

*Israeli History, Politics and Society*

# **SCANDINAVIAN DIPLOMACY AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

**OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL SOFT POWER**

Nir Levitan



“In this empirically granular study, Nir Levitan investigates the special mediation approach adopted by the Scandinavian countries during the Oslo years – and how it helped to put the right pressure on the parties to achieve progress. This book constitutes an important contribution to the field of negotiation theory. It also holds a wealth of new insights for practitioners, notably within international diplomacy – simply a must-read!”

**Dr Björn Brenner**, *Former UN official; Senior lecturer,  
Swedish Defence University*

“This is a very impressive work of scholarship that tells us in detail the involvement of three Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark) in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, beyond what we usually know about the ‘Oslo process.’ NGOs, students, politicians, practitioners, from the Middle East, Europe, and North America, will find this book very appealing and attractive, due to its important contribution to the subject matter.”

**Arie M. Kacowicz**, *Chaim Weizmann Chair in International Relations,  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Aaron and Cecile Goldman Visiting  
Israeli Professor, Georgetown University 2022–2023*

“Nir Levitan’s book is an important contribution to the history of the Scandinavian countries and the Middle East peace process. Whereas Norway’s role in the Oslo accords is evident, and Sweden’s position as active non-aligned power is broadly acknowledged, Denmark’s part is less known. Levitan offers exciting new insights, particularly on the initiatives of the former Mossad deputy chief David Kimche and the renown Danish journalist Herbert Pundik.”

**Thomas Wegener Friis**, *University of Southern Denmark*



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# Scandinavian Diplomacy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

This book scrutinises how three small Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden and Denmark – developed a unique foreign policy that brought Israel and the Palestinians to the negotiating table.

Bringing together the field of soft power diplomacy with the field of conflict mediation, the text analyses the specific type of peace diplomacy offered by Scandinavia. It identifies the different methods and policies of the three Scandinavian countries, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of their mediation strategies. Close examination of the historical record through primary and secondary sources in five languages reveals how Scandinavian involvement worked over almost three decades and to what extent it shaped the content of the Oslo peace talks. The author documents how the Scandinavian countries employed soft power diplomacy to enlist the aid of more powerful countries and international institutions to compensate for their limited authority and legitimacy, and how they used the Middle East peace process to strengthen their own national interests, financial standing and international status.

The book will appeal to scholars, diplomats, politicians, educators and students interested in Scandinavian foreign policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Nir Levitan** is a lecturer in the Israeli Special Studies Program for the Security Forces, a research fellow at the Europa Institute and an affiliate fellow at the Center for Koldkrisstudier, University of Southern Denmark. He is an Israeli-Danish scholar and geopolitical analyst. His academic work focuses on issues of conflict resolution, conflict management and mediation as well as negotiation theory. Levitan is the author of a wide range of articles on foreign politics in the Scandinavian countries and in the Middle East and he frequently appears on Israeli media outlets as a commentator on Scandinavian related political affairs. He holds a PhD from Bar-Ilan University's Graduate Program in Conflict Resolution, Management and Negotiation.

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# **Scandinavian Diplomacy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Official and Unofficial Soft Power

**Nir Levitan**

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To prepare a well-grounded research account, the findings in this book have been verified by in-depth research of primary sources and countless amounts of archival records. Numerous personal interviews added invaluable to my knowledge of the issues. I hope that this book will not only be instructive for any person interested in this conflict but also that it will be received as a significant contribution to a rich documentation that has been written (and continues to be written) on attempts to secure stability and peace for Israel and its neighbors.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Soft power diplomacy

In the long pursuit of peace in the Middle East, Scandinavian countries were a driving force in the negotiating process between Israel and the Palestinians. Even though Norway, Sweden and Denmark were small countries without major military power or limitless economic resources, they developed a unique and oft times successful mediation strategy to address international conflicts.<sup>1</sup> This mediation approach to conflict resolution may be considered a form of soft power diplomacy.

