Ambassador's Diary: How the Mideast Path to Peace Became America's Road to War

Norman Spector

In this exclusive excerpt from his timely book, ***Chronicle of a War Foretold: How Mideast Peace Became America's Fight***, Norman Spector connects the dots between the war on terror and the Mideast conflict by way of an intensely personal journey. As Canada's first Jewish ambassador to Israel and representative to the Palestinian Authority from 1992 to 1995, Spector lived in the region during the brief period of peace following the signing of the Oslo Accords at the White House in 1993, a peace shattered by the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli extremist in 1995, and the first round of Palestinian suicide attacks leading to the election of the hawkish Likud government of Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996. The peace process failed when Yasser Arafat walked away from the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000, sealing the fate of the moderate Israeli government of Ehud Barak who, as his country's most decorated soldier, had rare credentials for making peace. Now a columnist living in Victoria, Spector recounts Oslo's spring of hope, but concludes that realism is its most useful legacy.

Dans ce passage exclusif de *Chronicle of a War Foretold: How Mideast Peace Became America's Fight*, un ouvrage fort à-propos de Norman Spector, l'auteur retrace les liens entre la guerre au terrorisme et le conflit au Moyen-Orient à partir d'une expérience éminemment personnelle. Premier ambassadeur du Canada en Israël d'origine juive et représentant auprès de l'Autorité palestinienne de 1992 à 1995, Norman Spector a vécu dans cette région du monde pendant la brève période de paix ayant suivi la signature des accords d'Oslo à la Maison-Blanche en 1993. Une période d'espoir brutalement interrompue par l'assassinat en 1995 du premier ministre Yitzhak Rabin par un extrémiste israélien, de même que par les premiers attaques-suicides palestiniennes qui entraîneront en 1996 l'élection du gouvernement Likoud et belliciste de Benyamin Nétanyahou. Le processus de paix s'est définitivement enrayé lorsque Yasser Arafat s'est retiré des pourparlers de Camp David à l'été 2000, scellant du même coup le destin du gouvernement israélien plus modéré d'Ehud Barak. Celui-ci était pourtant tout désigné pour relancer ce processus, ayant notamment été le soldat le plus décoré de son pays. Norman Spector vit aujourd'hui à Victoria, où il est chroniqueur pour différents médias anglais et français. Son livre retrace les circonstances de ce printemps d'espoir à Oslo, pour conclure que le retour au réalisme en a été l'héritage le plus utile.

Returning from an early morning walk with the dog, I caught the phone on the third ring, just as the answering machine was about to kick in. In an excited tone, the caller urged me to turn on the television set. I did — in time to see the second hijacked passenger jet smash into the World Trade Center. As for others of my generation, this memory is now alongside that of November 22, forty years ago, when we learned of President John Kennedy's assassination. What I'll remember this time is that I heard about the attacks from an Arab friend.

I first met Sa'id in February 1992, shortly after arriving in Tel Aviv as Canada's ambassador to Israel. A forty-something man who worked for a non-governmental organization in East Jerusalem, he had been known for some time to the Canadian Embassy. Sa'id wanted to immigrate to Canada with his family, but he had a problem: As a young man, he'd participated actively in the first Palestinian Intifada in the late 1980s. Though he'd done nothing serious — certainly not by later standards of violence — he had a security record, which was sufficient to deny entry into Canada.

Sa'id and his family deserved a chance to settle in Canada, I concluded. Through various interventions, we at the embassy overcame the problem and the family eventually obtained the necessary visas. In the year before they departed, we visited in each other's homes and became friends. I was introduced to Sa'id's mother, the family matriarch, famous for her superb tea with *na'ana* (mint) — a specialty of Jericho. That's where Sa'id's well-off, land-owning family lived. Close to the Jordanian border, the area is also known for oranges and dates, and for its dry, almost perfect climate.

One day, over a sumptuous feast of Arab delicacies, I asked Sa'id why he had decided to leave his home and immigrate to a cold country like Canada. He pointed to his two boys. More in sorrow than anger, he told me he'd concluded that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would never be resolved. And he did not want his children and grandchildren to grow up hating Jews.

As the first images of ululating Palestinian women flashed across the television screen on September 11, I thought back to another conversation. In 1994, terrorists blew up a city bus a few blocks from the Canadian Embassy in Tel Aviv, killing many Israeli civilians. I had spent most of the afternoon alternately phoning employees who were not in the building and fielding calls from Canadian reporters. Later that night, over a drink, I asked the Palestinian woman with whom I was romantically involved how her family would be reacting to the news. She hesitated for a moment; then, in an almost indistinct voice, told me they would have smiles on their faces.

