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## An Aesthetic Confidence: The failure of Oslo Accords and the virtue of Aesthetics in Confidence Building Measures

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### **Abstract:**

*The Oslo Accords in 1993 was a great hope but also a great disappointment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As the conflict was marked by mutual distrust, hatred and insecurity, for the first time the leaders on both sides agreed to put the most conflictual issues on the backburner for the time being and move ahead with normalization of relations in order to build confidence first before the final settlement could be discussed. This paper demonstrates how the political upheavals are aesthetically represented, with an emphasis on visual mediums - posters and graffiti - and tries to mark the shifts in the various themes represented as a result of the political changes. Acknowledging that building confidence is a matter of the emotional relationship, this paper argues that Confidence Building Measures would do better by reclaiming and incorporating the political virtue of the aesthetic along with the mimetic approach to International Politics.*

**Keywords:** Israeli-Palestinian conflict, normalization, political changes.

The history of International Politics is that of conflict and a ceaseless study on peacemaking. It nevertheless suffers from the modernist construction of a disciplinary demarcation that privileges a certain notion of the *political* over the other forms of knowledge and seeks to render it exclusively compulsory in the study of conflict and peace. Post-positivist approaches challenge this disciplinary injunction and seek to recover the transdisciplinary exigency in understanding the political (Shapiro 2013). Mainstream approaches have been criticized on grounds of disciplinary austerity and inability to explain fully, let alone predict, some of the most significant political shifts, such as the end of the cold war. Bleiker (2001) stresses the need to employ the “whole register of human perceptions and sensations” to explain and therefore engage with key political dilemmas.



The Israel-Palestine conflict is one such dilemma that despite several attempts at peacemaking remains very much alive and hotly debated. The conflict has political, international, religious, ethnonational and (as this paper argues) aesthetic characteristics. The unique mixture creates a whole range of complexities in understanding the conflict but that also makes it very interesting to study, as one expert has commented. The assumption is that despite differences, conflicts around the globe have similar dynamics and understanding one would offer crucial insights into other conflicts as well. With this, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offers a colorful palette to unravel, therefore any efforts at a monochromatic black and white study will be vainful.

The Oslo Peace Process (or Oslo Accords) 1993, was a landmark in the history of the conflict as it concluded with Declaration of Principles that for the first time resulted in the Israeli recognition of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the provision for Palestinian self government through elections and laid down a roadmap for future peace. The PLO agreed to give up terrorism as a political tool and in return Israel recognised its right to exist as an independent state. It was, surprisingly, a huge progress in the aftermath of the First Intifada (1987-1993) and the principles laid down were conducive to a *two-state solution*, which many scholars and experts believe to be the only solution. Unlike the previous attempts at brokering peace and bringing the parties to the negotiating table, this time there was no great power interference. The nature of the negotiations is also interesting as they were held secretly without any publicity. The underlying assumption was that if the leaders are left alone at a conducive place such as Oslo, they will, over time, find more benefits in making peace than war.

The context of the negotiations was the underlying issue of political and military asymmetry between the parties and a history of violence that ensued mistrust and hatred. Therefore, in the negotiations it was decided that in order to move ahead, it was important to keep the most sensitive issues aside for a while and build trust and confidence first. Five sensitive issues: i) delimitation of borders, ii) status of Jerusalem, iii) water distribution, iv) Israeli settlements in the West Bank, v) management of refugees; were kept aside for future deliberation while moving ahead with the issues of economic and political development and building trust. The news of Oslo Accords were received with great fanfare and came as a glimmer of hope for the majority of public who were weary of the constant insecurity and, as I demonstrate in this paper, was represented via various aesthetic mediums. However, the extremists and the rightists, who were against making any compromises, did not accept it and launched a campaign to unpopularise the peace process through either democratic or violent means.

