup>

The Swedish Foreign Ministry immediately informed Shultz about Arafat's expected visit. The Ministry also asked whether Shultz himself could formulate the precise conditions and wording necessary for a US acceptance. Suddenly things were moving. On Saturday, 3 December, Shultz called the Swedish Ambassador in Washington to set out the US demands, which were subsequently confirmed in writing on official State Department paper. After much toing and froing, Arafat finally put his name to this statement which had been produced in the meetings with Andersson. However, Arafat did not make the statement public at his press conference in Stockholm, as expected by Shultz and his advisors. Consequently, the US reaction remained wary. While the Stockholm document clarified many issues there were still some paths to go, Shultz said at a press conference in New York. Israel's Prime Minister Shamir was furious. Whatever Arafat might have said in Sweden, the goal of the PLO still was to wipe Israel off the map, he declared on Israeli TV.<sup>241</sup>

The expectations before Arafat's appearance in Geneva were sky high. The US Ambassador in Israel had informed Peres beforehand that the American government was prepared to recognize the PLO if Arafat just said the 'magic words'. But again, what Arafat said in his Geneva speech was not good enough for the USA. He failed to use the precise wording as demanded by Shultz. The message had been dispersed throughout the speech. This was positive, but not sufficient. To help solve the complicated situation, Sten Andersson and his team became involved in a complicated negotiation game to get the exact wording of Arafat correct, going over every word and every comma in a statement the PLO leader was supposed to give at a press conference the next day. The telephone lines to Washington were also kept open to avoid any possibility of further misunderstandings. Finally, Arafat, at his press conference, managed to get the wording correct: He proclaimed the right of Israel to exist in peace and security, he referred to the UN Resolutions 242 and 338 and concluded in the end: 'We totally and absolutely renounce all forms of terrorism'. Sweden was showered in glory for the breakthrough and in several newspapers, both in Sweden and abroad, Sten Andersson was called a master of diplomacy.<sup>242</sup> as he saw it – far too soft with the PLO and too willing to play "high-stakes poker with the PLO" (a quotation from his own memoirs, p. 1034)."/>

On 14 December 1988, Secretary of State Shultz declared that the USA intended to start a dialogue with the PLO. However, the mutual distrust and bitterness between the USA and the PLO meant that the dialogue was handicapped from the start. The American Ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Pelletreau was the only authorized channel for the dialogue. By 20 June 1990, to the consternation of the PLO, the dialogue was suspended before having achieved any of its objectives.<sup>243</sup>

The Israelis were not happy with Sweden's efforts. No Israeli government member would visit Sweden. After the breakthrough in Geneva, Andersson put up an action plan to try to limit the damage caused by the close relationship to the PLO. On 19 December 1988, only four days after Geneva, Israel's new Minister of

Finance, Shimon Peres, was invited to Sweden. But Peres declined, saying that he did not have the time. Some weeks later, an official invitation was sent to Israel's new Foreign Minister Moshe Arens. He did not even bother to answer, although he visited both Denmark and Finland during the spring of 1989. The most likely reason why Arens, and the rest of the Israeli government, did not want to visit Sweden, was the part played by Sweden to open the US- PLO dialogue. The Israeli government regarded Sweden as too close a friend and ally of the PLO. Even the American Ambassador Pelletreau claimed that 'the PLO had more confidence in Sweden than in any other country in the world'.<sup>244</sup>

The US recognition of the PLO had come as a complete shock to the Israelis. They felt more isolated than ever. Ever since the creation of the PLO, Israel had looked upon the organization as a bunch of murderers that wanted to push all the Jews into the sea. Thanks to Sten Andersson and Sweden, Arafat had now become a dove in the eyes of the rest of the world. Many Israelis also regarded Andersson himself as extremely arrogant and provocative. When he met with journalists, for instance, he used to show them a rubber bullet with a core of steel. The bullet had killed a Palestinian boy on the West Bank. He used to tell them that he always carried the bullet in his pocket. He conveyed to the Israelis that he saw the conflict solely through the eyes of the Palestinians. However, Andersson continued to say that he also had good relations with the Israelis although this was not true. After the election in 1988, Israel retained its coalition government but this time with a much stronger position for the conservative Likud. Shamir continued as Prime Minister. In 1990, the coalition broke down, and Shamir formed a government together with some of the ultra-conservative parties. The contact between Swedish Ambassador in Israel and the government was reduced to a minimum and was of a formal character only. The Ambassador's channel of information was with the doves, Beilin and others in the Labour Party that openly favoured a dialogue with the PLO.<sup>245</sup>

Sten Andersson's 'silent diplomacy' was criticized, both in Israel and back home in Sweden, for not taking sufficient account of the relationship to Israel. Also the Andersson team understood that if Sweden was to continue playing any role whatsoever in the Middle East, the Swedes would have to have close relations with Israel as well. Only by so doing could Sweden continue to be a bridge-builder. In consequence of this perception, Andersson and the inner Middle East group at the Foreign Ministry again travelled to Israel, on 18 March 1990. Two months earlier, Foreign Minister Moshe Arens had strongly and sensationally launched a harsh attack on Sweden and had criticized Andersson's self-appointed role as mediator between the Israelis and the Palestinians. He had also accused Sweden of being PLO's closest ally. During Andersson's visit, Arens again attacked him, both in person and to the press, using language far stronger than normal in diplomatic relations. As a consequence of this and Sweden's mediating role in the Middle East the relationship between Israel and Sweden dropped to below freezing point – where it remained. Swedish Middle East policy lacked 'an important element, a relaxed and close relationship to Israel', the first secretary at the Norwegian embassy in Tel Aviv, Wegger Strømme, correctly observed.<sup>246</sup>

#### **4.4 Norway – Back on the mediation scene**

'Developments in the Middle East are of great concern, also for us in Norway. Especially disconcerting is the situation in the Israeli-occupied areas. We have felt compelled to criticize Israel - and rightly so - for violating human rights and contravening its obligations in international law, as an occupying power. In addition to this, it has been our aim to encourage dialogue between the parties and constructive progress in the peace process. This can hardly be achieved unless the spiral of violence is brought to an end at some time. We believe that the PLO has met Israel halfway on important issues and it must be in the interest of all involved to get the parties to participate in binding negotiations', head of division Knut Vollebæk wrote in December 1988.<sup>247</sup>

A year earlier, in the autumn of 1987, the PLO had contacted Hans Wilhelm Longva, now Norwegian Ambassador to Kuwait. In spite of the restrictive policy conducted by the Foreign Ministry and the various Norwegian governments, Longva had kept in close contact ever since the beginning in 1978. 'Ambassador Longva's regular contacts with the PLO in Kuwait continue and have a life of their own', the Foreign Ministry rightly observed in June 1988.<sup>248</sup> The PLO therefore used Longva to convey messages to the Norwegian authorities. The message to Longva this time was the same as the one to Sweden: the PLO wanted to open a channel to the USA. In December 1987, Thorvald Stoltenberg raised the question with the Americans, but they showed little interest. As already shown, it was Sten Andersson and his team who continued to work on the idea during 1988. Consequently, Stoltenberg left this question to his Swedish colleague. There was no special role to play for Norway at this stage.<sup>249</sup>

Since Thorvald Stoltenberg had taken over the Foreign Ministry in 1987, his friend and colleague Andersson had constantly informed him about Sweden's work on and ambitions for the Middle East conflict in general and the PLO in particular. During 1988 Anderson had regular contact with Stoltenberg. Norway's membership in NATO meant that Stoltenberg also had regular contacts with – among others – US Secretary of State George Shultz, and, consequently, could easily put in a word on behalf of his Swedish

colleague. Sten Andersson felt that Stoltenberg's 'messages' helped to bolster Shultz's trust in the Swedish initiative and secret contacts with the PLO. During the most hectic periods in Andersson's work for the PLO-US dialogue, he and Stoltenberg were regularly in touch, sometimes on a daily basis. However, Norway only played the role of a small helper. This was Sweden's show.<sup>250</sup>

The Israeli reluctance to engage in direct peace negotiations continued to be the major problem, both for Sweden and Norway. As previously shown, Sweden's relationship with Israel was problematic. The prevailing opinion at the Foreign Ministry in Oslo was that the political situation in Israel was mainly to blame for the lack of progress in the negotiations for peace.<sup>251</sup> It was also perfectly clear that Sweden, followed by Denmark, was the most critical of the Scandinavian countries of Israel's behaviour in the Occupied Territories.<sup>252</sup> The PLO was also perfectly aware that Norway was the slowest of the Nordic countries to establish contacts with the PLO.<sup>253</sup> But Norway had an advantage: the relationship to Israel was still a close one, and although they were in the process of opening up for a closer relationship to the PLO, the Labour governments, and not least Stoltenberg himself, were very aware of the need to nurse the Norwegian- Israeli relationship. As opposed to Sweden, Norway could function much more easily and directly as a bridge-builder between Israel and the PLO. In several letters to his social democratic party fellow and friend Shimon Peres, Stoltenberg raised the question of direct contact between the two arch enemies. However, he got little response.<sup>254</sup>

In January 1989, Thorvald Stoltenberg became the first Norwegian Foreign Minister to embark on an official visit to the PLO chairman in Tunis. 'The PLO under the chairmanship of Arafat evidently appears to be the representative of the Palestinians. I hope that Israel will thus re-evaluate its total dismissal of talks with the PLO', Stoltenberg told Parliament before he left.<sup>255</sup> Longva had unconditionally expressed his opinion; Arafat was the right man for peace in the Middle East: 'No other person has the symbolic function that Arafat has today in Palestinian society. His personal, political and diplomatic attributes and his vision are unique. He has a completely unique belief in the possibility of peace between Israel and the Palestinians and a completely unique vision of an Israeli- Palestinian co-existence and co-operation after such a peace. Yassir Arafat is a "visionary practical politician". It is his visions and his *Realpolitik*, together with the *Intifada*, that have created the process we witness today'.<sup>256</sup>

Stoltenberg's official visit upgraded Norway's 'working-level contacts' with the PLO to direct political contact. Although it was denied that Stoltenberg's visit meant a formal Norwegian recognition of the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people, it at least must be seen as a *de facto* one.<sup>257</sup> And from now on the Norwegian engagement was considerably increased. Sten Andersson and his team had played their role and their card with regard to the PLO, the Swedes' main strength. In one sense they needed a move on the Israeli side, a move the Swedes were absolutely unable to engineer themselves. In the beginning of 1989, Andersson contacted his Nordic colleagues. He wanted to try to get the Nordic countries to co-operate so that Israel and the PLO could develop a closer relationship. In January 1989, on his way to Arafat, Stoltenberg met with Sten Andersson and the Finnish Foreign Minister Kalevi Sorsa at Arlanda airport outside Stockholm. This was the first of several meetings between the Nordic foreign ministers during the spring of 1989. According to Stoltenberg, this meeting of foreign ministers was not a part of any Nordic initiative to mediate in the Middle East conflict, although he 'understood' that such expectations might be created as a consequence of just having such a meeting. The purpose was, as he saw it, to be updated on developments in the region. Arafat had recently visited both Stockholm and Helsinki. There he had stated several times that the Nordic countries had an important role to play in the peace process.<sup>258</sup> This was flattering, but - as Stoltenberg saw it - the wish for progress when it came to solving the conflict had to be balanced against the danger of being y one more 'cook' spoiling the broth and leaving more of a mess and confusion in the region.<sup>259</sup>

In Tunis, Arafat repeated what he more or less had been saying for the last six years: Norway and all of the Nordic countries had an important role to play and had great influence and prestige on the international stage. Norway could play an important role because of its strong ties with Israel, the USA and the EU. Arafat emphasized the close relationship between Norway and Israel and Stoltenberg confirmed the two countries' long-standing friendly relations. However, it was also exactly this close friendship that made it possible for Israel to consider Norway as a player with Israel's best interests at heart, Stoltenberg pointed out. It underlined the credibility of the Norwegian views in the eyes of the Israelis. Both Arafat and other Palestinian and Arab representatives that met with Stoltenberg had repeatedly referred to the importance of Norway's position as one of Israel's best friends and that it ought to be exploited in the ongoing peace process. Stoltenberg also said that he was very occupied with how Norway could contribute to the process, not least, how Norway could influence Israel. Norway did not mean to be a 'busybody' in the peace process, but wanted to be involved and was eager to do a job if the parties themselves wanted Norway to do so.<sup>260</sup>

Diplomatic wording is often not the same as political substance. Nevertheless some concrete gains did come out of the meeting, results that were not mentioned officially. A formula for a future peace solution

was elaborated. This peace plan was not only very much in line with the approach taken in the Oslo Back Channel four years later, it was almost identical. The PLO was willing to meet directly with the Israelis, Arafat told Stoltenberg. The parties could meet secretly or publicly. Moreover, the PLO was willing to have contact with Israel through a third party. Oslo could be an appropriate place to meet, and it might be useful if Norwegian research institutions could take initiatives to hold seminars where the parties could meet. In such a way indirect contacts could be established. All of this was Arafat's idea, and he saw it as a means by which peace could be developed. But, in addition, this time Arafat had a concrete assignment to give the Norwegian Foreign Minister. He wanted Stoltenberg to give a message to the Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens: the PLO was ready to enter into direct bilateral talks with Israel on whatever level the Israelis might want.<sup>261</sup>

The idea of using academic seminars as a cover for contacts between the Israelis and the PLO, contacts still forbidden by law in Israel, was not anything that Arafat had invented specially for Norway. Immediately after the breakthrough in Geneva, a couple of such seminars had been held in various places in Europe where representatives of the Israelis and the PLO were present. However, they were almost exclusively Israeli peace activists at these meetings, never representatives of the established Israeli political parties. Sten Andersson's two closest associates, Anders Bjurner, the head of political department at the Swedish Foreign Ministry, and Mathias Mossberg, head of the Middle East section, had attended such meetings in Milan and the Hague. The Swedes had hoped that the whole range of such activities would in the end encourage established Israeli politicians to talk directly with the PLO. During the spring of 1989, the Swedish team tried to persuade the doves in the Israeli Labour Party to participate at such meetings, together with American Jews, Israelis and Palestinians. But even the Labour Party doves thought that it was too risky an enterprise. Some of these attempts were prepared in close collaboration with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. In March 1989, a seminar was planned to take place in either Sweden or Norway. Stoltenberg, Longva, Andersson and Bjurner were the main participants on the Scandinavian side, together with representatives from Israel and the PLO, preferably Arafat himself. This planned seminar was also high up on the agenda at a meeting Vollebæk and Mossberg had with Arafat in Geneva in April 1989. But, once again, the initiative came to nothing. There were still too many obstacles in the way of a direct meeting.<sup>262</sup>

Foreign Minister Stoltenberg grasped the opportunity and accepted the challenge given to him and Norwegian diplomacy by Arafat in January 1989. A follow-up round was handled by Longva after Stoltenberg's return to Oslo. Longva reported that Arafat was still eager and even more precise as to the exact content of the part Norway could play: as a consequence of his conversation with Stoltenberg and friendship with Longva, the PLO chairman now wanted Norway to play the same role in the negotiations between Israel and the PLO as Sweden had between the USA and the PLO. In addition, the whole Oslo Back Channel approach was now directly, concretely and in detail elaborated by Arafat himself.<sup>263</sup> As Stoltenberg saw it, and Knut Vollebæk formulated it, the role of Norway could be to 'see to that views, evaluations and messages could be passed on in a highly confidential way. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry should be willing to provide the necessary human and technical resources. The necessarily secret nature of the project may require that it be kept within a narrow circle and given special security arrangements'.<sup>264</sup> Of course, nothing was said publicly about the results that issued from the Stoltenberg- Arafat meeting.<sup>265</sup>

On his return to Oslo, Stoltenberg was wise enough to underline the traditional close relationship between Norway and Israel. Unlike his counterparts in Sweden, he did not want to side solely with the Palestinians and such a policy would anyway have been at odds with traditional Norwegian policy on the region. 'Norway always has felt very close to Israel', Stoltenberg claimed publicly. 'This has not changed'.<sup>266</sup>

However, such statements did not help him much. The Israelis viewed the situation differently and were, to put it mildly, not pleased with the new Norwegian opening towards Arafat and the PLO. When Stoltenberg visited Foreign Minister Moshe Arens and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in Jerusalem in April 1989, there was no meeting of minds. Stoltenberg was aware of Arens' and Shamir's attitude before he left Oslo. Prior to his visit, the Director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry had called the Norwegian Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Torleiv Anda, to tell him that Foreign Minister Moshe Arens did not want to receive any message Stoltenberg might bring with him from Arafat in Tunis. The original Norwegian plan, according to Vollebæk, had been to ask for a conversation between the two foreign ministers. Stoltenberg would then take the opportunity to inform Arens of the result of his visit to Tunis and the part Norway might play as a mediator. According to Vollebæk's tentative plan, Stoltenberg should emphasize Norway's traditional friendship with Israel and the strong Norwegian support given to the Israeli state from 1948 onwards, thus creating an atmosphere of trust and understanding.<sup>267</sup>

It remains unclear how far Stoltenberg actually went in conveying his mediation plans to Arens. Arens himself does not remember, and the minutes from the conversation give no indication. The Norwegian embassy was instructed to ask for a meeting at which the two foreign ministers would be alone, but a counter order was issued in the wake of the negative response from the Israeli Foreign Ministry.<sup>268</sup>

However, the meetings Stoltenberg had with Arens, Shamir and Peres showed him clearly that direct talks between Israel and the PLO were totally unacceptable for the time being. Norway's mediation efforts were neither needed nor welcomed. In addition, the heavy water problem and the Norwegian contribution to the UNIFIL battalion were causing friction between the two traditional friends. But this bilateral friction didn't seem to have had anything to do with Israel's categorical rejection of any Norwegian peace attempt involving the PLO. Stoltenberg realised that the Israeli Likud government was unwilling to talk to the PLO under any circumstances. Over and over again Stoltenberg tried to explain why Norway had modified its attitude towards the PLO, but far from getting anywhere, the Israelis simply dug their feet in even harder.<sup>269</sup>

An extremely disappointed Stoltenberg had to shelve his mediation plans. Arafat was told that Norway still stood by its promise to act as mediator between Israel and the PLO, but Stoltenberg's meetings in Jerusalem gave him no reason to believe that this could be done under the regime of the present government in Israel.<sup>270</sup>

In the general election in Norway in the autumn of 1989, the Labour Party lost, and a non-socialist government took over. Mostly for internal reasons, the Christian People's Party had no interest in maintaining an activist approach *vis-à-vis* the PLO. For most party members, the PLO was the main obstacle to peace. Arafat was still regarded by many in the party as enemy number one in the Middle East. The new Foreign Minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, did not hesitate to clarify that he and the new government had a different conception of the PLO than that the previous government. Bondevik did not want to meet with Arafat personally and, in October 1989, Bondevik even refused to meet a representative of the Palestinian trade union federation, who was received by a head of department instead.<sup>271</sup> In Parliament, Bondevik asked for certain 'adjustments' in Norwegian Middle East policy to create a better 'balance' in Norway's relationship to the two parties. He wanted a more critical position towards the PLO and a stronger emphasis on Israel's right to exist within safe and recognized borders.<sup>272</sup> These 'adjustments', regarded by many as a big step back in the wrong direction, were evident in a letter written by the new Foreign Minister to his Israeli counterpart, and not least, in a draft speech by the new State Secretary, Knut Vollebæk: 'At the same time we wish to state more powerfully than before, that respect of Israel's rights is critical for any progress in the work for peace. This is not a cosmetic adjustment'.<sup>273</sup> In addition, in an interview with the press, the Foreign Minister gave expression to the religious aspects of his position on the Middle East conflict, stirring up a varied response as he did so: 'God holds his hand over the people of Israel in such a way that He will protect its right to the land. I have never ceased being puzzled by the way God holds His protecting hand over the people of Israel'.<sup>274</sup>

