

Keynote Address

Oct 18, 1996



In-Depth Reports

Three years ago, I had the honor of sharing the dais with Israel's chief Oslo negotiator, Uri Savir. We were both full of hope and enthusiasm about the future of Israelis and Palestinians working together in partnership to achieve peace -- peace based on mutuality, reciprocity, and recognition of dignity and freedom for both peoples; on the principle that the historic land of Palestine is the home of two peoples who have decided in their own self-interest to share the land; and on the understanding that the destinies of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples are intertwined and that therefore they have to find a formula for living together instead of killing one another.

The two parties in Oslo reached the conclusion that the implementation of the Declaration of Principles is a gradual, incremental process that will lead to the end of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, followed by the establishment of a Palestinian state that will live in peace and cooperation with the state of Israel. This is the philosophy of Oslo, and that is why it was supported by an overwhelming majority of the Palestinian people -- and also the overwhelming majority of Israelis.

There were extremists on both sides. On the Israeli side, opponents of the peace process assassinated Yitzhak Rabin. On the Palestinian side, there was a serious challenge to the authority of the Palestinian National Authority and Arafat, which at times they had to deal with very harshly. But the mainstream on both sides will lead this process and bring it to its logical conclusion -- namely, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East based on the principle of mutual recognition and mutual acceptance by the two sides.

The Palestinians proceeded to cooperate with the Israelis in integrating Israel into the region -- for, in the absence of peace with the Palestinians, no treaty could have been signed between Israel and Jordan, notwithstanding the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt. Because whether Ambassador Ben Elissar accepts it or not, the Palestine question is at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Egypt and others may sign peace agreements with Israel, but only peace with the Palestinians can lead Israel to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace rather than a series of separate agreements with Egypt, Syrian, or Lebanon.

The Requirements of Peace The requirements of peace include an acceptance of the principle of partnership -- not as a public relations ploy, but as a real policy, because no amount of public relations can substitute for the right policy. Israel must recognize that the Palestinian people have a right to self-determination, that they are not a conquered or defeated nation, and that treating them as such is a prescription for further conflict and confrontation.

The Palestinians made a strategic decision. They opted for a historic reconciliation with their Israeli enemies and decided to turn a new page for the sake of this and future generations of Palestinian and Israeli children, that there had been enough blood and suffering and that it was now the responsibility of leadership on both sides to move forward and create the kind of environment that their children deserve. To do so, they took into consideration the security not just of one side, but of both sides -- the security of free Palestinians in their own country and the security of the Israelis.

In Oslo, both sides realized that this is not a zero-sum game -- that what is in the interest of Israel can also be in the

interest of the Palestinians and vice versa. Therefore, we needed to build "bridges" between the two sides. But this kind of partnership cannot take place in the context of internal and external closures that lead to 60 percent unemployment in Gaza and 35-40 percent unemployment in the West Bank; that make a 20-lb. box of tomatoes cost less than one shekel in Gaza but twenty shekels in the West Bank because Israel prevents Palestinians and their products from moving between the two areas (and export their products to Jordan or Egypt); and when agreements are not implemented.

This kind of environment is not conducive to the realities both sides hoped for when they signed the Oslo Accord. Or, similarly, when progress is being made on Hebron and the prime minister of Israel announces that he will expand Israeli settlements as "compensation." Occupation and peace are incompatible -- what is needed is an end to Israel's occupation of the Palestinians.

Immediately after the 1991 Madrid peace conference, Palestinians thought that peace was at hand and went into the streets in Nablus to give Israeli soldiers flowers and olive branches. They want peace, but peace that recognizes their dignity and their right to live as free people on their own land, not as a minority within a larger Israeli or Jordanian state. This was what they wanted to achieve in Oslo and what they thought the Oslo agreement would lead to. It is the only solution that can lead to security for the Israelis because, as Benito Juarez said, "Paz es el respeto al derecho ajeno" -- "peace is respect for the rights of others."

The PLO made a historic decision. It was not an easy one, but they made it in the hope that they could proceed forward with their Israeli neighbors and partners. They were and still are willing to do all that is possible in order to achieve peace for both peoples. But this requires a change of attitude from the Israelis. They can no longer view and treat the Palestinians as enemies, and at the same time expect to achieve peace. They have to see them as partners, neighbors, and equals. This is the challenge that faces both sides.

The Burdens of History There is a great deal that the parties have to deal with in the peace process. They each have their histories, but they also have something much more important ahead -- their futures. Neither side should become prisoners of its history. Rather, they need to look forward and build up the Middle East that all of its inhabitants deserve.

Amb. Ben Elissar spoke earlier about Jewish history. No one is oblivious to the suffering and pain of the Jewish people. But the ambassador should also see and feel the Palestinians' pain of existing as a dispossessed nation scattered all over the Middle East and stateless in their own homeland for so many years. What can the world expect from them? They need to be treated as human beings with the dignity that every human being deserves.

During the 1990 Gulf crisis, there were 350,000 Palestinians living in Kuwait. All the other foreign workers -- Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, Filipinos -- had a country to escape to except the Palestinians. Furthermore, Israel has denied over 600,000 Palestinians (students and otherwise) who left to study abroad the right of return to their own country, the country in which they were born. These are not 1948 refugees; they are the children of families still living on the West Bank and Gaza. If a person is absent from the West Bank for more than one year, they lose their right to come back home; as far as Israel is concerned, Palestinians are only "residents" of the West Bank and Gaza, not citizens.

If Israelis and Palestinians are to work together in a relationship of equality and partnership, this must change. Israel cannot continue to treat Palestinians as foreigners in their own country and expect them to respond nicely. It's inhuman and it's impossible. That's why the philosophy of Oslo was the notion of mutual recognition. Uri Savir told me that he thought the most important achievement of the Oslo accord was mutual recognition. The Palestinians felt that Israel had finally recognized them as a nation, and the Palestinians also recognized Israel as a nation -- a legitimate government in the region.

Once the two sides agree on the parameters of their relationship and their vision for the region, everything else is just details they can work out. But if this initial issue is not settled, nothing else will work out. This is not a threat, but rather a fact that 100 years of confrontation should have taught both sides. They should be able to learn from all the conflict, bloodshed, and wars that peace is the only option. Palestinians are ready to discuss the final status issues, which can be resolved if the principle of mutuality is the basis of negotiations. They are willing to leave no stone unturned in the search for peace. Both peoples deserve peace, and they need the support of all of those who believe that peace in the Middle East is in everyone's interest.

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