Looking back at these and other conversations, I appreciate how privileged I was to have been based in the Mideast during the hopeful period following the Oslo peace agreement. And to have had the opportunity to get to know both Israelis and Palestinians.

There are many people to thank, but first on the list is a Liberal. Summoned one day to appear before a parliamentary committee to defend my appointment as ambassador, I could see from the outset that this would not be a pleasant experience. The animal spirits of politicians — otherwise known as partisanship — were flowing freely, as befitted an opportunity to interrogate Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's former chief of staff.

I later learned that the government's most senior public servant, Privy Council Clerk Paul Tellier, wanted to send me to Paris. As a francophone deeply committed to bilingualism, he wanted to break the barrier that had kept anglophones from serving as ambassador.

Mulroney had other ideas. In contrast to the policy in regard to the Paris embassy, the Department of Foreign Affairs had never sent a Jew to serve in Tel Aviv — at any level. The prime minister wanted to break this barrier.

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The department's policy not to send Jews, or Arabs for that matter, to the region was both counterproductive and discriminatory. Canada is very proud of its multicultural fabric, and most Canadians view our variegated population with its diverse linguistic skills as a great competitive advantage in an era of globalization.

Now that the controversy is behind me, I confess to having misled the parliamentary committee. Figuring that no one could verify, I exaggerated my fluency in Hebrew. I had studied it through high school thanks to my parents, who sent me to a Montréal Hebrew day school in deference to my very Orthodox grandmother. There, as a third-generation and secular Canadian, I studied with children of survivors under teachers who had also experienced the Holocaust first-hand.

After high school, I visited Israel twice. In 1969, I spent a month in Jerusalem with my girlfriend. In 1973, I spent four months on a first attempt at a doctoral dissertation. Like my amorous pursuits, it eventually came to naught. However, Hebrew did come in handy to fulfill the foreign language requirement of the Ph.D. I eventually acquired. Yet when I disembarked the plane at Ben-Gurion airport in February 1992, I hadn't spoken a word in nearly 20 years. Whereupon I set about trying (oh, how hard I worked!) to recover the language.

First came oral comprehension: I would tune in the car radio to public affairs programs, especially during the short but traffic-jammed voyage from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. And I never missed the evening television news.

Next came reading. The greatest challenge was figuring out English words transliterated into Hebrew. After five minutes trying to decipher "vvshngtn" — or to pronounce it to discover its three-letter root — I would end up calling an Israeli friend from high school days. I shall always be grateful to Ami for gently inquiring whether I did not know the capital of the USA and for limiting any outward signs of bemusement.

Speaking the language turned out to be the greatest challenge. At first — to the puzzlement of many, including myself — the words came out in French, which over the years had become my second language. When Hebrew emerged, it turned out I was using biblical expressions that no one had spoken in 2000 years. Though some at the foreign ministry found it charming, my spoken Hebrew did not turn out to be a real winner in Tel Aviv discos. Nor could Ami's five-year-old son quite understand why a greybeard didn't know the word for salt shaker or for other simple objects that were not standard fare in political columns.

After much perseverance, the spoken language returned, and friends began to laugh at my jokes instead of the way I told them. Within a year, I

AP Photo

President Bill Clinton presides over ceremonies marking the signing of the 1993 peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians, with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat on September 13, 1993 in Washington.

was calling radio shows and offering answers in prize-winning quizzes. Then I began giving interviews on television. Israelis did not quite know what to make of a Hebrew-speaking ambassador; thanks to my almost circus freak status, however, they laughed with me and not at my accent the night I insulted the entire nation for their table manners.

Once I had mastered Hebrew, I signed up to study Arabic in an *ulpan* — a specialized language institute. With successive waves of immigration, Israelis have had considerable experience teaching Hebrew. An *ulpan* outside Netanya, a seaside city now famous for suicide bombers, has adapted the intensive teaching techniques to Arabic. As with Hebrew, the focus is on speaking the language, which makes even greater sense in the case of Arabic. Spoken dialects vary significantly; only classical Arabic — the language of journalists, diplomats and intellectuals — unites the Arab world.

When word got back to Ottawa of a speech I had made in Arabic at Bethlehem University during the visit of a delegation of Canadian university presidents, my superiors at the Mideast division of External Affairs were not amused. Few could speak Arabic, though most had spent the better part of their careers in the Arabic-speaking world. Those who could had studied the language in English or French, thereby acquiring a rudimentary knowledge topped by a painful accent.

