

THE MIDDLE EAST PROCESS – WHERE TO?

Summary of a panel discussion

23 October 2003

Welcome address, introduction and moderator:

Oliver Rathkolb, historian and research co-ordinator of the Bruno Kreisky Forum.

Panellists:

Yossi Beilin, former Israeli Minister of Justice

Yasir Abd Rabbou, Member of the Palestinian National Authority, former Minister for Information

Jointly organised with the Karl Kahane Foundation: the lecture was the second one in the series *Talking for Peace - the Middle East Now and Tomorrow. A Lecture Series presented by the Karl Kahane Foundation.*

Yossi Beilin and Yasir Abd Rabbou, two high level experts, former official negotiators, politicians, intellectuals who had come to the Bruno Kreisky Forum before on different occasions, had decided after three years of meetings between Palestinian and Israeli delegations that the "time had come for civil society to form a peace agreement and to bring back the power of motion into society". After bitter experiences in Camp David, in Taba and before, they agreed not to talk any more to each other, but to think together. It took them more than two years of continuous work to reach a comprehensive agreement and to show public opinion on both sides that there was a partner and a possible solution based on "a balanced formula to satisfy the basic needs and interests of both sides". Both of them were inspired by the common desire to offer a better future to the coming generations. Abd Rabbou underlined that he himself, belonging to an uprooted generation, knew the suffering of a refugee from personal experience and was motivated, as was his counterpart Beilin, by the interest of his people.

The Geneva Accord, Abd Rabbou continued, represented an unprecedented document containing complete, detailed solutions for all issues, defining borders and territorial aspects of the conflict, dealing with security issues as well as with the problems of Jerusalem, refugees, water, etc. Before presenting the agreement publicly, criticism had been raised on both sides and they had been accused of being traitors, but he was ready to be considered a traitor to the continuation of bloodshed. He insisted that the most important "weapon" for them would be public opinion, the transparency of the proposals and the support of the peoples who wanted to get out of the conflict.

Yossi Beilin insisted on the importance of signing this agreement for a permanent solution, as both of them, Israelis and Palestinians, represented the pragmatic and moderate people whose failure would prove that it was impossible to resolve the conflict. As in Israel the feeling of futility had increased in the last years and the blaming of the other was no longer exclusive to the extremists but had entered the peace movement, it was extremely important for him to show to his own camp, rather than to the settlers or to the extremists, that a solution was possible. He said that during the negotiations they had started from their respective redlines, understanding the other's need to first solve the most difficult issues. Another essential point was the negotiation's coalitions, the co-operation of people who were not the "usual suspects", who came from very different backgrounds - from the Mossad, from different political parties, former generals, academics, intellectuals, businessmen and women - a mirror of the two societies.

The fact that the agreement was seen as problematic by their opponents made it very controversial. Like Yasir Abd Rabbou, he stressed the importance of public support from the international community to implement the accords as a reference point in their own societies.

He concluded that fulfilling dreams was impossible, that finding an agreement was difficult, but much less difficult than continuing the "stupid situation in which we find ourselves today".

Abd Rabbou answered the question about the key issue for the Palestinian side, which was that though all the issues were difficult, he classified things on one basis: "What would enable my people to live and flourish." For that reason all issues were equally difficult, but the top priority was freedom and independence for every Palestinian. The strategy would be to convince, to educate, to listen and to organise their public.

Yossi Beilin underlined once more the importance of overcoming mistrust and proving to each other that they were trustworthy.

Concerning the relevance of the agreement, Beilin said that it had to be proven. He was speaking as somebody who had been committed to resolving this conflict for many years and who believed in democratic public opinion. He believed that both people were sick and tired of the current situation and not talking to the other side meant submission to terror and violence rather than saving themselves.

Answering the question of the role of the international community, he said that it could be "an open window of hope". Their main target was still to convince the world that the Geneva Accords were not an alternative to the roadmap, as their aim was to fill the gaps in the roadmap with complementary, not contradictory elements. Their hope was for a positive reaction from the US administration, as well as from the European Union, the EU Parliament, individual European states and of course the Arab world.

Confronted with the question of the right of return, Beilin insisted on the fact that the agreement was dealing with solutions rather than dreams and the will to live would be stronger than the priority of justice and international laws. The necessity to enjoy life without the suffering of their neighbours was the solution that they were suggesting. Replying to the idea of a bi-national state, most recently put forward by the Israeli demographer Meron Benvenisti, a critic of the Geneva plan, Beilin stated: "Maybe a person who is as liberal as myself, should support an idea of one state for the two peoples, should support an idea that the Jewish people will be a minority in the land of Israel. It is fine. I do not agree to it. Yasir Abd Rabbou negotiated with a very clear Zionist. And I negotiated with somebody who is a Palestinian nationalist. This is the whole idea."

Abd Rabbou addressed the question of legitimacy by stating that though they were both "unofficial", they were introducing the model to the officials as a real one, a durable one. For him, illegitimacy was the wall that was built around Palestinian cities, the confiscation of Palestinian land, the lack of security, the building of settlements, etc. The aim of the present document, as well as of their efforts, was to change and to confront illegitimate procedures and measures, to unite the ranks and to reverse this order.

Referring to the question of Camp David he said that it had been full of mistakes, but the important thing was not to use failures of the past as an excuse not to continue their efforts.

Oliver Rathkolb concluded the evening with a citation from an article written by both Beilin and Abd Rabbou in 2002:

"People who are prepared to meet and conduct a dialogue while violence continues and innocent people are being killed on both sides are always criticised, accused of playing into the enemy's hands. This is why we need international legitimacy, extensive recognition and help from those who believe in peace".