The use of Confidence Building Measures as a tool for conflict resolution is a cold war phenomenon usually conceived when a conflict reaches a “situation characterized by a mutually hurting stalemate” (Zartman 1985). Therefore the success of Oslo was contingent on the success of the CBMs which is relevant only if there is a “fundamental will to compromise” (Desjardins 1996), which was compromised due to the communal and extremist turn that happened post-



Oslo. The increase in terrorism, especially palestinian suicide bombing, and the the Jewish-national mobilisation by the Israeli right-wing was distinctively post-Oslo (Brym and Araj, 2008). Drawing lessons from a history of communal politics, Chandra et al. (2008) argue that “communalism has to be confronted both politically and ideologically” and that the competitive nature of political factions is bound to push it towards extremism. The same has also been explained by “outbidding thesis” (Brym and Araj, 2008) which explains domestic factions competing to win popular support by outbidding the other by extremist demands. Nevertheless the ostensible assumption is that the society at large was pro-peace and pro-Oslo and only after several years of extremist campaigns did the progress on Oslo failed. This paper argues that communalism is as much *out there* in politics as it is into the collective emotion of the society and where matters of sensitivities are concerned, mainstream political solutions are bound to fail.

This paper demonstrates how aesthetics became the arena for representing the political developments around the Oslo peace process marking the much-cited post-Oslo shift. Wielding especially the aesthetic mediums of the *visual* (via posters and graffitis), this paper contextualizes the political representation and offers a critique of the exclusive emphasis on mimetic solutions. Assuming the essential emotional character of CBMs, this paper argues that the failure of Oslo lies in the failure to take into account first, the aesthetics of confidence, and second, by limiting the scope of confidence to the political class instead of the entire society.

### ***Posters and Graffitis: ‘we claim the walls that divide us’***

*“We live in a visual age indeed. Images surround everything we do”*

*Roland Bleiker [Book: Visual Global Politics, 2018]*

The employment of visual mediums - such as posters, graffiti, creative art, photography, cartoons, manga, etc - catering to global conflicts such as the Vietnam War and Iraqi crisis, as well as global issues such as climate change and third world poverty is well known. Their political implications in forming public opinion, especially when magnified by the media, cannot be understated. Bleiker (2018) acknowledging this significance of visuality argues that we “still know far too little about the precise role that art and visuality plays in Politics and International Relations” and urges to “address this gap” as we live in an increasingly “visual age”.

Posters and Graffiti in the Israeli-palestinian conflict offer us a unique insight into the popular sentiment. Image 1 depicts the poster created by Franz Krauzs in 1936, a Jewish immigrant from Germany. It was commissioned by the Zionist-oriented Tourist Development Association of Palestine, whose goal was to encourage Jewish travel and immigration to the country under the British Mandate (Belkind 2020). In the aftermath of the optimism offered by the Oslo Accords, the poster was resurfaced by David Tartakover, a Jewish-Israeli artist, who popularized it in hope of the prospect of reconciliation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict and establishment of independent Palestinian state (Belkind 2020). Before the terrorist extremism and ensuing brutal Israeli suppression began, the poster was embraced by the Palestinians “as one that broadcasts



Palestinian identity" and the "indigenous right to Palestine". The poster appeared at several sites in the Palestinian occupied territories and outside Israeli settlements representing the indigenous right to the land. The fact that the Palestinians were aware of the origins of the poster was emblematic of the idea of Israeli appropriation of the cultural heritage of Palestine and the attempt to erase the linked Palestinian identity.



Image 1: 'Visit Palestine' poster by Franz Krausz

However with the increase in suicide bombing and the Israeli construction of a separation wall in the West Bank, the optimism of Oslo faded away. The building of a Berlin-style wall was fiercely protested against by the Palestinians. Concurrently, the same poster was reworked to depict the nature of separation created by the wall separating the two societies rendering any visibility opaque. Other posters with the caption "Visit Gaza" and "Visit OneState" depict the absence and erasure of any Palestinian identity.



Image 2: 'Visit Palestine' posters reworked in an act of resistance

The separation wall in the West Bank itself became the canvas for resistance - most prominently expressed by graffiti artists. The wall was a symbol of a physical as well as psychological divide between the Palestinians and the land they claim. Graffiti is associated with the Black hip-hop culture of New York and is typically captured at public places such as railway stations, subways, car parkings and backside of buildings - often illegally as an act of vandalism. The public expression is the embodiment of "street art" by commoners challenging the traditional notions of accessibility and private ownership (Adamoulken 2022). The Palestinian art of resistance can be best explained by the Arabic word *Sumud*, which means a continuation of resistance through steadfastness, perseverance and non-violence (Faulkner 2019).



