

Book Review: Conflicted Are The Peacemakers: Israeli and Palestinian Moderates and the Death of Oslo

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*The 1993 Oslo Accords were a key attempt to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a failure largely attributed to extremists on both sides. This book challenges this conventional wisdom by examining the role of Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers themselves in derailing the peace process. Looking at the role of moderates before and after Oslo, the different agreements and peace proposals they negotiated, and their rhetoric, the book aims to show that these peacemakers retained an inherent ambivalence toward the peace process and one another. Reviewed by **Jeff Roquen**.*

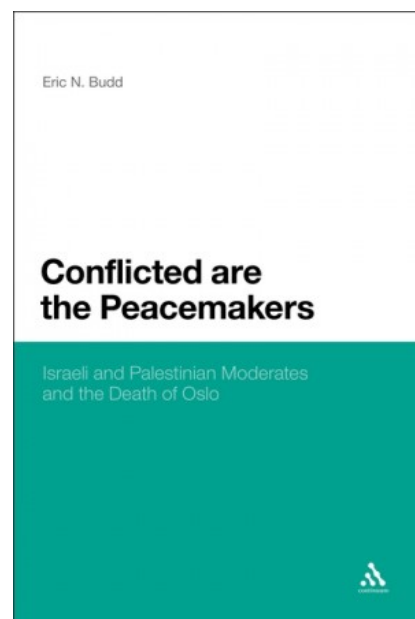
Conflicted Are The Peacemakers: Israeli and Palestinian Moderates and the Death of Oslo. Eric N Budd. Bloomsbury. December 2012.

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It all looked so promising. When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn in the presence of American President Bill Clinton on the same day as their negotiators signed the Declaration of Principles (13 September 1993) – an agreement to end the nearly century-old conflict – peace truly seemed to be at hand for the heart of the Middle East. In the coming months and years, however, the brokered deal unraveled to the dismay of the international community. Over the past two decades, it has been conventional wisdom to blame extremists on both sides for having successfully sabotaged the peace process through violence.

In *Conflicted Are The Peacemakers: Israeli and Palestinian Moderates and the Death of Oslo*, American professor [Eric N. Budd](#) challenges the reigning narrative and largely succeeds in locating the onus of the breakdown in an imbalance of power, the murky text of the peace accords, and the ambivalent attitudes of the moderate peacemakers.

By the early 1990s, new possibilities existed to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) ended after more than seven years of bloodshed, and a four-year Palestinian intifada (1987-91) against Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands prompted both sides to seek a political solution. Compared to Zionist and Arab partisans who sought to demonize each other, moderates within the Israeli government and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), of whom Budd characterizes as possessing the flexibility and credibility needed for diplomacy, represented a pragmatic, non-violent alternative. Yet, "moderates" are defined only in contrast to "extremists," and as Budd argues, they tend to bring their own shortcomings and limitations to the negotiating table.



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In Chapter Two “The Road to Oslo,” Budd lays out a tripartite methodology to reveal the inherent flaws contained within the negotiating strategies of moderate peacemakers. Although neither wholly concrete nor universal, these three principles, which represent the core of Budd’s thesis as applied to Oslo and subsequent Israeli-Palestinian agreements, shed light on the course of negotiations and further problematize the efficacy of diplomacy in a complex arena of historic resentments. Under Principle 1, the playing field of talks is heavily slanted to one side due to the ability of the economically and militarily stronger nation (Israel) to manipulate the agenda of the peace process. According to Principle 2, an implicit ambiguity exists in the moderate position. As a result, agreements of tangible value are seldom produced or achieved. In the final and most critical stage of diplomacy, Budd asserts in Principle 3 that moderates neither possess the capacity to dispassionately deconstruct their nationalist narratives nor push their constituents toward full reconciliation. In subsequent chapters containing case studies of Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives, Budd validates his approach to a significant degree and raises a plethora of new questions on the dynamics of war and peace.



Women in East Jerusalem. Credit: [john] CC BY-NC 2.0

From Oslo in 1993 to the Camp David Summit seven years later, Budd makes a convincing case that the asymmetrical power relationship allowed the Israelis to set the parameters of the negotiations around their interests. Not only did the Oslo Declaration of Principles fail to address the realization of a Palestinian state but the Israelis made few territorial concessions. For this central insight, Budd cites the late Columbia University historian, critical theorist and pro-Palestinian advocate Edward Said. Indeed, Said’s contemporary criticism of Oslo seems to have provided the foundation for Budd’s first principle. Rather than genuine reciprocity and an equal exchange of ideas, prime ministers from Yitzhak Rabin (1992-95) to Ehud Barak (1999-2001), along with Israeli negotiating teams, successfully forced the talks to pivot on the security of Israel. From the evidence (including reproductions of all the major agreements in the appendix), Budd has raised a legitimate contention, and the prospects for a settlement may have well been doomed from the beginning as a consequence of the inequity of power.

Compared to Principle 1, the case made for Principle 2 as a significant factor in the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian agreements is somewhat less convincing. According to Budd, the adoption of “constructive ambiguity” to move beyond intractable issues produced a fatal vagueness in the negotiated texts. In the absence of detailed provisions on the spheres of legal jurisdiction, the establishment of a police force for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the holding of elections in the Oslo Declaration of Principles, for example, constructive ambiguity allowed and perhaps encouraged each side to interpret the accords to its advantage. Although undeniably true in some of the agreements, the negotiators seem to have purposely avoided specific language on the most contentious issues in order to first establish a broad, workable framework to prepare a path for a permanent settlement.

If the talks had inspired a spirit of peace and a desire to make history among both the elites and their constituents – as Budd rightly claims did not occur, then further negotiations would have likely been able to bridge the deepest chasms of conflict. By the author’s own admission, the Beilin-Abu Mazen Agreement (1995) failed despite being designed for immediate implementation and concretely addressing hot-button issues. Hence, the presence of an asymmetrical distribution of power (Principle 1), the practice of diplomatic ambiguity (Principle 2) and/or the stalled deconstruction of national narratives (Principle 3) does not account for each and every failed Israeli-Palestinian agreement in the last decade of the twentieth century.

As Budd conceives his three principles as tools of analysis rather than inalterable axioms, his study proves to be a trenchant re-examination of the traditional narrative. While he will undoubtedly be accused of either downplaying the impact of domestic and regional politics or taking a pro-Palestinian slant by some scholars, his methodology will likely resonate with political scientists, foreign policy analysts and historians of diplomacy. After carefully considering Budd’s insights, few will be able to look at moderates in the same way again.

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