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Israelis who knew of my comings and goings would express amazement mixed with anxiety that I would think nothing of strolling about the roughest

refugee camps. For the two peoples live in separate worlds — even within Israel, which has a sizable Arab minority. To most Israelis, peace means being left alone by Palestinians, not getting along with them.

I spent most of my time in Tel Aviv looking for ways to boost Canada's commercial, scientific and cultural exchanges with Israelis and Palestinians. Sometimes, as in the negotiation of a free-trade agreement with Israel, this involved working around departmental officials. In particular, I abandoned any pretension that Canada could persuade the two peoples to beat their swords into ploughshares. That challenge was for the American ambassador, which left me with considerable free time.

The day I arrived in Israel — February 18, 1992 — Yitzhak Rabin defeated Shimon Peres in a primary election and became the Labour party's candidate for prime minister. Four months later, he defeated the Likud's Yitzhak Shamir in a general election. Over the years, I met most of the key players who secretly negotiated the Oslo peace agreement. I also met the politicians who tried, with varying degrees of commitment, to make it work. Without doubt, the most impressive was Yitzhak Rabin.

From the start, we had a good relationship. A few words in Hebrew — all I was capable of at the time — were sufficient to break the ice with Rabin. Yet he was a shy and taciturn man, and it took time to know him well.

It was only mid-way through my term that I was able — other than because of my accent — to put a smile on his face. It happened on his second visit to Canada. With the help of his advisers, I sold him on the idea of taking a short detour on a visit to the United States. For him, as for all his predecessors since the founding of the state, that was Israel's most important relationship.

Arriving at Uplands Airport in Ottawa on a bitterly cold January day, I could see — as he disembarked the plane — that he had not brought an overcoat. The temperature was –30 degrees Celsius. Chatting up him and his wife Leah in the hangar as we waited for Prime Minister Chrétien, I broke the ice by offering to trade Canadian for Israeli weather. Through chattering teeth, he promised to consider the offer, but only if we also traded neighbours.

Yitzhak Rabin was not a cheerful man: Forged in war, he was a supreme realist. He trusted no one completely, and Shimon Peres less than most. In the beginning, he tried to keep the foreign minister away from negotiations with the Palestinians. In the end, caught by his imprudent election promise to reach an interim deal within six to nine months, Rabin had no choice but to involve the man he once labelled a "ceaseless manipulator."

One could always sense Rabin's deep ambivalence about the Oslo peace agreement. Given how it turned out, it is tempting in retrospect to vilify him — and many have. My classmate, the Pulitzer Prize—winning columnist Charles Krauthammer, has accused the Oslo agreement's creators of Messianic thinking. That may have been true of Shimon Peres. Ultimately, however, it was Prime Minister Rabin who made the decision. And while it's true it was a leap of faith, he understood fully what he was signing.

The Arabs, Rabin believed, had learned in the 1967 and 1973 wars that they could not destroy Israel. The Palestine Liberation Organization was at a low point: It had officially accepted a two-state solution in 1988, but had blundered by supporting Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War. Rabin hoped the PLO's diminished status would translate into increased flexibility. Mostly, however, he understood that the alternative to the PLO was Hamas — Islamic extremists who wanted to eliminate the State of Israel.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, he saw a unique opportunity to lower the temperature of the conflict between Israel and her immediate Arab neighbours, before the "outer ring" of Iran, Iraq and Libya acquired nuclear weapons. As he said in the Knesset in January 1993:

> *Our struggle against murderous Islamic terror is also meant to awaken the world which is lying in slumber. We call on all nations and all people to devote their attention to the real and serious danger which threatens the peace of the world in the forthcoming years . . . And just as the state of Israel was the first to perceive the Iraqi nuclear threat, so today we stand in the line of fire against the danger of fundamentalist Islam.*

Rabin's peace initiative ultimately failed, and we still do not know how the story ends. However, in light of what we now know about Osama bin Laden and his ilk, it's clear he read the threat correctly. Had he lived to turn on his television set on September 11, I believe he would not have been at all surprised by what he saw, or by the American reaction.

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Governing Israel — a deeply divided and complex country — is no cakewalk at the best of times. The challenge was particularly complex during the Oslo period: As Bill Clinton told Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat at Camp David in 2000 — if they reached any agreement, both would inevitably alienate half their electorate.

Still, it is astonishing that six Israeli prime ministers have come, and five have gone, since the first George Bush convened the Madrid peace conference in 1991. They've been of different parties, with varying degrees of attachment to the peace process. Through it all, one man has survived — Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Always courting and counting on Western sympathy, he's contributed to toppling one Israeli government after another, including the promising one of Ehud Barak.