For more than three decades, researchers have been preoccupied with how countries use “soft power” and to what extent it occurs in relations between countries. The first scholar to coin the term “soft power” was Joseph Nye who made a distinction between measures of political power. He stated that countries differ according to the type of power they have: “hard power” and “soft power” (Nye, 2004, 1990, 2006, 2008, 2011). Hard power refers to powerful countries that can influence other countries through coercion. Hard power strategies have focused on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions aimed at enforcing national interests (Aall, 2007; Baxter, Jordan and Rubin, 2018; Beardsley, 2011; Campbell and O’Hanlon, 2006; Touval, 2003). In contrast to coercive power, soft power described the ability to encourage others to act more optimally in the international arena. Nye explained that in terms of resources, soft power was aided by persuasion as a primary asset (Nye, 2004). Using soft power, small states could create a consensus (in Nye’s language – create a “milieu”) and thus persuade others to take steps that would not have been taken had they been subjected to coercive force (Nye, 2004: 97; Vuković, 2015a, 2015b).

According to Nye, the core factor of soft power lies in what he called methods of “attraction” and “seduction” (Nye, 2004: 6, 11). In soft power mediation, means of attraction may include setting up discussions, making compromise proposals and conveying messages between conflicting parties. Means of seduction would indicate a deeper level of involvement including financial incentives, involvement of NGOs and other organizations, cultural

## 2 Introduction

exchanges, setting up think tanks and other foreign policy initiatives as a means to promote mutual trust between the conflicting parties.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the mediation efforts, mediators sought interests, stability, reputation and ambition to participate in the future of the area where they were mediating. Therefore, occasionally a mediator chose to intervene and influence a conflict under the appearance of promoting peace efforts. Based on studies in international conflicts, Bercovitch proved that the mediation framework illustrated the means in which the mediators identified different alternatives in negotiations: relying on persuasion alone, facilitating poor communication between the parties or assisting in formulating possible solutions based on the information provided to them. Bercovitch and Gartner classified these alternatives into three strategies (Bercovitch and Gartner, 2006: 329–354): (a) communication-assistance strategy, which focuses on building trust relationships and creating groundwork for negotiations; (b) a procedural strategy, which focuses on shaping the negotiations by setting the meetings, engagement factors and structural factors between the parties; (c) guidance strategy, in which the mediator seeks to influence the negotiation process and essentially through coercion on the parties.

This division in which the mediator uses a combination or one of them depending on the existing circumstances, covered the three strategies named by Touval and Zartman (Beardsley, 2011; Carnevale, 1986: 41–56; Svensson, 2007: 229–248; Touval and Zartman, 1985; Wallensteen and Svensson, 2016: 96): communication-assistance strategy – a strategy in which the mediator’s role was mostly passive, and the main mediation assisted the parties to communicate more effectively during the negotiations, while having minor control over the process; guidance strategy – a strategy in which the mediator formally controlled the process and assisted in the negotiations by formulating possible solutions and offering them to the parties; third strategy – manipulation strategy, the most active strategy in mediation: “mediation with muscles”, in which the mediator provided the parties with incentives or an ultimatum. On the one hand he threatened the parties with coercive measures, and on the other he offered incentives for compromises reached.

Soft power diplomacy is complex, nuanced and flexible. It can establish unofficial or official channels and each of those channels can be secret or public. There can be parallel but separate tracks operating at the same time. There can be official and unofficial tracks operating simultaneously, each furthering different goals, using different strategies. Sometimes those separate tracks morph into one official and public channel. However, success in any one of these channels is never guaranteed. Scandinavian soft power diplomacy can also be viewed as a kind of “preliminary diplomacy” that prepares the way for serious summits and permanent agreements.

This book introduces the use of soft power diplomacy to describe the mediation efforts of the Scandinavian countries in general and their attempts to bring a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. The Scandinavian mediators, who could not use hard power and coercive

means, used soft power in the form of attraction and seduction to influence international dialogue processes. By means of soft power, they sought to advance their own status on the international stage as well. The Scandinavian countries became known for promoting contacts that created mutual understandings between the disputed parties. The book explores in detail the soft power strategies used by the Scandinavians over several decades during their involvement in the Middle East.