## 4.5 Labour regains power

The non-socialist government was in power for just a year. In November 1990, Gro Harlem Brundtland formed her third Labour government. Thorvald Stoltenberg, at the time UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), was called home from Geneva and appointed Norwegian Foreign Minister for a new term. The new government would, Stoltenberg declared, maintain the foreign policy of the outgoing government. Throughout the post-war period Norway had enjoyed a general consensus on foreign policy issues apart from two major exceptions: the European Common Market and the Middle East.<sup>275</sup>

As regards the conflict in the Middle East, Norway's contribution to its solution would be to persuade Israel to negotiate with the PLO. This was a calculated political choice on the part of Stoltenberg and, as detailed earlier, he had been following this line ever since the beginning of the 1980s. When he took office in 1990, the shift of political tack was both plain and premeditated.<sup>276</sup>

Foreign Minister Stoltenberg also made some staff appointments that later (although he couldn't know it at the time) proved crucial for the breakthrough in the Oslo Back Channel. Jan Egeland was appointed Political Advisor, and, in February 1992, he advanced to State Secretary. Egeland had both an academic background and international experience from his work for Amnesty International and the Norwegian Red Cross. However, the most important factor was the new and much more operative, activist approach he brought with him to the Foreign Ministry. Egeland's Master's thesis in political science had already become something of a legend, as had his ambitions to go out in the world in order to confirm his findings. In his 1985 Master's thesis, he had tried to show how Norway, as a small state, had great opportunities to act as a moral and humanitarian entrepreneur, opportunities that the superpowers did not have. In a way, Egeland remained faithful to his thesis. He gave the new Norwegian policy of engagement a face.<sup>277</sup>

In 1989, Foreign Minister Stoltenberg presented a White Paper which became something of a 'Bible' for the new engagement policy. The stakes were high: Norway should strive to initiate processes; Norway should be active and creative; it should play the role as a bridge-builder; Norway had the advantage of being a small, homogeneous country, without internal conflicts and without a colonial past or other disadvantages common to great powers.<sup>278</sup>

This new engagement policy was expressed in many ways. Norway stayed active in traditional fields such as peacekeeping, environmental protection and development co-operation. However, the most striking feature was Norway's strong involvement and emphasis on peace-building operations of a non-military character. Policy under the Stoltenberg/Egeland regime tried to take advantage of the prevailing political winds. Norway tried to contribute in areas in which the great powers from time to time also wanted to get involved, but not necessarily *could*. Norway seemed to be the 'kindly and harmless entrepreneur working behind the scenes arranging meetings between players who could not come together in the limelight of the great power drama'.<sup>279</sup> Some major triumphs, like the Brundtland Commission – and later the Oslo achievements – seemed to reinforce the thought that small, presumably untarnished states could play a pre-eminent role in international politics. Last, but not least, Norway had a strong economy that could carry the burden of such an involvement. In 1995, Jan Egeland could claim that foreign policy had become one of Norway's best export articles.<sup>280</sup>

Another staff appointment made by Stoltenberg, which proved to be important, was the recruitment of the young diplomat Mona Juul as an assistant. In 1988, Juul had been given her first assignment as secretary at the Norwegian Embassy in Cairo. Mona Juul was married to Terje Rød Larsen, who travelled with her to Egypt and lived there in 1989. The stay in the Middle East was to be decisive for the couple. In 1981, Terje Rød Larsen was among the founders of the research institute Fafo. The ever active and entrepreneurial Larsen, with no particular knowledge of or background from the Middle East, used the fact of merely being in the region to examine whether Fafo could expand their research activities to the Middle East. Fafo already had a pilot project on living conditions in the Nile Delta based on Fafo's experience with similar projects in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. Norway was a big contributor to international development aid, and Rød Larsen was looking for projects linked to this area. However, after getting to know Fathi Arafat, the brother of Yassir Arafat, Rød Larsen found a channel through which his research ideas could bear fruit. Fathi Arafat was chairman of the Palestinian branch of the Red Crescent. Together with the then Director of the Palestinian Hospital in Cairo, Khalid Shaeb, they suggested that Fafo should take on responsibility for conducting a socio-economic study of the situation of the Palestinians in Gaza and on the West Bank.<sup>281</sup>

In his usual energetic style, Terje Rød Larsen decided to try to implement such a research project. He requested and managed to get sufficient financial support from State Secretary Knut Vollebæk to start designing and implementing a pilot survey. Naturally, after discussing and clearing the request for money with Foreign Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, Vollebæk saw Larsen's initiative not primarily as a request for research money, but as one of several Norwegian peace initiatives in the Middle East. Vollebæk regarded the living-condition survey as an important tool in ongoing Norwegian activities for achieving peace in the region. In many ways, Vollebæk himself represented continuity at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: he had been one of former (and later) Foreign Minister Stoltenberg's closest civil servants and advisors when Labour was in government, and had served as State Secretary (1989-90) and Foreign Minister (1997-2000) when the government was in non-socialist hands. Although political rhetoric on the Middle East conflict had changed in tone when Bondevik took over, mainly for domestic reasons, the goal and the direction of Norwegian peace efforts were so firmly established that the Bondevik regime, even if it had wanted to, would have had serious problems changing things. But the non-socialist government was not interested in any change. The Christian People's Party felt that the ongoing bridge-building efforts were important and should be continued, which was demonstrated in their support to Terje Rød Larsen. They wanted to follow up the Norwegian peace initiatives and the dialogue efforts.<sup>282</sup>

Because a study of the living conditions of the Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories during the *Intifada* would obviously be extremely difficult to do, in order to clarify the political and technical requirements, Terje Rød Larsen embarked on hectic visits to the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. The initial response was not encouraging. Rød Larsen was warned that Fafo 'would never get in or, if we did, that we would never get out with anything resembling success'.<sup>283</sup>

The trips to the Occupied Territories gave Rød Larsen an understanding of 'where the pitfalls actually were located, how deep they were, and how they might be avoided'.<sup>284</sup> It became clear from the very beginning that the project would require political clearance at the highest level, both in Israel and by the local Palestinian authorities. So Terje Rød Larsen initiated a whole range of negotiations. Undoubtedly, the survey would be strongly policy-oriented. In fact, Terje Rød Larsen actively worked on giving it a strong political component. Eventually, he managed to obtain a high degree of moral and practical support from Palestinian personalities and institutions as well as the acceptance of Israeli authorities. There is no doubt that coming from a friendly country like Norway, a country that still had important contacts in Israeli society, was important in helping Terje Rød Larsen get access to and help from representatives of the Israeli government. Without this background and 'citizenship', it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to get clearance and approval from the Israeli government for such a politically delicate project. As Terje Rød Larsen himself put it, speaking of the way he was treated on the Israeli side: 'Somebody had opened the doors already. That was an important precondition'.<sup>285</sup>

The work on establishing Fafo's research project in 1990- 91 opened Terje Rød Larsen's eyes, not only to the terrible conditions inside the Occupied Territories, and Gaza in particular, but also to the Middle East conflict in general. Perhaps it was not that insoluble after all? As Rød Larsen became increasingly knowledgeable he realised that what the parties needed was a forum where they could meet and where suspicion and antagonism could give way to mutual trust and understanding. He became convinced that the distance between the two enemies was not as great as either they themselves or the world surrounding them seemed to think. Where peacemakers for years had failed, Rød Larsen became increasingly convinced that he could contribute towards solving the Middle East conundrum. However, at this stage, Terje Rød Larsen was acting only in his private capacity as leader of a research institute and had, as yet, no official backing from the Foreign Ministry.<sup>286</sup>

Rød Larsen's new interest for the Middle East coincided with other major events in the region: the *Intifada*; the Gulf War; the disastrous situation for the exiled PLO; the hawkish attitude of the Likud government in Israel; the rise of – or more precisely – the fear of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and groups such as Hamas; the hopes for the establishment of the new Palestinian leadership inside the Occupied Territories; the US-initiated peace process in Madrid and Washington D.C. – just to mention the most important and dominant factors at the beginning of the 1990s. In general, the conflict in the Middle East was high on the international agenda and intensively covered by international media.<sup>287</sup>

In August 1990, Mona Juul returned to the Foreign Ministry in Oslo, and continued to work on Middle East questions. In 1991, she moved from the political department to the Secretariat surrounding Stoltenberg and Egeland. With Stoltenberg's and Egeland's new emphasis on contributing to the peace process in the Middle East, there was much activity, but not in any particular direction. But, in retrospect, a visit to Oslo on 28 February 1992 by Abu Ala (Ahmad Qrei) proved to be decisive.<sup>288</sup>

Abu Ala was Director of Samed, the investment fund which formed the basis of PLO's economy, and had broad financial experience. The economic prospects for the PLO were gloomy. Together with other Palestinian financial experts, Abu Ala had prepared a detailed economic plan, setting out the difficulties facing PLO's economy in the years to come. However, the document Abu Ala had written was an extremely pragmatic one. Among other things, he stressed the economic advantage of establishing peace with Israel and a fixed Palestinian state. He proposed economic co-operation in the region - Israel included - in this scheme. These views were completely different from the dogmatic arguments that usually came from the PLO, at least officially.<sup>289</sup>

Abu Ala had travelled to Oslo to gain Norwegian economic support for the PLO. He was given a negative response by State Secretary Jan Egeland, who politely told him that Norway only gave development aid for humanitarian, not political purposes.<sup>290</sup> However, both Egeland and Mona Juul, who also met him, were impressed by his way of reasoning. Mona Juul was obviously so impressed that she called her husband at Fafo. She wanted him to meet Abu Ala. Terje Rød Larsen, as always eager to make new contacts in the Middle East, informed Abu Ala about Fafo's living conditions project, but also about his own ambition to establish links and contacts between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Abu Ala encouraged Rød Larsen to continue his work of persuasion towards the Israeli side (the Palestinians had already been persuaded). Ala also ensured him that both he himself and others in the higher echelons of the PLO would give Rød Larsen their warmest support.<sup>291</sup>

Rød Larsen felt that Abu Ala spoke a completely different language to the traditional political jargon of the PLO, as did Egeland and Juul. Although of an age that normally represented the old established leadership, the gentleman Abu Ala – as Mona Juul characterized him – with his fluent English and modern style, was not dogmatic but pragmatic and realistic. His message was that the future of Palestinians and the PLO lay in economic co-existence and co-operation with Israel. However, nothing concrete came out of Abu Ala's meeting in Oslo. He was only a person and a name that had impressed the Egeland-Juul-Larsen trio.<sup>292</sup>

Terje Rød Larsen was, for his and Fafo's part, busy establishing the living conditions project in the Occupied Territories. Towards the end of April 1992, Rød Larsen got to know another person who would play a crucial role in the Oslo process, although as yet there was nothing resembling a master plan for peace negotiations in place. Coincidence was still the prevailing factor bringing these important and decisive people together.<sup>293</sup>

Yossi Beilin, the key Israeli figure in the Oslo process, had since the end of the 1970s held important and influential positions in the Israeli Labour Party and government. In 1977, Beilin had been asked by Shimon Peres to leave his job as a journalist to become spokesman for the Labour Party. After the Israeli election in 1984, Peres served as Prime Minister for 25 months and was replaced by Shamir. Yitzhak Rabin was Minister of Defence and Beilin was appointed government secretary and political director of the Foreign Ministry, making him number two to the Foreign Minister. After the election in 1988, Yossi Beilin entered the

Knesset. Although he was among the most extreme opponents of the establishment of yet another government of national unity, Beilin was appointed Deputy Minister of Finance under Peres, in the government led by Shamir. In March 1990, the government fell, and Likud took over. Labour was in opposition, and Beilin was left with his job as MP in the Knesset. When Labour won the election in June 1992, Yossi Beilin was back in the Foreign Ministry, this time as Peres' Deputy Foreign Minister.<sup>294</sup>

There was little doubt that Yossi Beilin was a rising star in the Israeli Labour Party.<sup>295</sup> However, he was a controversial figure, considered far too 'dovish' even for many politicians and supporters of Labour. He was far too critical of Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, he had too many contacts and meetings with them, and he had too many views on how to achieve peace that were too difficult to swallow for mainstream Israeli views. For instance, when Yassir Arafat, after the UN session in Geneva, finally managed to meet the US demands, Prime Minister Shamir flatly denounced the American decision to talk to the PLO, Shimon Peres said that it was a sad day for Israel, but Beilin asserted that he saw the decision as the beginning of a new era.<sup>296</sup> />

Beilin had for a long time favoured and worked for direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO. For the majority of Israelis, this was heresy and Beilin had to endure both scorn and enmity for his political opinions. Beilin also supported establishing a Palestinian state on the West Bank and in Gaza, although on the basis of a territorial compromise and an indivisible Jerusalem. In Beilin's view, the Israeli formula 'nobody to talk to, nothing to discuss' made no sense: there was somebody to talk to, namely the PLO, and there was something to discuss – if both sides wanted to talk and be creative. In Beilin's view, Israeli law prohibiting any direct contacts between Israelis and PLO members, represented a major obstacle to any achievement in the peace process. Consequently, one of the main tasks was, as he saw it, to get rid of the law.<sup>297</sup>

Yossi Beilin was engaged in a wide spectrum of political activities, the majority of them considered unacceptable by most of the Israeli establishment, not to mention the conservatives in Israeli politics. Although he never met PLO representatives directly, Beilin had many contacts with Palestinians living on the West Bank and in Gaza and had several meetings with such prominent Palestinians as Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi. In one way or another, Beilin was involved in most of the peace efforts in the 1980s, for instance the 'proximity talks' initiated by the former Dutch Foreign Minister Max van der Stoel in March 1989. One Saturday in July, Beilin and the other Israelis were sitting in one hotel and representatives for the PLO in another. Max van der Stoel was shuttling between the two hotels with proposals for a reasonable compromise; the realization of Palestinian rights; security for Israel and Israelis; withdrawal from areas in the West Bank and Gaza. The parties managed to agree on a draft, which was signed by Max van der Stoel in his capacity as chairman of the Dutch Labour Party. However, the paper was never put to the test because signals emerged from Holland that the PLO was not happy with it and would not support it if van der Stoel went ahead and published it.<sup>298</sup>

During the spring of 1992, Beilin and the Labour Party were involved in a hectic election campaign. Labour had launched a strong attack on Prime Minister Shamir and his Likud Party, and Labour leader Yitzhak Rabin had promised a quick move in the halted peace process. Inside Labour, the Rabin faction, which for fifteen years had felt itself in a minority, was, according to Beilin, gaining the upper hand. Yossi Beilin, who definitely did not belong to Rabin's inner circle, had, for the first time in years, been given no official role in the election campaign. He and Peres were not confident expectation of victory. On 29 April 1992, in a gloomy mood, Yossi Beilin found himself regretting a decision to meet a – to him – unknown Norwegian called Terje Rød Larsen at a restaurant in Tel Aviv.<sup>299</sup>

Yossi Beilin already had important contacts in Norway. In October 1987, he had visited Oslo and had met – among others - Thorvald Stoltenberg, Secretary-General Kjeld Vibe of the Foreign Ministry and Minister of Defence Johan Jørgen Holst. The peace process in the Middle East had been at top of the agenda then, too. Beilin had never met Rød Larsen. He had only been told about him by a trade union acquaintance, who was also present at the Tandoori restaurant in Tel Aviv. Obviously, the personal chemistry between the two men must have worked from the very beginning. In many ways, they also had similar backgrounds and shared an activist approach to politics. Just as Terje Rød Larsen had Fafo, Yossi Beilin, who also had an academic background, had the research organization the Economic Co-operation Foundation, founded in 1991. The foundation was still in its infancy, with no office, and its only address was the home of the history professor Yair Hirschfeld, an old friend of Yossi Beilin. Ever since the late 1970s, Yair Hirschfeld had been trying to establish links and contacts between the Israelis and the Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories. As Hirschfeld saw it, the way to peace lay in economic co-operation. Hirschfeld had been driving around on bumpy roads on the West Bank and in Gaza, searching for local Palestinian leaders willing to work with him on such an approach. As a consequence, Hirschfeld had developed personal contacts with many Palestinians, in itself a risky enterprise for a Jewish Israeli. On the Israeli side, Yair Hirschfeld played a central role in forging links with the Palestinians. He became a political ally of Yossi Beilin and had been working closely with him since the early 1980s. From 1991, Hirschfeld was running the Economic Co-

operation Foundation together with one of his former students, Ron Pundak. Beilin, Hirschfeld and Pundak were all on the left of the Israeli political spectrum, and they all came to play an important role in the Oslo Back Channel just a couple of months later. The research conducted by Beilin's organization in 1991- 92, however, primarily dealt with the potential for developing links between Israel and the Occupied Territories.<sup>300</sup>

During the conversation with Beilin, Rød Larsen told him about the meeting he had had with Abu Ala in Oslo back in February. Apart from Abu Ala and Fathi Arafat, Rød Larsen had met none of the PLO people in Tunis. But for Rød Larsen, such contacts were of less importance – at least so he thought at this stage. He felt that the PLO leaders in Tunis had less relevance. As he saw it, a future peace process had to be built on the local Palestinian leaders living inside the Occupied Territories. This power base had been widened and strengthened during the *Intifada*; they were new thinkers, often with an academic background and most of them did not have the established loyalties to either the old 'notables' or to the outdated PLO. Although Abu Ala had impressed Terje Rød Larsen and convinced him that there were PLO people that could find a common ground for contact with Israelis committed to peace, Terje Rød Larsen thought that Faisal Hussein represented the ideal candidate.<sup>301</sup> Faisal Hussein was born in Jerusalem and was the son of a famous freedom fighter killed in the battle of 1948. Consequently, Hussein grew up in the shadow of a Palestinian legend. He was one of the original PLO founders from the mid-1960s and was the most significant of the Palestinian leaders in East Jerusalem. He had been imprisoned several times by the Israelis.<sup>302</sup>

Yossi Beilin had already had frequent contacts with Faisal Hussein. He had even invited Hussein to address a meeting at the Labour Party headquarters in Tel Aviv in the beginning of 1989 and was afterwards massively criticised and attacked for initiating and organizing the event both by fellow Labour Party members and most of Israeli public opinion. Nonetheless, Hussein's appearance marked a watershed. He continued to address gatherings in various parts of Israel, he was invited to debates at party conferences, and gradually a dialogue with him came to be seen as legitimate. On 15 February 1989, another meeting was organized at the Notre Dame Church in Jerusalem between a Palestinian delegation, headed by Faisal Hussein, and an Israeli, headed by Yossi Beilin. Several meetings followed. Officially, there were no PLO representatives present, and the most accepted view both among the Israeli peace activists and among the Israeli elite was that the most achievable way to peace was still through the 'internal' Palestinian leaders. This view continued to be the prevailing attitude, although Faisal Hussein explicitly pointed out to Beilin and the others that they '[a]t the very least ... need to understand that we are part of the PLO'.<sup>303</sup> Faisal Hussein was touching on a key question that was difficult to grasp for both Israelis and other potential mediators like Terje Rød Larsen. Like it or not, the PLO in Tunis held the key to the whole process. Local Palestinian leaders either would not or could not do anything without the support and approval of Arafat.<sup>304</sup>

At the meeting between Beilin and Rød Larsen in Tel Aviv, making use of the Faisal Hussein link was discussed by the two men. What was perfectly clear to both of them was that the halted peace process in Washington needed a push or an alternative track. As it was currently functioning, it would get nowhere. Rød Larsen had already – after the meeting with Abu Ala back in February – been toying with the idea that Norway, and in particular Fafo, could constitute a perfect cover for a secret Israeli- Palestinian meeting. This back channel should by no means replace the Washington process, only help it back on track. The back channel option could be used to exchange ideas and establish connections without the intense media scrutiny that was a major obstacle to the process in Washington. Faisal Hussein was the ideal PLO candidate. As opposed to the dogmatic PLO people in Tunis, who had lost contact with their people and the real world, in Rød Larsen's opinion, Hussein and other local leaders from the territories – for example Hanan Ashrawi - stood for progress, moderation and peace. Yossi Beilin, already convinced that a secret track was the only way to go, thought it might be useful to establish such a contact with an academic institution like Fafo, which enjoyed close links with the Foreign Ministry.<sup>305</sup>

Terje Rød Larsen already had tested the idea on Faisal Hussein the previous day, and he had reacted favourably. He suggested that Rød Larsen should examine with Yossi Beilin the prospect of establishing a secret back channel after the Israeli elections in June. When Terje Rød Larsen came back to Hussein again, he expressed great interest in setting up a meeting in Oslo between him and Yossi Beilin.<sup>306</sup>

By 19 June 1992, Terje Rød Larsen was back in Israel where he arranged a joint meeting between himself, Faisal Hussein, Yossi Beilin and Yair Hirschfeld at the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem.<sup>307</sup> They all agreed that the Washington talks were still suffering from lack of progress. As proposed by Terje Rød Larsen, Faisal Hussein favoured using a 'laboratory' located in Oslo. However, the meeting at the American Colony Hotel led nowhere. The four participants, who had agreed to work together to support the official peace process were never to meet again in the same configuration.<sup>308</sup>

## 4.6 Official activities and the link to Terje Rød Larsen

It seemed by this time that it was Terje Rød Larsen who was doing the work of getting the sides onto the Norwegian peace track. He was the one taking the initiatives, he was the one following up, arranging the contacts and meetings, eagerly and at some speed. Of all the players in this drama, Terje Rød Larsen was the most active and effective one. The players in the region seemed more or less to passively respond to his ideas.

