



DEBATE

Professor Manuel HASSASSIAN, Palestinian Ambassador to the United Kingdom

I am the Palestinian ambassador to the UK. My name is Professor Manuel Hassassian. In 1998, I was one of the greatest friends of Mr Barak. To the point when I used to write articles when I said that here come a leader who is a disciple of a great leader like Rabin and a man that I considered to be a white hope. This does not still undermine my impressions of Mr Barak as being still the voice of reason in such a narrow right-wing government in Israel. I still believe that he could be the dramatic force in changing the perceptions of such a regime in Israel. We are not here to be involved in a polemical discourse, in finger-pointing, who is right and who is wrong; whether settlement activity is right or wrong; whether Abu Mazen is weak or ineffective. I think we have to transcend this polemical discourse into something much more positive. The reason I am saying this is that we are stuck in the historically inevitable and the politically impossible. I think we have to move a little bit forward. We must move forward from the tactics of myopic crisis management into something that we consider being a long-range objective of conflict resolution.

My question to Mr Barak is: He has been in power now two years - when is the right time, when are the conditions conducive, when can we look at this glass as being half-full rather than being stuck in the adversarial position of trying to say that 'you are wrong and I am right' and move forward when we know that the cracks of the problem in the Middle East today is the non-solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Arab Spring, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan are all peripheral issues that emanated because of the non-solution of this important conflict. When we talk about peace, security and so on that could reign supreme in the Middle East, I think if we resolve our problems and be strong enough to have the determination as leaders, to come forward without putting any conditions and say 'let us put all the package on the table and let us clinch a deal with a white smoke'. That is why we need the Europeans to help the Americans in facilitating this process. I wish that Mr Barak could be that important leader whom I always revered. He could be the draconian change in such a government in Israel, to have the boldness to come forward and to tell Abu Mazen 'come here, let us sit and let us make a deal'. Thank you.

Steven ERLANGER, Paris Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*

Thank you. Would you like to respond to that now.

Ehud BARAK, Former Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel

First of all, I would like to make my modest observation that I think that what happened with Iran and the Arab Spring are not the result of the inability to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is no causal chain that leads from the conflict to these events. They are beyond us. It is true that the fact that we have not yet been able to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is used, sometimes as an excuse, sometimes as an explanation by those who want to manipulate our perception of the severity both of the threats in the Arab Spring even over opportunities that are embedded into these developments. I do not believe that we are the reason for it, but I agree that it is part of the discourse and the public discourse about these issues. I think that the time is now mainly because of the quartet. Apropos the quartet, it is not just four individuals who elected themselves to guide us. It is America, Russia, the European Union and the UN. All the relevant powers in the world expect us and the Palestinians to sit together and start working with no preconditions. This makes it the right time.



Having said no preconditions, we really have to avoid any preconditions from being put on the table. Whenever we feel the Palestinians are putting certain preconditions, like putting an end to any construction activity, then that adds up to be part of the blame game rather than part of a serious attempt to enter negotiations, and I believe that we have to find a way to start it. Normally immediately after an election in Israel there is always the opportunity or the chance that a unity government will be created for which any entering into negotiations does not create any dissonance and it will simplify things for our side but will put the Palestinians to a tougher test. How did the agreement with Egypt get started? That was Hassan Touhami dealing with Dayan that created the background of this launching pad. Even in Oslo, we had certain discussions with the Palestinians long before it was pushed to the surface, in some Scandinavian woods, and it created the launching pad. Probably it had the active support of the world. We expect, of course, that this support will be even handed. The world will look in the same open-minded way into our considerations and demands and security needs as well as into the Palestinian ones.

To summarise, I believe that the time is ripe that we should negotiate. I can tell you that from our government, there is a readiness to enter into the negotiating room without any preconditions and Netanyahu himself said more than once that he is ready to start it immediately.

Steven ERLANGER, Paris Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*

Mary Robinson, please.

Mary ROBINSON, former President of Ireland, President of the Mary Robinson Foundation

Thank you, Ehud. If I could begin by saying that I agree with His Excellency the Palestinian Ambassador from the United Kingdom that you are somebody who seeks to find a solution. As you know, I am one of the elders and the elders have been very concerned.

Ehud BARAK, Former Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel

The youngest among the elders

Mary ROBINSON, former President of Ireland, President of the Mary Robinson Foundation

I am very glad you said that. My husband unfortunately goes around describing himself as a nursemaid to one of the elders and it is not so good. We have been supportive of the initiative which was taken by the Palestinians to seek recognition from the United Nations and they have gone the route of the Security Council. We know that if they go the route of the General Assembly that there will be a very significant majority there. I have been puzzled at the routed opposition to this because it is an ingredient that will enhance the sense of status on the Palestinian side. It does not change anything on the ground. In fact it is symbolic. I wondered if you could comment on just why there is such routed opposition in fact both from Israel and the United States. When UNESCO recognised Palestine as a member, all the funding was cut off. It does seem hard to understand why the issue is so hard line.