Advancing a new, comprehensive approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these three countries tried to resolve one of the most enduring political challenges of the modern era in what became known as the Oslo Peace Process. The Oslo process was a confusing journey filled with hope and disappointment, challenges and breakthroughs, dedication, deception, much passion and mostly good intentions. The material gathered for this book has been drawn from extensive research including personal interviews, archival material, secondary sources when necessary and autobiographical materials. In particular, the unpublished personal correspondence and archive of David Kimche was a rich source of information as was research in the archives of the Royal Danish Library.

## **1.2 Political secrecy in the Middle East**

Diplomacy in the Middle East is vastly challenging for many reasons, one of which is the extensive reliance on secrecy. Aaron Klieman studied the use of political secrecy in the Middle East and defined political secrecy as negotiations to achieve political goals that took place behind closed doors. He identified two goals of such diplomacy. One goal was to achieve political objectives through a matter-of-fact exchange of information, a tacit understanding, or the attainment of a secret arrangement that prevented exposure to local or international actors. A second goal was to conduct diplomacy without the knowledge or consent of the public. Sometimes secret diplomacy was the only middle ground between dialogue and disconnection. According to Kleiman, the theorist Hans Morgenthau was also in favor of assuming that secret diplomacy was essential and necessary for the formation of understandings far from the alternative of war and mutual destruction (Klieman, 1988: 25, 29).

Secret diplomacy may be motivated by defensive and/or offensive purposes. The defensive approach preserved the existing situation and prevented aggravation. The offensive approach was intended to break through an existing situation and resolve a confrontation covertly. The defined boundaries of secrecy allowed policymakers to speak more openly and to seek possibilities for reconciliation more bravely without those ideas being binding. Negotiating on especially sensitive issues increased the intensity of the secrecy. In addition, the use of secret diplomacy ensured that the dialogue between countries would occur without resistance that might damage the chances for success (Klieman, 1988: 15–17; Roberts, 2009: 515; Zartman,

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1992; Zartman, 2000; Zartman and Touval, 2007). Henry Kissinger argued that the demanding task of the diplomat to seek an acceptable compromise highlighted the necessity for confidentiality and that secrecy allowed the parties involved to negotiate without the influence of internal or external pressure (Berridge, 2001: 199).

Against the background of hostile states wrestling with one another by making vague proposals that were only aimed at examining the other side's position, the Scandinavians offered a different model of negotiation. By joining the element of secrecy with the posture of unofficial, informal talks, the Scandinavians offered a model of mediation that often succeeded in developing an unofficial diplomacy path into an official peace process.

### **1.3 Unofficial diplomacy**

Unofficial diplomacy creates an intermediate stage and a convenient replacement for governments that want to continue to conduct negotiations without obligation. Unofficial diplomacy helps official leaders resolve or manage conflicts through creative solutions, away from the public eye, and without formal demands for public negotiation or bargaining (Davidson and Montville, 1981; Montville, 1995; Schiff, 2018, 2010).

Unofficial diplomacy promotes a strategy of negotiation that supports participants to create personal relationships, to understand the conflict from the opponent's point of view, and to develop common strategies for dealing with the conflict as a common problem (Montville, 1991; Zartman and Touval, 1992). Approached psychologically, the aim is to reduce the sense of victimhood of the parties and to soften the opponent's image. If the process is successful, it will gradually allow for a change in public opinion or a change among key people. These changes have allowed political leaders to take positive steps to resolve a conflict that previously seemed impossible.

Official and unofficial diplomacy may be conducted at the same time. There are many ways these two tracks can complement one another. Sometimes the official public channel gives cover for the secret, unofficial one. An official and public channel can provide a distraction that allows the parties to negotiate on more favorable terms without provoking broad public and political criticism. In general, an unofficial track seeks to promote a more sympathetic environment at the political and public level through public opinion so that at a later stage, leaders could take lower risks (Bercovitch, 1997, 2006; Bõhmelt, 2010; Diamond and McDonald, 1996; McDonald, 1991).

