

The Prospects for Peace: A Palestinian View

Introduction

The Palestinians as a people, Muslim and Christian alike, share the same national identity, a joint loyalty to the land of Palestine and a shared sense of belonging to the Arab nation. Throughout history, Palestine has remained the homeland of the Palestinian people, although their struggle for freedom and independence first began as an integral component of the overall Arab struggle, early this century when the Palestinians joined their Arab brothers in working toward meeting the Arab national goal of establishing a united Arab state. However, whilst most of the Arab states succeeded in achieving independence in the early 1950s and 1960s, the Palestinians found themselves victims of the international and regional struggles pertaining to the balance of power – such as the struggle to promote and protect British and French interests, as embodied in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 – and the Zionist plans to establish a Jewish homeland in historical Palestine.

The Palestinians, despite having become victims of the Zionist enterprise, which aimed at uprooting and deporting them to neighboring Arab countries, and of the political struggle of the Arab regimes and their military impotency, failed, in their attempt to gain independence, to strike regional or international alliances. Nevertheless, the Palestine Question soon became the center of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Middle East witnessing a series of revolts and wars, the first being the War of 1948. This particular war was the outcome of the UN Partition Plan of 1947, which allocated more than 54 percent of historic Palestine to the proposed Jewish State. When Israel occupied what remained of Palestine in 1967, one-third of the Palestinian people came under Israeli military rule while the rest sought refuge in neighboring Arab countries as well as the Diaspora. Yet another disaster was to befall them when, in 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, crippled the military institution of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PLO, and forced its leadership to seek refuge in Tunis. Even then, however, the Palestinian people never lost sight of their ultimate goal, namely, to exercise their legitimate rights, most important of which was and remains the right to liberate their homeland and return to the soil of their grandfathers.

With the advent of the Palestinian *Intifada* (Uprising) in December 1987, there was reason to believe that things were finally taking a turn for the better and that justice would eventually prevail. There is no doubt whatsoever that the *Intifada* succeeded in bringing the Palestinian cause back not only to the center of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also to the headlines of the international media. Unable to ignore the potential consequences of the *Intifada*, Israel was obliged to confront a crisis that threatened, from its outset, to shake not only the stability and security of the Jewish State, but also that of the entire Middle East. Israel's long-time ally, the United States, was also acutely aware of the danger posed by the national uprising and consequently spared no effort in initiating a series of proposals to first, contain it and second, to bring it to an end. Indeed, after months of shuttle diplomacy, it was the US Government who, at the end of the Gulf Crisis, called for the holding of an international Middle East Peace Conference. Held in Madrid starting 30 October 1991, the Conference, which called for recognition of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 as a basis for peace, in addition to the acceptance of 'land for peace' as a guiding principle, opened the door to what is commonly referred to as the Middle East Peace Process.

The Peace Process Launched in 1991

Since the launching of the peace process in 1991, the Middle East has been undergoing a transformation; one – it is still hoped – that it will set the stage for the final chapter of the Arab-Israeli conflict and result in greater stability and economic prosperity in the region. Eight years after Madrid, however, the anticipated peace ‘dividends’ have yet to be felt and there are many disillusioned voices claiming that the peace process would appear to have failed to reach the conclusion broadly aspired to.

In asking why this is the case, one must consider the fact that when the Palestinians went to Madrid, they knew that the cards were not in their favor. Whilst the Israelis and Arab countries accepted the invitation with little resistance, the Palestinians were hesitant. They had good reason to be worried. The now famous conditions imposed by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir were hardly suggestive of a genuine Israeli willingness to make peace, or even to accept the fact that in spite of its geographical distance from the homeland, the PLO leadership was still, for all intents and purposes, the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people capable of acting on their behalf. The Palestinian leadership realized, however, that a failure to meet the conditions – no independent Palestinian delegation, but instead Palestinian participation under a Jordanian umbrella; no Palestinian Jerusalemites or PLO officials amongst the delegation, and no Palestinian flag – would negatively affect its already weak standing in the eyes of the international community, something that appeared all the more certain when US Secretary of State James Baker told Palestinian representatives that not only would the Palestinians ‘miss the train’ if they rejected this open door, but that a refusal to attend could result in the search for an ‘alternative’ Palestinian delegation.

