

A Conference of Local and International Experts

Reviewing the Peace Process:

Towards a Sustainable Peaceful Solution

26-27 November 2008, Jerusalem

Half a year after the international conference in East Jerusalem and at the Al-Quds University in neighbouring Abu Dis the two organizers submit its lectures and results. They reflect a mixture of stocktaking of the political failures, scholarly analysis, the search for experimental ways into a better future as well as expectations with regard to the local scene and the international community. Interesting enough the curative powers attributed to Barack Obama which dominated large parts of the conference, did not find a recurrent attention in the publication. Towards the cooperation with Europe I gave attention to political and operational ambivalences in the German and European policy. New hopes were referred to the Spanish EU Presidency in 2010 – here the lecturer Ofer Bronshtein probably spoke *per domo*.

Quite a few participants stressed their conviction that healing the internal Palestinian collision between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority be the obligation of the Arab themselves only; the results until now are known. In a external message which was added to the volume, the Jordanian Prince Hassan bin Talal demanded more patience and continuity from Europe and America by assisting the negotiation process. Still, how long the endurance shall last? The former president of the “Club of Rome“ desisted from

answering such a fundamental question. To an external observer time in the Near East is a flexible material, even urgent problems that should be solved immediately are postponed.

As a starting thesis the theory was forwarded to the conference that only by examining past experiences a successful new beginning to negotiate can be set in motion. All lecturers in fact *unisono* suggested that the contentions and disagreements between Israelis and Palestinians are embedded into multidimensional conflict situations raging throughout the Middle East. Nevertheless, all of them shared the view that the confrontation between the two peoples is drawing more than any other regional clash the attention of the whole world. The plenum refused the widely accepted advice to continue with the political gradualism which had been adopted by all international initiatives since the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, but did not present any success. Only Ron Pundak of the "Peres Peace Center" in Tel Aviv wanted to give new breath to the Oslo Accords as the „basis of all peace processes “.

On the other hand the Arab Peace Initiative of March 2002 was assessed and granted the value of highest symbolic and diplomatic priority. Walid Salem himself gave the initiative whose copyright Jordan and Saudi Arabia claim, as Marwan Muasher relayed in his book "The Arab Center"¹, the quality of being un-negotiable. After the proposals of the Arab League, the Geneva Initiative and the Ayalon-Nusseibeh Principles no more detailed presentations are required, Yehuda Paz emphasized. From a linguistic-semantic point of view and from a perspective of political sciences Eyal Erlich and Eli Podeh complained that the Israeli policy had rejected the offered gauntlet and thus had weakened the moderate Arab forces.

Recurring astonishment provoked the statement that the Israeli and the Palestinian governments were too weak in order to surmount the central obstacles. Here systematic discussions in working groups would have been effective. So, the estimation of Lucy Nusseibeh's about cosy feelings of „victimhood“ appeared to prevail which changes all too easily into self-righteousness and reproaches. It cannot be ignored that some major political and ideological blockades and aggravations are house-made. Thus, all Israeli governments took care to adopt right-wing and settlement-oriented arguments to defy thoroughly and consistently chances for suitable ways to peace with the neighbours and secured their confrontational strategies by strengthening the military-technological edge in the region. The continuation of the settlement and expropriation devices in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank cannot be interpreted in other ways than by intending to torpedo the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state.

Which hopes were behind the politico-psychological support for Tzipi Livni (Moshe Maoz: „Let us give women a chance where men failed “) remained mysterious. Following Ehud Olmert's warnings in autumn 2008 about the necessity of a considerable territorial offers in the West Bank in order to save the state of Israel morally and politically, the attitude of the foreign minister at that time fluctuated between a remarkable abstention an open disagreement. Apparently by staying away from her Prime Minister in his last months of governance she hoped to gain electoral success in February 2009. Even so, the request of Ofra Lyth for a re-secularization of Israel sounded rather peculiar despite of all the evidence she presented. However, to her credit goes the answer to Netanyahu that the Palestinians be obliged to acknowledge Israel as the Jewish state: This was previously granted by the UN Partition Resolution of 1947.

On the Palestinian side the counter-productive role of Arafat cannot be ignored – up to his refusal to consume the text of the Declaration of Principles prior to his signature in Washington. Arafat preferred to encapsulate himself with persons devoted to him personally and to deter even politically well-meaning visitors by long diatribes and by straying away thematically. In particular it has to be attributed (mildly expressed) to Arafat's unpredictable attitude that Islam ascended as the beneficiary movement for the national Palestinian identity. After Egypt and Jordan signed their peace treaties with Israel, Saudi Arabia staying apart with interests of her own, and the Syrian strategic play-games between Lebanon and Iran, before Damascus is prepared to enter into „full relations“ with Israel, the Palestinians stand on their own feet in terms of external diplomacy and political support beyond rhetoric entertainment. These burdens can hardly be digested and defeated by Arafat's successors under the conditions of the reinforced Israeli occupation.

Nevertheless, an answer should not be avoided: Which portions of the disaster falls into the Palestinian responsibility itself? Only the former Cabinet Minister Ziad Abu Zayyad – today one of the co-editors of the „Palestine-Israel Journal “ – went so far as to castigate the „Authority without authority“ which encourages radicalism as well as religious and national extremism. Abu Zayyad insisted on the resignation of Machmud Abbas and Salam Fayyad in order to force the international community to come clean towards Israel. Against this background the balance sheet of advancement and progress in the public sector submitted by Labour Minister Samir Abdullah did not attract the audience very much.

Additionally, those papers fell victim to oblivion which took note of ideas of a bi-national and/or unitary state for Jews and Arabs, of proposals for a Palestinian integration in Israel on an individual basis or for a political

double sovereignty in all parts of Palestine under the keyword „Parity for Peace “(Esther Riley). A future agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, how ever it may look, must be carried out and supported by the population on both sides. For the plenum this certainty was an indispensable condition of diplomatic progress. Although the readiness for peace is strongly maintained in both communities, David Kellen and Eric Eggleton suggested that only a minority is ready to support the politically necessary decisions. Whether an alliance of numerous Nobel Peace Prize Laureates that should be established as „a respected delegation“ to both parties, can promote reconciliation (Eyal Erlich), must remain undecided, but was a stimulating vision anyway.

To conclude: Everybody should be very grateful to Walid Salem as a main organiser for his enormous preparatory efforts. But nonetheless four short remarks should be attached: 1) Salem pointed out that hopefully “2009 will be a year of the negotiations in all the tracks toward a comprehensive regional peace agreement.“ Whether he would repeat this confidence to-date we do not know. Still, this year a follow-up conference is scheduled to take place and then Salem’s prognosis might be on the agenda again. 2) A lesser amount of lectures, more focussing as well as a broad display for discussions would be favourable next time. 3) The Palestinian participants were united in their political refusal of Hamas. This may be understandable, but the continued abstention and anger is a recipe for deepening the gap among the Palestinians instead of looking for an adjustment to the inevitability of a dialogue which foreign governments have already started to communicate with midlevel officials. 4) An editorial unit is highly recommended before publishing such a volume with 214 pages, since the arrangement of the contributions, some syntactic flaws, and peculiar ways of spelling the names of lecturers do not please the readers’ eyes.

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¹ Muasher repeated the claim to be “one of the architects of the Arab Peace Initiative” at one of the “Weinberg Foundation” conferences in Washington, D.C., as Dennis Ross and David Makovsky reported in their book “Myths, Illusions, and Peace” (2009), p. 129. A German review of this book you may find in this homepage.