While one of the benefits of a secret channel is to provide an opportunity for a more free exchange of ideas and suggestions for resolving a conflict, there is always concern and apprehension around the moment when the work of the group will become public. The same confidentiality that invites openness and paves the way for progress can become a liability for participants who might have been seduced to go beyond what the authorities

or their public might accept. Generally, agreements reached through an unofficial channel have incorporated bolder positions and have significant concessions due to the public's lack of criticism and knowledge. Knowing that the agreement will be made public can prevent the parties from establishing material elements in their final understandings.

Although an unofficial channel can be progressed relatively quickly and get understandings faster than official channels, they can be challenged at the stage where the agreement becomes known and has to stand up to public scrutiny (Wanis-St John, 2006: 139). In addition, even if the parties tried to process common creative ideas to overcome obstacles, implementing an fragile peace agreement can become problematic due to failures to agree on details and the emergence of unforeseen events (Saunders, 1996: 419–421) including a strong negative public response.

An unofficial channel allows even decision-makers to be involved in negotiations, especially one that endangers their status, until the agreements are published and they take responsibility for them (Schiff, 2018, 2010; Wanis-St John, 2006). Because their involvement is secret and the unofficial channel's agreements are non-binding, a vulnerable leader can, at that point of public exposure, deny involvement or dismiss the groups conclusions altogether.

In the Oslo process, the confidentiality of the talks led to a high degree of flexible thinking and creative ideas among the participants which led to high expectations for a successful agreement. But these expectations could not be backed up. If the parties ignored the reality on the ground, the political echelon would not be able to accept or implement their agreements. As a result, academic studies have concluded that civil society's lack of involvement has made it difficult to achieve lasting peace (Wanis-St. John and Kew, 2008: 11–12, 33–35). Often, covert processes contribute to the initiation of negotiations but sometimes fail to achieve the ultimate goal of reaching an agreement (Kelman, 1995: 20, 26–27; Kelman, 1997). Thus, an unofficial channel does not necessarily succeed in building a consensus in favor of a peace process, even when secret negotiations are conducted (Levitt, 2008).

Unofficial channel also influenced the mediation, one that does not depend only on national power and resources. Denmark was a clear example of leveraging an intermediary using the unofficial channel. That is, it compensated for its lack of influence in official processes by unofficial circles. This is also how Norway and Sweden acted from the end of the 1980s to build a substantial foundation for mutual trust and establish a relationship between the mediator and the parties for the benefit of a political framework. In the eyes of the Scandinavian mediators, this had a deep meaning that helped to create common ground, and even more importantly, to strengthen their image in the international community.

## Notes

- 1 *Nordic Approaches to Peace Mediation Research, Practices and Policies*, edited by Marko Lehti (2014) is a great in-depth research for understanding the important approaches and studies in making peace according to the Nordic models.
- 2 Others believe that this diplomacy fits the definition of former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, who named it Niche diplomacy. This diplomacy allowed small countries to play a broader role in the international arena, even though there were with limited resources and capabilities (Henrikson, 2005: 67).

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## 2 Historical Background

Since the core of the study deal with the mediation of the Scandinavian states in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this chapter will review Scandinavian involvement in the international arena in general and in the Middle East particular. The chapter will include an overview of Scandinavian foreign policy, the purpose of Scandinavian foreign aid, and each countries' policy. This chapter will also present the objectives of Scandinavian foreign policy, the scope of their activities and their impact, which led to their involvement in the Middle East.

By presenting the political framework of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, it will also be possible to understand the basic principles on which the Scandinavian mediation in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians was based.

