

His Excellency  
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# Israel/Palestine: History is Undecided

I'm of Christian origin and I'm often asked on the lecturing circuit, "When did you convert to Christianity?" I always with great resignation answer, "Have you forgotten that Christ and the Christian message were born in my country and we exported them to Europe and the West and it did not reach us through the colonial era." So I always say in a way I'm a descendant of the early Christians—I'm either a historical or a pre-historical Christian. The chairman asked me how that affected my itinerary. Well, in one sense it has affected my discourse. I have a lot of spiritual references. For example, I'm known to say even in the bleakest moments that I'm confident that Palestine will resurrect, and I add that, as you know, we in Jerusalem have had some previous experience in resurrection. I'm known to say that the region that was occupied in six days can also be evacuated in six days so that the Israelis can rest on the seventh. I'm known to tell a joke which reflects the tragic nature of reality: a Palestinian went to see God and asked him, "God, God Almighty, will there ever be peace in Palestine?" and apparently God looked at him melancholically and said, "Yes, yes, of course, but not during my lifetime." I usually add that I was posted to the Vatican for ten years and I've had it from reliable sources that God would like to be proven wrong at least on this one.

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I would like to tell you something that very few Americans and very few Arabs know; the first country to recognize America's independence was not France—yes, it deployed and redeployed Lafayette, and his influence on the battlefield was decisive—but it was an Arab country, Morocco, that was the first to recognize your independence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

There are very few Arabs and very few Americans who know that at the end of the First World War when the Palestinians discovered that we wouldn't have the independence that we were promised, we preferred then to have an American mandate rather than a British mandate. And the reason was three fold: One, we were aware of your anti-colonial experience; two, we were aware and moved by President Woodrow Wilson who went to the Versailles Conference that terminated the First World War upholding the principle of self-determination; and three, there was a fact-finding committee sent by the American Congress to Palestine which went back to Capitol Hill and reported that they thought the Balfour Declaration could only be implemented with massive usage of force against the indigenous population. For those three reasons, we wanted to have an American mandate rather than a British mandate.

We Palestinians don't have a negative prejudice concerning America. On the contrary, our disputes and our differences might be on terms of foreign policy, but we don't have a problem of values. On the contrary, we respect and are even fascinated by the American society and the American experience. My only hope is that one day America in Palestine-Israel will reconcile its power with its principles. I believe, that the unresolved nature of the Palestinian problem is what has poisoned international affairs—the Occident, the Orient, the East, the West, Islam, Christianity, etc. And I believe that today, the Palestinians, we who have become the Jews of the Israelis, have become unreasonably reasonable. We don't have high levels of expectation, we are in favor of the two state solution, we are ready to content ourselves with 22 percent of what was originally ours at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We are unreasonably reasonable and I happen to believe that if you were to help us obtain statehood and if you were to listen to our cry for freedom out of captivity and bondage, that we are the key for America's lovability in the Arab world, and the Muslim world.

I'm sure you all expect me to speak of Hamas and I will. First of all, let me give you my analysis of why the result of the election was the result of the election. First of all, I have no ideological affinities with Hamas; I belong to the secular wing of Palestinian nationalism. I am a democrat, and I believe that in a democracy, winners and losers have to behave gracefully. And yet for me a universalist Palestinian, a democracy is made

of four components: constitutional pluralism, the rule of the majority, respect for the minority, and that the last election should not be the last election.

negotiated solutions, and unfortunately we all know that the peace process has been nonexistent the last five years. It was unconvincing in the years that preceded those five years and whoever is a

keen observer knows that what happened underground during those theoretical years of peacemaking was the expansion of the Occupation and not the withdrawal of occupation because we all know that the illegal settlements doubled in volume and in numbers during the theoretical years of peacemaking, making the expansion of the Occupation rather than the shrinking and withdrawal.

But those factors we knew about, and analysts were expecting that Fatah would shrink but would remain the first party maybe need-

ing some coalition partners. And the partners were there, the liberal left, the independents like Hanan Ashwari and others. There comes the repeated blunders of Fatah, which resulted in what I said, that Fatah succeeded in defeating itself. You have read in the papers about bad personal relationships, and bad management of the forces of immobilization and the forces of impatience. Fatah had always struggled to reconcile internal democracy with external cohesion. Fatah had to learn to live without Yassar Arafat who was the dominant engine and locomotive for 40 years.

But besides that poor personal relations produced two competing Fatah lists. There were attempts to merge them. We bypassed the legal deadline, we had to go to court to ask for an extension of the deadline to register the lists. We got

a few hours of extension; the merging of the two competing Fatah lists was done by nominating the least appetizing candidate, which encouraged many a politician to run as an independent against the official list of his own party, thereby disbursing the votes. And I want you to know that the results of our election was not a landslide. Hamas won the election fair and square with 44 percent of the votes. So, there is a majority of 56 percent that do not belong to Hamas and did not vote for Hamas.