Now convinced that it had no other option, the Palestinian leadership accepted the fact that entering the unknown tunnel was its only course of action. Although still not enthusiastic, it hoped that, at the very least, the presence of the Palestinian people on the world stage would cause a change in the way the global community perceived and understood the merits of their cause. From that time until today, the merits and pitfalls of Oslo have remained a highly disputed topic in the Palestinian community.

Since the early 1990s, the peace process has witnessed the rise to power of five Israeli governments, all of which have differed – to a larger or lesser extent – in regard to how to govern the State of Israel and deal with the Palestinian issue. Each government, without exception, has been keen to impose its conditions and venues for the continuation of the negotiation process with the Palestinians. Moreover, they have been equally keen to take advantage of Palestinian weaknesses; a divided Arab World; sympathy for the Israeli people on the part of the American people and the US Government’s desire to protect its own interests by supporting the security needs of Israel, the absence of European pressure beyond rhetoric; a widely held global belief that the historical handshake between Arafat and Rabin on the White House lawn in Washington in 1993 signaled an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This would inevitably be followed by an era of normalization and of new or renewed diplomatic relations between Israel and the countries of the world.

It soon became obvious that all the Israeli side had in mind was to launch a containment process as was embodied in the plans of the Shamir government. These plans were reflected in Shamir’s own words when he called for „giving the Arabs of Judea, Samaria and Gaza the opportunity to conduct their own affairs within the framework of an autonomy – yes, but never an Arab Palestinian state...any Jew who so wishes will be able to settle anywhere throughout Eretz Yisrael.“

With regard to Jerusalem, Shamir refused to make it a part of any political initiative for a solution and denied its Palestinian citizens the right to participate in any political activity, including the Palestinian elections, making it very clear that he considered Jerusalem a closed

file, a united city, the eternal capital of Israel. The Palestinian negotiating team presented their position in what was known as the PISGA (Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority) Plan. However, the Israeli Government rejected every Palestinian initiative or idea, with Shamir going so far as to say that he wished the negotiations would continue for more than 100 years, allowing him to confiscate more Palestinian land in order to build more Jewish settlements and expand the existing ones, thereby forcing the Palestinians to flee. In spite of the intervention of George Bush and James Baker on behalf of the United States, the co-sponsor of the peace talks, who threatened to withhold loans in the amount of \$10 billion, earmarked for Israel but for purposes other than settlement activity, the negotiations with the Shamir government remained deadlocked.

The next phase of the containment process began with the rise to power of the government of Yitzhak Rabin, whose first main move was to help reduce the potential for Palestinian opposition by deporting 400 Islamic activists to South Lebanon despite vehement local, regional and international protest. Next was the opening of five backdoor channels that aimed at further weakening an already crippled and isolated PLO leadership in Tunis. Although one of these channels resulted in what came to be known as the Oslo breakthrough, the Declaration of Principles (DoP) negotiated there delivered only mutual recognition and the drafting of an agenda that outlined two main stages: a five-year transitional stage followed by a permanent status stage, to be negotiated in the final status talks that were to begin not later than during the third year of the transitional phase. This was in theory.

In practice, Rabin's containment thesis involved portioning, phasing, and testing, as manifested in his famous sentence that „there are no sacred dates“. He suggested parts of Jericho and Gaza as the first portion of land and a three-year period, during which the PLO leadership would have to prove itself capable of governing and maintaining security and stability, with no changes taking place in regard to the status of settlers and the settlements. Although deeply disillusioned as a result of these shortcomings and the disregard with which the signed agreement was treated, the Palestinians accepted, convinced that the Israelis knew that only genuine mutual recognition would lead to a peaceful coexistence based on justice and equality, making all their sacrifices worthwhile. However, Rabin did not have enough time to prove his intentions were genuine and achieve the separation envisioned as on 4 November 1995, he was assassinated at a peace rally in Tel Aviv. His murder exposed the deep divide in the Israeli society and the extent to which Israeli fanaticism had risen behind the scenes.