### **2.1 Scandinavian foreign policy: Autonomy, neutrality and Scandinavian balance**

The presentation of the Scandinavian policy makes it possible to understand the Scandinavian mediation infrastructure in the conflict, but since the mediation work took many years, ties were established with Israel and the Palestinians. The Scandinavian peace diplomacy did not focus on a single time frame but range over a long period in which they could establish authority and status among the parties and try to advance a political agreement. Thus, the communication of messages and attempts to promote negotiations between the parties were carried out as part of a broad and uneven process in which regional and international changes took place. These changes also created time and maneuver for the Scandinavian countries to promote political sponsorship in the political process. These are not necessarily essential or essential stages, but those that have advanced their status and created future possibilities. In this context, Wallenstein and Svensson believed that patience, transparency and adherence, even in times of recession, were an essential part of Scandinavian mediation (Wallenstein and Svensson, 2016: 38, 208, 219–220).

Although ostensibly the Middle East did not serve a vital interest in Scandinavian political leaders, it gained wide attention before the State of

Israel was established (Staur, 2016: 76). One of Denmark's most recognised monarchs, King Erik Ejegod (Erik the Good) went on as pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1103 but died on Cyprus. His wife Boedil Thurgotsdatter, however, continued and reached Jerusalem where she died and was buried on Mount of Olives in the Valley of Josaphat. Many Nordics were attracted to the Middle East for theological reasons alongside a national ethos that promoted international interest and increased their involvement in the region until the middle of the 20th century (Kark, 1994: 38–40).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the development of relations and the penetration of the Nordic countries into the Middle East accompanied by a complex relationship. As early as the beginning of the 18th century, three research expeditions were sent by the King of Sweden, Charles XII, to the Holy Land and they accelerated interest in the Middle East. During the 19th century, Swedish representatives visited the country, primarily pilgrims, travelers and researchers who came for personal and unofficial reasons. In 1884, the three sons of King Oscar II visited the area (Kark, 1996: 50–51).

When the Zionist movement developed and waves of immigration to the Yishuv began, in broad circles in Scandinavia, Jewish communities in the land were perceived as a sign of the return of the Jews to the homeland and resurrection of Jesus (Carmesund, 2010: 85). In Norway, where there was no consensus on the theological vision among the Christian currents, Jewish history made biblical prophecies a reality and strengthened the positive attitude toward Jews, which was also reflected in the giving of biblical names to children. Some of the curricula included compulsory teaching of biblical stories, called the “Good Book” (Sæbø, 1976).

In Denmark, too, Danish Christian societies appealed to the UN Secretary-General and urged him to uphold previous decisions of the League of Nations to build a national home for Jews. Although other Christian bodies called on Jews to convert to strengthen their support for the establishment of Israel and in 1948 established the “Danish Committee for the Support of the Jewish Defense and Struggle in Palestine” (Lausten, 2015: 228, 263).

Due to the partition plan and growing international interest in resolving the conflict, the political intervention of the Scandinavian countries has also expanded. However, the foreign policies of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, which were diverse, sought to maintain a uniform political line according to national considerations. Following the adoption of the partition plan and the military clash between Israel and its neighbors, the Scandinavian countries adopted a political line that carried broad and cautious considerations towards the region's countries. In the next section, therefore, an overview will be given of the policies of Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

## **2.2 The beginning of modern Scandinavian mediation**

Scandinavian diplomacy is characterised by a tradition of mediation in international disputes, as reflected in diplomats Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjöld,

Count Folke Bernadotte, Gunnar Jarring and Martti Ahtisaari, who excelled in making peace. Simultaneously, because historically, the Norse peoples were involved in many wars and some ruled remote areas, they went a long and winding road until their image as peacemakers established.

“Nordic peace” is a new phenomenon that began only in the 19th century and intensified after establishing the League of Nations and the United Nations. Streamline their political involvement, mainly through international mediation, by appointing representatives on their behalf who have been sent to the Foreign Ministries in Stockholm and Oslo (Wallenstein and Svensson, 2016: 228). Scandinavians believe that the process of resolving conflicts and bringing peace to the world can be achieved under the right conditions. In spite of the fact that peace and conflict resolution differ considerably between Nordic countries, a great deal of collaboration took place between Nordics on many levels. Thus, it is impossible to ignore the Scandinavian culture, as well as their political cooperation.

