

The Oslo Diaries

Documentary Review by Eric Galson

What's with the recent interest in Oslo? First, the Tony Award-winning Broadway play *Oslo* makes waves in 2017. Now, in 2018, comes the HBO-backed documentary *The Oslo Diaries*, from Israeli filmmakers Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan. Both focus on the year 1993, when secret back-channel negotiations in Norway between Israelis and Palestinians led to the historic Oslo Accords, memorialized by the much-publicized Rose Garden signing ceremony with President Clinton, Yasser Arafat, and Yitzhak Rabin. The Broadway play includes more of a focus on the Norwegians, a professor and his diplomat wife, who brokered the secret meetings, while the documentary mostly treats Oslo as a background, and narrows its focus on the Israeli and Palestinian participants. While a fascinating subject, the documentary unfortunately can be misleading. The main theme of the documentary is how the negotiation process took in participants from two enemy factions, and subsequently humanized them, fostering lifelong relationships. This cheery narrative, however, creates a strange and uneasy contrast, as the hermetic world of the negotiators, operating in secret in a snowy land, clashes with the heat of seemingly endless terrorist attacks, bombings, and strife plaguing an Israel in the throes of the first Intifada. In particular, the documentary is misleading in its portrayal of the two sides of the conflict, and who bears responsibility for the breakdown of the peace process.

First, the positive parts: the strength of the documentary is how it weaves in diary entries from the negotiators, shining a fascinating light on the inner-workings of the negotiations. According to these sources, the talks in Oslo did not get off to a smooth start. Abu

Ala, at the time the Minister of Finance of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the lead negotiator for the Palestinians, starts off the meeting in Oslo by comparing Israel's occupation to that of the Nazi's. Yair Hirschfeld, an Israeli professor and one of the architects of the negotiations, rebukes this comparison, and threatens to leave if Ala ever repeats this sentiment. This is mirrored in a later stage of the negotiations, this time to implement the Oslo accords, in Taba, Egypt, when Nabil Shaath, Arafat's chief advisor, finds out that his negotiating counterpart, General Amnon Shahak, was part of the military operation that killed three of Shaath's friends in Beirut. In both cases, the two sides powerfully decide to forget the past, and instead focus on building a peaceful future. Shahak responds to Shaath's worries by saying "we are here so that we'll never repeat that". Abu Ala and Hirschfeld ended up becoming close friends, and there is footage of the Oslo negotiators celebrating Shabbat and reciting the Kiddush together.

These stories of personal relationships are the backbone of the documentary, along with the interesting cultural difficulties surrounding the negotiations. Joel Singer, described as a "rigid military lawyer", effuses on how men don't kiss each other in Israel or the United States, but Abu Ala kissed him on the cheeks when they met – so his first kiss with a man was with a terrorist. There is humorous discussion about how Clinton didn't want Arafat to wear his military garb to Washington – a request that was refused. Clinton also requested that Arafat refrain from kissing and hugging other politicians; this time, the request was granted, perversely enough, "for peace". The most touching relationship story is that of the leaders, Arafat and Rabin, who go from reluctantly shaking each other's hands in Washington, to Rabin joking later on that the Jewish national sport is speech-making, and he is "now starting to

believe that Arafat is close to being Jewish". Arafat responds, seemingly ad lib, with "Abraham is my grandfather!"

While these rosy personal anecdotes drive the film, when it comes to dealing with the larger political context, the film falters. The filmmakers distort the narrative which, in their defense, produces a more dramatic film, yet leaves its viewers with a misshapen sense of the events. The drama of the early portion of the documentary largely derives from stressing the illegal nature of the initial meetings. This is obviously included to add an element of danger, but there is no mention of the fact that the law forbidding meeting with the PLO was actually repealed by the time of the first meeting in Oslo.¹ There is also the illusion in the early part of the documentary that Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak were two scrappy Israeli academics, acting completely on their own accord to fake an academic conference, even publishing fake pamphlets and schedules, in order to secretly meet with the PLO in Oslo. In fact, Pundak and Hirschfeld were acting at the behest of the Israeli government, on specifically on behalf of Yossi Beilin, the deputy minister of foreign affairs under Shimon Peres. The documentary opens with the illusion that Pundak and Hirschfeld were acting alone, but 10 minutes later into the film, Beilin admits in an interview to sending the academics to meet with the PLO himself. And the documentary almost completely ignores the role of the Norwegian government, which had been attempting to set up secret back-channel negotiations since 1979.

It may be unfair to criticize a documentary for what it doesn't include. After all, it's not a textbook. However, major distortions should be pointed out. Namely, there appear to be distortions related to the events that hurt the peace process, which impress upon the viewer an

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/20/world/israeli-parliament-lifts-a-ban-on-plo-contacts.html>

unfair perspective of Israel's blame. It also may be reductionist to speak about the documentary in terms of heroes and villains, and the filmmakers, in their defense, have presented what appears to be a nuanced and seemingly balanced recanting of events. However, upon viewing the documentary multiple times, I started to realize that certain framing devices unnecessarily portrayed the Israeli side as the villains in the story.

The first meeting between the Israeli professors and the PLO representative negotiators in Oslo is presented as a sort of breakthrough. After the rocky start between Ala and Hirschfeld mentioned above, the PLO's offer of a gradual withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is said to be a shocking concession from an organization which was thought by all to be completely extremist. This viewpoint paints the PLO negotiators as noble actors, willing to compromise. This is a problematic portrayal, since it unnecessarily puts the PLO into the "hero" role. If you hold extreme views, and then later modify them to a moderate level, is that really heroic? By presenting this shift as something to praise, the documentary partially absolves the PLO for holding extreme views in the first place.