Yitzhak Rabin never wanted to negotiate with Arafat. Only when it became clear that he was blocking the post-Madrid negotiations in Washington did Rabin initiate serious discussions with the PLO and, eventually, allow Arafat to return to Gaza. That experiment failed. With rare exceptions, Arafat — for whom terrorism has always been a tactical, not a moral issue — turned a blind eye to attacks on Israelis. Supported by the European Union and to a lesser extent Canada, he was able to dodge his commitment to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute by peaceful means.

Terrorism led to the defeat of the dovish Shimon Peres in 1996; it helped elect the hawkish and discredited Ariel Sharon in 2001. Immediately after that election, I concluded that peace was impossible with these two leaders at the helm.

In the summer of 2002, US policy took a dramatic turn: George W. Bush indicated that regime change was essential in the Palestinian Authority. It is not yet clear whether Arafat will survive, as he has done in the past, by blocking any alternative path to peace. Nor is it clear whether at some point the United States will conclude that Ariel Sharon is not "a man of peace."

I still believe a change in leadership is necessary — on both sides — but no longer believe it is sufficient to resolve the conflict. For Yitzhak Rabin, Oslo was a test of Palestinian intentions, and he always maintained that the agreement was "reversible." He did not mean that Israel would reoccupy Gaza; along with most of his people, he was hugely relieved to give up most of that densely populated strip of land. However, he always insisted that if Yasser Arafat violated his commitments, Israel could and would stop any further handover of land to the Palestinians.

On several occasions over the years, Arafat has lamented the falling of his "peace partner" to an assassin's bullet. However, having known the late Israeli prime minister, I believe he would have been on the constant lookout for a new and more reliable partner. And I do not believe he would have acted more gently against Palestinian terrorism than has Ariel Sharon, who, for 19 months, worked with Rabin's daughter and his former foreign minister, Shimon Peres, in a national-unity government.

Anwar Sadat and King Hussein understood, but Yasser Arafat never did. If you're looking for concessions from Israelis, show them love, not hate. And don't put their backs up against the wall: A people with a collective consciousness of the Holocaust — preceded by 2000 years of tragedies while in exile — does not react well to threats.

In 1978, at Camp David, Sadat recovered the territory Egypt lost to Israel in the Six Day War. He had broken the ice and stunned Israelis when he announced he would fly to Tel Aviv. Their chief of defence staff, suspecting a ruse, asked the government for permission to mobilize the reserves. Wisely, his request was turned down, and members of the Knesset listened excitedly as Sadat pledged "No more war, no more bloodshed."

For years, until it went off the air, Sadat's words resounded on Israel's semi-legal peace station, which broadcast aboard a ship anchored in international waters. And he was rewarded for his courage and foresight with the Nobel Peace Prize. Unfortunately, he also paid with his life; the group responsible for his assassination later merged into Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida.

Though the Palestine Liberation Organization had not yet recognized the Jewish state when Sadat went to Camp David to meet Prime Minister Menahem Begin, Egypt took care not to abandon its brethren in the eventual peace treaty it negotiated. Some saw proposals for Palestinian "autonomy" as a fig leaf, but most observers believe statehood would have been inevitable had the PLO taken what it was offered.

With its position weakening, the PLO was finally driven to accept a two-state solution in 1988. However, at that point Israel refused to negotiate with Yasser Arafat; at the U.S.-convened Madrid conference following the Gulf War, Palestinians sat in the Jordanian delegation. And when peace talks began, they were represented in Washington by a delegation from the West Bank and Gaza.

Though it was illegal to meet with PLO representatives, Israeli academics tied to Labour party doves had already opened secret channels, aided by Norwegian officials, before the 1992 Israeli election. In the end, it became impossible for Yitzhak Rabin to make any progress with the local Palestinian delegation, or even to maintain the fiction that the PLO was not calling the shots. The secret channel ultimately led to the Oslo peace agreement, and to mutual recognition by Israel and the PLO.

Like the autonomy plan included in the Camp David treaty with Egypt, Oslo was based on an incremental approach and consisted of a series of interim agreements. The approach was inspired by Anwar Sadat, who always maintained that easier issues dividing Israelis and Palestinians should be resolved first, leaving difficult issues like Jerusalem to the bitter end.

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From a deal-maker's point of view, that approach has certain attractions. But because Jewish settlements were a highly sensitive issue, it meant that Palestinians had to accept Israeli cohabitation in all of the West Bank and Gaza, instead of obtaining a clean divorce over part of the territory. That inevitably led to friction — particularly because many Palestinians mistakenly believed that Israel had agreed at Oslo to freeze settlement construction.