The Scandinavian countries have used diplomacy to increase their maneuverability (Ingebritsen, 2006) and Scandinavian states have established the political infrastructure for their area of operation in line with foreign policy objectives. Owing to this fact, one has to understand the foreign policy design of Scandinavian policies and examine their traditional policies, especially in Europe during the Cold War. In this context, it is possible to mention Norway, which has formulated policies to promote narrow interests alongside fostering international commitment (Riste, 2001).<sup>2</sup> This policy also balanced the relationship between conflicting interests and established growing involvement in the international arena, the most recognisable of the Oslo process (Pruitt, 1997).

Norway, Sweden and Denmark, which used to identify with other peoples and aid them financially, especially in conflicts of interest, have over time succeeded in strengthening the network of ties between the Western bloc and the Soviet bloc and highlighting their international image (Löden, 2012; Davis, 1990). As small countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark were countries with fewer international interests. They restricted military use and the use of economic sanctions in their foreign policy. Sweden chose to remain unidentified and remained outside NATO and joined the European Community (EC) in a later stage. Norway remained outside the European Community but joined the North Atlantic Alliance (Ingebritsen, 2002: 12), while Denmark became a NATO member and a pioneer in joining the European Community in 1973.

The presentation of the foreign destinations developed in Scandinavia reveals how the Scandinavians realised their goals to influence the international arena, primarily through international bodies. However, apart from that, they also established generous foreign aid and used it towards Third World countries. Although foreign aid did not necessarily establish and strengthen their influence or pave the way for political involvement, it promoted their political status in the international community, a status that persuaded distant countries to agree to Scandinavian mediation.

### **2.3 Scandinavian foreign diplomacy**

To the formation of foreign aid diplomacy had a major part of the influence of Scandinavian policy is to intervene and act as mediators. Allegedly, the Scandinavian countries have gained a positive international reputation because they have not linked economic aid to economic or strategic interests (Stokke, 1989). In each of Scandinavian countries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs outlined the aid policy, although in the past, all aid ministries were independent and operated within the framework of the Aid and Development Agency. Thus, even in times of change of government, Scandinavian governments have demonstrated that aid policy remains stable and anchored in a unique worldview. On the other hand, the differences between the Scandinavian countries showed that Denmark tended to link aid in the interests of the private sector significantly, while Norway and Sweden tended to keep it modest (Olsen, 2005; Selbervik and Nygaard, 2006: 3, 7; Selbervik, 2003).

However, due to the Scandinavians' desire to be portrayed as economically powerful and prestigious humanitarian nations, they sought similar ways to aid in this endeavor. Over time, aid grants were accompanied by increasing mediation involvement, mainly on behalf of Norway (Van der Veen, 2000). The countries' generous efforts, which were poor until the 1970s, changed for several reasons, including hidden competition between them for the most generous donor and their role in international institutions (Tamnes, 1997). Thus, for example, the former president of Finland and Nobel Laureate for Peace, Martti Ahtisaari, competed with the Norwegians to promote his peace diplomacy in the previous decade (Wallenstein and Svensson, 2016: 228). Even if they shared the same history and goals each state endeavors to demonstrate political superiority over other Nordic states.

Because the tendency to maintain a high level of assistance to Third World countries stemmed from the official vision to contribute to democratic development and economic advancement, at the same time, it also revealed an intention other than altruistic values. Given the background, from 1980 onwards, the Scandinavians gradually believed that foreign aid allowed them to promote dialogue between countries and fortify their role as mediators. Official political documents contain mentions and declarations of Nordic countries that link foreign aid to their ability to leverage their status beyond their weight in the international arena (Selbervik, 2003) and promote national interests. However, these countries have officially endeavored not to declare their intentions and have publicly advocated the development of human rights and promoting democratic values (Krab-Johansen, 1995; Selbervik, 1997). Over time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Assistance and Development influenced the identity of aid recipients (Danielson and Wohlgemuth, 2005; Olsen, 2005: 203). These have refined the purpose of strengthening their influence and national image in the international arena.

As part of this activity, NGOs have also been able to outline informal connections and create an infrastructure for Nordic mediation (Jørgensen