Following the assassination of Rabin, the Palestinians expressed hope that his successor in the Labor Party, Shimon Peres, the caretaker Prime Minister, would carry on the mission Rabin had started. They soon discovered, however, that Peres was too weak, too reluctant, and too late to deliver what had been agreed upon in the past. When he gave the green light for the assassination of Hamas activist Yayha Ayyash (The Engineer) – which led to a strong Palestinian reaction, including revenge suicide bombs in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem – and bombarded the village of Qana'a in Lebanon, killing many civilians, the environment of fear and mistrust that he had helped to create resulted in rightwing voices calling for change.

The fall of the Labor Government and the rise of the right wing government headed by Benyamin Netanyahu marked the beginning of the next phase, which will go down in history as the one in which the Palestinians kept complaining that they had lost their partner in peace while Israel tried to cope with a deeply divided society and unprecedented criticism on the part of the United States, Israel's main ally, as well as other nations across the globe.

The newly elected Prime Minister presented himself as a professional politician. His forums were TV screens and his goods were words in addition to an extremely inflexible stance *vis-à-vis* anyone who did not share or was not ready to accept his visions, which reflected the traditional Zionist school of thought. However, he failed to strike new alliances

and guard old ones, sacrificed friends and comrades, and was famous for misinterpreting and twisting facts and positions. His only real ‚success‘ was in challenging and confronting the Palestinians at any given opportunity and ensuring that the peace process became frozen with not a glimmer of hope in sight. Countless regional and international attempts were initiated to bring the Netanyahu government back to the negotiation table but the vast majority were in vain, the only two exceptions being the result of a desire on the part of Netanyahu to renegotiate what had already been agreed upon and signed by both parties. The first was the Hebron Agreement of January 1997, which provided for a new redeployment scheme for the disputed city, and the second, the signing in October 1998 of what came to be known as the Wye Plantation Memorandum, which rearranged issues pertaining to the implementation of the stipulations for the transitional phase. After three and a half years of a cat-and-mouse game between the Netanyahu government and the Palestinian Authority, there were not many that would be prepared to dispute the validity of the widely heard slogan ‚Oslo is dead‘.

The Israelis, for reasons related mainly to their internal disputes rather than the stalled peace process, displayed dissatisfaction with their government on 17 May 1999 when a landslide victory brought the Labor Party back to power, leaving behind a badly defeated Likud Party whose leader – Netanyahu – resigned soon after. It remains to be seen whether the newly elected Prime Minister Ehud Barak will prove capable of keeping his election promises, including those to reunite the deeply divided Israeli society and bring peace to the region.

The Current Political Environment

The Palestinians are aware that every Israeli election and subsequent emergence of a new prime minister and government is being sold to them as a new chapter, a new beginning, and, particularly now, a new political and security formula that will allow for a resumption of the long-frozen peace process. This time around, they find themselves facing a former chief-of-staff turned Prime Minister whose military background hardly encourages optimism.

After spending a whole month forming his coalition government, Barak paid an official visit to two Arab Leaders in the region – with trips to Amman and Cairo – where he presented his credentials as a successor to Rabin and an ardent follower of his school of thought. He passed several much-publicized messages, claiming that he was keen to progress on the Palestinian track as well as resume negotiations on the Syrian-Lebanese track, and, during his first meeting with President Yasser Arafat, reiterated his „so-called“ commitment to delivering what has already been agreed upon. Next, he toured America, where he held a series of talks with US President Clinton and other American leaders, presenting, in the process, an ambiguous agenda – the conclusion of the final status talks within 15 months – and himself as peacemaker. He emphasized his obsession with the leadership styles of Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin who, respectively, concluded the Camp David accords with Egypt in 1979 and a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, and stressed that he is determined to conclude a security and normalization agreement with Syria and to withdraw from Southern Lebanon within one year. These, quite obviously, were the words the United States wanted to hear – and which, as Barak was well aware, would be broadcast all over the world – after three years during which the US-Israeli relationship had remained less than friendly due to the policies of Netanyahu. Now, at last, the Americans were finally reconciled with their favorite ally in the Middle East.

