



## 1990's:

- Prime Minister
- Israeli Society and the Peace Process

### Overview

Yitzhak Rabin was elected by the Labor party to serve his second term as Prime Minister in 1992. Rabin understood the need to change Israel's priorities. He believed that focusing on internal challenges was as crucial for the future of the State of Israel as was advancing the peace process. He initiated major infrastructure projects during his administration including investments in education, roads, railways, and the international airport, all of which greatly improved mobility for the flow of capital and labor.

Victory of the United States-led coalition over Iraq in the Gulf War and the fall of the Soviet bloc, and the continuing loss of lives of both Israel and the Palestinians in the Intifada, created a window of opportunity for progress in the Middle East peace process. The Madrid conference was the first phase, culminating in the Oslo Accord signed with the PLO paving the way to signing of a peace treaty with Jordan. In 1994 The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat.

However, Palestinian terror attacks during this period continued augmenting the already existing right-wing Israeli opposition to the peace process. The demonstrations grew more violent, and came to include personal incitement against Rabin. On November 4, 1995, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an extremist right-winger at the end of a rally held in support of the peace process.

### Prime Minister

#### ***"I will navigate" – from Defense Minister to Prime Minister***

Yitzhak Rabin served four years as defense minister for the national unity government that was formed in 1984, two years with Shimon Peres as prime minister and two years with Yitzhak Shamir. In the 1988 elections, Labor lost strength in the Knesset. However, since the Likud was unable to form a narrow right-wing coalition government; a second unity government was formed in which Rabin again served as defense minister. Political events eventually led to the breakup of the unity government in 1990 and the establishment of a right-wing coalition headed by Yitzhak Shamir.

Despite the hawkish positions of the government and its prime minister, Israel accepted the United States' invitation to attend the peace conference that convened in Madrid in October 1991. At the international summit Israeli representatives sat alongside those of the Arab states for the first time. The goal was to initiate a comprehensive peace process in the Middle

East. The summit concluded with a decision to pursue negotiations along two axes: The bi-national route, in which representatives of Israel would negotiate with the representatives of each of the Arab states, and the multinational route, in which representatives of all of the countries that participated in the conference would hold talks on regional issues such as water, the environment and economic cooperation.

Meanwhile, in February 1992, Knesset elections were drawing near. Under the slogan “Israel is waiting for Rabin” Yitzhak won the Labor party’s primaries, and embarked on a campaign to win the election and form a new government. In June 1992, the party scored a clear electoral victory, although the leftist camp in the Knesset was nearly identical in size to the right. In July 1992, Rabin presented his new coalition government to the Knesset and the public.

### ***From Intifada to Oslo***

After formation of the new government, Israel continued to carry on negotiations with the Arab states true to the format decided upon at the Madrid conference. Negotiations with the Palestinians took place in Washington through the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. The Palestinian delegates were not from the PLO, but rather residents of the territories, since Israel was unwilling to negotiate directly with the PLO. This was at odds with a statement made by Yitzhak Rabin shortly after the outbreak of the Intifada, as expressed in an interview with the daily newspaper “Davar”, regarding the right of the Palestinians to choose their representatives and not have to accept dictates from Israel.

At the diplomatic level, however, things had changed. Palestinian and Israeli representatives were secretly meeting in Oslo, Norway, to draft an agreement of principles between the two peoples. On September 10, 1993, Rabin wrote a letter to the PLO chairman in which the government of Israel declared recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and that Israel was willing to begin negotiations to formulate an agreement with the PLO in the framework of the Middle East peace process. This letter came in response to a similar letter from Yasser Arafat to Rabin, in which he declared that the PLO recognized the State of Israel’s right to exist, and that his organization repudiated all violent activity. Three days later, an initial agreement called “Oslo A” was signed on the White House lawn. This agreement opened new diplomatic vistas to Israel. Countries such as Indonesia, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates recognized Israel and began carrying on official contacts with Israel.

