

The Israeli Palestinian conflict: the Chances for Peace, the Road Map

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The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is becoming one of the oldest conflicts in modern times. It contains multiple layers of complexity, including the most profound elements of both humanity and religion, transforming it into the most unique conflict of its kind. It has been the source of regional instability and world concern; it has shaped the face of the Middle East in the most dramatic way, forcing a sense of regression against modernity, progress and reforms; it engulfs the majority of the Arab countries in its blazing fire, forcing a collective solidarity among the Arabs and elevating the conflict into higher dimensions. All countries in the world see themselves as stakeholders in such a conflict for a variety of reasons, and either for being Arab, Muslim, non-allied, neighbouring nations, Mediterranean, or as a result of strategic assets, and whether the point of view be religious, historical, humanistic, anti-colonial, Zionist, from solidarity or Jewish lobbies, or simply to satisfy the US administration.

It is more than fifty-five years since the Palestinian Nakba and the Israeli liberation, and the conflict is only growing worse, at least in terms of human suffering, and extending its complexity through the creation of new fundamental facts, favouring the conviction that the conflict is unsolvable. All the warring over the last fifty years has not eliminated Israel. Neither have the total

occupation of Palestinian territories, the expulsion of the Palestinian population and forcing them to become a nation of refugees, and their replacement with Israeli settlers, eliminated the Palestinians, or even eliminated the internationality of their cause.

It was only in the last decade that we started to see serious international interest in finding an end to the conflict. It was the second gulf war that prompted the conservative American administration to seek the assembly of an international effort to impose an official dialogue in Madrid and negotiations in Washington, with the intention of finding an agreed formula for peace. The US administration had realised the influence that the conflict has on Arabs and Muslims alike, and has understood the influence that such conflict can have on the stability in the Middle East and on the need for a secured flow of oil to the West.

It was always clear from our point of view that without serious US intervention in the conflict there would be no real and lasting peace, and the idea of bringing the Americans to play the facilitator was considered by many observers as an impossible task due to the support Israel receives from the US administration. While pushing for stronger involvement from the EU, the Palestinians realised that the Europeans do prefer to follow the path set by the US rather than to establish one of their own. The Palestinians thus found themselves trapped in a catch-22 situation: unable to reject the exclusive American role in any peace efforts despite its protection of Israel and its provision of unconditional support, and on the other hand also lacking any willingness from the Europeans, the Arabs or

the world community in general to take or lead any action beyond slogans and dialogue. Such a situation was advantageous for Israel because the US was in the forefront, and will continue to be there, to the detriment of Palestinian rights and needs.

Agreements that have been reached, starting with the Oslo agreement, were either not implemented or not adhered to by both parties, thus adding to already existing human suffering and further complicating the possible achievement of peace. Ten years after the Oslo agreement was signed in the White House, the situation in the field is even worse. The guarantors of the Oslo agreement failed the very signatories of the agreement, failed the peoples of Palestine and Israel, and thus failed themselves. In the aftermath of the failure of Oslo, the US administration tried on different occasions to overcome the failure through a set of marathon meetings between the Palestinians and the Israelis, which resulted in the total collapse of discussions, and confirmed the need for an imposed solution on the parties or an active and fair third party role with international presence in the field to act as an intermediary between the two parties and to put an end to the human suffering, as a first step toward a permanent solution.

Unfortunately the US administration was vehemently against direct involvement in the conflict due to the Israeli rejection of the idea, and also seemed reluctant to exert any pressure on Israel in order to force them to accept the implementation of previously agreed measures. In this way the US damaged further its reputation as a fair mediator, and in the process forced both

the Palestinians and the Arabs to question the whole theory of US supervision. It took the US administration more than six months to declare the proposed peace plan, eventually given the name of the Road Map. The Bush administration was not willing to force Israel into an undesired negotiating position, and even when it finally declared its plan, the US automatically eliminated the role of its partners in the Quartet, and only allowed a virtual role of consultation based on distance meetings. While the Palestinian leadership agreed to the unconditional acceptance of the plan, the Israeli government was granted the advantage of being permitted to lobby the American administration for certain changes before its publication, and went as far as to make their approval of the plan conditional to the introduction of fourteen basic changes, which if implemented would undermine the entire structure of the plan and transform it into a completely different document.

The continuation of the Palestinian *Intifada*, the Israeli incursions into the Palestinian territories and the re-occupation of the Palestinian land, as well as the closure and the sieges, the total destruction of the Palestinian infrastructure, not to mention the civilians killed on both sides, have dealt a detrimental blow to the Road Map plan, and forced the US to rethink its direct intervention. Still, the US involvement did not follow the expected procedure, and the US administration, which was always acting with the next presidential elections in mind, failed to maintain the

expected pressure and the involvement of human resources.

The first stage of the plan calls for the abolition of the existing circumstances, including a range of issues from violence to settlement activities, reforms and negotiation, to the withdrawal of Israeli troops and the collection of illegal weapons. Such expected actions are in essence the issues that prevent either side from reaching any compromise, and without direct and extensive US intervention there will be no desire on either side to fulfil its part. To agree to send between only eight and twelve US office observers to the field was not the response expected in the Palestinian camp, but it was the Israeli demand which was ultimately the factor that forced the US to operate accordingly. Eight to twelve observers, sitting in their offices in Jerusalem, will not lead to any progress on the ground, as was somehow expected to take place.

The plan's second phase calls for the creation of a Palestinian state with temporary borders, a concept that has neither any legal interpretation nor historical precedent. The fear among the Palestinians that what is temporary might become permanent is a firm apprehension. Sharon never hid his strategy to offer the Palestinians only forty-two percent of the land of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a self-governing entity, which is not far removed from the proposed idea in the second phase of the Road Map. When added to the proposed construction of the separation wall, which will swallow more than fifty-eight percent of the Pales-

tinian land, thus leaving only forty-two percent, just as proposed both in the Road Map and in Sharon's strategy, the fears of the Palestinian people are only further fuelled. Palestinians are calling for the emission of the second phase of the plan, in the fear that they will be forced to accept the second phase as permanent, and with less than half the land they feel they are owed.

Despite Palestinian fears, they do believe that the Road Map offers them the only opportunity for progress through a process of negotiations. The Road Map offers the Palestinians, for the first time in history, the chance to have their own independent state by the year 2005. The Palestinian people have been asking for more rigorous US and international intervention and involvement, always fearing that if left to Israeli control, no progress will ever be made. For the first time in history we have achieved a world consensus on a peace plan, and for the first time, despite its virtual role, the Quartet represents the major players in world policy and contains the necessary components for any required success, which must always be based on serious commitment from third parties, and a serious determination to implement measures on the part of the main parties involved in the conflict. The resolve of the main parties is not sufficient for any progress, which requires the direct and profound involvement of the third party. So far, the Road Map has lacked both. However, if the present holds any chance at all for peace it is to be found in the Road Map.