ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Shlomo Avineri

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers for giving me the opportunity to bring in a voice from the region and also an Israeli voice, though this is not the Israeli voice. Please let us have no illusions about that! Let me also say that, after having listened yesterday to the very moving address by Zbigniew Brzezinski, reminding us where we are 60 years after the Warsaw Uprising, let me also take this opportunity to mention that today is the 61st anniversary of the final repression of the Jewish Warsaw Ghetto Uprising by Nazi forces—the Ghetto was more or less where we are today. Today is the 61st anniversary of one of the few urban insurrections against Nazi rule in Europe. One of my uncles died in that insurrection, so I’m taking the liberty to share a very personal experience and memory with you.

Let me say how unhappy I am and deeply disturbed and saddened that Dr. Sari Nusseibeh is not with us. Certainly, I cannot speak for him. But I have known Sari for many, many years. He is one of the most moderate and one of the most reasonable Palestinian spokespersons. He is an academic; he is a philosopher; he takes a view that would be shared by many Israelis. Perhaps part of his difficulty, and I don’t know whether this is or is not the reason for his absence, is that it is very difficult for him to speak his views regarding the response within his own community. He does not have the militia, he doesn’t have armed men behind him, he never killed anybody, he was never a terrorist—he is just an intellectual and a very moral person. In certain situations, this does not sit well with some members of his own community.

Listening to our three speakers, I am a little bit in the situation of the proverbial Jewish rabbi who was hearing a case where two people came to his court and the rabbi listened very carefully to one of them. After some reflection he said, ‘you are right.’ Then he listened to the other one, and, after more reflection, he said, ‘you are right.’ The rabbi’s wife, who was in the kitchen overhearing this, then said: ‘Rabbi, how can both of them be right?’ The rabbi, after reflection, said, ‘you know, you are right.’ I am slightly in this difficulty, so let me try to introduce one perspective, certainly my perspective, which will not only deal with Israel-Palestine, but since everybody else also mentioned the wider context, I will also say a few things about Iraq. Mr. Chairman, some of what I am going to say is going to be contrarian, but I hope it is also going to be moderate.

The United States' Iraqi Fallacies

Without going into the substance of the matter, of the war and the present, I think there were two major fallacies in the American policy regarding Iraq. The first is now more or less universally accepted. It is that you cannot create, almost ex nihilo and under occupation, a legitimate, democratic transition in Iraq. I’m speaking from a regional perspective: Tel Aviv in 1991 during the first Gulf War was attacked by Iraqi missiles which took seven and a half minutes to reach Tel Aviv from western Iraq. So we are in the region, we are in the “near abroad,” as the Soviets or the Russians would say. From that perspective_ one has to realize in the Arab region where there is not one Arab democratic regime, not one serious attempt at democratization—it is very unlikely to be possible to bring in democracy from the outside and under occupation. Since we are in Poland, let me put it this way. The Arab world has seen a lot of leaders in the last 40 years, but there wasn’t one Lech Walesa or a Solidarity movement. The question is why? This is a question that is now asked in the UNDP Arab Development report by some very courageous Arab
intellectuals. I don’t know the answer and I don’t think that they have supplied the answer. But to imagine that under such circumstances you can create between now and June 30 something that is a “democratic transition” seems to me completely unrealistic, to say the least.

The second point is that one takes it for granted—here, I am going to be much more contrarian—that one can create an Iraqi democratic state. One takes the territorial integrity of Iraq as a given, but Iraq is a country which is as complicated in its ethnic and religious composition as Yugoslavia. After it was set up by the British in the 1920s for their own reasons, they put a Sunni minority in the saddle. It could be controlled only with an iron fist, and Saddam’s iron fist was only the most extreme one. All Iraqi regimes, royal and republican, were Sunni minority dictatorships over a Shia majority and a Kurdish minority. To imagine that you can put this together again is like thinking you could keep Yugoslavia together again once Titoist socialism and communism disappeared. I know we are all committed to territorial integrity. There is a good argument for that, not only in law, but also in morality. Yet the differences between Shias and Sunnis are not just like the differences between Methodists and Baptists. You have to go back to the Europe of the 17th century, when you had some sort of stability by introducing *Cuius regio, eius religio*. To translate into modern terms, perhaps three Iraqi states, connected loosely or not with each other, may give more stability than one. Yugoslavia is an example as, after a terrible war, this is what is really happening. Perhaps this can happen in Iraq without a terrible internal war. We need perhaps a paradigm change. It is difficult in terms of international law and regional stability; I know all those arguments. But to imagine that the only option is one Iraq, whether federal or confederal, is something that has to be—given the last year—rethought.

**Israel-Palestine Peace: The Need for a New Paradigm**

In the last decade, we have had three attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We had Oslo in 1993, we had the attempt at Camp David in 2000, and we had at least the attempt of the Road Map in 2003. I agree with Ambassador Nogami that not only is Oslo now unfortunately a failure—I supported it and had very few problems with it—but all three attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum have failed. What one can learn from this is not to just try to have a better plan, since all those plans were pretty good. They failed because there wasn’t enough local will or they didn’t have enough local support. As an Israeli, I could argue about who is responsible for the debacle at Camp David, but I’m not going to do it here. Regardless of who is responsible, the fact is that those three attempts to resolve the conflict have failed. One has to learn from that not to try to have a better plan, but perhaps to rethink the paradigm. Cyprus is another failure than nobody talks about anymore. But this was a failure of soft power. The soft power of the enticement of European Union membership didn’t work in Cyprus. And this was after 30 years of stabilization. One has to learn from that to try to solve religious, national, ethnic conflicts from the outside, which is what in a way the Road Map is. But the Road Map failed as well, and I’m saying this as someone who supports the end result of the Road Map. The problem is how do you go from A to B. Cyprus failed and all the attempts in the Middle East in the last decade failed.

