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Palestinian-Israeli meetings 1990's Where to??

The Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs

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Dear Friends,

I am pleased to be with you at this round table in a Palestinian house in Jerusalem to tackle an important question on the Palestinian agenda inside and outside Palestine, namely Palestinian-Israeli meetings and their direction. The question of what direction such meetings should take leads to several other questions that we should try together to find objective answers to, at least for some if not all of them.

I believe that the entry point for discussing this question of Palestinian-Israeli meetings or dialogue is the possession of knowledge about the other side: the Israelis. At the start, Jewish gatherings were closed and religious. Jewish migration started with mass migration from Europe to a new world with the aspiration of meeting the challenges of the age. Part of this Jewish migration opted to respond to this challenge with religion, while others opted to link religion to the concept of building a new world like that constructed in the American West. This was the beginning of politicization and the religious connection.

Zionist activity started among the migrant minorities. The onset of politicized migration added a new dimension and depth to earlier factors, all of which crystallized in the concept of establishing an ideological institutional relationship to deal with the balance of forces and to have a role in the political equation. The decision within the Zionist institution was decisive in favor of politicization and not religiosity. The Western paradigm of colonial settlement was adopted, thus unifying many Jewish trends together within a Western camp to confront the dangers of the East. The West in this case is meant to represent Western Christian-Jewish civilization, while the East represented Arab Islamic civilization.

In the second phase, as the institutions loyal to the West that established the Hebrew state dominated, some elements of conflict appeared between two trends. One trend worked to cement the state on the basis of joint interest against a joint enemy and joint danger, namely Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. The other trend wanted to direct state institutions towards a policy of cooperation and coming to terms with the Arabs until such time when the state would be well-established and able to dictate formulas for united action serving joint interests from an undisputed, robust, confident and solid position.

However, the "achievements" of the June 1967 war, the "drunkenness of the military victory", and the appearance of the "Israeli empire" bragging of its military arrogance and its "undefeatable army", enabled Israeli society to progress to a new situation that differed from that of conflict between the two previous schools of thought in the thirties and forties. The new situation opened the door to intellectual luxury, bringing to light an intellectual plurality and an Israeli methodology for dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian problem. This methodology was based on self-confidence. Some researchers have noted that this situation prompted Israeli society to move from its general "Spartan" footing to a new status manifesting "Zionist specificity" and greater militarization. I

believe that this is incorrect, although the image that distinguished Israeli society at that period was characterized by the power of the army.

The disparity in Israeli society between the role of the army and that of diplomacy in dealing with the Arabs and Palestinians gave rise to a variety of social groups in Israel, from the far left to the far right. This made it possible to talk about "moderate forces" in Israeli society, not necessarily directed by officialdom, though part of them are indeed incorporated within it. The general circumstances allowed these moderate forces a limited margin for growth and development, making it possible to appear every now and then to present "intellectual challenges" for political, social or economic solutions. These forces underwent scrutiny inside and outside of officialdom, were gradually exploited in one phase, and were able, in another phase, to impose their views on Israeli society for discussion.

The longstanding "incapability" of the Arabs to present a military or political alternative turned the internal Israeli conflict into a social and political one. Internally, Israeli society focused on sectarian, religious and social issues as a top priority for research, discussion and interest, while the more important issue, namely that of the Palestinians, was not on the agenda. The Palestinian issue was perceived as a security issue under the slogan "either us or them". Naturally, the Arab issue was not any better

This feeling of practical certainty and theoretical uncertainty allowed 'intellectual forces" to appear and raise questions about the Palestinian and Arab case. However, these forces failed to put this issue on the same footing as other internal Israeli issues. That is to say, these forces did not succeed in presenting the Palestinian and Arab case to Israeli citizens as an issue on the list of priorities. As long as the ruling political composition was in harmony with the internal and external balance of forces, there was no need for the "problem" or the Palestinian case to be discussed. Official policy supported the maintenance of the status quo.

However, the advent of changes altered the picture as follows:

- The socio-political focal point started to shift from Western to Oriental Jews, marking the decline of the historic traditional leadership.
- Absolute confidence was lost after the 1973 War and Israeli military capability was shaken.
- The Arab and Palestinian case entered the homes of Israelis with a scenario of military and political alternatives.

- The Palestinian resistance (the intifada) linked to a political challenge dictated the presence of a Palestinian-Israeli issue.
- The international political equation changed with the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the wind of change in Eastern Europe, and subsequent transformations in traditional roles and laws.