Although Barak is keen to go down in history as the one who achieved a historical reconciliation with the Palestinians and ended the century-old Middle East conflict, it is clear to the Palestinians that he is driven more by a notion of containment than one of reciprocity with regard to the signing of a final peace accord. The most recent round of talks – the

renegotiating of the already signed Wye Plantation Memorandum – has not provided reason for hope, it being clear that the old carrot-and-stick policy that Israel had used so effectively in dealing with the Palestinians in the past was once more being applied. The carrots were the release of less than one third of the Palestinian prisoners, the resumption of the building of the sea port, and the re-negotiations to share the control of a long promise to open „safe passages“ between the West Bank and Gaza, as well as a further redeployment from six and a half percent of the West Bank – all things, it should be stressed here, that have already been dealt with in the Gaza-Jericho Agreement of 4 May 1994, the signing of which marked the beginning of the so-called interim period. The stick, on the other hand, was the knowledge that if the Palestinians would not agree to Barak’s new chapter, the Israeli side would insist that they implement to the letter the security arrangement, and in addition, would speed up efforts to get the Syrian track going, which may lead to normalization with at least ten Arab States in the Gulf (...).

The new document, known as the Sharm El-Sheikh (or Wye II-) Agreement, signed on 4 September 1999, is regarded by many Palestinians as yet another concession if not a sign of defeat. Not only did the Israelis once more suspend something already negotiated and agreed upon – which equals compromising on a compromise or making a concession on a concession – but they also forced the Palestinians to accept that the final stage with the permanent status talks is linked to the ongoing implementation of the outstanding points of agreement. Long before the Palestinians enjoy anywhere near to full Palestinian authority over their territories, Barak – with American support and Egyptian understanding that the final stage is based on Security Council Resolution 242 and 338 – succeeded in pushing through his plan whereby the permanent status negotiations will resume before concluding all issues of the interim phase! In addition to that, he imposed the idea of reaching a framework for the permanent status issues within one year and that there should not be a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood before February 2000, i.e., he managed to extend the transitional phase for another year and a half while containing the Palestinian leadership in a framework in which Israel continues to have the upper hand with regard to security, borders and settlements. Lastly, Barak went so far as to threaten that if the two parties do not reach an agreement within one year, Israel position is to postpone the major permanent status issues, i.e., the question of Jerusalem and that of the refugees in exchange for Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state in principle.

This is the crossroads at which the Palestinians find themselves today, wondering where they will go from here. There has been worldwide understanding for the need for an independent Palestinian State for many years, but in reality, the hopes of arriving at a satisfactory solution are fading. Successful negotiations will depend to a great deal on there being a genuine desire and determination on the part of both sides to reach feasible compromises and a formula with which they can live without feeling defeated or sold out. This, in turn, will require – especially on the part of the Israelis – the willingness to stop hiding behind the shield of security.

From the Transitional Phase to the Permanent Status – Prospects for Peace?

With the two sides positions as far apart as ever, it is doubtful whether the final agreement aspired to could be achieved and bring to a satisfactory end the 100-year conflict that has caused so much suffering. Negotiations must now address critical and deeply emotional issues, including Palestinian statehood, the status of Jerusalem, the future of Jewish settlements and the rights of Palestinian refugees. Israel has thus far shown little readiness to consider them with the seriousness and readiness to make concessions that they require.