Image 3: Emulation of Eugene Delacroix's 'Liberty leading the people' (Right) on the separation wall in West Bank (Left)

The separation wall is lined with eye-catching graffiti by local as well as international artists. Image 3 depicts what became a viral emulation of the nineteenth century French artist Eugene Delacroix's 'Liberty leading the people'. The stark contrast and the inequality in application of the same western values in the Palestinian contest is aptly captured. Image 4 depicts a blindfolded man being dragged away by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) capturing the nature of arbitrary law enforcement and brutality impacted on the ordinary people.



Image 4: Man being dragged by Israeli Defence Forces

The popular contemporary anonymous artist Banksy (pseudonym) has drawn international attention towards the West Bank wall through his provocative graffiti such as the 'Girl with balloon' (Image 5) which also formed the theme of his popular and acclaimed art at the Sotheby's in London and fetched 25 Million Dollars for a shredded painting. The other graffiti in Image 5 - depicting a man throwing a bouquet of flowers instead of a hand-grenade and a dove carrying an olive branch but having to defend itself from getting shot by wearing a bulletproof vest - represent the Palestinian sentiment to make peace and not war, as symbolized by flowers and olive branch. Image 6 represents provocative murals of national leaders - Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu and Theresa May - and functions to capture the International relations of Israel with the United States and the United Kingdom depicting the international forces that make the Wall possible despite the wall being termed 'illegal' by an ICJ ruling.



Image 5: Banksy's graffiti on West Bank Wall: a dove representing carrying an olive branch and wearing a bulletproof vest with a locked sniper target (top-left); a man posing to throw a bouquet of flowers (top-right); 'girl with balloon' on the West Bank wall (bottom-left); shredded 'girl with balloon' exhibited at Sotheby's in London (bottom-right)



Image 6: Provocative representations of national leaders through graffiti on the West Bank Wall

### **The visual aesthetics of violence: 'walls that scream'**

"The problem was not just the suicide bombing, but its commemoration"

-PRK [anonymous commentator]

With the fading optimism as the result of increasing tensions - terrorism, building of the wall, brutal suppression of the activists and the factionalism in domestic politics taking a communal and extremist turn - the violent and extremist sentiment is ostensibly clear in not only the visual but other mediums as well. The representation of *Sumud* was overwhelmed by the confrontational sentiment and it reached its pinnacle with the outbreak of violence and the Second Intifada (2000-2005). The leaders that brought about Oslo were no longer popular. Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995 and Yasser Arafat passed away in 2004. The rise of Hamas and the rigidity of the Netanyahu government meant that no further compromise could be conceived and the era of Israeli idea of "mutual coexistence" and the Palestinian "Sumud" was over.

As previously mentioned, suicide-bombing was a distinctive phenomenon associated with the post-Oslo period. The commemoration of the suicide-bombers was done by the extremist leaders led to a communal sentiment based on Islamic fundamentalism (Allen 2009). The same was represented through various aesthetic mediums, most notably through visual - films, posters and graffiti - and aural - especially hip-hop artists. Depiction of the suicide-bombers as martyrs and the values of the ultimate sacrifice for the political cause made possible the recruitment of women



and children in the conduct of terrorism, which would not be possible under a non-communal environment (Allen 2009).

Image 7(a) is a mural of the popular Palestinian activist Ahed Tamini who was arrested for slapping an IDF personnel. She became an icon of Palestinian violent resistance after her arrest and subsequent release from prison. Image 7(b) depicts the mural of Leila Khaled, a leading member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). She came to public attention due to her association with the Israeli TWA Flight 840 hijacking in 1969. She became the first woman to hijack a flight and in her public appearances, she is seen promoting the violent method to obtain concessions from the Israelis. She was arrested but later released as prisoner exchange for civilian hostages kidnapped by the PFLP. In the viral mural on the West Bank Wall, she is seen holding an AK-47 rifle with the caption “don’t forget the struggle”. After her release, she goes on traveling across Palestine and other countries commemorating the Mothers of the suicide bombers who she describes as “brave women” and “God’s chosen”. It startled the Western public and placed the Palestinians on a world stage. One popular account describes her as having become “a sex symbol for her violence; she shattered a million and one taboos overnight” (Allen 2009).