Perhaps, we have to move in the Israeli-Palestinian case from unsuccessful attempts at conflict resolution to more realistic attempts at conflict management. Example: Kosovo. Example: Bosnia. Example: Kashmir. Nobody in his right mind today would suggest a Road Map for how to solve the Bosnian issue, because trying to solve Bosnia is another war. Trying to solve Kosovo is another war. Trying to solve Kashmir is yet another war. But there are mechanisms of stabilization, de-escalation and conflict management. For 30 years, such mechanisms were successful in Cyprus. Cyprus was unilaterally, after the Turkish invasion, *de facto* divided. There was a barrier, a wall, whatever you want to call it. But Cyprus had 30 years of no violence, no armed conflict and no terrorism. The attempt to move from this to conflict resolution didn’t work, so we are back even in Cyprus to conflict management. This is not the way things should be in an ideal world, but we do not live in an ideal world. I would suggest especially to our European friends—who know that they cannot solve Bosnia (which is much nearer to home), who
know they cannot solve Kosovo, and who have failed to solve Cyprus—to think that perhaps in the Middle East we need a similar mechanism. This is where I come to the issue of disengagement.

I have to declare that I am a member of the Labour Party in Israel. As such, I never thought in my life I would say a good word about Ariel Sharon. But I do find myself very reluctantly saying that the disengagement plan of Sharon, which is not enough as far as I am concerned, may be today the only game in town, if one looks realistically, because to my mind what one should think about is not what is desirable. What is desirable is the Road Map. Perpetual peace is also desirable, as is Isaiah, chapter II, verses 1-4. The question is not what is desirable, but what is possible and attainable.

The consequence of Sharon’s disengagement plan, which is not just disengagement, is dismantling Jewish settlements, which for somebody like Sharon coming from the Likud was taboo until two years ago. Now, he has crossed a Rubicon. One should help him cross the Rubicon, saying, “there are wider rivers ahead, so beware, this is the first river you’re crossing, though at least you are crossing it.” And he should be encouraged, not criticized, because this is not enough. It is not enough. Sharon is not a de Gaulle giving freedom to Algeria or a Nixon going to Communist China, but the syndrome is similar. It is very paradoxical that Sharon is now beginning to carry out something that started on the Israeli left: unilateral disengagement absent an agreement. The left was unable to do it. This is now being done by Sharon with great opposition from within his own party. That’s why Labour and the Israeli left, which were totally annihilated by the collapse of Oslo, find themselves in the position of saying “let us at least stabilize the situation”. If we have disengagement, if we have the dismantling of 21 Jewish settlements in Gaza, as I hope we’ll have, and 4 settlements in the West Bank, this is the beginning of a process that many of us only two years ago thought was not the first key to open this box. We have now perhaps the first key. The difficulties Sharon is being confronted within his own party suggest how much this is a departure from the right-wing, nationalist, harsh and hawkish position of the Likud. There is movement toward the center by Sharon and many of his ministers. As I said, this is not enough, but this may be the only realistic thing that can happen. Again, let’s keep Bosnia, Kosovo and Cyprus in mind. Absent resolution, let’s have conflict management that leads to de-escalation.

The barrier, ugly as it is in some places, can help put an end to suicide bombings, already diminished in some places, and put an end to brutal Israeli reprisals like Jenin, which are a horror and we don’t want to see again. The alternative to these latter is a fence. The alternative is disengagement. After this, let us wait for another day. And I imagine if we have two or three years of Cyprus, two or three years with no violence, perhaps we may then restart negotiations. Because to talk today about restarting negotiations, either reviving Oslo or Geneva or the Road Map, seems to me terribly utopian.

Let me just briefly say a word about Dr. Henry Kissinger’s very important and significant article [“Opportunity Exists for Breakthrough in Middle East”, The Washington Post, Sunday 9 May 2004] which all of us have read. Again, I agree with the contours. I am probably less sanguine than he is about the possibility of negotiations, but I think I have stated my case, for what it’s worth. But there is one point where I think Dr. Kissinger mentioned something that I would like to enlarge, and he may or may not agree with me. At one point, Dr. Kissinger wrote that it is very important to engage moderate Arab countries in lieu of a non-existent Palestinian leadership. I think that this is very important. Let me move one step further. If it is the case that on the Palestinian side, for whatever reason—either there is no partner or no credible partner, et cetera—then we should not give up.

But perhaps one should rethink not only about moderate Arab countries—which may be Egypt, Saudi Arabia is in a difficult position, but perhaps Morocco—perhaps we can begin to think of something like a joint Egyptian-Moroccan trusteeship for a limited time over the Palestinian territories. If it is impossible or very difficult to find Palestinian interlocutors, perhaps the Egyptians and the Moroccans should not only try to push the Palestinians toward meaningful negotiations but should also be the trustees. Not the
Europeans, not NATO, it has to be a legitimate Arab regime. The legal form would have to be found, and it should be found within the Arab League much more than within the United Nations. I know that this is not very conventional thinking, but we have already tried all conventional means and they have failed. So, the time perhaps has come for some paradigm change.

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