ATFP Pres. Ziad Asali?s Statement at the UN Conference on the Question of Palestine in Ecuador

Image Gallery

- Image type unknown
  https://www.americantaskforce.org/sites/default/files/imagecache/img_gal_thumb/pictures/
  [1]

Press Release
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 25, 2014 - 11:00pm

UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

March 25, 2014 Quito, Ecuador

ATFP Pres. Ziad Asali's Statement at the Conference

Advancing Peace between Israelis and Palestinians: Obstacles and Opportunities

Introduction:

Over recent decades, particularly in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 and all subsequent resolutions following the 1967 war, an overwhelming international consensus has emerged in favor of peace in the Middle East based on two states -- Israel and Palestine -- living side by side in peace, security and dignity. The Palestinian state will be highest form and vehicle for realizing the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people through the exercise of self-determination. Since it was established in Madrid in 2002, this international consensus has been most directly expressed through the Middle East Quartet -- the United States, the European Union, the UN Secretariat, and Russia -- which has effectively given the imprimatur of the entire international community to the project of seeking this outcome. Moreover, a solid majority of both Israelis and Palestinians have expressed a preference for this outcome in virtually every poll and survey over more than two decades. Despite the enormous frustrations resulting from a lack of peace, these majorities remain committed to this goal. The Arab League has unanimously expressed the Arab consensus in favor of this as well, through the Arab Peace Initiative. With the exception of a few outliers

internationally and in any given society, the whole world essentially agrees on both a two-state solution and its fundamental outlines: a Palestinian state alongside Israel based on the 1967 borders with mutually agreed land swaps and its capital in East Jerusalem, a fair and just resolution of the refugee issue, and full regional acceptance, recognition and integration of Israel in the Middle Eastern family of nations, and guarantees for its security.

There is an obvious reason for this consensus: it is the only potential conflict-ending solution. Other outcomes are achievable, most notably a continuation of the conflict in its present or modified forms. All other formulas are either fanciful and unachievable or would simply extend the conflict, albeit potentially in a somewhat altered context. Both of the parties, their neighbors and the entire world have a large stake in resolving this most long-lasting and politically damaging of conflicts. It is in the interest of no responsible party and no sensible people to wish to continue the Israeli-Palestinian conflict any longer. And this has been true for decades now. The problem before us today is, why have we been unable to achieve a conflict-ending two-state peace agreement, and what can be done to advance that crucial goal?

Obstacles to Advancing Peace:

The fundamental problem confronting all efforts to develop a two-state solution and realize the international consensus on a two-state peace agreement boils down to a fundamental disconnect between stated policy versus practical politics at several registers. Practical politics interferes with the stated policy aim of achieving a two-state solution. Everyone says they are for it, yet everyone is held back -- at least to some extent -- by political considerations and restraints.

The first, and perhaps most far-reaching of these, is a fundamental lack of trust that political leaders on both sides confront. For both Israelis and Palestinians, there is a lack of trust between the two sides, both at the political leadership and popular registers. Israelis and Palestinians do not believe each other, and while strong majorities of both say they want a two-state solution, they also say they believe the other side does not. They believe, in other words, that they are telling the truth but the other side is lying and has actual goals that are fundamentally incompatible with a two-state agreement. Second, there is a gap between the leaderships and their own publics. Both Israeli and Palestinian leaders have not done enough to prepare their peoples for the necessary and inevitable concessions that must be made to secure a viable peace agreement. Often the general publics on both sides don't trust their political leaderships to secure their interests, and leaders find themselves harassed on peace issues from both their left and right wing flanks. Finally, on both sides, political leaders lack strong personal and political incentives to make bold steps towards peace, even if that is clearly in the national interest of both Israel and the Palestinians. They face opposition within their own political establishments, which, on both sides, include significant and empowered actors that are either not committed to a two-state solution, or who find a personal or political benefit in opposing the necessary steps to advance one. There are powerful forces in both the Israeli and Palestinian political establishments opposed a two-state solution, in some cases under the present circumstances, and in some cases altogether. This is particularly damaging, and presents the most direct obstacle to leaders for the necessary compromises to move the process forward.

The agreed-upon final status issues themselves present another serious set of obstacles to advancing peace, because – despite significant progress in bridging the gaps over the past quarter century – the distance between the parties on these specific issues remain real and

substantive. As the peace process has ground on, there have been several highly sanguineous and traumatizing eruptions of violence during the past two decades. Expanded settlement construction, ongoing occupation, violence, incitement, and regional and international meddling have exacerbated these problems. All these factors have led to a hardening of positions. In the past, both negotiators and the publics they represent appeared to be more flexible, and have more wiggle room, on the final status issues.

Amid growing cynicism about the prospects for the realization of a genuine and lasting two-state solution, self-serving narratives about the history of the peace process on both sides have intensified their grip on the public imagination, making compromise more politically difficult both to propose and to implement. Everyone agrees there are difficult choices to be made, but the political conditions render making them far more difficult than it should be.

