

Thinking about the Future of Jerusalem

Sep 17, 2000



In-Depth Reports

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this session. The preceding speakers, Nabil Sha'ath and Shimon Peres, would seem to be a hard act to follow, with all their bright ideas and beautiful language, but I will do what I can. At the same time, following them makes my job a bit easier, because they have already covered such subjects as why there is a need for peace now.

I would like to talk about some of my personal experiences -- about peace, the war, and the need for peace. The first experience was in 1948, when I was eight years old. My father was leading the Palestinian fighters in Jerusalem and was killed in the battle for Jerusalem. As my mother came from a family of fighters, she did not cry; she tried to act as befits the widow of a hero. So I did not cry in front of anyone either. But when I went to bed, and in my dreams, I was always that child who lost his father.

My second experience was in 1988, during the intifada. In that short period of time when I was free to be with my family, between two arrests, I remember dropping my son off at school, looking into his eyes, and seeing there my wonderful child. That very day, he was arrested by the Israeli army in Ramallah. He was beaten, and only late in the afternoon did he return home with a face full of blood and a change in his eyes. When I looked into his eyes, that child I had seen earlier in the morning was not there. I felt then that I had lost my child. But I was lucky. I lost the child inside him, but I did not lose my son. Others lost their sons.

After all these years, Palestinians and Israelis need peace; after all of this suffering, we need peace. We need it not only as individuals, not only as Palestinians and Israelis, but as the people of the Middle East. We need peace.

In this century, there is no place for small states. Small states like the United Kingdom, Germany, and France find themselves forced to build the European Union to face the other big parties in this world. So what about us, the states of the Middle East -- Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine? We need regional cooperation in the Middle East.

But when Palestinians call for a Palestinian state, it is not because we want to add another small state to the Middle East. It is because we believe that an independent Palestinian state can be the key toward regional cooperation. The creation of Palestine can lead to stability in the Middle East, and without stability, there is no possibility of regional cooperation.

For that reason, we want a solution for the Palestinian people and for the Israeli conflict, and we would like it to last not only for the next several years, but beyond that. I do not know to what extent this world regime will continue, but we would like to have a solution that can survive, even if there were to be a change in the world regime. Thus, we do not want to leave behind us any kind of time bombs. We would like to find a complete solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that can lead the way to peace, stability, and regional cooperation in the Middle East.

Palestinians believe -- that without solving the problem of Jerusalem, there will be no real peace. Jerusalem is so important to both Israelis and Palestinians. In Jerusalem there are five elements no one can ignore: the Palestinian element, the Israeli element, and the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian elements. Without solving the problem of these five elements, there will be no peace in Jerusalem, and the only way to do so is to have two capitals in one open, free-

access city. There must also be certain regulations inside the city to provide the three religions with the full freedom to reach their holy places. Each religion must respect the others' holy places, ways of thinking, and beliefs, and we must all understand each other's history, even if we differ in our views.

It is important to reach for and build such a solution in Jerusalem. If we can succeed in Jerusalem, we can succeed not only in Palestine and in Israel, but in the whole Middle East. We can create a new example of how Arabs and Israelis can live together and build a future for our children together.

Having two capitals in one open, free-access city requires some sort of definition for the two capitals. Where is the Palestinian capital? Where is the Israeli capital? Palestinians believe that the only way to make this definition is to accept the principle of the borders of June 4, 1967 -- not because it is the Palestinian dream, or because it is the Israeli dream, but because these borders existed there. The current situation of Israeli-occupied territories is the result of a war, and the June 4 borders are specified by United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, upon which the whole peace process is built.

If you ask me, as a Palestinian, "if you had the liberty to move these borders toward the West, where would you stop?" I would ask myself, "Who is saying that Deir Yassin, Lifta, Kattamon -- all of these areas -- are not Palestinian? They were Palestinian neighborhoods in 1948. Who says Leid or Ramallah is not a Palestinian city, that Jaffa is not a Palestinian city?" So maybe if I had this opportunity, I would not stop until I will reach the sea.

But if you ask this same question to the Israelis, they would say, "Who is saying that Judea and Samaria are not part of our history?" or "Who can neglect our history in East Jordan and beyond?"

Accepting Resolution 242 means accepting borders between the two states. It means solving the problem of unending demands, because without putting aside our very beautiful dreams and our nightmares, we will not reach any kind of peace.

But adopting these borders can create certain problems. If these borders are the borders between the Palestinian state and the Israeli state, then everything in the West is under Israeli sovereignty and everything in the East under Palestinian sovereignty. So how can we then solve all the problems? And there are a lot of problems: Israeli settlements, which Israelis call neighborhoods; Haram al-Sharif, which Israelis call the Temple Mount; al-Burak, which Israelis call the Kotel, or the Western Wall. There are important holy places for Muslims and Christians.

So how can we solve the problems? Borders can help, because they confirm that the area in the East is Palestinian, but problems persist in the Old City.