### ***The Peace Treaty with Jordan***

For many years, relations between Israel and Jordan were calm. Essentially, the two countries had a de facto peace; without official agreement. The clandestine cooperation between the two states was expressed, for instance, in the dozens of secret meetings between King Hussein and Israeli prime ministers. This was the product of several factors such as the twin ambition of Israel and Jordan to cooperate with other groups in the Arab world and in particular the Palestinians, who represented two-thirds of the population of the Jordanian kingdom. The quiet along the eastern frontier caused successive Israeli prime ministers to try to translate the situation in the field into a signed peace treaty, but this proved unrealistic, as King Hussein was afraid to take any move that ran counter to the stated policies of other states in the region.

The agreement with the Palestinians finally made it possible for King Hussein to take the decisive step, and from that point the road to signing a full peace treaty was short. On October 26, 1994, the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan was signed at a ceremony held in the Arava desert. Soon after the signing of the accord, the route between Amman and Jerusalem became well traveled for tourists as well as for businessmen and diplomats. This treaty and the Oslo Accords signaled the diplomatic and economic possibilities in the region, as reflected in an international economic conference that took place in Amman, in which Israel took part.

### ***Changes in the Public Agenda During Rabin's Second Term in Office***

In the 1992 elections, Rabin outlined a social-economic program based on the transformation of budgetary priorities and a reallocation of resources. Seemingly overnight there was a new civil agenda. In Rabin's view, the economic future of Israel depended on its extrication from the Intifada and the damage it generated, and the necessity of redirecting funds away from the settlements. Yitzhak Rabin championed assistance in the integration of immigrants, a war on unemployment (which had reached a rate of 10.5 percent), enhancements in education, improvements to roads and the strengthening of the infrastructure for a modern high-tech economy. Realization of his socio-economic program and its various aspects transformed the public and civil agendas. The following are a few aspects of that program:

#### ***The Civil Agenda – the Arab Sector***

The new agenda spearheaded by the Rabin government between 1992-95 called for a change in the status of Israeli-Arabs. The government initiated preliminary reforms to equalize their rights as citizens and empower them to join in the creation of a new public and political agenda in Israel.

This shift in policy had wide-ranging effects. For the first time since Israel's establishment, the government was dependent on the votes of members from Arab political parties in the Knesset to block the right wing (although the Arab parties were not included in the coalition). At the same time, an Arab member (Hashem Mahameed of the United Arab List) served for the first time on the Knesset's State Control Committee. During these years, many Arabs joined the ranks of mainstream Zionist parties. Among other things, this led to the formation of an Arab sector within the Labor party.

At the economic level, the reforms generated a new trend of development and promotion of small industry within the Arab sector and increased budgets allocated to the Arab local councils.

Aside from these 'local' developments was the general progress in the peace process and the signing of the Oslo Accords, which generated much support for government policies among Israeli-Arabs.

All of this led to a slight shift in the attitude of Israeli-Arabs to Rabin himself: Until his second term as prime minister, in their eyes he represented the Arabs' defeat in the War of Independence and in the Six-Day War; and the rigid attitude toward the Palestinians in the first Intifada. From 1993 onward, their attitude toward Rabin grew more positive, which explains why many Arab citizens mourned him after his assassination.

## **Israeli Society and the Peace Process**

### ***Israeli society – from the Intifada to Oslo***

When the Intifada first broke out, the conventional wisdom among Israelis was that it would end quickly after being put down with a firm hand by the army. However, the persistence of the uprising, the numerous victims it claimed among soldiers in the territories and among the settlers, its spread beyond the Green Line in the form of acts of terrorism against civilian targets, and the moral difficulties of clashing with an unarmed civilian population, made the Intifada a significant symbol in Israeli society's attitude toward the conflict with the Palestinians.

The first few years of the Intifada aggravated the internal dispute in Israel, not only regarding the appropriate means of response, but what it meant in terms of the state of Israel in the future. Was Israeli society willing to continue bearing the burden of occupying the territories with the belief that it belonged to the Jewish people - as the right claimed - or should Israeli society recognize the right of the Palestinian people to political independence in exchange for assuring its own existence within more limited boundaries - as the left claimed.

Increasingly more voices supported the diplomatic option as a way of reaching a solution, but they were opposed by other voices that supported an escalation of the response.