I'm not only an activist player and participant but also an observer. The first reaction in the media in certain places was to say, "Oh, the election of Hamas was a blow to the peace process." Which peace process? There is none. On the contrary, the absence of the peace process was one of the many factors that brought Hamas to power. So, the easy explanations, explanations that are too convenient to be convincing, were heavily in circulation. I'm sure you've often heard the theory, that I do not adhere fully to, that says that only a Nixon could make an overture towards China, only a Begin could sign that treaty and only a Sharon could withdraw out of Gaza. So why don't those who adhere to this say that maybe a Palestinian could be the most convincing player for a binding acceptable peace. Why do we always exclude the Palestinians from a logical rational analysis?

I'm not comfortable with decisions that were taken in Washington, in the Quartet and elsewhere. I personally believe that after our elections we had two possible scenarios from which we needed to make a choice. We could either devise and engineer a credible peace process—with emphasis on the word "credible," because we have had farsical peace processes. We either engineer a credible peace process so that we can enhance and persuade and drag into that process a majority of Hamas, and I believe they were available for that, or we



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So, ladies and gentlemen, we had our elections on the 25 January and the party to which I belong lost those elections. I believe that Fatah succeeded in defeating itself on that day. Why? Fatah went into those elections with three major handicaps. The first handicap was the longevity and durability of power. Fatah was in charge of monopolizing decision-making from the late 60s until 2006, and any durability and longevity of that nature results in the erosion of one's popularity.

The second burden was the reality and the reputation of corruption. The reality was serious, grave, and acute, and the reputation was even further magnified—that also had an electoral cost. The third burden that Fatah went into the elections with was the fact that Fatah was identified with the peace process'

could try to rob them of their electoral victory and push the majority of Hamas back to militant policies, which unfortunately is what is taking place today.

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Unfortunately, in politics we don't always make the right choice.

The title of my lecture this evening is that history is still undecided. Speaking to Palestinian audiences I always say I've never belonged to an optimistic school of thought that promises victory and salvation to the oppressed as a sort of predetermined outcome. Unfortunately, history is a cemetery of oppressed people who remained oppressed until they are vanished into historical oblivion. So I always say that the dilemma tormenting the Middle East today is that we either have one people too many—this time it's the Palestinians—or we have a state which is missing and which needs to be created.

I'm known to be a peace enthusiast. I personally believe that the major flaw of the previous peace processes was the fact that the local belligerent parties, the local negotiating partners, were left to sort it out between themselves. There is so much asymmetry between the two

players that Israel was constantly tempted to dictate conditions and the other side was constantly negotiating at the mercy of the very unfavorable balance of power. I always told the Israelis that you want a diplomatic outcome that reflects and mirrors Israeli power-ending transitions, America's constant instinctive alignment on the Israeli preference, Russian decline, European abdication, Arab impotence, and what you hope to be Palestinian resignation. Such a solution, such an outcome, is neither fair, equitable or just. Nor will it be durable, lasting and permanent.

I, for one, have a special affection for de Gaulle. He was a statesman like they make no more these days. De Gaulle after 1967, because he was familiar with the pathology of conflict and the psychology of belligerence, called for the coordination of the [four] major forces; China was not yet in the Security Council. This meant that the key players in the international system would tell the local belligerent actors what the international community expected from them. Unfortunately, his proposal never took off the ground. Why? Because America in 1967-68 was not unhappy with the Israeli military victory—it compensated for the humiliations of Vietnam. The Soviets were shortsighted like they frequently could be, and didn't see why they should give equal status to lesser countries like Britain and France. The British were unenthusiastic simply because the initiative was French to begin with, and as a result, ladies and gentlemen, instead of permanent peace we have a durable peace process. I'm one of those who have been a major dialoguer with Israel and I have no problems with that, but diplomacy is not an exercise in intellectual seduction; it's a balance of power.

I have always believed, ladies and gentlemen, in the need of an elegant im-

posed solution, and maybe that should be mutually unacceptable. I believe sometimes the concept of mutual unacceptability carries more potential than mutual acceptability because if I know that the other side does not like something, it might make it less unattractive to me. So double negatives might be a helpful way out. So as an observer and a practitioner of international relations I'm really intrigued how today we are in a uni-polar international system—luckily we have bypassed the bipolar system where in the third world we were afraid both of superpower collision or of superpower collusion for which we would also pay a price. I personally believe America is the only superpower around the world, except in Israel-Palestine, where it suffers from what I call “self-inflicted importance.” We need America to be the engine and the locomotive for that desirable peace and to tell you frankly, today we all know what the contours of that possible desirable peace should be. You don't need to be a genius, you don't need to reinvent the wheel, we've had enough dialogues, enough symposiums, enough seminars, the homework has been done ad nauseam. We have explored every possible scenario and its opposite. What is lacking is the political willingness to do it. I personally believe that the initiative should be American-led, Quartet-blessed, and internationally supported.

Let me end by saying, as I told you, history is undecided and we need you to help history make the right choices. As a student some 35 years ago I was very impressed with Hegel's diagnosis of the itinerary of humankind that we learn from history that man can never learn anything from history. I think that he, like God in the joke at the beginning of my speech would like to be proven wrong.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.

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