At this stage, the activities initiated and run by Terje Rød Larsen appear to have been on a private and personal level only. Naturally, the Foreign Ministry 'knew' what was going on via Mona Juul. But Rød Larsen seems to have had no direct, official backing or support. Up to this point it seems as if Foreign Minister Stoltenberg and State Secretary Egeland did not even know. There exists no written documentation in the Foreign Ministry of any formal decision or internal meeting involving Terje Rød Larsen and his peace initiatives. Whether or when Stoltenberg and/or Egeland were informed of Rød Larsen's activities in the Middle East, or whether they attached any importance to them – if they did know – is also most unclear. There was no clear link at this stage between Rød Larsen's activities and the political leadership at the Foreign Ministry.

However, what is clear is that the Foreign Ministry in Oslo, and Jan Egeland in particular, attached extreme importance to Fafo's living conditions project. The project was also directly linked to the multilateral part of the Madrid/Washington process in general, and, increasingly, to the Norwegian peace attempts for the region in particular. The Foreign Ministry wanted and succeeded in getting Terje Rød Larsen to present the project at the first meeting of the working group for refugees in May 1992. Fafo's project received strong recognition at the meeting, not least from the Palestinian representatives. The Foreign Ministry put strong emphasis on Norway's contribution to this particular working group and succeeded in getting the third meeting held in Oslo a year later (where it became an important part of the cover for the secret negotiations going on at the same time). Rød Larsen was personally involved in the Foreign Ministry's preparations for this meeting and was actively participating in and contributing to the internal meetings at the Ministry.<sup>309</sup>

The top echelons at the Foreign Ministry were also becoming more and more preoccupied with and involved in the peace process in the Middle East. Knut Vollebæk, who held various positions both of a political and non-political nature, was a key figure, as he had been ever since he had become head of division in 1986. Although he left Norway in March 1991 for a two-year stretch to serve as Ambassador to Costa Rica the Middle East still seemed to be on his mind. In July 1991, he sent home some 'thoughts from a flight' between Oslo and San José. Although the Gulf War had considerably weakened the prestige of the PLO, the participation of the organization was still necessary if any peace in the Middle East were to be obtained, Vollebæk thought. Norway could also play a constructive and confidence-building role, although US Secretary of State James Baker was obviously aiming at playing the major one. Vollebæk also warned that Norway should not follow the 'Swedish model', which he considered nothing more than a ploy to get attention. On the contrary, Stoltenberg should use his close contact with the parties in the region, and Norway should propose to arrange an informal process, with representatives for all parties present, and try to build a sense of confidence and openness among them. Norway should keep a low profile and invest as little prestige as possible, in case anything went wrong.<sup>310</sup>

Jan Egeland and Mona Juul were both attending the opening of the peace process in Madrid in November 1991. The aim of their visit was to take part in as many discussions with the respective delegations as possible. The Norwegian embassy in Madrid, in charge of setting up as many meetings as possible, was given particular instructions to underline that Egeland was acting as Foreign Minister Stoltenberg's personal representative.<sup>311</sup> Jan Egeland, however, had already established much direct contact with prominent figures on both sides, not least with 'internal' Palestinians, headed by Faisal Husseini, when he had visited Israel in April 1991. Also on that occasion, he had been accompanied by Mona Juul. The aim of the trip was to discuss the peace process and, probably, a possible future Norwegian role.<sup>312</sup>

Hans Wilhelm Longva, who headed the Foreign Ministry's law department from September 1991, continued to follow the peace process closely and was as well-informed as usual through his sources on the Palestinian side. At all the Norwegian embassies in the Middle East region, but particularly at the one in Tel Aviv, there was much activity, as was the case at the Middle East desk in Oslo. All these officials and diplomats were important players who handled the growing number of diplomatic activities in connection with the ongoing peace process and, not least, with the Norwegian ambitions to contribute to the process.

Foreign Minister Stoltenberg searched for ways to contribute to the halted peace process. He set both the political level at the Ministry and his diplomatic corps to work. In addition, he used his Israeli Labour Party connections, and re-established his dialogue with both the PLO and the 'internal' Palestinian leaders. In January 1992, Faisal Husseini visited Oslo, and Stoltenberg lost no time in telling him that Norway was eager to do 'whatever we can to support the peace process'. Norway was more than willing to contribute, but would not do anything that might harm the ongoing process. In fact, Norway was afraid of being just

'another cook in the kitchen'. Jan Egeland, who was at the meeting together with Stoltenberg, raised the question of arranging a seminar in Norway, with Israeli and Palestinian participants from both the military and civilian sector. Hussein thought this was a good idea.<sup>313</sup> These initiatives led nowhere, however. At this stage, neither Stoltenberg nor the other Norwegian players had any clear idea of which direction the process was heading in, or, in fact, if it was heading anywhere at all.

For various reasons, Sweden had lost the lead and the track in the Middle East peace process. Israel completely lacked confidence in Sweden. The dialogue between the USA and the PLO, in which Sweden had played the most important role, had been aborted since June 1990. The new situation for the PLO after the Gulf War also made it very difficult for Sweden to play its traditional role as the PLO's best friend. On the home front, Sten Andersson was no longer Foreign Minister. In the autumn of 1991, Labour lost power and a Conservative government had taken over. Although the new Foreign Minister Margaretha af Ugglas personally had got on well with Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi on her visit Sweden in April 1992, the foreign policy emphasis of the new Swedish government did not lie with the PLO. The new government considered the improvement of Swedish relations with Israel to be of the utmost importance and wished to place some distance between itself and the PLO, Foreign Minister Ugglas claimed. However, the main emphasis of the government did not lie in the Middle East at all because, at the time, Sweden was having to deal with a number of European issues. Sten Andersson felt neglected and was of the opinion that the Conservative government was throwing away all his work and a big opportunity. When he left power, he called his friend Arafat and recommended that Norway took over the mediation baton from Sweden. 'You can trust Thorvald Stoltenberg', Andersson told Arafat. Andersson called Stoltenberg to encourage him to run the next lap.<sup>314</sup>

Independently of all these efforts by Terje Rød Larsen, Sten Andersson, Thorvald Stoltenberg and others, an old acquaintance of Hans Wilhelm Longva, Bassam Abu-Sharif showed up in Oslo 17 August 1992. Bassam Abu-Sharif had the neutral title of 'Advisor to Arafat'. But this was the same Abu-Sharif who in June 1988 had published the famous article in the *New York Times* in which he claimed that the PLO was ready to accept the UN Resolutions 242 and 338 and recognize Israel's right to exist within safe borders. This was the first time anyone belonging to the higher reaches of the PLO had supported this solution. The article had caused an enormous fuss within the PLO. Abu-Sharif was heavily criticised, and no one supported him, not even Arafat. Obviously, Bassam Abu-Sharif had been a rising star in the PLO in the late 1980s. By 1992, however, he was a kind of 'freelance advisor' outside Arafat's inner circle (although it is difficult to specify exactly positions or statuses in the PLO-hierarchy: Arafat has tended to move people about and keep no permanent successor to the PLO throne).<sup>315</sup>

Already in June 1990, the Foreign Ministry, through Longva, had been asked whether it could receive Bassam Abu-Sharif, who wanted to pay Oslo a visit. Both Foreign Minister Bondevik and State Secretary Vollebæk had been willing to receive him, although offering no formal, official invitation or any new initiatives since their travelling schedules were difficult to combine. However, in the end, the planned visit was cancelled by the Ministry. It was politically too touchy to receive such a high-ranking and well-known member of the PLO at this point, as Vollebæk told the leader of the PLO-office in Oslo, Omar Kitmitto on 9 August 1990. A week earlier, Iraq had invaded Kuwait and the tension in the region was accelerating everyday. Arafat had supported Saddam Hussein, a move that was both unintelligible and politically unwise, Vollebæk told Kitmitto.<sup>316</sup>

In August 1992, however, the situation was a different one. But while Foreign Minister Stoltenberg and State Secretary Egeland were willing to receive a visitor from the PLO, there were other considerations on their minds. Obviously, they shared the popularly held view that the 'internal' Palestinian leaders, and not the PLO, represented progress and the road to peace in the Middle East. In April 1992, when Arafat's plane crash-landed in the Libyan desert, Hanan Ashrawi and Nabil Sha'th, one of the founding members of the PLO, had to cancel their planned trip to Oslo.<sup>317</sup> Originally, they had planned to come to Oslo during the summer instead and the top level at the Ministry wanted to give this visit priority.<sup>318</sup> In addition, they were afraid that negative Israeli reactions to the PLO visit might harm the already reluctant Israeli participation in the working group for Palestinian refugees in which Norway and Fafo's research project were playing a major role. Bassam Abu-Sharif's proposed visit was therefore given less priority and scheduled for the middle of August at the earliest.<sup>319</sup>

Although the trip to Oslo was Bassam Abu-Sharif's own idea, he had informed Yassir Arafat of his planned visit. Arafat, who was increasingly worried over the lack of progress in Washington and also disliked the whole concept of excluding the PLO, had given Abu-Sharif his approval. The purpose of the PLO visit was to examine the possibility of opening a back channel between Israel and the PLO, with Norway acting as mediator and facilitator. Back channel approaches were now being worked upon on both the Palestinian and the Israeli side. Probably, Norway was only one of several test-balloons they were trying out.<sup>320</sup>

Abu-Sharif met Foreign Minister Stoltenberg and State Secretary Egeland. Both Arafat and Abu-Sharif were of the opinion that Norway could help and contribute to the peace process which was in a critical phase. Abu Sharif thought that Norway ought not to put pressure on the Israelis, but use its close contacts and give them some friendly advice. Stoltenberg told Abu-Sharif, according to the latter, that he was shortly going to meet Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Berlin. The PLO representative set out three key issues that Stoltenberg could raise with Rabin: Firstly, there was the issue of reducing tension between the Israelis and the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Secondly, Stoltenberg should underline that the Israeli Labour Party must not hesitate to use its victory in the election to push for peace. Thirdly, the question of direct contacts, in secret, between Israel and the PLO, should be raised. Thorvald Stoltenberg should try to persuade and convince Rabin of the new opportunity available to him, the opening of a secret back channel in Oslo.<sup>321</sup>

According to Bassam Abu-Sharif, Stoltenberg had been enthusiastic about the idea. Consequently, he had raised the issues when he met Rabin in Berlin and had tried to convince the Israelis of the need to speed up the process. Whether Stoltenberg in this conversation with Rabin also offered Norwegian mediation and/or facilitation services, is not known. However, Rabin had been hesitant. According to Bassam Abu-Sharif, Stoltenberg had called him in Tunis immediately after the Rabin conversation, conveying the message that Rabin needed more time to think things over. In a report to Chairman Arafat, Abu-Sharif concluded that the chances of direct negotiations between the PLO and Israel in Norway at some time were very good. However, as all the other Norwegian initiatives so far, the Bassam Abu-Sharif track led nowhere. Of all the balls being thrown up in the air, none seemed to land on the Norwegian peace track.<sup>322</sup>

However, this did not prevent the Norwegian peace-makers from continuing trying. On 9 September 1992, three weeks after Bassam Abu-Sharif's visit, State Secretary Jan Egeland went on an official visit to Israel. The Rabin government had only been functioning for a month when Jan Egeland arrived. Shimon Peres had been offered the Foreign Minister portfolio by a reluctant Rabin and Yossi Beilin had been appointed Deputy in a trade-off between the two old rivals. Severe restrictions on Peres' freedom of action had been imposed: Rabin would handle the relations with the USA himself, as well as taking charge of the political negotiations in Washington. Peres and the Foreign Ministry were given responsibility for the multilateral track.<sup>323</sup>

Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin was in a pessimistic mood when his first foreign policy colleague arrived on an official visit. Nothing substantial at all was happening in Washington. There was no progress, and no expectation of progress. Yossi Beilin was surprised when Jan Egeland told him that the formal and official side of his visit was partly a cover and a pretext. The most important purpose was to figure out whether there was any real substance in the tentative plans, first suggested to Beilin by Rød Larsen in April, then followed up at the meeting between Beilin, Hirschfeld, Hussein and Rød Larsen in June: did they seriously want to try a secret back channel set up in Norway? Egeland asked for a meeting with Beilin, at night, outside the official programme, to discuss and evaluate the practicalities.<sup>324</sup>

On the evening of 10 September 1992, after the formal, diplomatic dinner, the Israelis and the Norwegians met in secret at a hotel room at the Hilton in Tel Aviv – to do some real talking. Participating on the Norwegian side were Jan Egeland, Mona Juul, now working at the secretariat in the Foreign Ministry, and her husband, Terje Rød Larsen. While Egeland officially was touring the Middle East together with the State Secretary from the Defence Ministry, Mona Juul had flown directly to Israel from Oslo, probably together with her husband, with the aim of attending this particular meeting. The Israeli participants, besides Beilin, were Yair Hirschfeld and Shlomo Gur, Beilin's political advisor and office manager.<sup>325</sup>

Jan Egeland opened the meeting by confirming that the visit and back channel initiative were authorized by Foreign Minister Stoltenberg. He was now fully informed about the meeting and the agreement between Terje Rød Larsen, Yossi Beilin, Yair Hirschfeld and Faisal Hussein at the American Colony 19 June 1992. On behalf of the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Jan Egeland also confirmed that Oslo would host secret meetings between the two parties. Moreover, Egeland added, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry was standing behind Fafo and would finance the back channel project.<sup>326</sup>

The ideas that were worked on at these April- September meetings, differed in important respects from the final Oslo outcome. The original plan was that the Oslo Back Channel should be a secret and parallel track to the process going on in Washington. The main participants were intended to be Faisal Hussein and Yossi Beilin, who, through a series of meetings, should identify the obstacles creating the problems in Washington. The secret channel should, according to the original scheme, solve the problems, conclude the process and – after approval of their respective leaders – put the completed work back on the negotiation table in Washington. The world would never know of the existence of a back channel.<sup>327</sup>

Before leaving Israel, Egeland and Beilin agreed that Foreign Minister Shimon Peres would have to be informed of the Norwegian offer and that he would have to give his support to this back channel option. Yossi Beilin, eventually seeing a chance for progress, promised to speak with Peres without delay. Beilin would come back to Egeland and tell him when he could make the trip to Oslo. Egeland, for his part, would co-ordinate with Faisal Husseini.<sup>328</sup>

But even this serious peace attempt, now involving governmental figures on the Norwegian and Israeli side, came to nothing. Two days later, Yossi Beilin was scheduled to have a private meeting with Shimon Peres at which he had planned to raise the Norwegian offer with his superior. Instead, Peres was now closing the issue before he even got to know of the plan. During the conversation it emerged that Shimon Peres had also had personal plans for meeting Faisal Husseini to discuss the limping process in Washington. In order to do so, he had had to raise this delicate question with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The old warrior, however, had refused Peres permission. Obviously, Beilin could not ask for a meeting, knowing that Peres had been denied permission, nor could he go to Oslo without informing Peres. Moreover, Yossi Beilin felt that he could not tell the Norwegians the real reason for cancelling the Oslo track. That would reveal the fraught relationship between Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres – and show everyone the vulnerable status of the latter. To get round this sensitive situation, Beilin – according to his memoirs – furnished various excuses for not meeting Faisal Husseini in Oslo, Jan Egeland contacted him on several occasions and tried to arrange meetings in October, November, and December 1992. Terje Rød Larsen contacted him too. To the Norwegians, Beilin seemed very busy, and Husseini's travelling plans chaotic. The Norwegian team drew the conclusion that the parties were hesitant and not ready for an Oslo meeting after all.<sup>329</sup>

When Hanan Ashrawi and Nabil Sha'th finally visited Oslo at the end of November 1992, Stoltenberg, as was his habit whenever he met representatives for either the Israelis or the Palestinians, again offered Norwegian assistance. He was perfectly aware that such assistance would involve both economic and personnel resources, but he was willing to make the investment. Stoltenberg expressed some uncertainty as to exactly what Norway could do. He doubted whether the Israelis were interested in any 'go-between activities', but underlined his own close contacts with the Americans, and mentioned US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger in particular. At the meeting with the two Palestinians, Stoltenberg offered to make contact with the Americans and try to sound out their present role in the peace process. In addition, he would examine the possibility of using the Socialist International to further contact between the two parties.<sup>330</sup>

## 4.7 Towards the Oslo back channel

On the Palestinian side frustration grew, not least among the Palestinian team in Washington. The Palestinians were appointed as a part of a joint Jordanian- Palestinian delegation. The conditions for participation specified that they must not be a member of the PLO and that they belonged to the 'internal' Palestinian leaders living in the Occupied Territories, although it was common knowledge that they received all of their orders from the PLO headquarters in Tunis. Over that past year of negotiations, a conflict had developed between the Palestinian team in Washington, who wanted real negotiations, and the PLO leaders in Tunis, unwilling to make an effort as long as they themselves were excluded. Consequently, instructions emanating from PLO headquarters were becoming increasingly more rigid and exacting.<sup>331</sup>