### ***Response of Israeli Society to the Signing of the Oslo Accords***

In June 1992, the Labor party, headed by Yitzhak Rabin, won the election for the thirteenth Knesset. Nevertheless, the ensuing political situation was particularly complicated, since the nearly equal balance between the two blocs (right and left) was maintained. The situation, which remained stable throughout the final three years of Rabin's second term of office not only made it difficult to crystallize political support for his policies in the cabinet and in the Knesset, but among the public as well.

In September 1993, the Oslo initiative became public knowledge. It was welcomed by the majority of the Israeli public, which had grown weary of the Intifada. The initiative was conceived among supporters of the left and among some supporters of the right as a path of hopefulness for an end to the circle of violence and terror, and resolution of the prolonged conflict with the Palestinians and the entire Arab world. Even so, not all of the public shared these feelings. Many of those on the right, and especially the settlers, expressed their strident opposition to the plan, which to them symbolized the abandonment of the Land of Israel and of the security of the Jews living there.

### ***Israel's Foreign Relations in the Wake of Advances in the Peace Process***

The peace process influenced not only Israel's bilateral relations with its neighboring states, but also its status and image throughout the world. The total number of countries that maintained diplomatic and economic relations with Israel of one sort or another increased from 91 in 1991 to over 150 in the mid-1990s. Arab states that do not border on Israel, such as Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman began carrying on diplomatic relations with Israel, albeit at a low level, and even gradually reduced the Arab boycott of companies that conducted trade with Israel. At the same time, Israel's diplomatic and economic relations prospered with countries that had in the past been afraid of conducting trade with it due to the Arab boycott, such as Japan, China and India, as well as large multinationals from the West.

This general change also extended to the UN arena, which was traditionally perceived as being hostile toward Israel. For instance, in 1994 the General Assembly of the UN reversed the resolution adopted in 1975 in which Zionism was equated with racism. One year later, Yitzhak Rabin arrived at the UN for the opening session of the General Assembly and received dozens upon dozens of requests by heads of state for a meeting with him. Two other important events in the international arena – the direct result of the advances in the peace process - were the international economic conferences that were held in the Middle East in 1994 (Casablanca) and 1995 (Amman). Israel took part in both conferences.

### ***Path to Assassination: the Violent Public Debate in 1994-95***

Opposition to the Oslo Accords increased as Palestinian terror groups opposing the peace process began carrying out a series of attacks, largely through suicide bombings. The massacre carried out by Baruch Goldstein, a settler from Kiryat Arba, against Palestinian worshippers in the Cave of the Patriarchs on Purim in 1994 became a sharp cause for dispute in Israel. The left demanded that the Jewish settlement in Hebron be immediately uprooted; the right protested that the entire settler public should not be besmirched by the actions of a single individual.

The arrival of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian security apparatus in Gaza and Jericho following Israeli withdrawal in the summer of 1994 increased hopes for progress and a successful conclusion of the peace process, but also increased opposition to it. A wave of demonstrations, by both right and left, washed over Israel. As the terrorist attacks carried out by the Palestinian rejectionist organizations grew more frequent, and as the diplomatic negotiations between the sides progressed toward the signing of an agreement on Israel's withdrawal from the main cities of the West Bank, the public dispute in Israel grew more passionate and violent. Many of the right-wing demonstrations bore an air of incitement; the slogans "Rabin is a traitor" and "Rabin is a murderer" grew routine. In October 1995, on the eve of the Knesset vote on the Oslo B agreement (which included the Israeli army's withdrawal from the cities of the West Bank), in the course of a demonstration held in Zion Square in Jerusalem that came to symbolize the epidemic of incitement, photomontages of Rabin dressed in a Nazi SS uniform were burned.

In the wake of this escalation of the personal attacks against Rabin and the Oslo B agreement, peace supporters decided that a response should be made to the rightwing demonstrations. They called for a counter-demonstration that would express support for the process, condemn the violence and above all and prove that there was a large core of support for the peace process. On November 4, 1995, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an extremist right-winger at the end of this rally held at Malchei Israel Square in Tel Aviv in support of the peace process.