The Middle East and North Africa region is currently undergoing a period of protracted instability and change, the outcome of which cannot be predicted or controlled (although it can be strongly influenced by sound policies). Under circumstances of uncertainty, societies typically fall back on familiar narratives, traditional positions that do not easily lend themselves to compromise, and an attachment to traditional assumptions that are familiar even though they may also be unsustainable and dangerous. Regional dynamics have also proven to be an impediment given the relentless interference in Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, and internal Palestinian politics, by various regional actors, some of whom are not committed to a two-state solution. Most notably Iran has used the Palestinian issue as a tool for its own foreign policy, and used proxies in the occupied Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Syria to undermine the prospects for a peace agreement. These forces use Palestine as a proxy for their own, independent, and sometimes entirely unrelated, purposes, and as a means to distract from other realities.

Another major impediment to peace arising from the present condition of instability in much of the region is the present inability of Egypt -- which is an indispensable partner in achieving a sustainable Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, and even significant progress towards such an agreement -- to play such a role because it is undergoing a period of difficult transition of its own. Over the past three years, it has become increasingly clear that it is more difficult than ever to attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in isolation from its regional context. Instead, it must be part of a broader transformation throughout the Middle East. And, in particular, crucial peace partners such as Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states must be in a position to play their necessary roles.

Regional turmoil, in Syria and many other Arab states, also means that the Israeli-Palestinian issue has receded as an immediate priority for much of the international community, including many in the American political establishment, and even in the Arab world. Simply put, Palestine is no longer the overriding issue on the international and regional agenda that it was for so long, although its long-term strategic significance remains undiminished. The relative de-prioritizing of Palestine in the minds of many is a mistake, but also an unsurprising outcome of the broader turmoil facing much of the rest of the region. In Israel, this turmoil is often misinterpreted as arguing for a strategic imperative that emphasizes security based on a "fortress" mentality, emphasizing walls, missile-defense systems and a risk-averse approach to regional changes. But it could, and should, prove a catalyst for greater cooperation, or at least understanding, between Israel and many of the Arab states that share some of its core concerns about the strategic future of the Middle Eastern region. However, lack of progress towards a two-state solution is greatly hampering prospects of turning these potential convergences into open cooperation.

Opportunities for advancing peace:

Despite this relatively gloomy assessment, there are real reasons to hope and assume that a two-state solution remains not only a plausible outcome, but the most likely one because it is in the interests of all parties over the long run. The most obvious new opportunity for progress is the dynamic personal engagement of the American Secretary of State John Kerry. Through skill and determination he has accomplished more than most thought possible a mere 12 months ago.

If, for the reasons outlined above, the present circumstances are not conducive to a major breakthrough on final status issues in the immediate term, in their own core interests all parties need to "buy time" to sustain the viability of a two-state solution. Should no major breakthrough emerge in coming weeks for both political and strategic reasons, the parties, the region and the international community all have a major incentive to keep the prospects for peace alive. They should work together to achieve such progress or measures as can be realized in order to ensure that Israelis and Palestinians, other Middle Easterners, and people and leaders around the world do not give up on the prospect for a two-state, conflict-ending peace agreement.

The prospect for a real engagement by significant regional players in the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic in a positive, rather than a counterproductive, manner is foreseeable. Jordan has made its willingness to play a significant and helpful, and indispensable, role clear. Many of the Gulf states, too, appear interested in playing a constructive role if possible. And it is likely that Egypt, once it has reestablished domestic security and secured its new political system, will once again emerge as a central player in the pursuit of a conflict-ending agreement. However, a series of horizons can be identified to all of the regional obstacles and opportunities outlined above. They must be taken advantage of when they present themselves, or cultivated and encouraged to emerge. Otherwise, they may become yet another footnote in the endless catalog of missed opportunities in the Israeli-Palestinian annals.

One of the more encouraging recent developments that presents a new opportunity for advancing the peace agenda is the emerging policy of the European Union and key EU member states individually of declining to subsidize or be involved in Israel's settlement project. The recent negotiations over the "Horizon 2020" EU-Israel joint research project, in

