



The Road from Annapolis: The Partial View of an (Im)partial Chairman

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The EuroMeSCo Quarterly Seminar *Annapolis and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Role for the EU and the EMP?* was held at the Dead Sea, in Jordan, on 12-13 March. A total of 23 participants - from Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and European countries - were present, and the EU Commission and Council were also represented. The seminar addressed the following main topics: the aims and results achieved by Annapolis; the issue of territoriality in the outlining of the Palestinian state; internal Palestinian power struggles; as well as the role of regional, sub-regional, and non-regional actors.

Lively discussions ensured a wide-ranging dialogue. As we had anticipated (and even secretly wished for) the speakers did not always limit themselves to presenting their views on the specific themes of each session. Anticipations, associations, delayed reactions, come-backs, overlaps – all took place with a certain degree of flexibility from the chairpersons. The effect this created was an atmosphere of openness, participation, intense debate, and at times even controversy. It was difficult for me to leave the room, for fear of missing a particularly interesting exchange or an illuminating new perspective.

I was charged with presenting the meeting's conclusions. I feared this would be an impossible task, yet was kindly advised otherwise: all I had to do was to pick up one individual "pearl of wisdom" from each speaker. If I listened carefully, I would be able to collect all these pearls and thread them together to make a necklace of final conclusions. I wish it were that easy! I followed this advice but found that the contributions of each participant went well beyond the call of duty, submerging me with fascinating ideas, opinions, and proposals, all worthy of consideration. What I offer, therefore, is no more than a pale version of the very powerful discussions exchanged, a personal interpretation of what was expressed over these two days.

Why we must be concerned and involved

I will begin by stressing that it was generally felt that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a source of great suffering, weighing heavily on the stability of Middle Eastern states and on the lives of their peoples. It not only conditions the daily reality of many, but also acts as a powerful constraint to efforts made towards achieving sustainable political, economic and social development. If not settled rapidly, this conflict promises to render ever more problematic the lives and well-being of future generations.

This situation also affects broader circles. Europe, Russia, China, India - all feel the wider influence of events, in an area that extends from the Mediterranean across to the Persian Gulf, and beyond, reaching as far as Central Asia. We should all feel concerned, worried and even threatened.

In such circumstances, not only should those directly involved in the conflict negotiate with greater conviction and political will, but their neighbouring countries and the EU must become more involved in the process, effectively supporting the ongoing peace efforts. We must be aware that this is a responsibility we all share. Indulging in a “blame-game” bears no fruits – the urgency of the situation demands and deserves a far more constructive approach. We also believe that, to a certain extent, all of us bear a measure of responsibility in putting an end to this “endless” struggle.

Peace

The suggestion that the peace process should aim at a solution founded on the principles of international law and the resolutions of the UN Security Council, and guaranteeing the basic goals approved by the international community, was not disputed. Other conditions upheld include the mutual recognition of Israel and Palestine, each within clearly defined and secure borders. Both states should be internationally recognised, exercise clear and uncontested authority within their territory, enjoy the benefits of stable and democratic institutions, and have the equal rights and freedoms of their citizens assured, developing a plural, vocal and productive society. They should establish an active cooperation, both between themselves, as well as with the broader region to which they belong.

Process

It was easier to define our ultimate goals than it was to reach a consensus on how these could be achieved. We did not attempt to draw out a roadmap during this seminar, but instead I think we identified a set of ideas that we would like to see seriously considered by the negotiating parties. But here, inevitably, my conclusions become even more subjective.

It should be recognised that only strong actors are capable of negotiating without fear, backed by the confidence that their people will accept and implement any agreements reached. The main concern of each negotiating party should therefore be to strengthen, rather than weaken the other. Great concern was expressed at the weakening of the position of Abu Mazen, even from inside the West Bank. And many thought that the exclusion of Hamas, as opposed to efforts to include it, could potentially be far more damaging and jeopardise negotiations.

It follows that, in what concerns these negotiations, the interveners should bear in mind that short-term strategies that exploit the difficulties of the other are self-defeating in the long run. In this context, strong emphasis was put on issues such as the expansion of settlements, the road blocks, the disproportionate reprisals, the indiscriminate attacks, and inflammatory statements. These tactics might be suitable to winning a conflict, but they do little to promote peace. Strategies of peace must be based in respect and in the search for mutually-beneficial solutions, seeking to reinforce the cohesion of peoples and the legitimacy of governments, and laying the foundations for future prosperity and stability.

A step-by-step approach may be the only solution, yet it must be realised that the proposed goals should not be side-lined in the face of unavoidable challenges and setbacks – and these are sure to emerge, sooner rather than later.

Both parties could do much to improve their attitude at the negotiating table, and some suggestions were explored within this context. I will mention a few instances: the recognition of a Palestinian state, with sovereign rights over most of the occupied

territories, could help Palestinians accept the need for a period of transition for the evacuation of settlements – these would officially fall within the sovereignty of a new state, but remain under the transitional jurisdiction of Israel. The final borders themselves would be defined later on, after minor exchanges, when convenient and where agreed. The costs of resettling the Israeli settlers, as well as displaced Palestinians, could be borne by an international fund to which the EU could contribute. Regional actors should become more involved and assist the main parties, as well as the Quartet. At the moment, it unfortunately seems that some are more committed to disturbing the peace process, rather than to supporting it.

External powers *can* and *should* encourage all efforts aimed at the success of negotiations, offering to share the burdens that over time will result from the processes of reconstruction and resettlement, and with the creation of the conditions needed for development, prosperity and regional cooperation.

The EU has not been sufficiently concerned or involved. It can and should do more, not so much by the use of force, but by channelling into the international peace efforts all its power and prestige. The influence of the EU was, in itself, an issue discussed widely, with a few voices arguing that the Union had not even been able to settle its own internal problems. In general, however, a majority expressed support for a bigger role for the EU.