The need for a back channel was obvious, Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian spokeswoman, thought and raised the question at a meeting with Yair Hirschfeld at her home in Ramallah. Hirschfeld and Ashrawi were old acquaintances from several past reconciliation and peace attempts. The Steering Committee of the multilateral part of the Madrid/Washington process was having a meeting in London 3- 4 December 1992 and Hanan Ashrawi suggested that Yair Hirschfeld should go. Hirschfeld had for years been working on economic development and co-operation projects. Although he had no formal position, he had been closely following events and was quite involved in the multilateral process. In addition, Beilin's research organization, headed by Hirschfeld, was constantly short of money. The London meeting might be an opportunity to get some of the research financed.<sup>332</sup>

Without knowing it, Hanan Ashrawi was triggering the whole Oslo Back Channel. She suggested that Yair Hirschfeld should use the Steering Committee opportunity to go to London and meet Abu Ala. The PLO member was also on his way to the British capital to 'supervise' the Palestinian delegation, which meant that he would sit in a hotel room giving the orders and taking the decisions. Yair Hirschfeld could raise some of the economic questions involved in the multilateral process directly with Abu Ala, Ashrawi suggested. However, Hirschfeld was hesitant. According to Israeli law, it was still illegal to have direct contact with members of the PLO.<sup>333</sup>

In 1991, Yossi Beilin had introduced a private member's bill in the Knesset to abolish the Law of Association, forbidding Israelis to see PLO members. Beilin's bill had failed at a preliminary reading, with a sizeable proportion of Labour members voting against. Labour's coalition partner in the government, Meretz, however, continued to press the issue. Reluctantly, Rabin gave in, and a government-sponsored bill was tabled in the Knesset. On 2 December 1992, the bill passed its first reading. On 19 January 1993, the day before the first meeting in Sarpsborg, the law prohibiting contacts with the Palestinians was abolished by a majority of one.<sup>334</sup>

When the Israelis travelled to the London meeting 3- 4 December 1992, they knew that it would soon be possible to speak legally to the PLO. However, it was only as private Israelis that they no longer were prohibited from participating at meeting and conferences. The Rabin government had still no intention to start direct negotiations. But for 'doves' like Yossi Beilin and Yair Hirschfeld it made a great difference.<sup>335</sup>

For quite different and unrelated reasons, many of the later participants in the Oslo process were gathered in London this December weekend: Yossi Beilin was heading the Israeli delegation to the multilateral talks. Abu Ala was there to guide the Palestinian delegation. Terje Rød Larsen was in London to attend a trade union conference, which had nothing to do with the peace process in the Middle East. And finally, Yair Hirschfeld had also decided to come after his conversation with Hanan Ashrawi. He wanted to look for money for his research projects and 'to make contact with anyone that might turn up'.<sup>336</sup>

Obviously, Hanan Ashrawi had fired Hirschfeld's interest. At the same time, he was still hesitant, wondering whether it was wise to meet a prominent and official member of the PLO. But he was curious and impulsive as well, so he decided to risk the big step. He was unsure how a secret meeting like this should be arranged. At this point Terje Rød Larsen entered the scene. He was a man Hirschfeld and the Israeli side both knew and trusted. Since he happened to be in London, Hirschfeld called him and asked if he had any information about Abu Ala and whether he had any advice as to how to arrange a secret meeting. Terje Rød Larsen immediately realised the importance of a direct meeting and grasped the opportunity. He suggested that Hirschfeld and Ala should meet the next morning at his hotel.<sup>337</sup>

While a nervous Yair Hirschfeld was waiting for Abu Ala, it seems as if Terje Rød Larsen already at this stage had suggested that a follow-up meeting, of any kind and level, could be held in Norway. Although making it clear to Hirschfeld that he was not talking on behalf of the Norwegian government, Rød Larsen stressed his close contacts both with the Foreign Ministry and the governing Labour Party. This, of course, Hirschfeld already knew from the September meeting in Tel Aviv at which Jan Egeland offered a back channel option on the instructions of Foreign Minister Stoltenberg.<sup>338</sup>

In spite of the initial nervousness, the conversation and atmosphere between the Palestinian and the Israeli were good and positive. Terje Rød Larsen did not participate at the meeting. Hirschfeld felt that also Ala wanted to continue to sort out whether there was a possible path forward. Ala had questioned Yair Hirschfeld's lack of official position and status and there was, indeed, a difference in levels of 'authority' between the men. Nevertheless, they agreed to meet again in the evening.<sup>339</sup>

Abu Ala had not informed the PLO leaders in Tunis of the meeting beforehand. Nor had Yossi Beilin been informed in advance so he knew nothing of what was going on. After the meeting, late in the evening, Hirschfeld had paid Beilin a visit 'running as usual on high-octane fuel and claiming he had "lots of news to report"'. With even 'more exuberance than his norm', he told Yossi Beilin about his meeting with Abu Ala.<sup>340</sup> According to Beilin's memoirs, Abu Ala had suggested to Hirschfeld that the best way to make progress was to reach an agreement on the principles governing the interim settlement. Originally, Abu Ala had suggested that this could be done by American shuttle diplomacy. That is why he had been surprised when Yair Hirschfeld suggested Norway. Yossi Beilin, however, thought that the USA was not prepared to play such a role because this would ruin the whole Madrid/Washington structure. The most effective solution would be a meeting between Yair Hirschfeld and Abu Ala in Norway. At such a meeting, the various options could be discussed and it would soon be apparent whether there existed any possibility for a common ground for progress or not.<sup>341</sup>

While Terje Rød Larsen and most of the other Oslo players were in London, Arafat's old friend, Hans Wilhelm Longva, was visiting PLO headquarters in Tunis (26 November to 3 December). Longva was sent to Tunis as a direct consequence of two meetings he had had with Foreign Minister Stoltenberg 24 November and with State Secretary Jan Egeland the following day. As always, Longva got immediate and trouble-free access to Arafat and his close advisors. The purpose of Longva's visit seems to have been multi-faceted: all of his political conversations were centred around the peace process and the lack of progress. During his meeting with Arafat 27 November, the PLO chairman became deeply pessimistic over what he described as a serious crisis. Also internally on the Palestinian side, Arafat felt threatened by the rise and progress of Hamas, the growing lack of support for and trust in the PLO from Palestinians living on

the West Bank and in Gaza, and the threats of resignation of some of the Palestinian negotiating team. Again Arafat pleaded for help from a third party – Norway. There would be no progress in the negotiations without third party intervention, he maintained. Since Norway was a suitable third party, he hoped that the country would be willing to take on such a role if – or rather when – it proved necessary.<sup>342</sup>

In answer to this plea from Arafat, Longva revealed the most important purpose of his trip: the overall aim of Norway's contribution to peace in the Middle East in the months to come was to bring about a successful meeting of the working group for refugees, scheduled to be held in Oslo in February 1993. (It was later moved to May.) This working group was part of the multilateral side of the Madrid/Washington process, and Norway was playing an active role in it. The result of Fafo's living conditions survey would be presented at the Oslo meeting. In the conversation with Arafat, Longva stressed the importance the Norwegian Foreign Ministry attached to this report. It was a tool for the future work for peace and reconciliation. The successful completion of the Oslo meeting, Longva added, would also strengthen Norway's chance of active third party intervention. Consequently, the Ministry wanted to keep in close contact with the PLO. In this context, Longva mentioned the already scheduled visit to Tunis by Terje Rød Larsen. This meeting seems to have been arranged with Abu Ala, and Longva's task seems to have been as a door-opener with Arafat.<sup>343</sup>

When Longva met with Abu Ala later in the day, the agenda was the same. It was Arafat himself who suggested to Longva that he should meet with Ala to discuss the forthcoming Oslo meeting. Abu Ala informed Longva that he was familiar with Fafo's living conditions study, and that he was looking forward to seeing Terje Rød Larsen in Tunis. Accordingly, Rød Larsen's visit to Tunis was not a result of the hectic activities in London. It had already been scheduled and was linked to the Oslo meeting, Fafo's survey and Norway's attempts at playing an active role in the peace process.<sup>344</sup>

So two weeks later, Terje Rød Larsen travelled to Tunis. He had never visited PLO headquarters before. In Tunis, Abu Ala showed little interest in the results of Fafo's study. He wanted to follow up the conversations in London. Since the London meeting, Ala had submitted a report to Arafat, who in turn had handed it over to Abu Mazen who was the person in the PLO responsible for Israeli affairs. Ala had told Mazen about the possibility of a secret back channel in Norway and Mazen was also positive. The two PLO representatives both felt that Norway's position was unique, both with regard to Israel and the PLO. They realized that, as an ally, friend, and NATO member, Norway would also be most acceptable to the USA. However, Abu Ala wanted more information on Yair Hirschfeld and his stance. Terje Rød Larsen confirmed that he was 'Beilin's man'. If they were to meet in Norway, Abu Ala wanted help from Fafo and the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. Terje Rød Larsen promised to raise the question with Foreign Minister Stoltenberg and State Secretary Egeland as soon as he was back in Oslo.<sup>345</sup>

Terje Rød Larsen understood that Abu Ala was taking a big risk. Powerful forces within the PLO would be totally against such an initiative if they had known of it. Rød Larsen's first meeting with chairman Arafat had made him insecure and Arafat's management style had been revealed to Larsen while he was there. To Rød Larsen, Arafat seemed neither democratic nor easy to handle and he understood the kind of balancing act Arafat's closest advisors had to perform. Arafat had been informed about the meetings in London by Mazen, but Terje Rød Larsen did not know this when he left Tunis.<sup>346</sup>

What was now perfectly clear to Rød Larsen and the other Norwegian participants, as opposed to what had been the case earlier, was that the internal leaders in the Palestinian areas would or could do nothing without the approval of Arafat. He was the one exercising sole power. Whatever the Norwegians might think or feel about the dogmatic, old-fashioned and undemocratic leaders in Tunis, there would be no solution without the PLO, like it or not.<sup>347</sup>

Back in Oslo, Terje Rød Larsen, Mona Juul, and Jan Egeland called Yossi Beilin in Jerusalem to persuade him to continue to develop the back channel option and the meetings in London. Yossi Beilin assured Jan Egeland that Yair Hirschfeld had his approval and blessing. However, if any secret meeting actually took place, he – because of his position as Deputy Foreign Minister – demanded the right to full denial. If Yair Hirschfeld, as an Israeli citizen, was willing to meet a PLO representative to sort out the many sensitive questions, the more the better. However, no one must know that Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister was involved in the plan. Yossi Beilin's conditions were crystal clear: Yair Hirschfeld was not speaking on behalf of the Israeli government. There existed no secret negotiations, only a discussion on central items.<sup>348</sup>

In January 1993 the back channel option was finally given a careful 'yes' by Beilin. It was clear from the beginning that Norway would play the role of facilitator, not mediator. Terje Rød Larsen was given charge of the arrangement. Fafo's living conditions project constituted the cover. Rød Larsen arranged the time, the place, and the transportation. Jan Egeland approved the plan and found money on the Foreign Ministry's budget to pay the bill. 'Fafo acted as the quiet, efficient and informed operator organizing dozens of meetings, booking hundreds of hotel rooms and tickets, and making thousands of phone calls. The

Norwegian government provided the political backing, the resources and the prestige necessary to embark on and carry out this unique venture.... Without Fafo and its Director Terje Rød Larsen, Norway could not have provided the services so necessary to the parties during those days of distrust rather than mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO', said Jan Egeland.<sup>349</sup>

Yair Hirschfeld and his assistant Ron Pundak were put on Fafo's pay roll. Nothing could possibly be traced back to the Israeli government. Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg was informed, as was Norway's Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, but Stoltenberg deliberately maintained a certain distance between himself and the details. Head of the Middle East section at the State Department, Dan Kurtzer, was also informed. When Egeland told him what was going on, Kurtzer's response was a kind of "I hear what you say", meaning that the Americans would neither approve nor reject a back channel option. The USA did not want to be involved, but as long as the Israelis and the PLO were talking to each other to sort out some of the problems in Washington, the Americans had no objections.<sup>350</sup>

The back channel was established as a supportive and complementary secret tool for the public and official negotiations in Washington. It was a well-guarded secret. Few people knew, and even fewer believed it would lead anywhere. On 20 January 1993, Yair Hirschfeld and his student and friend Ron Pundak met Abu Ala, Hassan Asfour and Maher al-Kurd at Borregaard manor in the small Norwegian town of Sarpsborg. They started what was later to become known as the Oslo Agreement, a Declaration of Principles that was to pave the way for the establishment of the Palestinian Self-Government Authority and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO.<sup>351</sup>

<sup>185</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 167, memorandum, Longva, 25 September 1979; 25. 11/19, 176, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 27 August 1980; 25. 11/19, 185, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 3 July 1981; 25. 11/19, 197, memorandum,

<sup>186</sup> Waage 1996, pp. 338–340.

<sup>187</sup> Tamnes 1997, p. 379; Tveit 1996, pp. 309–310.

<sup>188</sup> Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–381; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24.

<sup>189</sup> Same references as above; for more detailed information, see references below.

<sup>190</sup> Tamnes 1997, pp. 197–198.

<sup>191</sup> UD 52. 4/87b, 1, Graver to Foreign Ministry, 29 December 1972, enclosed three memoranda 26, 27 and 29 December 1972.

<sup>192</sup> UD 52. 4/87b, 1, memorandum, Vibe, 20 October 1976.

<sup>193</sup> UD 52. 4/87b, 1, memorandum, Olav Bucher–Johannessen (special advisor on energy questions), 2 February 1979. This memorandum gives a good overview of the whole issue.

<sup>194</sup> UD 52. 4/57b, 1, interview with Lars Korvald, n.d.; Stortingstidende 1978/79, pp. 2457 and 3105; Tamnes 1997, pp. 197–198.

<sup>195</sup> UD 52. 4/87b, 1, memorandum, Stoltenberg, 3 April 1979; 44. 1/71, 2, memorandum, Evensen, 1 April 1979; Tamnes 1997, pp. 197–198.

<sup>196</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 157, memorandum, Andersen, 12 December 1978; 52. 4/87b, 1, memorandum, Bucher–Johannessen, 2 February 1979; memorandum, Georg Kristiansen (secretary general), 26 March 1979; memorandum, Foreign Minister to members of government, 28 March and 2 April 1979; Stortingstidende 1977–78, pp. 3105–3106; Tamnes 1997, pp. 197–198.

<sup>197</sup> Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–380; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24.

<sup>198</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 167, memorandum, Longva, 25 September 1979; 25. 11/19, 176, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 27 August and 1 September 1980; 25. 11/19, 180, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 23 February 1981; 25. 11/19, 185, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 3 July 1981; 25. 11/19, 192, memorandum, Longva, 8 February 1982; 25. 11/19, 197, memorandum, Longva, 29 July 1982; 25. 11/19, 201, memorandum, Longva, 25 October 1982; interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva 24 February 1999; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–381; Johansen 1980, pp. 62–66; Jebsen 1997, pp. 21–24.

<sup>199</sup> Same references as above; see also UD 25. 11/19, 192, memorandum, Longva, 15, 17 and 24 February and 1 March 1982; memorandum, Eivinn Berg (state secretary), 24 February 1982.

<sup>200</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 202, memorandum, Longva, 15 November 1982:

<sup>201</sup> Aftenposten (evening edition), 11 June 1983; Aftenposten, 14 June 1983; Arbeiderbladet, 13 June 1983; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–381; Johansen 1980, pp. 62–66; Jebsen 1997, pp. 21–24.

<sup>202</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 3, memorandum, Andersen, 6 February 1979; memorandum, Andersen, 2 March 1979; 25. 11/19e, 4, memorandum, Longva, 16 January 1981; Foreign Ministry to Beirut, 16 February 1981; 25. 11/19e, 6, memorandum, Longva, 17 June 1983.

<sup>203</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 6, Kuwait to Foreign Ministry, 13 September 1984:

<sup>204</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 6, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 10 September 1984; Foreign Ministry to Kuwait, 11 and 13 September 1984; Kuwait to Foreign Ministry, 13 September 1984; memorandum, Bjarne Lindstrøm (head of division), 3 October 1984; press release, 11 October 1984.

<sup>205</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 7, Foreign Ministry to several embassies, 15 January 1985; Aftenposten, 16 and 17 January 1985; Arbeiderbladet, 16, 17 and 18 January 1985.

<sup>206</sup> Aftenposten, 19 and 21 November 1985; Arbeiderbladet, 19 November 1985; 29 August 1986; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–381; Jebsen 1997, pp. 21–24.

<sup>207</sup> Stortingstidende 1981/82, p. 1660:

<sup>208</sup> Lie 1983, p. 135; Jebsen 1997, p. 22. The pro-Palestinian process among the Social Democratic parties in Europe is

observable in the debates of the Socialist International (SI). In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, especially up to the war in 1967, the debate in this international forum was totally dominated by the Israelis and the Israeli perspective. From the beginning of the 1970s, the social democratic parties in Europe, except for the Norwegian, became increasingly interested in the political aspects of the Palestinian issue. Socialist International (hereafter SI), records, 1946–1983, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Devin 1993, pp. 127–151.

<sup>209</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 178, travelling report, Middle East journey, LO delegation, 5–16 September 1980; 25. 11/19e, 4, Ola Dørum (chargé d'affaires, Beirut) to Foreign Ministry, 11 September 1980; Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 18 and 24 September 1980.

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Kjell Bygstad 15 January 1998 and other conversations with him in the period 1997–1999; Norsk og palestinsk fagbevegelse, special volume, published by LO's International Office, 1997, later published as *Palestina*.

<sup>211</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 183, Foreign Ministry to several embassies, 8 April 1981; 25. 11/19e, 4, memorandum, Prime Minister's Office, 30 April 1981; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–380; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24; Lie 1983, pp. 117–141; Salvesen 1994, pp. 332–353.

<sup>212</sup> VG, 20 December 1982; Aftenposten, 29 November 1989; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–380; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24; Salvesen 1994, pp. 332–353; Lie 1983, pp. 133–134.

<sup>213</sup> Bernt Bull's private archive: PLO to Frydenlund, 2 February 1982; Frydenlund to Arafat, 30 July 1982; memorandum, Lasse Budtz, 4 January 1983; Bull to Labour Party, Board Meeting, 14 January 1983; Bull's handwritten notes from the meeting with Arafat 31 December 1982; article, Lasse Budtz in *Ny Politikk* [New Politics], no. 2, 1983; Aftenposten, 3 January 1983; VG, 4 January 1983; Morgenbladet, 4 January 1983; Arbeiderbladet, 3 and 4 January 1983; interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg, 26 February and 9 March 1999; interview with Bernt Bull, 21 June 1999; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–380; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24; Salvesen 1994, pp. 332–353; Lie 1983, pp. 133–137.

<sup>214</sup> Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–380; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24; Salvesen 1994, pp. 332–353.

<sup>215</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>216</sup> Same references as above; Aftenposten, 11 April 1983; Arbeiderbladet, 11 and 13 April 1983.

<sup>217</sup> Bruno Kreisky was Chancellor in Austria from 1970–83 and Party Leader from 1967–83, Willy Brandt was Chancellor in Germany from 1969–74 and Party Leader from 1964–87.

<sup>218</sup> Gro Harlem Brundtland was Party Leader from 1981–92 and Prime Minister in 1981, 1986–89 and 1990–96.

Thorbjørn Jagland also supported the opening towards the PLO. Jagland was Party Secretary from 1986–92, Party Leader from 1992– and Prime Minister from 1996–97.

<sup>219</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 5, Stockholm to Foreign Ministry, 15 and 18 April 1983; memorandum, Longva, 15 April 1983; Bernt Bull's private archive, handwritten notes from the Stockholm meeting with Arafat; Aftenposten, 14 April 1983; Arbeiderbladet, 14 and 15 April 1983; Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–380; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24; Salvesen 1994, pp. 332–353; Lie 1983, pp. 133–138.