Still, I never had any difficulty understanding why the Palestinians had agreed to the approach. What puzzled

me was why Israel — the side that was conceding tangible assets, land — would have agreed. It seemed to me, before I arrived in Israel, that its interest lay in putting the whole package on the table and demanding reciprocal concessions before it gave up anything tangible.

The Oslo accords turned out to be remarkably similar to the one that led to Meech Lake, when I had the constitutional file as secretary to the cabinet for federal-provincial relations. The process was secretive, expectations were kept low, but ultimately unravelled over symbolic issues. Like the Canadian process, too, there would be very little cabinet input or scrutiny of positions that negotiators were taking. As with Meech, both sides would eventually oversell the merits of the Oslo peace agreement. Rabin promised Israelis that it would bring security, and it did just the opposite. Arafat promised that Palestinian statehood was guaranteed, and had to deal with dashed expectations when the daily lives of his people did not quickly improve.

Israeli politicians, as did ours, made good use of language differences in the interest of ambiguity. In English, Arafat told the world he had signed a "peace of the braves"; in Arabic, that Oslo was a temporary truce. Meanwhile, Shimon Peres began to refer to him as the "Rais" or President — in violation of Oslo's terms stipulating he be called Chairman.

That linguistic sleight of hand provided one clue to resolving a conundrum that was still weighing on my mind, viz. why the Labour party, which clearly was interested in a peace agreement, had agreed to Oslo's incremental approach. For Shimon Peres, the incremental approach was a way to sugarcoat the concessions that Israelis would be called on to make.

Economically, the post-Oslo go-go years were filled with wishful thinking — Israelis assumed their dispute with the Palestinian people was well on its way to being resolved. Yet Peres understood that he could not persuade a majority to compromise on Jerusalem, and was unwilling even to broach the subject. He wagered that, at the end of the day, Israelis would have no choice but to make the most painful concessions, if that was all that remained between them and peace.

Shimon Peres lost his wager because of the naïve belief that Arafat would never again resort to terrorism. He also lost his job as prime minister — to a younger opponent far less committed to the Oslo agreement. Those who followed Benjamin Netanyahu — Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon — had also not been present at its creation. However, they were all acutely impressed when, inside Israel's 1949 borders, terrorists fuelled by Islamic extremism strapped nail bombs to their waists and blew up innocent civilians, including teens at a disco and mothers and their kids at a pizzeria. And they all understood that these attacks were garnering wide support amongst the Palestinian population.

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In July 2000, 22 years after Sadat and Begin met at Camp David, Yasser Arafat found himself at the same presidential retreat. His encounter with Ehud Barak was the final nail in the coffin of the Oslo peace agreement.

As chief of defence staff, Barak had been no fan of Oslo; as prime minister, he was determined to put everything on the table, including Jerusalem. Yet, for nearly three weeks, Arafat stuck to his insistence that millions of refugees and their descendants should have the right to live in Israel, which would result in two Palestinian states — and no Jewish one. During the negotiations, he refused to present a single counter-proposal.

The Palestinian leader understood that Islamic extremists who send suicide bombers are not interested in a peace agreement that recognizes the legitimacy of Israel, or even its borders. He walked away from an offer to create a Palestinian state, because he did not want to confront them and risk assassination.

Many, including President Bill Clinton, believe that Arafat missed a historic opportunity at Camp David. After the US president publicly blamed him for the failure, the Palestinian leader chose not to put an end to the path of violence. The most intense wave broke out in September 2000.

Today, it's become fashionable even for early supporters of Oslo to criticize that agreement's incremental, staged approach. Many who are justifiably distraught by the conflict go on to suggest that outside powers must impose and guarantee a settlement. It is they, therefore, who in the end refuse to address the root causes of the Mideast conflict. Without a change to the mindset that views any non-Muslim sovereignty in the Mideast as illegitimate, an imposed settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is an invitation to future wars, and to future September 11-type attacks.

For Yitzhak Rabin, in the absence of trust the Oslo agreement was to be a test of Palestinians' intentions. He wanted to test whether Yasser Arafat was prepared to take half a loaf — as the Jews did in 1947-48. In signing the Oslo agreement, the two sides papered over the essence of their conflict. With the collapse of Oslo, there is no alternative path to peace than the truth.

As indigenous peoples, both Israelis and Palestinians have quasi-aboriginal claims to the land. The only solution today, as it was when the United Nations voted in favour of partition in 1947, is to establish two states.