which Europe insisted that no funding would be extended to areas not under Israel's jurisdiction before 1967, was an excellent model of how the international community can emphasize to Israel that while it emphasizes Israel's legitimacy, it does not accept the legitimacy of its settlement project and will not cooperate with it. Efforts by Germany and other European states to extend this multilateral approach to existing and future bilateral agreements, and to include private sector initiatives as well as purely public sector ones, are also highly encouraging. This European approach is based firmly in international law, pursuant to a two-state agreement, and a responsible intervention to try to de-incentivize Israel from further provocative settlement construction and other unlawful activity in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Similarly, some official American rhetoric increasingly constitutes a kind of "tough love" for Israel by emphasizing the potential consequences of a failure to compromise with the Palestinians on peace and to maintain the occupation and the status quo. Recent comments by US President Barack Obama that, should peace talks fail, the United States might not be able to contain the international consequences for Israel are a prime example of such rhetorical toughening. Palestinians, too, have been hearing from both Europe and the United States about the urgent need for them to not only compromise with Israel, but also to reform their own governance and public-sector structures. Some of these warnings have been tied to aid and other assistance programs to the Palestinian Authority, just as the EU is making its investments in Israel contingent on its funding not being expended in the occupied territories. All of this is heartening because it constitutes friends and allies doing what they always should: encouraging in word and deed the parties to do what they need to in order to make serious progress towards a peace agreement, or at least maintain its viability and prevent any significant re-eruption of violence on the ground. On the whole, Western friends of both Israel and the Palestinians are becoming less knee-jerk and more critical in their responses to the conduct of the parties. A further such measure might be holding senior officials on all sides accountable for statements that gratuitously and brazenly undermine the two-state solution, and credibility and viability of efforts to achieve it.

What can be done now?

If it's true that a major substantive breakthrough on the core final status issues is unlikely in coming weeks, then what can be done immediately to maintain the viability of peace and improve the situation on the ground? Short of the urgent goal of ending the occupation, certainly Palestinians are in dire need of greater economic assistance, development and reform. The PA is under-funded and its ongoing fiscal crisis exacerbates the difficulties in maintaining stability and empowering leaders to compromise. It is a source of tension that can be fairly easily dealt with, given the political will in the West and among the Arab states to provide the necessary financial aid. Palestinians, too, must do their part in heeding the advice of all of the multilateral and international economic and financial institutions by trying to shift from a top-heavy, public sector-based economy to one that focuses more on private sector initiatives. Palestinians will need significant external assistance, and at least non-interference, if not cooperation, from Israel, in order to create more small and medium-sized private sector businesses. These can form the basis for a sustainable domestic economy into the future, and in a Palestinian state to come. In this regard there have been several encouraging Israel-Palestinian private sector initiatives that are worthy of support.

Similarly, Palestinian institution-building, which was initiated at the end of the last decade, and has been fraying somewhat of late for both political and financial reasons, needs to be reinvigorated. This will require significant efforts on the part of all parties. The Palestinians

must have the will to reengage institution-building in a focused and determined manner. Israel must not use the occupation to thwart or stymie the creation of the institutions for a future Palestinian state. And the international community, particularly the West and the Arab world, must provide the political, technical, institutional, educational and financial backing for such projects. Not only will they help to provide the basis for Palestinian statehood, such efforts will foster and engender hope in the future within Palestinian society and promote stability and enhance the prospects for peace.

Palestinian political and institutional reform should be strongly encouraged. Notwithstanding the significant practical and political difficulties involved, municipal and national elections should be held. Palestinian political space would benefit from a wider public debate and engagement with civil society. The primary initiative for this must come from the Palestinians themselves, but, again, they will require international assistance and Israeli non-interference in order to achieve this important goal. The Palestinian people, Israel and the international community all should have a strong interest in helping Palestine engage in a thoroughgoing process of institutional development.

Finally, the international community should continue to develop and intensify efforts to de-incentivize Israel from any further illegal activities in the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly additional settlement construction, home demolitions, the expansion of the separation barrier, land seizures, population displacement, and many other practices that are prohibited under the Fourth Geneva Convention and other key bedrocks of international law. As the occupying power, Israel has rights and responsibilities, but also clear restrictions which it cannot be allowed to violate without consequences. As long as Palestinians perceive the occupation as intensifying and further entrenching with every year of the peace process dragging on without a clear path to Palestinian independence, all other obstacles will be exacerbated. Nothing is more damaging to the prospects for achieving a conflict-ending, two-state peace agreement, or more detrimental to stability.

Because of some of Israel's occupation policies, especially settlement expansion, the Israeli-Palestinian relationship is not a static one, but rather is a dynamic that is in almost continuous deterioration. This must stop. If final-status issue breakthroughs are to be achieved in the future, encouraging Palestinians to focus on institution-building and reform and discouraging Israel from unlawful and damaging occupation policies is crucial. The international community has a major opportunity and responsibility to take significant measures to improve conditions on the ground, and between the parties, through such incentives and disincentives which can stabilize the situation in the immediate term. Ultimately this also can lay the groundwork for progress on a final-status, conflict-ending Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

TAGS: Diplomacy [2]Peace Based on Two States [3]International Community [4]Palestinian Statehood [5]

Source URL (retrieved on *Nov 19 2019 - 6:28pm*):

http://www.americantaskforce.org/in_media/pr/2014/03/26/1395806400

Links:

[1] https://www.americantaskforce.org/

[2] http://www.americantaskforce.org/diplomacy

[3] http://www.americantaskforce.org/palestinian_statehood/two_state_solution

[4] http://www.americantaskforce.org/international_community

[5] http://www.americantaskforce.org/palestinian_statehood