<sup>220</sup> Tamnes 1997, pp. 379–380; Jebsen 1997, pp. 23–24; Salvesen 1994, pp. 332–353.

<sup>221</sup> Tamnes 1997, pp. 380–381; Njølstad 1999, pp. 140–146.

<sup>222</sup> See part I.

<sup>223</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the Bernadotte assassination and its consequences for Swedish–Israeli relations, see Waage, 1989, pp. 168–173, 203–205, 231–233, 243–250, 255–256; Waage 1996, pp. 17–20; Palme 1993, pp. 30–31.

<sup>224</sup> Waage 1996, pp. 287–292, 296, 383, 397–398; Palme 1993, pp. 17–19.

<sup>225</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 17–19.

<sup>226</sup> Olof Palme was leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Party 1969–86, and Prime Minister 1969–76 and from 1982 until he was assassinated in 1986.

<sup>227</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 11, 17–19, 22–28, 56–58; Tamnes 1997, pp. 354, 443.

<sup>228</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 11, 17–19, 22–28, 56–58.

<sup>229</sup> Rabie 1996, p. 56; Palme 1993, pp. 11, 17–19, 22–28, 56–58, 60–65. The co-operation between these three social democratic leaders is clearly evident in the records from the Socialist International, 1946–1983, IISH, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

<sup>230</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 15–50; Rabie 1996, pp. 55–56.

<sup>231</sup> Same references as above. The letter from Anderson to Arafat 6 May 1988 is quoted in Rabie 1996, p. 56.

<sup>232</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 15–50; Rabie 1996, pp. 55–56.

<sup>233</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 29–50.

<sup>234</sup> Interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; Palme 1993, pp. 51–71; Rabie 1996, p. 55.

<sup>235</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 51–71, 76–78.

<sup>236</sup> Interview with George Shultz 14 September 1999; Shultz 1993, pp. 1029–30; Palme 1993, pp. 51–71, 93–98.

<sup>237</sup> Interview with George Shultz 14 September 1999; interview with Richard Murphy, one of the State Department's leading specialists on the Middle East and head of the Middle East section at State Department under Shultz, 20 July 1999; Palme 1993, pp. 51–71, 93–98; Shultz 1993, pp. 1034–36.

<sup>238</sup> I was given a copy of this 'Stockholm-document' by Sten Anderson when I was in Stockholm discussing Sweden's role with him 23 June 1999.

<sup>239</sup> Interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; interview with Rita Hauser 5 August 1999; interview with George Shultz 14 September 1999; Palme 1993, pp. 99–131; Rabie 1996, pp. 59–61, 63; Shultz 1993, 1036–1039.

<sup>240</sup> Interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; interview with Rita Hauser, one of the

<sup>241</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 99–131; Rabie 1996, pp. 60–63; Shultz 1993, 1038–43.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; interview with George Shultz 14 September 1999; Palme 1993, pp. 132–151; Rabie 1996, pp. 54, 64–66; Shultz 1993, pp. 1043–45. In my interview with Shultz he strongly underlined how he had to be tough, not only with the PLO, but also with Andersson and Sweden, as they were –

<sup>243</sup> Interview with Robert Pelletreau 16 July 1999; Palme 1993, pp. 148–151, 164–170; Rabie 1996, pp. 64–66; Shultz 1993, pp. 1043–45.

<sup>244</sup> Quoted from Palme 1993, p. 169; see also pp. 152–163, 195–200; interview with Robert Pelletreau 16 July 1999.

<sup>245</sup> Palme 1993, pp. 151–163, 195–202.

- <sup>246</sup> Same references as above; UD 25. 11/19, 268, Strømmen to Foreign Ministry, 12 April 1991: 'Svensk Midt-Oesten politikk mangler imidlertid et viktig element, uanstrengte og naere forbindelser med Israel'.
- <sup>247</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 9, memorandum, Vollebæk, 6 December 1988.
- <sup>248</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 252, memorandum, Mette Ravn (head of division), 6 June 1988.
- <sup>249</sup> Interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva 24 February 1999; Tamnes 1997, p. 382; UD 25. 11/19e, 7, memorandum, Tove Sælø Kijewski (consultant), 26 January 1988. This memorandum concludes, however, that Norway should not take on as delicate mission as conveying PLO messages to the USA would imply. This was supported by both Kjeld Vibe (secretary-general) and Bjørn Krisitvik (head of the political department). However, in *Aftenposten*, 21 January 1989, the journalists Geir Salvesen and Morten Fyhn claimed that Norway had carried a message from the PLO to the USA a year earlier.
- <sup>250</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 9, Foreign Ministry to UN delegation, 7 December 1988; statement, Stoltenberg, 12 December 1988; Stockholm to Foreign Ministry, 1[3] December 1988; Vollebæk to Stockholm, 21 December 1988; Stockholm to Foreign Ministry, 23 December 1988; 25. 11/19, 257, Stockholm to Foreign Ministry, 7 and 10 July 1989; interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg 26 February and 9 March 1999; interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; Tamnes 1997, p. 382–383; Palme 1993, pp. 162–163; Salvesen 1994, pp. 339–342; Butenschøn 1989, pp. 8–11.
- <sup>251</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 244, memorandum, Vollebæk, 27 May 1987.
- <sup>252</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 249, memorandum, Vollebæk, 14 March 1988.
- <sup>253</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 7, memorandum, Ravn, 23 June 1988.
- <sup>254</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 249, Stoltenberg to Peres, 23 March 1988; 25. 11/19, 250, Peres to Stoltenberg, 19 April 1988; 25. 11/19, 252, Peres to Stoltenberg, 16 November 1988; interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg 26 February and 9 March 1999; Tamnes 1997, p. 382–383; Palme 1993, pp. 162–163; Salvesen 1994, pp. 339–342; *Internasjonal Politikk*, nos. 1–2, 1989, pp. 8–11.
- <sup>255</sup> *Stortingstidende* 1988–89, p. 2242.
- <sup>256</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 9, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 28 December 1988: 'Ingen annen person har den symbolfunksjon Arafat i dag har i det palestinske samfunn. Hans personlige politiske og diplomatiske egenskaper og visjoner er unike. Han har en helt unik tro paa at fred mellom Israel og palestinerne er mulig, og helt unike visjoner om israelsk-palestinsk sameksistens og samarbeid etter en slik fred. Yassir Arafat er en visjonær realpolitiker. Det er hans visjoner og hans realpolitikk som sammen med intifadaen har skapt den prosess en naa er vitne til'.
- <sup>257</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 10, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 6 February 1989; 25. 11/19, 255, statement on the Middle East, 31 March 1989; *Aftenposten* (evening edition), 30 January 1989; *Aftenposten*, 31 January 1989; *Arbeiderbladet*, 28, 30 and 31 January 1989; 6 February 1989.
- <sup>258</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, 10, Helsinki to Foreign Ministry, 18 January 1989; *Aftenposten*, 18 January 1989.
- <sup>259</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 253, Cairo to Foreign Ministry, 30 January 1989, conversation, Stoltenberg/Andersson/Sorsa 24 January 1989; 25. 11/19, 254, memorandum, Vollebæk, 10 February 1989; interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg 26 February and 9 March 1999; interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; Tamnes 1997, p. 382–383; Palme 1993, pp. 162–163; Salvesen 1994, pp. 339–342; *Internasjonal Politikk*, nos. 1–2, 1989, pp. 8–11.
- <sup>260</sup> UD 11. 7/154, 1, minutes, meeting between Arafat and Stoltenberg 29 January 1989, Gunnar Flakstad (regional advisor), 1 February 1989; memorandum, Vollebæk, 7 February 1989; 25. 11/19, 254, memorandum, Vollebæk, 10 February 1989; interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg 26 February and 9 March 1999.
- <sup>261</sup> UD 11. 7/154, 1, minutes, meeting between Arafat and Stoltenberg 29 January 1989, Flakstad, 1 February 1989; memorandum, Vollebæk, 7 February 1989; Longva to Foreign Ministry, 20 February and 6 March 1989; 25. 11/19, 254, memorandum, Vollebæk, 10 February 1989; interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg 26 February and 9 March 1999; interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva 30 June 2000; *Aftenposten*, 30 and 31 January 1989; *Arbeiderbladet*, 30 and 31 January 1989; 6 February 1989; Tamnes 1997, p. 382–383; Salvesen 1994, pp. 339–342; *Internasjonal Politikk*, nos. 1–2, 1989, pp. 8–11.
- <sup>262</sup> UD 11. 7/154, 1, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 6 March 1989; 25. 11/19, 255, Foreign Ministry to Longva, 21 March 1989; Longva to Foreign Ministry, 29 March 1989; 25. 11/19, 256, Strømmen to Foreign Ministry, 4 April 1989; memorandum, Vollebæk, 21 April 1989; Palme 1993, pp. 162–163; interview with Yair Hirschfeld 7 May 1998 and 22 March 1999. Yair Hirschfeld, history professor and one of the two Israeli academics to participate in creating the Oslo Back Channel, had for years been travelling around Europe attending a whole range of such meetings and seminars in order to achieve a dialogue.
- <sup>263</sup> UD 11. 7/154, 1, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 20 February and 6 March 1989.
- <sup>264</sup> UD 11. 7/154, 1, memorandum, Vollebæk, 7 February 1989.
- <sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*; UD 11. 7/154, 1, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 20 February and 6 March 1989; Tamnes 1997, pp. 382–383; Salvesen 1994, pp. 341–344; *Internasjonal Politikk*, nos. 1–2, 1989, pp. 8–11.
- <sup>266</sup> *Internasjonal Politikk*, nos. 1–2, 1989, p. 11.
- <sup>267</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 254, London to Foreign Ministry, 24 February 1989; 11. 7/154, 1, Anda to Foreign Ministry, 28 March 1989; memorandum, Vollebæk, 28 March 1989.
- <sup>268</sup> UD 11.7/154, 1, Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, 28 and 29 March 1989; Anda to Foreign Ministry, 28 March 1989; minutes, meeting between Stoltenberg and Arens 3 April 1989, Vollebæk, 17 April 1989; minutes, meeting between Stoltenberg and Peres 4 April 1989, Vollebæk, 17 April 1989; minutes, meeting between Stoltenberg and Shamir 3 April 1989, Vollebæk, 18 April 1989; 25. 11/19, 255, Longva to Foreign Ministry, 29 March 1989; interview with Moshe Arens, 16 November 1999; interview with Yitzhak Shamir 21 March 1999.
- <sup>269</sup> Same references as above.
- <sup>270</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 256, memorandum, Vollebæk, 21 April 1989.
- <sup>271</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 258, memorandum, Olav Berstad (consultant), 26 October 1989; *Aftenposten*, 20, 21, 30 and 31 October 1989; *Arbeiderbladet*, 24 and 27 October 1989.
- <sup>272</sup> *Stortingstidende* 1989–90, pp. 186–187; *Aftenposten*, 20, 21, 30 and 31 October 1989; *Arbeiderbladet*, 24, 27 and 31 October 1989.
- <sup>273</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 258, memorandum, Ravn, 31 October 1989; 25. 11/19, 259, Bondevik to Arens, 17 November 1989; memorandum, draft, speech by State Secretary 28 November 1989, Berstad, undated: 'Samtidig ønsker vi sterkere enn

før å understreke Israels rettigheter som en avgjørende forutsetning for framgang i arbeidet for fred. Dette er en reell justering'.

<sup>274</sup> Arbeiderbladet, 5 March 1990, 'Gud har sin hånd med Israels folk på den måten at han vil verne om dets rett til land. Jeg har ikke sluttet å under meg over Guds vernende hånd over Israels folk'; Arbeiderbladet, 10 April 1990; Stortingstidende 1989–90, pp. 2928–2929.

<sup>275</sup> Tamnes 1997, p. 383; Salvesen 1994, pp. 345–47.

<sup>276</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>277</sup> Same references as above; in addition, Tamnes 1997, pp. 339–49, 443–47; Stoltenberg and Eide 1996, 1996), pp. 58, 79–80; Aftenposten, 1 September 1989, 17 November 1991 and 17 February 1993. For a major contribution to the myths created around Jan Egeland and the other main Oslo actors such as Terje Rød Larsen, Mona Juul and the Norwegian contribution to peace, see Jane Corbin's much cited book about the Oslo Back Channel (1994, especially pp. 19–38).

<sup>278</sup> White Paper no. 11, 1989–90, pp. 48–53; Tamnes 1997, pp. 341–349: 'Norge skulle etterstrebe en pådriverrolle'.

<sup>279</sup> Quoted from Tamnes 1997, p. 443: 'Norge var

<sup>280</sup> Aftenposten, 31 March 1995; Tamnes 1997, pp. 339–49, 443–47.

<sup>281</sup> Interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul 16 June 1999; Heiberg and Øvensen 1993, 1993, pp. 6–10 (preface by Terje Rød Larsen); Corbin 1994, pp. 19–23.

<sup>282</sup> Interview with Knut Vollebæk 11 September 2000; Heiberg and Øvensen 1993, p. 7.

<sup>283</sup> Heiberg and Øvensen 1993, p. 6.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul 16 June 1999; Heiberg and Øvensen 1993, p. 6–10; Corbin 1994, pp. 19–23.

<sup>286</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>287</sup> See Part I for an extensive discussion on the international, regional and national conditions.

<sup>288</sup> Interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul 16 June 1999; Corbin 1994, pp. 36–39.

<sup>289</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>290</sup> I have not been able to find any documentation from this meeting in the Foreign Ministry archives.

<sup>291</sup> Interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul 16 June 1999; Corbin 1994, pp. 36–39.

<sup>292</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>293</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>294</sup> Beilin 1999, pp. 12, 15–17, 19–20, 32–33, 54.

<sup>295</sup> After the Israeli election in May 1999, Beilin was appointed Minister of Justice in Ehud Barak's government.

<sup>296</sup> Beilin 1999, pp. 9–46, see especially pp. 19–20; Corbin 1994, pp. 30–32.

<sup>297</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>298</sup> Same references as above; interview with Hanan Ashrawi 23 March 1999; for the 'proximity talks', see Beilin 1999, pp. 25–27; Ashrawi 1995, pp. 220–221.

<sup>299</sup> Interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 49–64; Corbin 1994, pp. 30–34.

<sup>300</sup> UD 34. 4/87, 5, memoranda, Vollebæk, 29 September, 1 and 12 October 1987; minutes, meeting between Beilin and Holst 1 October 1987, unknown author, 6 October 1987; interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Yair Hirschfeld 7 May 1998 and 22 March 1999; interview with Ron Pundak 21 March 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 13–14, 49–64; Corbin 1994, pp. 30–34.

<sup>301</sup> Faisal Hussein had visited Oslo 30 April (3 May 1989 when he had had meetings with Stoltenberg – among others – discussing the peace process and Norway's potential role in the process, see UD 25. 11/19, 256, memorandum, Berstad, 5 May 1989.

<sup>302</sup> Interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 49–64; Corbin 1994, pp. 30–34; for information on Hussein, see Ashrawi 1995, pp. 58–59; Beilin 1999, pp. 18–19.

<sup>303</sup> Beilin 1999, p. 22.

<sup>304</sup> Beilin 1999, pp. 18–23; Ashrawi 1995, pp. 220–221.

<sup>305</sup> Interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 49–64; Corbin 1994, pp. 30–34.

<sup>306</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>307</sup> Before this June meeting, Rød Larsen had sent a letter dated 26 May 1992 to Beilin, pressing the issue of a secret Norwegian track. In the letter, he explained to Beilin that after the April meeting between the two, he had become much more optimistic about the prospects of obtaining progress. The subsequent meeting he had had with Faisal Hussein had strengthened his optimism; Beilin 1999, p. 52.

<sup>308</sup> Interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 49–64; Corbin 1994, pp. 30–34.

<sup>309</sup> UD 25. 11/19s, 1, Egeland to Rød Larsen, 5 May 1992; Foreign Ministry to Ottawa, 6 May 1992; memorandum, Juul, 18 May 1992; memoranda, Rolf Willy Hansen (head of division), 23 June, 22 October and 18 November 1992; memoranda, Knut H. Christensen (head of division), 17 and 23 November 1992; Foreign Ministry to several embassies, 10 December 1992; memoranda, Hansen, 23 December 1992 and 18 January 1993.

<sup>310</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 269, Vollebæk to Løvald, 29 July 1991.

<sup>311</sup> UD 25. 11/19, 270, Foreign Ministry to Madrid, 28 October 1991; interview with Jan Egeland 11 March 1999; interview with Mona Juul 16 June 1999.

<sup>312</sup> UD 25. 11/19n, 3, Strømmen to Foreign Ministry, 12 and 17 April 1991; memorandum, Ravn, 2 May 1991; 25. 11/19, 268, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 26 April 1991.

<sup>313</sup> UD 25. 11/19ø, 1, memorandum, Ravn, 10 January 1992.

<sup>314</sup> Interview with Sten Andersson 23 June 1999; interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg 26 February and 9 March 1999; Palme 1993, pp. 7–14, 162–163, 239–245; Salvesen 1994, p. 347.

<sup>315</sup> Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi 1995, pp. 280–282; Palme 1993, pp. 83–89.

<sup>316</sup> UD 25. 11/19e, memorandum, Ravn, 5 June 1990; Foreign Ministry to Longva, 15 June 1990; Longva to Foreign

Ministry, 21 June, 9 and 15 July 1990; memorandum, Løvald, 17 July 1990; Foreign Ministry to Longva, 18 July 1990; memorandum, Berstad, 19 July 1990; memorandum, Juul, 27 August 1990.

<sup>317</sup> Ashrawi 1995, pp. 200–206.

<sup>318</sup> Ashrawi and Sha'th finally arrived 23 November 1992, UD 25. 11/19ø, 3, memorandum, Hansen, 8 December 1992.

<sup>319</sup> UD 25. 11/19ø, memorandum, Longva, 4 May 1992; memorandum, Longva, 30 June 1992.

<sup>320</sup> UD 25. 11/19ø, 2, memorandum, Longva, 4 May 1992; interview with Bassam Abu-Sharif 23 March 1999; Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi 1995, pp. 280–282.

<sup>321</sup> Same references as above; UD 25. 11/19ø, 3, memorandum, meeting between Stoltenberg and Abu-Sharif 18 August 1992, Hansen, 19 August 1992.

<sup>322</sup> Same references as above. In the interview with Bassam Abu-Sharif, who acted in an extremely good, frank, interesting and well-informed manner, he claimed that the reason why he had suggested to Arafat to use Norway was because of the special relationship between Norway and Israel. Only a country with high standing on the Israeli side could help the PLO to move the stubborn enemy. In his memoirs, however, Abu-Sharif gives another explanation: Norway could compensate for the loss of Sweden. The Swedish channel had been working really well: so 'why not try using another Scandinavian country that had the same advantage of complete neutrality: Norway?' With Bassam Abu-Sharif's close contacts with Longva and general knowledgeable, it is strange that he claims this as his motivation for trying Norway. Although being a clever analyst, Bassam Abu-Sharif also gave the impression of having very high thoughts of his own contribution to the peace process and generally exaggerated his own role.

<sup>323</sup> Beilin 1999, pp. 53–56; see Part I for the organization of the Madrid/Washington process in a bilateral and a multilateral part.