These issues contributed to unsettling the balance of forces in Israeli society and making the Israeli political map multi-colored. This indicated that the differences inside Israeli society that may appear superficial and limited are, in fact, deeply rooted, varied and contradictory, although not conflicting.

It is here that we can see the importance of the Palestinian interlocutor's role in clarifying these varied colors, stirring some of them, and revealing the differences, contradictions, and conflicts between them. It is here that we can see the importance of the Palestinian interlocutor's role in presenting the Palestinian cards and encouraging their interpretation and understanding as part of the Israeli political map.

The growing gap and disagreement among Israeli intellectual and political trends requires that the Palestinian issue be placed on the agenda. Any doubts that may be raised must be overcome for Palestinian rights, institutions and demands to be understood and accepted by the Israeli political public, or at least not rejected or resisted but understood to be just, and to take a first step in agreeing to discuss and recognize them.

The relationship between Palestinians and Israelis today is one of "dialogue". This dialogue differs in time and place, and vis-à-vis the location of the parties to the dialogue and those who listen to it.

There is a dialogue conducted with stones, bullets, rockets, bombs, jet fighters, cannons, and tanks.

And there is a dialogue that is conducted through reading the writings and ideologies of parties in the political equation like Metsben, Rakah, and progressive leftist forces.

And there is a dialogue among active intellectual forces that seek to coordinate locations, viewpoints and future orientation, like Mapam, Ratz, and Peace Now. It may be prudent to indicate that dialogue with these parties can provide for a clearer understanding of various positions before approaching the other party.

There is also a dialogue with parties who are more hostile and extremist. These parties are approached initially in order to unmask them and employ their extremism to divert public opinion away from them, or to separate them from other forces, or at least to neutralize those who do not agree with them.

We live in a world of change where contact with the other party is inevitable. Those who reject dialogue as an idea or behavior find themselves obliged to use it in their daily life one way or another. This is particularly the case with militants subjected to interrogation or imprisonment. Unless the reality of the other party is clear and well-understood by us, the obligatory contact with that party will have a detrimental impact on us. On the other hand, if we close our doors and windows and stick to the picture of the other party as we imagine without any objective details, we are surrendering reality and facing illusions we draw and surrender to. In fact, we would be fighting ghosts without any result.

Entering into dialogue should be a well-planned process that is calculated and informed because just as we will try to change their positions, stances, and interests, they will also try to do the same to us.

The clarity of Palestinian inviolable principles and rights and adherence to them should be required preconditions for any dialogue.

National protection of dialogue is also required because the other party, aware of the seriousness of the issue, will try to distort this dialogue in the media, potentially leading to attempts by Palestinians to deter those participating in the dialogue and douse their zeal. This will result in Palestinian society being pushed into marginal internal discussions that divert it from the priorities on the agenda. It will also push Palestinians into an arena of ill-timed intellectual contradictions in which the goal will become obscured and efforts will be squandered.

Dangers on the path to dialogue include the following:

- Lack of awareness of the Israeli political map.
- Failure to adhere to and defend Palestinian rights and inviolable principles.
- Failure to observe the priorities on the agenda and being sidelined by marginal issues that may deter, freeze or derail the dialogue.

This may also produce duplicity which may also threaten the future dialogue altogether.

- Dialogue should not be an alternative for our own internal dialogue, nor should it be moved from the Israeli to the Palestinian street.
- Palestinian strategy should not be confused with tactical tools and should not lead to frustration in the Palestinian public.

For a clear overall goal, divided into phases, an interim solution must be presented to the other party. This will prepare the other party to move forward to the next phase, not simply as an intellectual exercise but to recognize and accept it. The primary overall goal must be maintained, unchanged, through the consecutive phases.

Emotional reaction is a serious issue that may impact the content and results of dialogue. An emotional reaction resulting from a specific development or incident may derail the dialogue and divert it to discussion of contingent issues, or to justifying, defending, or attacking specific positions. Although it may appear tempting at times, this will give the dialogue a different characteristic and impede the possibility of obtaining the aspired result.

The language of the dialogue is one of the essential tools for the success of the plan. The language that should be used should influence the other party and pave the way towards the aspired goal. The language I mean is the political lexicon employed to serve the dialogue, for instance:

- Formulas of political solutions for coexistence in equality, justice, independence, and dual sovereignty.
- Our ideas and understanding of issues like Zionism, extremism, violence, democracy, and plurality.

Dialogue is a tool of politics and the media. Used well in the appropriate time and place, and as a calculated method, if it is open and wins national consensus as a form of struggle, then the political equation in our region will enter an arena of change that will last until national goals are realized.

Ends