In addition, the Palestinians are well aware of the fact that it was the previous Labor Government that postponed deadline after deadline, dragged on promises under the pretext of security, and that expanded or approved the expansion of numerous settlements, including the extremely controversial Har Homa settlement on Jabal Abu Ghneim in East Jerusalem. Palestinians also realized during the Rabin-Peres term that the main aim of the talks as far as Israel was concerned was to rid itself of the burden of the Gaza Strip – under the slogan of returning land and waiving authority – as well as to create a domesticated PLO that would be responsible for containing the local resistance referred to by the Israelis as ‚terrorism‘. Meanwhile the expropriation of land and the arresting of Palestinians would continue unabated. The agreements signed so far have left Israel in effective control of most aspects of the Palestinians' daily life – clearly, this cannot form the basis for a future final settlement.

It was also Rabin – the acclaimed mentor of Barak – who made no secret of the fact that the signed agreements had been drafted in accordance with Israeli interests. The Israeli Government has always been against the ‚right of return‘ of Palestinian refugees and other displaced persons, and thus, there is no mention of such a right anywhere in the DoP or subsequent agreements. As far as Jerusalem is concerned, the Israeli negotiators ensured that the city would remain, for the entire negotiation period, under the sole control of Israel.

There are many Palestinians, perhaps the majority, who believe that the Palestinian leadership compromised its principles when it formally recognized Israel as a state, thus recognizing its sovereignty, while Israel only recognized an organization, the PLO, but no Palestinian sovereignty, and has not made a secret of its intention never to do so. Moreover, none of the Israeli leaders, whether from the Likud or from Labor, have ever missed an opportunity to reiterate their opposition against the emergence of an independent state between Israel and Jordan; from its outset, the peace process has never been a process involving equals, and if this kind of thinking applies to the current Israeli Government and negotiators, the coming talks will lead nowhere. Unfortunately, thus far, nothing points to the opposite.

In his remarks at the ceremony marking the beginning of the final status talks on 13 September 1999, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy stated clearly that „Israel's fundamental principle will be no return to the 1967 borders“, and that „A united Jerusalem will remain the capital of the state of Israel. Blocs of settlements will remain under Israeli control. No foreign army will exist west of the Jordan River.“ With regard to the latter point, the question remains of how a sovereign Palestinian state – the ultimate Palestinian goal – could ever accept to be forced to exist beside an Israel that is armed with weapons of mass destruction and high-tech conventional arms.

On his part, Palestinian chief negotiator Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) said that no one should doubt the Palestinians' will to „live within the borders of an independent Palestinian state, according to the June 4, 1967 boundaries, with holy Jerusalem as its capital“, with a just solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees.

The Issues at Hand

The main issues of the Israeli-Palestinian final status talks are Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, security and borders, and related to this, water, as well as the relations with neighboring states; these are the most sensitive, controversial and conflicting subjects at the core of the Arab -Israeli conflict.

On *Jerusalem*, Israeli spokespeople continue to vow that no part of the city will ever be relinquished and to insist that it will remain the undivided capital of the Jewish State. However, for Palestinians, too, Jerusalem is of major significance and they insist on it

becoming their future capital. No leadership will ever be in the position – at least in the long run to be able to afford to give up Jerusalem. This is *the* red line for the Palestinians, who in this regard have the backing of the entire Arab and Islamic World, which wants to see Islam's third holiest city back under Arab sovereignty.

Neither party wants to see the city come under an international trusteeship or be divided, and there has been almost a universal position that Jerusalem should not be under exclusive Jewish rule. Thus, what is left for discussion is the idea of 'sharing' the city. If the two components of justice – freedom and equality – for both Palestinians and Israelis are seen to exist, the former would be ready to consider the idea of a shared open city for the two peoples, whereby four types of sovereignty are to be examined: exclusive, divided, shared, and delegated.