<sup>324</sup> Interview with Thorvald Stoltenberg 26 February and 9 March 1999; interview with Jan Egeland 11 March 1999; interview with Yair Hirschfeld 7 May 1998 and 22 March 1999; interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 56–58; Corbin 1994, pp. 32–34; Salvesen 1994, pp. 346–347.

<sup>325</sup> Same references as above; UD 25. 11/19n, 3, Tel Aviv to Foreign Ministry, 2 September 1992; Foreign Ministry to Tel Aviv, 7 September 1992. Many memoranda summing up the various meetings of the two State Secretaries, are filed here, but none of them relates directly to the peace process or Norway's potential role.

<sup>326</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>327</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>328</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>329</sup> Same references as above; UD 25. 11/19ø, 3, Egeland to Hussein, 22 September 1992; Egeland to Beilin, 22 September 1992; memorandum, Sverre Bergh Johansen (assistant director general), 7 October 1992; Corbin 1994, p. 38.

<sup>330</sup> Ashrawi and Sha'th had underlined the importance of putting more efforts into influencing Rabin and his closest associates, as opposed to Beilin and Peres. According to the two Palestinians, Rabin himself planned to participate more actively in the meetings of the Socialist International, and he was open for back channel contacts. The Socialist International might be an option to use. UD 25. 11/19ø, 3, memorandum, Hansen, 8 December 1992.

<sup>331</sup> Interview with Hanan Ashrawi 23 March 1999; Ashrawi 1995, pp. 218–220.

<sup>332</sup> Interview with Yair Hirschfeld 7 May 1998 and 22 March 1999; interview with Hanan Ashrawi 23 March 1999; Ashrawi 1995, pp. 218–220; Corbin 1994, pp. 39–52.

<sup>333</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>334</sup> Beilin 1999, pp. 58–60, 65.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Beilin 1999, p. 60.

<sup>337</sup> Interview with Yair Hirschfeld 7 May 1998 and 22 March 1999; interview with Hanan Ashrawi 23 March 1999; interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 58–64; Corbin 1994, pp. 39–52; Ashrawi 1995, pp. 218–220. Yair Hirschfeld had already scheduled a meeting with Terje Rød Larsen to discuss with him the economic foundation of his research projects in the Palestinian areas. Hirschfeld had hoped that the Norwegian academic would help him get a research grant.

<sup>338</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>339</sup> Same references as above; Abbas (Abu Mazen) 1995, pp. 112–115.

<sup>340</sup> Beilin 1999, p. 61.

<sup>341</sup> Interview with Yair Hirschfeld 7 May 1998 and 22 March 1999; interview with Yossi Beilin 23 March 1999; interview with Terje Rød Larsen 16 June 1999; Beilin 1999, pp. 58–64; Corbin 1994, pp. 39–52; Abbas (Abu Mazen) 1995, pp. 112–115.

<sup>342</sup> UD 25. 11/19s, 1, two cables, Foreign Ministry to various embassies, 10 December 1992; memorandum, Rolf Willy Hansen, 23 December 1992; interview with Hans Wilhelm Longva 30 June 2000.

<sup>343</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>344</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>345</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>346</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>347</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>348</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>349</sup> Same references as above; Egeland 1994, p. 350.

<sup>350</sup> Same references as above.

<sup>351</sup> Same references as above.

## Conclusion

The insoluble Middle East conflict had become ripe for mediation. The new international, regional and national configurations had made it so. The parties themselves had willingly and voluntarily entered into negotiations. However, this ripeness, this willingness, does not explain precisely why Norway succeeded in bringing the parties together. It does not explain why Norway, a country geographically and culturally far removed from the Middle East, on the periphery of Europe, and situated on the northern shores of NATO, could play a role in world politics.

'It might seem strange and disagreeable to say that the minnow was able to perform the miracles which the whale could not. Norway is not on the list of influential countries which have capabilities and influence in the new world or the old. In spite of this Norway achieved what the giants could not and accomplished what the great ones could not', Abu Mazen observes. So, as implied by the second-in-command in the PLO, Norway's success needs to be explained by other factors than power and size.<sup>352</sup>

However, the Oslo Back Channel, which developed separately from the negotiations in Washington, did not emerge from a vacuum, either on the Palestinian/Israeli side or on the Norwegian side. The history of secret talks and channels on the Palestinian/Israeli side had been long and complex. On the Norwegian side, past policies constituted the basis of the role played by the Norwegians, and seen from this perspective, the achievement appears less sensational than it might appear. Over forty years of contact and friendship between influential circles in Norway and the Middle East culminated in the secret Back Channel. The Norwegians did not stumble by coincidence into the peace process in the Middle East. It came about as a result of contacts made over the course of many years; it was the result of long-term perspectives and hard work; and it was the result of a conscious policy that prioritised the Middle East conflict and aimed at giving it a new and active Norwegian content. The aims and the strategies were not vague and did not develop as the now well-known Norwegian players went along. They were clearly defined beforehand and had been so for years.

Moreover, neither the Foreign Ministry, the Labour Party, nor leading officials and politicians were dragged unwittingly into the process by an NGO – in this case the research organization Fafo headed by the entrepreneurial Director Terje Rød Larsen. But it is impossible to explain the proceedings in the final phase that led directly to the Oslo Back Channel without analysing the role of Rød Larsen. As has been shown above, he was the one who pushed, pulled and dragged the parties into the Norwegian option. He was the one who kept the window of opportunity open by keeping in touch with the parties. Terje Rød Larsen was the one who prevented the window from shutting. There had been and might still have been another Norwegian mediation role, but the precise timing and the precise way in which this one was achieved were definitely a result of Terje Rød Larsen's efforts and commitment. He was the one who saw the opportunity and took the chance. He was the one who worked enthusiastically on the idea and followed it up at a time when the Norwegian peace initiatives were on a slippery slope and none of them seemed to succeed.

Yet whilst much credit is due to Terje Rød Larsen, it would be a mistake to see his contribution in isolation from the long-term engagement of the Labour Party, from Haakon Lie's burning Israel engagement to Knut Frydenlund and Thorvald Stoltenberg, who worked to open channels to the PLO. Without this political past, this political will and this political commitment, without this door-opening, knowledge and experience, without all the political and economic resources, Rød Larsen, when he stumbled into the Middle East peace process, would not have got anywhere. Hypothetically, the Norwegian peace efforts, which had been worked on for ten years and more, might not have got anywhere either without a man of Rød Larsen's calibre and un-Norwegian manner. In particular, Terje Rød Larsen deserves credit for taking a risk and grasping an opportunity when he saw it.

Undoubtedly, some elements of chance contributed to the end result. But the Oslo Back Channel was not something that primarily happened by accident, nor something that succeeded just because the right people showed up at the right place at the right time and with the right connections. Norway did not fly in out of the blue. The importance of Norway's political past in the Middle East and, more to the point, Norway's special relationship with Israel, together with the conscious mediation and confidence-building efforts by the Norwegians for years prior to the opening of the secret Oslo Back Channel, constitute the decisive and most important explanatory factors underlying the establishment of and the Norwegian entry into the Back Channel. Moreover, one must distinguish between the factors explaining the entry, the *beginnings*, from the factors explaining the result, the success.<sup>353</sup>

Thus, the special relationship between Israel and Norway, dating from as far back as 1948, is of great significance. Since that time, Israel had been a particular concern of Norway's. This was, above all, a Labour Party phenomenon. The Norwegian Labour Party, in power for most of the post-war period, developed strong ties early on, also on a personal level, with the Israeli Labour Party. In the Middle East conflict Israel was, and still is, the strongest party. And Israel was and is the country that sets the premises for peace negotiations. The necessary foundation of trust, which was paramount for the Israelis if they were

to enter into direct talks with the PLO, had been built up during the long-standing Norwegian–Israeli friendship.

One of the most usual explanations of the Oslo success, is that in Norway, Israel and the PLO found a country that was keen to promote its image as an international peacemaker. This is obviously a correct observation and an important factor in any explanation. Although the new Norwegian policy of engagement, whose foremost spokesman was Jan Egeland, involved a new and far more active and conscious mediating role, ever since the turn of the century there had been a tradition of peace and mediation in Norway, symbolized above all by the explorer Fridtjof Nansen. Another aspect that is often remarked upon is that Norway is a small country with a positive image and reputation and no colonial past. This is also true, but it is difficult to gauge the extent to which this particular consideration affects the 'why Norway' question. The most widespread explanation, however, is that Norway managed to conduct a 'bridge-building' Middle East policy with similarly close contacts and on similarly friendly terms with both the Israelis and the Palestinians. The three main Norwegian players themselves – Jan Egeland, Terje Rød Larsen and Mona Juul – emphasise this explanation in particular. They correctly stress the very special relationship with Israel and the special Labour connections. However, they go on to claim that 'few Western countries established direct contacts so early with the PLO leadership as Norway. Few, if any countries, combined these contact networks to the same degree'.<sup>354</sup>

Clearly, this was not the fact. There existed a strong asymmetry between the Norwegian contacts with the two sides. The relationship between Norway and the PLO was much weaker and much more recent than the already established friendship between Norway and Israel. They cannot in any way be compared to each other. Yet ironically, it was exactly this asymmetry that made Norway the most attractive and suitable, indeed, almost the ideal country. As shown above, at the end of the 1970s and the 1980s, the Foreign Ministry and parts of the Labour Party worked to achieve a more balanced Middle East policy. Contact with both the PLO and Israel was seen as important. If peace were to be achieved, the only path would be through direct talks between the two enemies. However, a significant segment of Norwegian opinion and the political establishment did not see the conflict this way. In the 1980s, Norway, still one of Israel's staunchest friends, was isolated in Europe and in the UN. When contacts were established with the PLO in the 1980s, Norway was among the last and most cautious of the Western countries to do so. Relations between the Norwegian and the Israeli labour parties were still close, although the special relationship had cooled somewhat.

This is what made Norway, a remote and isolated country in Europe, suitable and attractive to the PLO and to Yassir Arafat. It was neither Norway nor Israel that thought that the little northern country could fill the role of mediator. It was PLO chairman Yassir Arafat who took the initiative in the first place and suggested Norway. Arafat considered Norway an important channel because of – not in spite of – its close relationship with Israel. Therefore, the PLO considered Norway to be a valuable friend and the PLO warmly welcomed Norway's contribution. Moreover, Arafat saw Norway as a serious and responsible country that could not be accused of playing along with its own national interests. In addition to the close links to PLO's enemy, Norway also had close ties with the USA, ties that were undeniably needed in the Middle East. In one way or another, the USA would have to play a key role in any peace negotiations.

It was these two dimensions in Norway's Middle East policy and their mutual asymmetries that made Norway the ideal country. In an attempt to answer the 'why Norway' question, a perspective has been drawn up, from the burning engagement of Haakon Lie and the Labour Party, to the new ideas that evolved during Foreign Minister Knut Frydenlund's incumbency and his unsuccessful attempt to modify Norway's Middle East policy, to Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg's ability to carry these two approaches forward. Stoltenberg got the peace train moving. Since 1982, he engineered, first as an active Labour Party politician and then, through his two terms as foreign minister, the important initiatives taken *vis-à-vis* the PLO, but was careful to maintain relations with the Israelis. This created the confidence and climate necessary for Norwegians to stand at the centre of the negotiating process. A similar process could not have been completed if Sweden, Norway's friend and competitor on the peace scene, had been in the driver's seat.

The thesis of Norway acting as the best friend of both the parties does not hold. True, Norway managed to win the trust of the Palestinians. Prominent figures on the Palestinian side, such as Abu Mazen and Abu Ala, waxed lyrical in their praise of the Norwegians. In the course of the 1980s and the 1990s, Norway developed relations with the Palestinian side through the Labour Party and the trade unions. Norway then emerged as a facilitator, enjoying a high degree of confidence and trust, also among the Palestinians.

But – as pointed out several times – Norway had a long history of supporting Israel. The Middle East conflict had figured prominently since 1948 on the Norwegian foreign policy agenda. Israel was a moral and an emotional issue for large sections of the Norwegian population and a central international issue involving the great powers. So if a country, big or small, ought to have had any chance at all of a positive mediation

outcome, then the trust and confidence of the strongest party in the conflict would be one of the most important conditions for success. And there is no doubt that the strongest party in the Middle East conflict was – and is – Israel. In addition, the mediator not only needs to have the trust of the strongest party in the conflict, but also the trust and confidence of the superpower behind the regional strongest party – that is to say, the United States. Compared to Norway, some countries scored better on some of these points. But very few, if any, enjoyed them all at the same time. Sweden, for instance, had a much closer relationship to the PLO, but a much weaker relationship with both Israel and the USA.

A further factor that also might have counted in Norway's favour, was that the Norwegians stood outside the European Union. Despite the fact that the PLO felt that it was important that Norway had close relations with the EU, for many Israelis, Norway was an acceptable mediator or facilitator *because* Norway was not an EU member. In the eyes of many Israelis the EU had been far too critical for far too long and had advocated far too much of an interventionist style. At the same time, Norway was very close to the United States. So while both the Israelis and the Palestinians are equally appreciative of the Norwegians, praising their skill, their dedication, their flexibility, their humanity and their discretion, the long-established bonds between Norway and Israel again constitute the bottom line. That heartfelt friendship had endured throughout the post-war period. It was undoubtedly the most important precondition for the role which Norway came to play before the eyes of the whole world – on the White House lawn some fifty years later.

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<sup>352</sup> Abbas (Abu Mazen), p. 103. However, not all of Mazen's explanations are either relevant or correct.

<sup>353</sup> The task the Foreign Ministry entrusted me was to analyse the political past, leading to the establishment of the Oslo Back Channel. This preliminary study does not deal with the Oslo process or its outcome.

<sup>354</sup> Corbin 1994, p. 8. However, the introduction to the Norwegian version of the book – from which this quotation is taken – was written by Egeland, Juul and Larsen themselves.

## Summary

The signing of the Oslo agreement showed an astonished world the extent to which the small state of Norway had contributed to one of the most successful attempts at peace in the Middle East since the creation of Israel in May 1948. Through secret diplomacy and by playing a role far out of proportion to its size, Norway had succeeded where all others had failed, managing to get the entrenched adversaries to agree to a gradual Israeli withdrawal from some of the Occupied Territories, and to local Palestinian self-determination.

The Middle East conflict had seemed 'ripe for resolution'. The parties had seemed willing. The Madrid peace process had begun on the basis of such a conceived ripeness, but the whole Madrid/Washington process had dried up completely. It was this stalemate in the Washington-led negotiations that triggered the establishment of the Oslo Back Channel.

In addition, the motivational ripeness – the desire to end the conflict – had been growing on both sides, not only in the period just prior to the opening of the negotiations, but since the Six Day War in 1967. The parties' desire to seek a compromise had gradually developed. The conflict seemed ripe for a settlement, a historic compromise that would ultimately mean partition and a two-state solution.

The changing international, regional and national conditions that created this ripeness explain why the Oslo Back Channel came into being. There never would have been any Norwegian option without these changes and the willingness of the parties to try something other than conflict and bloodshed. Oslo was a successful experience precisely because it took place just as changes in political circumstances, internally and globally, changed the parties' perceptions of gains, losses and risks that had been maintained for more than 30 years.

The all-too-recent past had seen many attempts to negotiate peace and just as many failures. However, at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, major changes in the international, regional and national situations provided a totally new opening for fundamentally new mediation efforts.

After 1945 the international situation was dominated by the rivalry between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA. The situation in the Middle East and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict were also influenced by the Cold War, which had constituted a major obstacle to any genuine peace process. Suddenly, in 1989, the Cold War was over. The Soviet Union and its empire collapsed. The Russians were faced with huge internal problems and had very limited resources to continue the rivalry game in the Middle East – or anywhere else. The United States, as the remaining superpower, wanted to get things moving.

The Gulf War constituting the most important regional change, had profound effects throughout the Middle East, fundamentally altering the political landscape and making peace a genuine possibility. It also shattered the myth of Arab unity. The majority of the Arab states – and Israel - supported the US-led war against Iraq. The PLO did not belong to this mixed majority group. The PLO's support for Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly one of Yassir Arafat's greatest mistakes. It provoked harsh international criticism, even among the PLO's traditional friends. The PLO found itself in an extremely weak position, both in relation to the West and most of the Arab states. After the Gulf War it faced bankruptcy and had scant political room to manoeuvre. From this position of weakness, the PLO was necessarily ready to explore any diplomatic initiative that would include a Palestinian delegation.

Increasingly frustrated, the Palestinians felt that they had to do something themselves instead of relying on the PLO leadership over a thousand miles away in Tunis. The Palestinian uprising, the *Intifada*, initiated and sustained by local Palestinians, began in December 1987. Over the years, a new Palestinian elite had gradually emerged, not incorporating the traditional old notables or the PLO leadership-in-exile. If Arafat and the official PLO leadership wanted to maintain their authority after the outbreak of the *Intifada*, they would have to get involved in negotiations or be swept aside by the growing self-confidence of the local Palestinians.

The *Intifada* also had an important impact on Israeli political reasoning. Many Israelis questioned the wisdom of trying to maintain full control over the West Bank and Gaza. Both the Israelis and the PLO were alert to the growing threat from militant Islam. Hamas had begun to challenge the PLO as the sole leader of the Palestinians – a source of particular concern to Chairman Arafat himself. The Israeli political leadership also feared this development. The Israelis needed a stable, friendly government on the West Bank. They felt that only Arafat could give them that regime, the other options being so much worse.

The Madrid Conference was, in a way, the direct outcome of the new international and regional context. Under the umbrella of the Jordanian delegation, the Palestinians – for the first time ever at an official international setting – were given a place at the negotiating table, from which they could speak for themselves and, not least, speak to the Israelis. But the Madrid process ground to a halt on the central Israeli- Palestinian question. By the beginning of 1993, it had reached a dead end. Nevertheless, the Madrid Conference marked a watershed in Arab-Israeli relations, laying the groundwork for the peace process and paving the way for the breakthrough in Oslo in 1993.

Thus it was changes at the international, regional and national levels that worked to create a window of opportunity for genuine conflict management between Israel and the Palestinians. By 1992, both Israel and the PLO had come to realise that the status quo was untenable, and that coercion was not the answer. Reluctantly, the new Israeli government decided to do the unthinkable – to talk directly with the PLO.

Before any agreement could be signed, however, the parties had to be convinced that such an agreement was not only necessary, but also possible. They would have to be persuaded that the other side was prepared to make the necessary concessions – that there was a reasonable probability that the negotiations would yield an acceptable agreement that would not jeopardise their own national existence. They would have to feel that there was a viable way out of this seemingly unending conflict. Then a series of developments – at the international, regional and national levels – together with renewed perceptions of the long- and short-term interests of the parties - came together to create the *ripe moment*. At this crucial point, the Norwegians, taking advantage of the situation, were able to intervene to provide a channel to exploit this ripeness.

But the ripeness of the Middle East conflict does not explain why it was Norway rather than any other country that succeeded in bringing the two parties together. It does not explain why Norway was particularly suitable for such an extraordinary mediation task.

Several books and articles have already been published on Norway and the Norwegians that initiated the secret back channel and helped negotiate a peaceful settlement. Myths have sprung up. As in fairy tales, the focus is strongly centred on the individuals involved, as are the explanations.

The history of Norway's involvement with the Middle East conflict throughout the post-war period is surprisingly lacking from nearly every account of the Oslo Back Channel. Recent research has shown that a very special relationship did indeed exist between Norway and Israel, long before the exciting days of the secret Norwegian Back Channel.