The Haram al-Sharif must be part of Palestinian sovereignty, but because it is also holy to the Jews, to the extent that they are not allowed to walk there because of its holiness, we Palestinians must not only give guarantees; we must agree that we will not build, dig, or add more buildings. The same must be true for the holy places of both sides.

The problem of the settlements can be solved in more than one way, and in more than one scenario. One view is that these Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, within the Palestinian neighborhoods and beside them, are a healthy experience that can help the communication between the Palestinians and the Israelis in the future. If that is the case, then why should West Jerusalem be denied such an opportunity? If the Palestinians are not allowed to solve part of their housing problem by building in West Jerusalem -- if Israelis would see this as bad -- then why should Israelis continue building in East Jerusalem?

I believe we can find another solution. We can in some way swap land and institute regulations on how to deal with this matter, but starting from the point that everything in East Jerusalem is under Palestinian sovereignty, and everything in West Jerusalem is under Israeli sovereignty. There are a lot of important things in the East for the Israelis, and a lot of important things in the West for the Palestinians. So if we are talking about an open, free-access

city with two capitals inside it, then even if there are certain borders between Palestine and Israel, we cannot make borders between East and West Jerusalem. It must be open.

But between Jerusalem and the other areas in Israel and Palestine, I believe the picture must be a little different. I can imagine that in the future there will be external borders or checkpoints for East and West Jerusalem. Internal borders will be open, so a Palestinian or a visitor to Palestine can go to Jerusalem and cross the eastern border of East Jerusalem with no problem and even continue on into West Jerusalem. But when he reaches the western border of West Jerusalem, he will find an Israeli checkpoint. The opposite would likewise be true: an Israeli or a visitor to Israel could cross the western border into West Jerusalem and travel all the way into East Jerusalem, but on the eastern border of East Jerusalem he would find a Palestinian checkpoint. Such an arrangement can help us to keep Jerusalem itself accessible to all Palestinians, all Israelis. But Israel itself would not be accessible, nor would Palestine itself be accessible.

Maybe this plan needs a lot of work to be organized. Then again, maybe another agreement will be reached eventually, and the whole border will be open between Palestine and Israel. But I am talking about a case in which there would be borders between the two states. In this case, inside Jerusalem we must create a lot of different regulations concerning what we can do together, what we cannot do together, whether Israelis can act at all, how they can act in East Jerusalem, and how we can act in both East and West Jerusalem.

Everything can be dealt with, and we are ready to solve any potential problems created by these borders. I believe that there are many subjects to be discussed. But the only way to reach a solution is to have Jerusalem as two capitals in one open, free-access city.

Given the know-how and relations that Palestinians have with the Arab and Muslim world and with other places in this world, and given what the Israelis have, I believe Jerusalem can prosper in many ways. I envision Jerusalem as a place where service industries -- financial services, tourism, religion, and other services -- will one day be concentrated. Jerusalem then will be one of the most important cities or capitals not only in the Middle East, but in this world. It will be the warm sun of the Middle East. The only problem would be that Jerusalem then might be too expensive for people to live in, like New York or Tokyo.

We have been fighting each other for hundreds of years for our own interests in Jerusalem. Now is the time to work together for the interests of the city. In such a solution, we can reach the point where any of us -- Palestinian or Israeli, Muslim or Jew or Christian -- can say "Our Jerusalem" and know that the other parties will understand the word "our" to mean all of us.

I hope that we will be able to do that. I worry about the next several weeks, what will happen if we do not reach an agreement, what kind of problems Ehud Barak, the Labor Party, and possibly all of Israel will face. Who will control it? What kind of life will be there? What kind of regime? And where will we find the religious parties and their influence? If they gain more influence, what will be the effect in our area, and to what extent will extremists then be able to mobilize more and more people?

I am worried not only about the peace process, but also about the future. I do not want to see my daughter walking in the street covered with a "tent." I am a secular man, and I want to see Palestine as a secular state. On the Israeli side, there is already a fight over such matters as they relate to Jews. The only way Palestinians and Israelis can overcome the influence of the religious hardliners is to work together. Otherwise, Middle Eastern society as a whole will be endangered.

Unfortunately, these negotiations started not from the understanding that there are two sovereignties and two states, and that there are borders between two of them, but from the opposite angle. We put the most important and sensitive issues on the table immediately, such as Haram al-Sharif, or Har HaBayit, the Temple Mount. We put it on

the agenda along with the issue of sovereignty, but by doing so, all of these religious questions arise. As Shimon Peres said yesterday, negotiation and compromise may be possible in politics, but what about in religion?

We should step back and try to solve our problems another way. We should define the relationship between Palestine and Israel first, and then solve all the other problems. This will allow us to go on, leading our people to a new level of bilateral relations and to a new level of regional relations in the Middle East.

I hope we can accomplish this, because if Jerusalem can be solved -- and I know a lot of Israelis share a similar view -- then Jerusalem can be the warm sun of the Middle East. Let us not make it the black hole of the region, which can swallow everything, including the hope of peace. Leaders are aware of that horrible possibility. They need more courage to reach a better solution.

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