

Israeli-Palestinian Settlement, Now!

The trilateral meeting between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Mahmud Abbas held on February 19 in Jerusalem did not make even one timid step forward toward reviving the peace process. Once again, the United States and Israel have imposed a series of conditions which, in this preliminary stage, are impossible to meet. They refuse to recognize the significance of the inter-Palestinian agreement reached after surmounting innumerable difficulties only a few days ago in Mecca, under the presidency of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Once again, the spark of hope has been extinguished. And from the international community silence. And once again, Europe says nothing. Only Jordan, aware of how complex the situation is, because Jordan sees it from the inside, has begged the United States to reconsider its rejection of the Palestinian President's proposals.

And once again there is a risk of spiraling actions and reactions when, as in any conflict, there is only one means for concluding it peacefully: the parties do not abandon their principles and the defense of their ideals, because that would imply that one of them has defeated the other. What changes is that the parties decide to defend their ideas and resolve their differences without violence.

And together with this inevitable first step there is another one of equal importance: when commencing a peace process it is essential to look to the future, to accept the premise that only the children of the adversaries are important, because only then will it be possible to resolve the present problems during the process and rid ourselves of the heavy burdens of the past. For that reason, refusing to negotiate with the Palestinian unity government is a serious mistake, which must now be urgently remedied. Now. Immediately. Only then, with the firm resolution of both parties not to resort to violence and to make the future their initial priority, can the diplomatic conferences and negotiations be held that would enable the parties to address on equal footing the conflict-laden questions affecting the entire area, particularly Lebanon and Iran.

The “preventive war” strategy has shown that nothing is achieved by force, and at such a price of death and suffering. Once again the blatant tragic failure of war is evident, a solution borne of our war economy supported by an immense war machine that spends nearly 3,000 million dollars a day on weapons. The strategies adopted to date have all proved fruitless. The time has come to adopt a different one. Now.

The formation of a Palestinian national unity government was both necessary and urgent so that, leaving their differences behind, Hamas and Al Fatah could prevent the downward spiral toward civil war and work toward what could logically be expected after the elections: a government for Palestine and the prompt conclusion of an initial settlement with Israel, which given the unbearable moral and political burden of the occupation, also begs an urgent solution.

President Abbas could not enter into peace negotiations with Prime Minister Olmert until he made peace among his own citizens. For that reason, the results of the “trilateral” meeting in Jerusalem are so disappointing.

After the Mecca Accords, the European Union should free the Palestinian people from the obstacles posed by the boycott of the Hamas government. Refusing to recognize election results is another matter that affects the complex situation in the Middle East. Only if an “oral agreement” is achieved and violence is renounced, could the European Union then firmly promote the adoption of new policies in the area as a whole, taking advantage of the influence of Chancellor Merkel and the German presidency.

Only then would it be possible to address the many cases of a lack of peaceful coexistence resulting from the collapse of dictatorships, which maintained peoples of different cultures and beliefs united by force. And make no mistake: “indivisible unions” held together by armies always have a short shelf life. Only those based on freedom of expression and the will of their citizens will exist in peace, with only the tensions and adjustments required in any enterprise in common.

For many years the Israeli and Palestinian peoples have been caught up in the perverse dynamics of “if you want peace, prepare for war”. Now, after so much violence, the bloody reality inevitably requires them to consider the possibility that if they really want peace, they will have to prepare for it. “If you want peace, let your conduct each day make it possible”. In that regard, it is urgent to

immediately put an end to terrorism, incitement, expropriation, settlements, ill-timed construction in inopportune places,... so that the idea that it is ultimately possible to discover new roads to peaceful coexistence can finally take root.

A dialogue of mutual recognition is impossible unless an acceptable political solution can be found for both parties. For that reason, and as stated above, rather than a debate based on the past, which by definition will always be an arbitrary reconstruction, it is imperative that both peoples reach a common perspective for the future based on political agreement. Acceptance based on a secure coexistence and recognition of two independent states; acceptance of a common future, because it is obvious to anyone capable of observing this tragedy with any amount of clarity that the two states will need each other, in order to resolve their conflicts and, above all, to overcome their past.

Internal peace and peace with their neighbors: these are the two great challenges that the Israelis and Palestinians can meet if they decide, both within and without, to resolve their often diametrically-opposite positions without resorting to violence. And based on this premise they would be supported not only by the initiative of the Arab peace plan, but also by the international community. In view of the foregoing, we believe that the situation in the Middle East could now urgently be addressed, based on the following criteria:

- 1) There possible solution can be based on force, either on the part of Israel or the Palestinians. Both parties must recognize the other's right to exist within a state that is

secure, viable and protected by the international community.

- 2) The refugee question must be addressed based on a declaration of the international community (United Nations, the Arab countries, Israel, the Palestinians, and the major powers) within the framework of the borders based on the Peace Accords, to return those refugees who so desire to Palestine. A compensation and rehabilitation fund should be established both for refugee returnees as well as those who choose to remain in their asylum countries.
- 3) With respect to Syria, the Baker-Hamilton report recommendations, rejected by President Bush, should be implemented, supporting negotiations between Israel and Syria, based on prior discussions with Rabin and Barak. The points in conflict left open since then can be resolved, as shown in the recent discrete channel for negotiations opened between Alon Liel, former Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a well-known Syrian close to the regime. As for Lebanon, the border and other pending conflicts are less complicated and can be easily resolved.
- 4) Peace among Israelis, Palestinians and Syrians would enable the Arab League to become involved, since its 2002 peace proposal indicated that if Israel signs peace accords with Syria and the Palestinians based on the 1967 borders (including certain changes acceptable to all parties) and finds a consensual solution to the refugee problem, all of the Arab states would sign the peace with Israel and 22 Arab flags would fly over their embassies in Israeli Jerusalem.

- 5) Creation of an Israeli-Palestinian Forum to bring together leaders from all areas of civil society on both sides, to promote cultural and religious co-existence.

An Israeli-Palestinian agreement is the first indispensable step toward resolving the problems that today darken one of the regions that, once this situation has been resolved, may contribute very significantly to a new era. Now is the time.

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