This political past is not insignificant when it comes to understanding and explaining the Oslo Back Channel: it is the most crucial element in any explanation of how Norway could play such a role. After 1948, Norway became one of Israel's best friends. The decisive formative years of the Norwegian- Israeli

relationship in the 1940s and 1950s is of utmost importance for the understanding of the whole post-war period. From the 1970s, however, things changed. Norway managed to maintain its old friendship with Israel while establishing contacts with the Palestinians. It is this with which the report deals, in an effort to explain the background, the premises and the creation of the back channel, to a greater degree than the process itself, its outcome and success.

After its founding in 1948, Israel became much more than just one of the many states with which Norway was on friendly terms. Norwegians developed an enormous admiration for Israel, indeed, almost akin to religious veneration. And this was not confined to Norway's religious and conservative circles. It was within the Labour movement that this religious 'conversion' was most clearly seen.

Several factors help explain the development of this relationship between the two social democratic governments and parties and the extraordinary admiration and support which was felt towards the new Jewish state from the whole spectrum of the Norwegian political environment. Of course, as in many European countries after 1945, general feelings of guilt for the fate of the Jewish people during World War II underlay the largely one-sided pro-Israel attitudes in evidence. Moreover, Norway had long been a country where folk religion, rooted in a conservative, fundamentalist Christianity, traditionally had a firm foothold. The fact that Norway has a state Church has meant that the teaching of Christianity has also had a strong position, both in the public school system and in the more general upbringing of new generations. This deep-seated religious foundation, this familiarity with Scripture and history, was instrumental in creating a positive attitude towards the new and modern Israel. Most Norwegians felt a naturally close – albeit not always clearly-defined – relationship with the Jews. In addition, the more religious segments of the Norwegian population saw the creation of Israel as a fulfilment of the prophecies in the Bible. Once the Jewish State stood there as a reality, strong ties were forged between present and past, religion and politics.

The Christian community and socialists in the governing Labour Party both tended to view the state of Israel through the eyeglass of religion. For the more fervent Christians, Israel marked the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. For the Labour movement, it was their dream of a socialist paradise come true. Both agreed that a 'land of milk and honey' was being created. They admired how the Jews stubbornly fought for a state of their own, and, not least, how they had managed to overcome what they saw as aggressive Arabs. For politicians within the Norwegian Labour Party, the main reason for their almost religious support was their conviction that a socialist community was being built up from the ground. Everything in Israel corresponded, on the whole, to how leading Labour Party politicians felt a model society could be created.

These factors formed the basis of Norway's one-sided Middle Eastern policy in the late 1940s and 1950s. They were all decisive in making Norway one of Israel's best friends. Except for the efforts of a few officials at the Foreign Ministry, not one single attempt was made to even try to understand the complexities of the Middle East conflict, or the existence of another party that also had long-established rights in the same area.

Leading Foreign Ministry officials did not share the widespread Norwegian attitude towards the situation in the Middle East. They were more concerned with the rights and obligations in international law and considered the interests of small states as best attended to by such a system. From this perspective, the creation of a Jewish State at the expense of the Palestinians who already lived in the disputed area was problematic indeed. Israel seemed destined for a conflict-filled future. In such an unpredictable situation, there was no reason to rush things and grant hasty diplomatic recognition. In addition, the Foreign Ministry gave priority to important domestic interests like NATO membership, preserving good relations with its closest allies, Britain and, increasingly, the United States, and overseeing Norway's merchant marine fleet – the country's most important foreign currency earner. Again and again, these considerations had to be weighed against the possible consequences of an overly friendly policy towards Israel.

But most Norwegians saw the Middle East in a different light. For them, the only country and the only people that counted were Israel and the Israelis. The fate of the Palestinians was neglected totally. The prevailing opinion among politicians, within both the governing party and the opposition, was that Israel could not be blamed for the flight of 600,000–760,000 Palestinians. They had fled because the surrounding Arab states had told them to do so. The Israelis had asked them to stay. No one, not even officers at the Foreign Ministry, wanted to encourage or pressure the Israelis to take back at least some of the Palestinians. On the contrary: the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, the government, and the political establishment as a whole were of the opinion that Israel had more than enough with its own problems. It would have to be up to the Arab states to take care of their fleeing brothers and sisters. The solution was, in other words, to have all the Palestinians integrated into the Arab countries.

This attitude must of course be seen in light of the massive Norwegian support for Israel. If all the Palestinians were allowed to return to their homes, in what had now become the state of Israel, this would undermine the state. Israel was absorbing hundreds of immigrants from all corners of the earth every day. That was Israel's problem, and the new state had set about solving it as best it could. The politicians felt that the Arab states ought to show the same sense of responsibility, and integrate the Palestinians into their midst. The Foreign Ministry, not that preoccupied with seeing the conflict from the Israeli side, took a more pragmatic approach and saw integration as the only possible solution.

While Norway's Middle East policy was strongly sympathetic towards Israel, things could easily have been even more one-sided: The Foreign Ministry was instrumental in maintaining a certain balance. The Labour Party was prepared to do its utmost to rescue what it saw as a Jewish state threatened on all sides by aggressive Arabs. Border incidents, escalating from 1955, were always explained in terms of Israeli responses to Arab aggression. Israel was never criticized, not even when the number of Arab casualties far exceeded Israeli losses. In the eyes of the Norwegian Labour Party, Israel had only good intentions and had to protect itself against aggression. The Labour Party, and, not least, Norway's most powerful Israel supporter, Labour Party Secretary Haakon Lie, felt that it had to take immediate action to rescue the Jewish state from being wiped off the map. In 1956, the Norwegian Labour Party launched the 'Let Israel Live' campaign, originally planned as an international drive.

This Norwegian support for Israel lasted throughout the 1960s. Internationally, and especially within the United Nations, Norway was obviously considered one of the staunchest members of the pro-Israeli camp, as had been the case in the 1940s and 1950s. The three Scandinavian countries - generally, Sweden was less pro-Israel than Norway and Denmark - continued to try to find a common ground in their approaches to the Middle East.. But as earlier, Norway's position created problems.

The outbreak of the third war in the Middle East in 1967 once again brought traditional sentiments in Norway to the surface, with the political establishment and the press fiercely backing Israel and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs being the critical and less supportive bastion. In the huge pro-Israel camp, Israel's 'security' was the main theme, both before, during and after the war. Just as in 1956, the last time the conflict in the Middle East had been close to war, the Norwegian Labour Party launched a campaign to rescue the threatened Jewish State.

The Foreign Ministry did not share these worries for Israel's security. Thanks to Norway's contacts in the United Nations and all the diplomatic reports coming in from the embassies in the region, the Foreign Ministry's view of the conflict in the Middle East differed considerably from that commonly held by politicians, the media and public opinion in general. In the UN, immediately after the Six Day War, Norway supported the famous Resolution 242: the UN could not accept territorial expansion by military means, but recognized at the same time Israel's right to exist and territorial integrity. But the Foreign Ministry was becoming increasingly more critical of Israel's attitude. In defiance of the resolution, Israel held on to the territories it had seized during the Six Day War. The Foreign Ministry felt that both Egypt and Jordan were willing to fulfil Resolution 242. Israel's way of taking the law into its own hands was conflicting with how the Ministry felt the Middle East conflict should be solved and, obviously, with its interpretation of Resolution 242. International law, and not military superiority, was the only means to ensure peaceful co-existence among nations.

In the twenty-odd years after the end of the Second World War, the Foreign Ministry in Norway was a 'lone voice' advocating critical and more 'balanced' views on the conflict in the Middle East. But because they were considerations for internal consumption only, buried in classified documents and beyond the reach of anybody outside the ministry, its position was unknown by the public.

This picture changed slightly as a consequence of the Six Day War. The war also contributed to a new attitude on the outside. Israel had been almost unanimously regarded as the weak and threatened part in the conflict. The Arab states, in turn, had been viewed as strong and aggressive, with only one goal – to destroy the little Jewish State. But the massive Israeli victory in the 1967 war triggered a process that forced the political establishment in particular, and Norwegians in general, to reconsider the question of comparative military strength. Who was the weak one? Who was strong? Thanks to its military machine, Israel had gained the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, the Golan Heights and, not least, the old part of Jerusalem itself.

In 1967, leading figures in the Norwegian Labour Party were celebrating the Israeli victory. But they had become older, and were on their way out of the Labour Party. The younger generation, now in the process of assuming leading positions, who had kept quiet in the beginning, became increasingly vocal and critical. They were aware of Israel's military superiority, its occupation of new territory, the fate of the Palestinians and the terrible conditions in the refugee camps. They knew about the nationalist movement among the

Palestinians and the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. This new generation began to work for justice for the Palestinians. They wanted information and contact with the other side in the Middle East conflict. These new approaches were part of the political radicalization that swept through Norwegian society in the 1970s.

After 1967, criticism was beginning to be heard from the left of the political spectrum in the shape of the Socialist People's Party. Before 1967, nobody called nor regarded the Palestinian people as Palestinians. Their fate was referred to as the 'Arab refugee problem'. And it was a problem that received little attention by either Norwegian politicians or civil servants and was, on the whole, regarded as unresolvable. After the Six Day War, all this changed. The 'Arab refugee problem' was now seen as a serious *political* problem, whereas once it had counted only as a *humanitarian* problem. UNRWA, the United Nations' special organization working among the Palestinian refugees, was now seen as a stabilizing factor. The Norwegian contributions to UNRWA had been extremely modest in the 1940s and 1950s. From 1968 onwards, significantly larger contributions began flowing through to the organisation. And after having languished in obscurity for twenty years, the Palestinian refugee question caught the attention of the Norwegian Parliament.

Finally, the people who made up the 'Arab refugee problem' were officially referred to as the Palestinians. This happened for the first time when Norwegian Prime Minister Per Borten spoke in the United Nations in 1970. This represented a powerful symbolic watershed. Prime Minister Borten, Foreign Minister John Lyng and, in 1971, Labour's Foreign Minister Andreas Cappelen, stated officially that there could be no political solution to the problems in the Middle East unless the rights of the Palestinians were included in future solutions. The old method of mass integration into the Arab countries was abandoned. What was to replace it, though, was still unclear.

These opinions expressed by these ministers reflected a deeper and widening change of opinion in Norwegian society, both in attitudes towards the Palestinians and towards Israel. The new generation was not affected by the extermination of the Jews in quite the same way as their parents'. Many of them were shocked at the injustices committed towards the Palestinians. *They* were seen as the victims of the Middle East conflict. The new generation, on their way to leading political positions, described the fate of the Palestinians as their parents had described the fate of the Jews. This started among the socialists on the political left, and was given its clearest expression by the Labour Party's youth organization, the AUF, in 1970- 71, something that sent shock waves down the spine of the parent party. Not only was the present situation of the Palestinians viewed differently, but questions were asked of the past. Israel's treatment of the refugees during the wars of 1948 and 1967 came under scrutiny. Its new position as an occupying power meant that the security card had become much more difficult to play: Was Israel's security the only problem in the region?

The growing ambiguity in Norwegian attitudes to the conflict in the Middle East and the widening generation gap, especially within the Labour Party, were given an extra stir when the fourth war broke out in 1973. The old friends of Israel, who still wielded considerable political clout, rushed to the defence of the Jewish state. They emulated their 1956 campaign, even using the same slogan: 'Let Israel Live'. As in 1956, this campaign aimed at mobilizing the masses. But Israel did not have as many friends as it used to.

While Israel was in the process of losing its position in Norwegian opinion, the Palestinians were being upgraded. In the beginning of the 1970s, the PLO, still regarded by most Norwegians as a terrorist organization, demonstrated a new will to compromise and follow a more moderate approach. In June 1974, the PLO's National Council indicated for the first time the possibility of a two-state solution: a partition. That same autumn, the Arab summit in Rabat declared that the PLO was the Palestinians' only legal representative. The United Nations passed a resolution accepting the rights of the Palestinian people and the PLO was granted observer status at the UN. In November 1974, Chairman Yassir Arafat was given the opportunity to speak before the UN General Assembly.

These international developments came to have major implications on Norwegian Middle East policy. Labour's new Foreign Minister from October 1973, Knut Frydenlund, was not blind to this new climate, either at home or internationally. He – together with Foreign Ministry civil servants – felt that Palestinian representatives should be included in international organizations like the United Nations. In 1974, he was ready to accept that PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat be given the chance to address the UN General Assembly and instructed Norway's UN ambassador to vote in favour of the motion.

However, this was too far for the political establishment for most Norwegians. This was the first time Norway had voted contrary to Israel's desires. The Norwegian vote led to strong reactions in Norway, not least within the governing Labour Party. A storm of protests was directed at the Minister, from the supporters of Israel within the party, making it clear in no uncertain terms that they were still a factor to take into account

when it came to Norwegian Middle East policy. Knut Frydenlund had obviously misjudged the extent of both the opposition in itself and, not least, the Israel lobby's ability to mobilize support for its cause.

The whole episode resulted in a sharp political backlash for Knut Frydenlund personally. Looking back, Frydenlund said that the decision had been 'historically correct, but politically wrong' because it differed too much from the prevailing Norwegian attitudes to the conflict in the Middle East. The upshot was that the episode secured the continuation of the pro-Israel line. That same autumn, the Norwegian UN delegation fell back on Norway's traditional anti-Palestine position. Norway had definitely taken up with an odd company and had marked itself as one of the countries most supportive of Israel in the world. The PLO continued to be treated as though it had leprosy.

This setback notwithstanding, Norwegian policy gradually became more critical of Israel and more sympathetic to the Palestinians. A round trip to the Middle East conducted by the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs served as an eye-opener for many of them. This was the first time that members of all the political parties in Norway had travelled to the Arab countries. What they saw on their trip to the Arab countries, including the Palestinian refugee camps, came as a complete shock to many of them and exerted a major influence on their views on the conflict. It became obvious that the conventional black and white perceptions of bad guys and good guys was totally inadequate. The predicament of the Arab-Palestinian side and the Israeli leaders' uncompromising attitudes towards the Palestinian refugees and border disputes did not fall on deaf committee ears: not only the Arab states, but Israel too had to carry the blame for the lack of peace.

The Norwegian contribution to the United Nations' peacekeeping force in South Lebanon was another and probably even more important catalyst in bringing about a change in the Norwegian position. Since 1956, Norway had contributed high-ranking military officers to UNTSO, the United Nations' Truce Supervision Organisation, and, from 1956-67, a battalion of soldiers to UNEF, the United Nations' Emergency Force, to oversee the border between Egypt and Israel. The United Nations' Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was established March 1978. This mission, gave the Norwegians stationed in the Middle East the chance to gain new experience and new knowledge, as other Norwegian peacekeeping operations in the region had before them. The Norwegians serving under the UN banner had almost certainly gone to the Middle East with a strongly pro-Israeli view of the conflict. But many of them returned home with a completely changed perception. They realized that the conflict was far more complicated than they had anticipated, and that it was not just the Palestinians and the Arab states that were to blame. In fact, their experiences with the Israelis had not been very good. The Norwegian UNIFIL force in Lebanon found itself under constant pressure and clashed frequently with the Israeli armed forces. The stories they brought home with them and which they related to friends and relatives, helped to widen people's perceptions.

Furthermore, the media were suddenly no longer dominated by reports on the Middle East promoting the usual Israeli angle. Norwegian journalists moved out of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and started to investigate the situation in South Lebanon. As a consequence, there was a massive increase in reports from refugee camps and coverage of the conflict between the Israeli army and PLO guerrilla groups in the Norwegian media. Moreover, the Norwegians serving in the UNIFIL force did not meet Israeli politicians, Labour Party members or trade union representatives, as most other visiting Norwegians generally did in the past. In addition to the Palestinian and Lebanese refugees, who they mostly regarded as victims, and consequently felt sorry for, the Norwegian boys were confronted with tough Israeli soldiers. The Norwegian forces were, on the whole, given a new version of Middle East reality which greatly changed their perceptions of the conflict.

The Norwegian involvement in Lebanon also had major implications at the governmental level. The relationship between the Norwegian and the Israeli governments deteriorated. Repeatedly, the Israeli government was warned that if the situation didn't improve, Norwegian forces would be pulled out. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, tensions escalated. Appeals were to no avail. Even the Americans were asked to try to influence the uncompromising Israelis. Although the American government understood the predicament, no perceptible results were seen on the ground.

As the traditionally warm relationship with Israel cooled and became increasingly tense, relations with the PLO improved and slowly expanded. Already before 1974 there had been some informal low level contacts with the PLO. From 1976, this dialogue received a boost when influential Norwegian diplomats met high-ranking PLO representatives. The UNIFIL engagement extended this network even further. The UNIFIL work required this kind of a working-level contact, primarily for the security of the young Norwegian soldiers, according to Foreign Minister Knut Frydenlund. The contacts were established by Norway's new chargé d'affaires in Beirut, Hans Wilhelm Longva, who had been appointed in March 1978. He was the key Norwegian figure when it came to the PLO and an important person in the mediation efforts in the years to come.

Norwegian contacts on the Palestinian side had to be built from scratch. This exercise in relations and confidence-building was to be Longva's major undertaking. Longva quickly gained access to Yassir Arafat's office, and soon developed a good relationship both with Arafat himself and other high-ranking Palestinians. But in addition to Longva's work, the contribution of the various Norwegian NGOs that gave humanitarian aid to the Palestinian refugees in the camps in Lebanon in building political confidence between Norwegians and the Palestinians should not be underestimated, nor should the active involvement of the Defence Ministry and the Defence Headquarters. The Foreign Ministry acquired important allies among military personnel.

By the end of the 1970s, a shift was clearly taking place. Labour Party politicians, high-ranking Norwegian officials and military leaders had all met with the higher echelons of the PLO. Norwegian–Palestinian contacts were developed with the old pro-Israeli bastion, the trade union LO. But, although Norway had started to move towards a more balanced Middle East policy, it had become clear during the 1970s that Norway was isolated in Europe as regards its restrictive policy towards the PLO. The heated debate over Arafat's UN performance in the autumn of 1974 had taught Foreign Minister Frydenlund a lesson when it came to making experiments: changing Norwegian Middle East policy in a more pro-Palestinian direction was dangerous and should only be attempted with great care. Official Norwegian policy changed hardly at all after 1974. In the meantime, huge changes had been going on internationally and Israel had become more isolated. The Jewish State still refused to negotiate with the PLO or give up any of the land it had conquered. This was becoming increasingly unacceptable for a growing majority of the world's states. In fact it would have been difficult to find a single pro-Israel country in the whole of the European Union. Even the Netherlands, traditionally considered a pro-Israeli country, sharply criticized Israel for its line on the Palestinian question and voted against Israel in international forums. Norway was isolated, a remote country – in every sense – in this European context with its restrictive policy on Palestinian matters. A decreasing number of countries were voting with Norway on Middle East questions in the UN. Norway had one of the most restrictive policies towards the PLO in the whole world.

Surprisingly enough, it was Norway's traditional position as Israel's best friend that made the remote country suitable and attractive as a possible mediating partner. And, even more surprising, at least at first glance, it was neither Norway itself nor Israel that drew Norway into this position, it was PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat who took the initiative and brought Norway's name forward. Arafat considered Norway an important channel because of – rather than in spite of – its close relations with Israel. Arafat saw Norway as an important channel that could be used in possible negotiations in the future, a serious and decent country that could not be accused of mainly wishing to promote its own national interests. In addition to the close links to the adversary, Norway also had strong ties with the USA, something that was definitely needed. In one way or another, the US would have a major role to play in any peace negotiations in the Middle East.