After the first meeting, the drama is presented as a struggle to convince the higher-ups in the Israeli government of the legitimacy of the negotiations. There is the sense from this discussion that the Israeli government is the antagonist of the story, since they are portrayed as recalcitrant in their refusal to negotiate with the PLO. Rabin does eventually give its blessings, after the first meeting in Oslo, to continue the talks, but on the condition of strict secrecy. The Israeli populace is described as the driving force behind that secrecy, since the discovery of the talks would purportedly, according to Pundak's diary, immediately result in Rabin's ejection from office. This portrayal is not only unfair, given the legitimate suffering of the Israeli

population at the hands of the PLO, but it may just be a plainly inaccurate political assessment.

This example illuminates a frequent problem for the film, which relies on diary entries to propel the story. Although this a fascinating delve into a personal reality, the documentary is in essence presenting one man's viewpoint as the authoritative political assessment of the situation. These diary entries may be accurate assessment, and additional credence should be given to those actors intimately involved with the negotiations – but it is problematic to present Pundak's political assessment of a complex situation as the ultimate authority.

The second meeting in Oslo adds Uri Savir as a negotiator and includes his diary as another source. Again, Israel is portrayed as a sort of villain: according the Pundak's diary, Rabin altered the proposal, by emphasizing security and not mentioning settlements or the return of refugees. Abu Ala says that this new proposal is a "massacre", painting Rabin as a hardline or inflexible negotiator, unwilling to bend to the PLO's demands. The PLO is again portrayed as a hero for having moderate views, and Rabin is portrayed as an extremist. This is exacerbated by footage from a speech by Rabin where he announces the closure of borders between the Palestinian territories and Israel. In the third Oslo meeting, Israel's refusal to discuss firm borders at that start of negotiations is portrayed, through a reading of Abu Ala's diary, as the reason for the derailment of the talks.

On a separate note, Uri Savir has an interesting anecdote, where he notes that Abu Ala asked him how, if Israel is a superpower, "with the third or fourth biggest army in the world", then why the Palestinians are viewed as a threat. Savir has a good response, about Palestine

being the tip of the spear for a wider Arab effort. But this exchange is misleading. At the time, Israel had nowhere near the third or fourth biggest army in the world.²

The documentary gains momentum when it discusses the leaks to the press, and the resulting backlash in the Likud over the proposal to politically recognize the PLO. However, there is an unanswered question, as the talks resume in Oslo: why have the talks there, if it is no longer a secret? The ceremony for signing the first agreement between the sides, in August 1993, is noted as a “secret” ceremony. Uri Savier says that it was a strange feeling to sign the agreement when “the world [knew] nothing”. But this feels strange and confusing coming after the segment about the leaks to the press, when the world did find out about the Oslo talks. Then the documentary cuts to news footage about the agreement, again piercing the secrecy. This confusion is probably the result of the filmmakers trying to emphasize the secrecy in order to add drama.

The documentary reaches an emotional zenith with footage from the Rose Garden signing ceremony for the Oslo accords. There is a sense of positivity both sides are “on the right path” as talks in Egypt begin to implement the Oslo Accords through the Gaza-Jericho agreement, promising democratic Palestinian elections for the first time. This bubble of positivity is then popped, according to the film’s narrative, by the 1994 massacre in Hebron perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein, ignoring the Hamas suicide bombings of the previous year. Then, it is noted that 9 Palestinians were killed in the subsequent riots. But that number is meaningless if we as viewers do not know the precise circumstances of those deaths. The decision on the part of the Israeli government to issue a lockdown in Hebron, and to continue

² http://articles.latimes.com/1991-03-06/news/mn-359_1_north-korea

building settlements, is then presented to the viewer. Then, curiously, the Palestinian response is glossed over, with very few details about the Afula and Hedera attacks, just some footage of the bloody aftermath of the bombings, but no details of the extent of damages, unlike the Goldstein attacks. This is a strange choice, and one that puts more weight on the Israeli side of the violence.

Despite this bloodshed, the documentary returns to a tone of positivity, with the Gaza-Jericho Agreement signing in May 1994. In July of that year, Arafat and Abu Ala return to the area triumphantly. Again, the two sides meet in Taba to negotiate Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank. And yet again, Israel is portrayed as a villain, demanding a gradual, instead of immediate, withdrawal from the region, and offering only two percent of full control to the Palestinians. There is speculation Abu Ala's heart is broken by this plan. The film goes on to mention a Palestinian terror attack – a bus bombing that Peres visited – but no details of the attack whatsoever are laid out. Instead, a segment from the Peres interview is shown where he notes that Israelis were calling him a traitor when he visited the site. The peace talks resume in September of 1994 but are interrupted by another bomb attack in Israel. No more information is given on the attacks besides the fact that it occurred in Jerusalem. In contrast, more detail is then given to the killing of a seven year old boy by the Israeli army.

The Oslo-B agreements are signed, and there is a final positive note about the 1995 peace rally in support of Rabin's efforts – which is ultimately shattered by the assassination of Rabin, and purportedly, the peace talks are doomed for the immediate future due to the election of Netanyahu.

Viewed in isolation by someone with scant knowledge of the history of the region, this documentary presents a dangerous narrative by giving more detail and focusing more on Israeli responsibility for the breakdown of the peace talks. The narrative that repeats throughout is one of positivity and hope, which is shattered by Israeli actions. This is a one-sided viewpoint that obfuscates Palestinian responsibility. A documentary about peace should not, however subtly, blame one side or the other, but rather should present a balanced viewpoint in order to reach a mutual understanding of the past that both sides can agree on.

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