The prospect for Peace in a shared, open city based on equality and justice for the two people is not in enlargement of the current Israeli municipal boundaries of the city as suggested by Beilin-Abu-Mazen unsigned document of 1995. East Jerusalem is an integral part of the OPT captured by Israeli troops in the June war of 1967. UNSC Resolution 244 of 1967 should be implemented by Israeli, i.e., Israeli withdrawal from OPT including East Jerusalem. The enlargement of the city towards the east means annexation of parts of the West Bank to the city boundaries. As for the western part of the city, it was occupied by Israel in the 1948 war, and the UN Partition Plan (UN Resolution 181 of 29 Nov. 1947) considers the two parts, East and West as *corpus separatum*. I believe that as a basis for discussion the geographical boundaries of the city should be those of 1947. There is a need for two municipalities serving each of the two peoples in the city, with a joint body for coordination and matters of cooperation. Both people will share sovereignty over any areas, which are within the municipal boundaries of each state. Inhabitants of the open, shared city will enjoy their respective national citizenship – Israeli and Palestinians. There will be free access to the city for both peoples and respect for the status quo of all holy places. Both people can have their seat of government in any of the areas under their municipal authority as their capital.

With regard to the *settlements*, Israel wants to annex parts of the West Bank and Gaza in order to keep the majority of its almost 175,000 settlers (excluding those in Jerusalem) under Israeli rule. The Palestinians, on the other hand, want to establish their state in all of the West Bank and Gaza, which comprises only 22 percent of historical Palestine, and call for the dismantling of Jewish settlements. It was agreed upon in various Palestinian-Israeli political forums that the classification of settlements as political, security and religious was misleading. Israeli settlements are the result of an invasion, occupation and confiscation of Palestinian land, and are recognized as such before international law, as is the fact that the settlements are illegal. All settlers are foreigners on Palestinian land. There is a worldwide consensus that settlements represent one of the main obstacles to securing a lasting peace. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the Israeli Government to dismantle all settlements and to evacuate and compensate the settlers. As long as the settlements and settlers have not been removed from Palestinian territory, it will be impossible to separate between Palestinians and Israelis. This will lead to a *de facto* bi-national state – a notion vehemently rejected by both sides.

On the issue of *borders and security* the Palestinians are demanding the implementation of UN Resolutions 242 and 338, calling for an Israeli withdrawal from all land occupied by Israel in the course of the 1967 June War, including the city of Jerusalem. It was on the basis of these two resolutions that the 1991 Madrid Conference convened and all subsequent agreements between Israel and the PLO were signed. However, Barak has ruled out a return to Israel's pre-June 1967 War borders and has said repeatedly that Israel will not hand over the agriculturally precious Jordan Valley. Israel also intends to annex the West Bank's most heavily settler-populated areas. The Palestinian Authority now controls 29 percent of the West

Bank, a figure that is supposed to increase to 41 percent by January 2000 following the implementation of the Wye revision or Sharm El-Sheikh Accord. ‚Authority‘, however, applies mainly to civil matters while authority over territory still does not exceed 18 percent (i.e., Area A). The final extent of Palestinian control and the permanent borders will depend on the implementation of UNSC resolutions 242 of 1967.

The Israeli right wing scenarios for borders is based on an annexation of 40-50 percent of West Bank territory, while the Israeli left wing scenario foresees a five (Yossi Beilin) to 12 percent (Joseph Alpher) annexation. Neither scenario allows for the integrity and geographic continuity of a future Palestinian State. A size of five or 12 percent will not change the current status of occupation and not improve the overall situation. If Israel will execute the planned annexation, all Palestinian cities will turn into border cities with a principal status of being isolated islands and with no direct geo-strategic connection between the north and the south.

As for the sensitive issue of *refugees*, Israel makes no secret of the fact that it will not permit their return to areas under its sovereignty. It goes without saying that Palestinians cannot and will not accept such terms and one wonders what remains to be discussed if Israel insists on adhering to its rigid stand. Palestinians insist on their demand that the millions of refugees – the core of the Palestinians tragedy – be allowed to return to the homeland should they desire to do so. No legitimate Palestinian leadership would or could conclude a final settlement without a satisfactory solution to the issues of Jerusalem and the refugees. It should be noted that such an agreement will never be long-lived but bear in itself the threat of yet another conflict to explode sooner or later.