The idea of Norway as a fitting mediator was raised seriously for the first time in 1979, in connection with the Camp David agreement. The American government had asked Norway to guarantee Israel oil, to replace oil from Iran. For the Norwegian government the oil guarantee request created several dilemmas, and it was during this internal process of sorting out dilemmas that Norway's possible role as a future mediator was raised by Yassir Arafat. The Foreign Ministry had asked Longva to discuss the matter with Arafat and find out whether he was opposed to the idea of a guarantee. It came as a surprise, both to Longva and the Foreign Ministry in Oslo, when Arafat replied that he found the deal unproblematic. However, as a trade-off for his acceptance of a possible Norwegian–Israeli oil deal, Arafat wanted something in return: he wanted to come to Norway some time in the future if he needed a secret back channel to the Israelis. Israel was governed by the hawkish Likud and wanted nothing to do with the PLO. Foreign Minister Frydenlund was, not unexpectedly, positive and willing to serve as a possible back channel. In the coming years this thought was addressed on several occasions, but nothing concrete came of it. Strong Israeli resistance was always the problem. Frydenlund represented the political driving force in Norway, Longva was his local representative. They both felt that a future solution only could be found in a two-state-solution, a partition.

From the beginning of the 1980s, it was the Norwegian Labour Party, now in opposition, that forced through the changes in attitudes towards the PLO. The Norwegian Labour Party was following in the footsteps of other social democratic parties in Europe, first and foremost in Austria and Sweden, although in those countries the pro-Palestinian process had been going on for years and was far ahead of the small, uncertain steps being taken in Norway.

Both at the congress of the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions (LO) and at the 1981 Labour Party Congress in April, the new approach to the Middle East conflict was in evidence. Israel's right to exist within secure and recognized borders still had to be ensured, but a just solution to the Palestinian situation also had to be found. The PLO was regarded as a representative of the Palestinian people. It was decided that the Labour Party should broaden its contact with the PLO and do what it could to see that the PLO was

included in the peace process in the Middle East. Elements within the Labour Party were clearly aware of the need to balance this new contact with the PLO with the traditional close friendship with the Israeli Labour politicians.

Being in opposition from 1981 made it easier for Labour to push forward the reconciliation process. Several of the Party leaders met with Arafat. Simply by meeting the 'symbol of terrorism' they were crossing a threshold. The first person to do so was former Party chairman. Reiulf Steen in December 1982. Under the pretext of interviewing Arafat for a Norwegian paper, Steen travelled to Tunis to try to establish a direct contact between the Israeli diplomat and Labour Party politician Abba Eban and the PLO chairman. Two weeks later, on New Year's Eve 1982, an 'official' Labour Party delegation, including Knut Frydenlund and Thorvald Stoltenberg, visited Tunis. Again Arafat raised the question of a Norwegian and/or Scandinavian role in the peace process in the Middle East. Primarily, he wanted help to establish a channel between the USA and the PLO. But of even greater importance and use, the Norwegian Labour Party could help establish a direct contact between the Israeli Labour Party and the PLO. Arafat asked his Norwegian guests to be instrumental in handing this message over to the Israeli comrades.

Thorvald Stoltenberg followed up Arafat's initiative enthusiastically. He was anxious on behalf of the Norwegian Labour Party to make a Norwegian contribution to getting the peace process in the Middle East back on track. He saw the building of a personal relationship with Yassir Arafat and the PLO as an important part of the Norwegian peace-building efforts and he considered Norway's close friendship with the Israeli Labour Party as its main asset. This network was the obvious one to use. Stoltenberg called an acquaintance there, but received a negative response. Arafat, however, wanted to continue the contacts established with the Norwegians. During the winter of 1983, he called Stoltenberg and told him that he wanted to send his close associate, Issam Sartawi, to Oslo to discuss further progress. The murder of Sartawi came as a serious blow to the Norwegian hopes of setting up a direct channel between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The loss of Sartawi also meant that many other of the European social democratic parties had lost one of their most important links to the moderates in the PLO. The incident did not, however, influence the Norwegian Labour Party's goal of normalizing relations with the PLO. But the work of mediation and reconciliation suffered severely for years after this episode.

Stoltenberg was not acting as a one-man show. He was supported by the leading politicians in the Labour Party, such as party leaders Reiulf Steen, Gro Harlem Brundtland and Thorbjørn Jagland. There was a broad consensus within the higher echelons of Labour in favour of developing a network of Palestinian contacts. In April 1983 Yassir Arafat went to Stockholm to meet social democratic leaders in Scandinavia. It was here that Gro Harlem Brundtland met Arafat for the first time. The question of a direct Israeli-Palestinian channel was discussed again. The social democratic leaders present decided to continue to look for possible openings in any such negotiations. Many small attempts at promoting peace were tried, but with no progress.

When the Labour Party regained power in May 1986, the new government immediately spoke out in favour of a more PLO-friendly approach, signalling a turning point in the Norwegian Middle East policy. Again, the PLO contacted Norway, this time through Hans Wilhelm Longva, who had become Norwegian ambassador to Kuwait. Longva had maintained close connections since his first contacts with the PLO in 1978. The PLO was now eager to start a dialogue with the USA. In December 1987, Foreign Minister Stoltenberg raised the question with the Americans, but they showed little interest. Instead, this task became Sweden's major contribution to the peace process in the Middle East. In December 1988, the Swedish Foreign Minister, Sten Andersson, and his team managed to open a dialogue between the American government and the PLO. Stoltenberg left this question to his Swedish colleague. There was no separate role to play for Norway at this stage. Thorvald Stoltenberg and Sten Andersson were regularly in touch, however, and Andersson kept Stoltenberg informed at every stage about Sweden's work and ambitions for the Middle East conflict in general and the PLO in particular. But in this US-PLO process Norway only played the role of a small helper. This was Sweden's show.

The Israeli reluctance to engage in direct peace negotiations continued to be the major problem, both for Sweden and for Norway. Sweden's relationship with Israel was extremely problematic. This was where Norway had the advantage: its relationship to Israel was still close, and although the Labour government had worked towards a closer relationship with the PLO, the government, and, not least, Stoltenberg himself, were very conscious of the need to maintain the Norwegian-Israeli relationship. As opposed to Sweden, Norway would have the edge when it came to bridge-building between Israel and the PLO. In several letters to his party comrade and friend Shimon Peres, Stoltenberg raised the question of direct contact between the two arch enemies, but the response was bleak.

In January 1989, Thorvald Stoltenberg, embarked on the first ever official visit by a Norwegian Foreign Minister to the PLO chairman in Tunis. From then on the Norwegian engagement widened considerably. At

the meeting, Arafat again repeated that Norway had an important role to play. A formula for a future peace solution was also elaborated. This peace scheme was quite similar to the approach taken with regard to the Oslo Back Channel four years hence. Again Arafat emphasized that Norway could play an important role because of its strong ties with Israel, the USA and the EU.<sup>355</sup> Norway also had a moral weight internationally, Arafat claimed. This time Arafat had another concrete assignment for the Norwegian Foreign Minister: he wanted Stoltenberg to forward a message to the Israeli Foreign Minister, Moshe Arens, that the PLO was ready to enter into direct bilateral talks at whatever level the Israelis might want. The parties could meet secretly or publicly. In addition, the PLO was willing to have contacts with Israel through a third party. Oslo could be an appropriate place to meet, and it would be useful if Norwegian research institutions could arrange seminars at which the parties could meet. In such a way indirect contacts could be established.

Foreign Minister Stoltenberg grasped the opportunity and the challenge given to him and Norwegian diplomacy by Arafat in January 1989. As Stoltenberg saw it, the role of Norway would be to 'ensure that views, evaluations and messages be passed on in a highly confidential way. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry would be willing to provide the necessary human and technical resources. The necessarily secret nature of the project may require that it be kept within a narrow circle and given a special security arrangement'.<sup>356</sup> Of course, nothing was said publicly about the results emanating from the Stoltenberg–Arafat meeting.

On his return to Oslo, Stoltenberg was wise enough to underline the traditionally close relationship between Norway and Israel. 'Norway has always felt very close to Israel', he claimed. 'This has not changed'.<sup>357</sup> However, such statements did not help him much. The Israelis viewed the situation differently and were, to put it mildly, not pleased with the new Norwegian opening towards Arafat and the PLO. When Stoltenberg visited Moshe Arens and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in Jerusalem in March 1989, no appreciation was forthcoming. Stoltenberg tried to explain why Norway had changed its attitude towards the PLO but he got nowhere. The Israelis dug their heels in even harder. An extremely disappointed Stoltenberg was forced to shelve his mediation plans. This disappointment was compounded when, in the autumn of 1989, the Labour Party lost the election and a non-socialist government took over. Mostly for domestic reasons, the new government had little interest in conducting an activist line *vis-à-vis* the PLO. For most members of the Christian People's Party, the PLO represented the main obstacle towards peace.

As Stoltenberg saw it, Norway's contribution to solving the conflict in the Middle East would consist of persuading Israel to negotiate with the PLO. This was a calculated political choice on the part of Stoltenberg and was the line he had been working on since the beginning of the 1980s. When he took over office again in 1990, the change of policy direction was both resolute and well-considered.

At the same time, Stoltenberg recruited new people who were later to become instrumental in the breakthrough in the Oslo Back Channel process. Jan Egeland was appointed Political Advisor, and in February 1992, he advanced to State Secretary. Jan Egeland brought with him a new and much more activist approach to the Foreign Ministry. Another appointee who proved important for the future, was the young diplomat Mona Juul, who became one of his assistants. In 1988, Juul had been appointed to her first job as Secretary at the Norwegian Embassy in Cairo. Mona Juul was married to Terje Rød Larsen, who travelled with her to Egypt and lived there in 1989. Their stay in the Middle East was to be decisive for Larsen and Juul. In 1981 Terje Rød Larsen had been one of the founders of the research institute Fafo. The ever-active and entrepreneurial Larsen, with no particular knowledge of the Middle East, used the opportunity to examine whether Fafo could expand its research activities to the Middle East. His ideas bore fruit. Fafo was given responsibility for conducting a socio-economic study of the living conditions of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The preparations for the project brought him into direct contact with the prominent figures both on the Israeli and the Palestinian side.

The work of establishing Fafo's research project in 1990- 91 opened Rød Larsen's eyes, not only to the terrible conditions inside the Occupied Territories, and Gaza in particular, but also to the Middle East conflict in general. Perhaps it was not that insoluble after all? As Rød Larsen saw it, the parties needed a forum where they could meet and talk and substitute trust and understanding for suspicion and enmity. Rød Larsen became convinced that the distance between the two enemies was not as great as either they themselves or the rest of the world seemed to think. He became equally convinced that he could contribute towards solving a conflict, where for years, other peacemakers had failed. However, so far, Rød Larsen was only acting in his personal capacity as leader of a research organization. He had no official backing from the Foreign Ministry.

With Thorvald Stoltenberg and Jan Egeland's new emphasis on making peace in the Middle East, there was much activity in Oslo, but this lacked any real direction. However, a visit to Oslo 28 February 1992 by the PLO economic expert Abu Ala proved decisive for future developments despite the fact that nothing concrete came out of his meeting in Oslo at the time. Towards the end of April 1992, another important Oslo

actor became linked to the Oslo team, which still lacked anything resembling a master plan for future peace negotiations. Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin was to become the key Israeli figure in the Oslo process and he was now introduced to Rød Larsen. Beilin already had important contacts in Norway. In 1987, he had visited Oslo and met Stoltenberg, though he had never met Rød Larsen before. At this stage, Rød Larsen, and probably also Yossi Beilin, felt that any future peace process would have to be built by local Palestinian leaders living inside the Occupied Territories, as opposed to the dogmatic PLO people in Tunis, who had lost contact with their people and the real world. Faisal Husseini was seen as the ideal candidate. It was also perfectly clear to both of them that the stalled peace process in Washington needed a push or an alternative track. Rød Larsen seemed already to have been toying with the idea that Norway, and Fafo in particular, could be a perfect venue for a secret Israeli–Palestinian meeting. This back channel should by no means replace the Washington process, only help it back on track.

It seemed by this time that it was Terje Rød Larsen who was doing the work of getting the sides involved in the Norwegian peace track. He was the one taking the initiatives, he was the one following up, he was the one arranging the contacts and the meetings, eagerly and efficiently. Of all the players in this drama, Terje Rød Larsen was the most active and effective one. The players in the region seemed more or less passively to respond to his ideas. In June, a meeting was held between Rød Larsen, Yossi Beilin, Yair Hirschfeld and Faisal Husseini. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss a Norwegian option to help the peace process in Washington. It led nowhere, however.

At this stage, all the activities initiated and organised by Rød Larsen were private and personal only. Of course, the Foreign Ministry 'knew' via Mona Juul but Rød Larsen seems to have had no official backing or clearance. At this point it seems as if neither Foreign Minister Stoltenberg nor State Secretary Egeland were informed – there is no written documentation of any formal decisions or meetings involving Rød Larsen at the Foreign Ministry. Whether or when Stoltenberg and/or Egeland were informed of Rød Larsen's activities in the Middle East, or whether they attached any importance to them – if they knew – is also most unclear. There was no definite link at this stage between Rød Larsen's activities and the political leadership at the Foreign Ministry.

Nevertheless, top Foreign Ministry officials were becoming increasingly occupied and involved in the peace process. Knut Vollebæk, who held various positions of both a political and non-political nature, was definitely a key figure. Hans Wilhelm Longva, from his position in Kuwait, was also an important figure in the diplomatic corps, handling the day-to-day relations with the PLO. Foreign Minister Stoltenberg was in contact with Shimon Peres on several occasions, but each time his initiatives led nowhere. At this stage, neither Stoltenberg nor the other Norwegian actors had any idea of where the process was heading, if it was heading anywhere at all.

Independently of all these efforts, an old acquaintance of Longva's, Arafat's 'freelance advisor' Bassam Abu-Sharif, showed up in Oslo on 17 August 1992. The purpose of the visit, cleared with Arafat, was to examine the possibility of opening a back channel between Israel and the PLO, with Norway playing the mediating and facilitating role. Obviously, back channel approaches were now being worked upon both on the Palestinian and the Israeli side. Norway was probably only one of several 'test balloons' being floated at the time. As a result, Stoltenberg raised the issue when he met Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin had been hesitant and the Bassam Abu-Sharif track failed. Of all the balloons being launched, none seemed to land on the Norwegian peace track.

However, this did not prevent the Norwegian peacemakers from continuing trying. On 9 September 1992, three weeks after Bassam Abu-Sharif's visit, State Secretary Jan Egeland went on an official visit to Israel. The real purpose of the trip was to find out whether the parties seriously wanted a secret back channel set up in Norway. Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin was Egeland's contact. A secret meeting was set up in Tel Aviv. In addition to Egeland, Juul and Rød Larsen were there. Beilin had brought Yair Hirschfeld along. Speaking on behalf of Foreign Minister Stoltenberg, Egeland confirmed that Oslo was willing to host secret meetings between the two parties. Moreover, Egeland added that the Norwegian Foreign Ministry was behind Fafo and would finance a back channel project.

But this peace attempt, now involving governmental figures on the Norwegian and Israeli side, also came to nothing primarily because of the reluctance of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Several times Egeland contacted Beilin, trying to arrange a meeting during the autumn of 1992. Rød Larsen also contacted him. The Norwegian team assumed that the Israelis were not ready for an Oslo meeting after all.

On the Palestinian side frustration was growing, particularly among the Palestinian team in Washington. Unwittingly, Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian spokeswoman, triggered the whole Oslo Back Channel. She suggested that Yair Hirschfeld should go to London 3–4 December, where the multilateral part of the Madrid process was having a meeting, and meet the PLO representative, Abu Ala. For different reasons, many of

the people who were later to play a part in the Back Channel, happened to be gathered in London that December weekend: Yossi Beilin was heading the Israeli delegation to the multilateral talks. Abu Ala was there to guide the Palestinian delegation. Rød Larsen was in London attending a trade union conference which had nothing to do with the peace process in the Middle East. And, finally, Yair Hirschfeld had also decided to travel to London after his conversation with Hanan Ashrawi. However, he was unsure as to how such a secret meeting with Abu Ala should be arranged; this was where Rød Larsen entered the scene. He was a man whom Hirschfeld and the Israeli side both knew and trusted. He happened to be in London. Hirschfeld called him and asked whether he had any information about Abu Ala and whether he had any advice as to how such a secret meeting could be set up.

Rød Larsen immediately realised the importance of such direct contacts and grasped the opportunity given to him. He suggested that Hirschfeld and Abu Ala should meet the next morning at his hotel. It seems as if, already at this early stage, Rød Larsen had proposed a follow-up meeting, of any kind and level, to be held in Norway. Although he made it clear to Hirschfeld that he was not talking on behalf of the Norwegian government, Rød Larsen stressed his close contacts both with the Foreign Ministry and the governing Labour Party, of which, Hirschfeld, of course, was already aware.

Abu Ala had not informed the PLO leaders in Tunis about the meeting beforehand. Beilin knew nothing of what was going on, nor had he been informed in advance. Two weeks later, Rød Larsen travelled to Tunis to meet PLO leaders for the first time. Yassir Arafat and Abu Mazen, head of PLO's Department for National and International relations, were now informed. What was now clear to Rød Larsen and the other Norwegians involved, was that the leaders in the Palestinian areas would not or could not do anything without the approval of Arafat. He exercised sole power. Whatever the Norwegians might think or feel about the dogmatic, old-fashioned and undemocratic leaders in Tunis, like it or not, there would be no solution without the PLO.

Back in Oslo, Rød Larsen, Juul and Egeland called Beilin in Jerusalem to persuade him to continue to work on the back channel option and the meetings in London. Beilin assured Egeland that Hirschfeld had his approval and blessing. However, if any secret meeting should transpire, he – because of his position as Deputy Foreign Minister – would exercise his right to deny any knowledge of it. If Hirschfeld, as an Israeli citizen, was willing to meet a PLO representative to sort out the many sensitive questions, that was good. However, no one must know that Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister was involved in the plan. Beilin's conditions were crystal clear: Hirschfeld was not speaking on behalf of the Israeli government. There existed no secret negotiations, only a discussion of central items.

In January 1993 the back channel option was finally given a careful 'yes' by Beilin. It was clear from the beginning that Norway would play the role of facilitator, not mediator. Rød Larsen was in charge of the arrangement. Fafo's living conditions project was to be the cover. Rød Larsen arranged the time, the place and the transportation. Jan Egeland approved the plan and found money in the Foreign Ministry's budget to pay the bill. Hirschfeld and his assistant, Ron Pundak, were put on Fafo's pay roll. Formally, nothing could possibly be traced back to the Israeli government. Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg was informed, as was Norway's Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. Stoltenberg was regularly briefed, but deliberately maintained a distance to the details. The head of the Middle East section at the US State Department, Dan Kurtzer, was also informed. When Egeland told him what was going on, Kurtzer's response was a kind of 'I hear what you say' approach, meaning that the Americans would neither approve nor create any obstacles for a back channel option. The USA did not want to be involved, but as long as the Israelis and the PLO were talking to each other in order to sort out some or all of the problems in Washington, the Americans had no objections. Most likely the negotiators on the American side did not have much faith in the idea. However, the Oslo Agreement, a Declaration of Principles that was to pave the way for the establishment of the Palestinian Self-Government Authority and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, would be the eventual outcome of the Norwegian Back Channel.

<sup>355</sup> For Israel, it was important that Norway stood outside the EU.

<sup>356</sup> DU 11.7/154, I, memorandum, Vollebæk, 7 February 1989

<sup>357</sup> Internasjonal Politikk, nos 1-2, 1989, p. 11.

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