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The Middle East: the way forward

Mohamed Higazy

Israel should be persuaded to respond positively to the opportunity created by the Arab League peace initiative and work with the Palestinian Authority and the regional and international partners to start a peace process that will lead to the creation of a viable Palestinian State.

Upon an invitation of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), a conference was convened on June 22, 2007 to commemorate 40 years of the Israeli occupation of the Arab territories. The conference reflected in its debates and discussions the commitment of all spectrum of the Indian society to support the just cause of the Palestinian people and their plight under Israeli occupation. Therefore, I feel obliged at the outset to express a word of recognition and gratitude to the Indian Government and the people of India who have stood, over the years, firm and committed to the side of justice and in supporting the independence of Palestine and the end of the Israeli occupation.

We have all been following the tragic events taking place in the Gaza Strip recently. It is certainly very sad to see brothers turning against each other after decades of heroic resistance. Palestinians should remain united and should not crack under the heavy-handed policy of the occupation. Like so much that has been going wrong in the Occupied Territories, these regrettable events are merely a symptom of the root cause of the problem affecting the Middle East as a whole, which is the continuation of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. We all hope that the Palestinian National Authority with the help of the Arab and international partners will bring peace and reconciliation between the different Palestinian factions.

The latest developments in Gaza should not at any moment draw our attention away from the fundamental reality of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories as well as the Syrian Golan Heights and what is left in Lebanese Occupied Territories, as being the core issue of the conflict in the Middle East. The Israeli occupation should be looked at as the illness and any other development as merely a symptom. Therefore, ending the occupation is like curing the disease that has exhausted the body of Palestine and anguished the heart of the Middle East, and preoccupied for decades the mind of the whole world.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has squandered the resources and disrupted the lives of the people of the Middle East for many years. With its political, historical and religious dimensions this is a clear and continued threat to world peace and stability and, most importantly, to the relations between various cultures and faiths in the world. Hence, the importance for all of us, people living in this region and members of the international community alike, to act in concert to reach an immediate, just and comprehensive solution to this conflict.

The ugly practices of the Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories provide further evidence of the lack of international commitment in dealing with the rights and future of the Palestinian people. Daily incursions, target killings, road blocks and the segregation wall among many other lawless practices have left little hope, if any, in future peace plans. Today, more than ever, the international community and its institutions should act immediately to end the Palestinian suffering under occupation and to allow moderation and the voice of peace to prevail. Otherwise, only radicalism and fundamentalism will further dominate the scene to the loss of all among them or, on top of them, both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

As we all know, the International Quartet has drawn up a road map for peace. It was accepted by the parties and the states of the region. It was also endorsed by the United Nations Security Council in its resolution 1515. It was hopeful that it would constitute the political framework for negotiation and the end of the conflict. However, this did not happen for many reasons; among them was the lack of international political will and clarity about the endgame, and the failure to curb Israel's continuous breach of Palestinian rights. The international community should renew its adherence to principles of peaceful co-existence between Israel and Palestine and determine the general parameters of the final settlement among Israel, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon.

There is a need now to build upon this cornerstone in order to create a political framework that would move the parties towards the objective desired by the international community as a whole, namely the establishment of a comprehensive peace that would put an end to occupation and strife in this part of the world and the creation of the Palestinian State to live side by side with the State of Israel in defined and secured borders.

All parties should engage in formulating the "endgame," and setting the parameters for a permanent settlement based on U.N. resolutions and the principle of "Land for Peace," where light should appear at the end of the tunnel. This is the only way to give the Palestinian people hope and confidence in the process that has been dragging for decades. Today, once again we are at a crossroads in the peace process. A historic change has to be made and bold decisions have to be taken, and commitments should be honoured locally, regionally and internationally.

To help the peace process further and to identify the way forward, in their summit in Riyadh in March 2007, the Arab leaders yet again offered Israel peace and full recognition in return for the creation of a Palestinian State on the land it occupied in 1967 with East Jerusalem as its Capital and ending the occupation of the Golan Heights and the rest of the Lebanese territories in Sheba Farms. This initiative was adopted in Beirut in 2002 but was not taken up by the Israelis, and we hope that they will not squander this opportunity again. The alternative is the continuation of the cycle of violence and misery of occupation that has been going on for far too long.

Israel must be persuaded to respond in a positive and constructive manner to the opportunity created by the Arab League peace initiative and work with the Palestinian Authority as well as regional and international partners to start a meaningful peace process that will lead to the creation of a viable Palestinian State. Through this road alone, the Middle East and its people will find their way to tranquillity, peace and prosperity in a region rich with economic potential, young and dynamic populations and, above all, a wealth of knowledge and cultural heritage. During his last visit to Israel last month along with Jordan Foreign Minister Abdul Elah Alkhalib to present to the Israeli leadership the Arab Peace Initiative, Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul-Gheit reiterated the need to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people in the occupied lands through tangible Israeli measures that could be felt by ordinary Palestinians. He also added that such measures could lead to a political process, which could help in reaching a just settlement and establishing an independent Palestinian State.

Therefore, and in the meantime, Israel should, inter alia, (i) end all settlement activities, (ii) release the blocked Palestinian tax revenues, (iii) remove all restrictions on the movement of peoples and goods in all Palestinian Occupied Territories, (iv) release Palestinian prisoners, (v) stop all incursions, arrests and targeted killings, and (vi) refrain from provocative actions in East Jerusalem and around its holy sites.

The Arab world renewed once again through the Arab Peace Initiative our commitment to a just and comprehensive peace. By doing so, we assured the Israeli people that there is a path other than that of violence and counter-violence, and that the Arab world is ready to accept them as neighbours and part of the region, within a comprehensive peace agreement that transcends the suffering of the past, preserves the interests of the peoples of the region and assures Arabs and Israelis of a life in safety, security and cooperation.

One final comment concerning the statement made by the U.S. President on July 16 regarding the Palestinian issue. Egypt welcomed the American proposal to convene an international meeting later this year to restart peace talks. The Egyptian Foreign Minister stated that he supports the indications included in the statement which refer to the need to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and to establish a viable Palestinian State with territorial integrity. He also referred to what was included in the President's statement concerning resolving the issues of the Palestinian refugees and Jerusalem. The Foreign Minister also outlined that establishing a Palestinian State will not be achieved by just ending the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian lands but also through dismantling existing settlements, not just refraining from building more in the future.

Let me conclude by making a reference to the new Middle East that we in the Arab world are looking forward to, and here allow me to quote Mr. Aboul-Gheit who said:

“The new Middle East we are looking for is a Middle East free from all threats to its stability and progress; a Middle East free from the occupation by one country of another; a Middle East where all peoples enjoy their independence within safe boundaries; a Middle East immune from political terrorism, religious extremism and ethnic chauvinism; a Middle East in which there is no place for nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, Such, is the Middle East for which we in the Arab world are working with our partners to build”.

(Dr. Mohamed Higazy is Egyptian Ambassador to India.)

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