The idea of handing over the refugee problem to the international community or an international body as has been suggested – or hinted – on several occasions by Israel as a possibility to conclude the final status talks without resolving this tricky issue, would take from Israel all its responsibility related to the matter and is thus unacceptable. There must be clear recognition of the (moral) right of return for all Palestinian refugees and displaced persons. Negotiations should lead to a scheme granting all Palestinians the exercise of their right to return to their homeland. Dual citizenship with regard to the host countries – including those who became citizens in the state of Israel – should also be considered, especially in light of the fact that not all refugees will return to settle in Palestine. Finally, there is a need to implement the compensation plan stipulated in UN resolution 194 of 1947.

Concluding Remarks

Today, as we find ourselves at the door of the third millennium, we note that in spite of the existence of international organizations such as the United Nations and NATO – organizations that are supposedly concerned with justice and peace – and the interest of the nations of the world in maintaining a presence in these bodies, not to mention their call for international legitimacy to be respected, the fact remains that the will to formulate and implement international policies is subject to the interests and alliances of the stronger members of these organizations and very much characterized by inconsistency. The Gulf War and the siege imposed on Iraq, which has resulted in a human catastrophe as far as the Iraqi people are concerned, are good examples of the power enjoyed by the NATO, which, along with other international organizations and the so-called co-sponsors of the Middle East Peace Process, will bear a serious responsibility in the next round of negotiations, whose outcome will not be merely yet another signing ceremony but instead, will determine the future of future generations in the region. It is high time for justice to prevail and International Law and UN resolutions to be applied to the Palestinian cause.

Those responsible for any future strategy, formula or agreement that aims at containing the Palestinian people and their rights and aspirations should be well aware that such containment

can never last but is a temporary solution with the potential to lead to an explosion. One hint in this direction are the demographic trends, with the Palestinian population in the region predicted to have doubled by the year 2020. Unequal economic development and prospects, with a high number of Palestinians living under the poverty line, should also be considered a matter for concern. In the past, the negotiators on both sides displayed a tendency to disregard, whether deliberately or intentionally, the situation of the Palestinian masses beyond the doors of their negotiation room (...) Thus the Palestinians should insist that the coming negotiations not be conducted as before, under the auspices of only two or three people with a high degree of personal involvement, but instead, that they involve a team of highly professional negotiators, backed by a circle of knowledgeable legal and other experts. After all, dissatisfaction, anger, and frustration will eventually lead to a rise in fundamentalist ideologies and the voices of extremists on both sides.

It is time for Israel to recognize the fact that its short-sighted vision, which has nurtured a culture of fear and continues to deny the Palestinians' legitimate rights in regard to self-determination, freedom and independence, will never bring security and stability to the Jewish State nor to the region as a whole. The region is now at a crossroads between fear and hope and the possible future scenarios range anywhere between achieving real peace and stability to the drawing of a new geopolitical map and the emergence of a new circle of violence and confrontation. One thing alone is certain, the struggle of the Palestinians will continue until their rights are granted in full. Accordingly, chaos will prevail if the PLO succumbs to attempts to force an unacceptable solution on its people, living under an autonomy that is not even territorial.

Undoubtedly there will be some kind of continuous development, but currently nothing suggests that it will have much to do with peace. Whatever comes next could one day be regarded as yet another stage or document in the timeline of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; it could, however, also transpire to be the first real opportunity for reaching a lasting peace on the basis of which a brand new era in the region could unfold. We are certainly face to face with the last opportunity to continue on the current track. What the outcome will eventually be will very much depend on the wisdom and farsightedness of the negotiators. Peace at any price will not last – there is no such thing as partial independence or limited freedom and sovereignty.

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