*Image 7: (a) Graffiti mural of Ahed Tamini (left); (b) Graffiti mural of Leila Khaled (right)*

Similarly, the news of a planned art exhibition in Israel depicting the women suicide bombers and the mothers of suicide bombers in the figure of Virgin Mary (Image 8) created a backlash. The depiction attracted comments such as “female terrorism” in Israel but on the other hand as “Godly Women” which was celebrated in Palestine. Thousands of Palestinians celebrated suicide bombings by distributing sweets and singing popular resistance songs. The same was represented through other aesthetic mediums such as the street hip-hop artists, popular films, processions carrying posters of suicide-bombers and slogans valourising their ‘martyrdom’.





*Image 8: Faces of female suicide bombers reworked upon images of Virgin Mary at an art exhibition in Israel - paintings removed from the walls*

The visual representation in the form of graffiti was not limited to the West Bank wall. It was in fact employed by ideological adherents across the globe. In India's Jawaharlal Nehru University, a graffiti reading "Free Palestine, Stop the Bloodshed" appeared anonymously and the spatiality and temporality of its appearance is interesting - it was painted outside the classroom where the course "Foreign Policy of Israel" was being taught in the Monsoon Semester in February. A resistance to the course being taught in the Central University in the context of improving India-Israel relations can be inferred.



*Image 9: A graffiti outside a classroom in Jawaharlal Nehru University reading "Free Palestine Stop the Bloodshed"*

### **Conclusion: An Aesthetic Confidence**

The aesthetic representation of extremist and violent sentiment, while on one hand, captures the popular sentiment; on the other hand, it seeks to reinforce the popular sentiment and vocalizes its credence. Therefore aesthetic representation becomes a powerful tool creating insecurity. Steele (2010) gives a Transgressional view of power and highlights the importance of Aesthetic power that can be checked by "reflexive discourse" and "counterpower", as "those moments when the aesthetic creation of the self is challenged". His work "Defacing Power- The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics" offers insights into the role of counternarratives and their implication through not only local but global actors (Steele 2010). It is precisely this insecurity that is exploited by the factionalism in domestic politics and leads to "outbidding" the other by taking more and more extremist positions on issues.

The case of the post-Oslo factionalism of both the Israeli and Palestinian side is a classic example of the nature of communal politics. Therefore, Krippendorff (1999, cited in Bleiker 2001) rightly comments that politics is "too important to leave to politicians, or to political scientists for that matter". The reliance on CBMs for the success of the Oslo peace process was well thought but was limited in its scope to the political class only. Where societies and sentiments are involved, Oslo could not have gone too far without factoring in the popular perceptions. Therefore Bleiker (2009) urges to employ the "full register of human perceptions and sensations" and not only the post-enlightenment practice of "reason" to deal with the most important political issues.

Therefore the confidence has to be built on the Aesthetic front as well. This paper deals only with the visual aesthetic mediums, focusing especially on posters and graffiti. The movement in other



aesthetic mediums - organizing peace museums and peace rallies by cultural diplomats, musical concerts calling for peace by artists such as Roger Waters, Madonna and Radiohead, and bringing together artists from both sides to produce artwork on the themes of peace such as the Palestinian Peace Orchestra - are moves in the direction of bringing the two societies closer. It therefore seeks to develop a counterpower (Steele 2010) and gives us an effective tool to check communalism by reducing mistrust and hatred among people.

The Oslo Accords laid down the best possible plan of action to resolve the political crisis, and many scholars believe that any future peace plan will essentially follow the same set of principles. The need, therefore, is to ask the question: Where did it go wrong? This paper has looked at the issue of Confidence Building Measures and its failure as a result of the political dynamics of factionalism and communalism leading to extremism. This paper emphasizes the need to broaden the scope of CBMs to apply it to the masses and incorporate the insights offered by the scholarship of Aesthetics to render it much more effective in peacemaking.

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