Christopher DICKEY, Paris Bureau Chief and Middle East Regional Editor for *Newsweek Magazine*

This is a short question, maybe not a simple one. I think there is a lot of concern in the United States, even among people who would like to see some kind of action taken to get rid of the nuclear potential in Iran, that Israel might be able to start a war but that the United States would have to finish the war. What kind of scenario can you paint, theoretically of course, in which Israel could eliminate Iran's nuclear potential and it would not lead to a conflict that would in fact involve the United States of America?

Ehud BARAK, Former Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel

I noticed that Professor Kishore Mahbubani raised his hand twice.

Kishore MAHBUBANI, Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore

I can see, Steve, that the Prime Minister Barak has better eyesight.

Steven ERLANGER, Paris Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*

I just wanted to give him a chance to answer two at a time, but go ahead.

Kishore MAHBUBANI, Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore

I hope Mr Barak that you will accept this question as coming from a friend of Israel. I will be very honest with you. I genuinely worry about Israel's long-term future. I will tell you why- the long-term correlation of forces is working against Israel. American power globally has peaked, not in absolute terms but in relative terms, and can only go down. The power of the Islamic world has troughed, it can only go up. The combination of these two forces leads to a kind of pincer movement against Israel's long-term interests. If you accept this as the logic of the future, would you consider that maybe it is best to try an imperfect solution today rather than a perfect solution tomorrow because tomorrow there may not be a perfect solution. If that is the case, would you also consider doing something 'out of the box', like attempting a kind of unilateral withdrawal from all Palestinian territories because then you remove the poison that is being used in the international system that keeps saying that the Palestinians are the only people under foreign occupation. If you destroy that completely and say 'now you Palestinians, you have your own territory, you are on your own' then Israel is in a very profound way liberated from a huge burden by doing that.

Ehud BARAK, Former Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel

Let us try to answer. First of all, we see the Palestinians going to the Security Council and the General Assembly as a unilateral step that basically tries to bypass the natural road which is to enter into the room without preconditions and try to have a breakthrough. It is clear that the zeitgeist, the atmosphere in the world, is moving gradually closer to the Palestinian position in recent years and it is clear to us that they can reach a majority, at least a numerical majority, in



the General Assembly. It might just reinforce the idea that they can come to the negotiation table and try to dictate phrases that were collected from these forums about the nature of the solution, rather than to sit down and understand that no side can get out of the room with everything you dreamed of. There is a need for painful decisions on both sides. We just refer direct negotiations. The road to the General Assembly is always open to the Palestinians.

Another element is that we feel that something has been changed during the 10 years since we negotiated with President Clinton and Arafat. Two important elements have changed. One is that the atmosphere is more promising in the West Bank but on the other hand is the tie with Arafat, however tough kind of character he is. I used to say that if he looks like a terrorist, walks like a terrorist and quacks like a terrorist, then he probably is a terrorist. He got the Nobel Peace Prize as a down payment for something that I always used to use as a metaphor: we have to behave like two leaders who are coming to save two townhouses from a fire, and you never know if there is a great fireman on the other side who already has the medal from the whole world for excellence in fire extinguishing and he is not a pyromaniac and he does not carry some gasoline and some matches. That was the kind of feeling on our side. We feel that we have to act together with them and here comes the fact that they lost control of Gaza.

With Arafat, if he can overcome his inhibitions, you can have a peace agreement that the others can implement. You go to the other side of the table and start to implement. Probably within three or four years, you will have peace. Now the maximum you can expect is something that will be put on the shelf because he lost control of his people in Gaza. We do not want to see something artificial, some hollow wrapping that brings a government of technocrats and says that 'it is okay with Hamas, do not look at them, Abu Mazen and Fayyad are running the show'. If they create any kind of unity with the Hamas, we expect that at minimum the Hamas will be able to accept the rules of the Quartet, namely, recognising Israel, renouncing terrorism and accepting all previous agreements, and we aim to dismantle the terrorism machines, the missiles.

Steven ERLANGER, Paris Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*

This is the last question. We are running out of time.

Ehud BARAK, Former Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel

I will try very fast to answer the others. I cannot honestly answer in public Chris's question, so I will go beyond it. I will answer Professor Mohommad Baneer's question. I think there is certain truth in it but let me tell you the following: 20 years ago, I was a commander of the armed forces under Rabin as a Prime Minister, and I said in a public appearance that we have an interest for our security to come to an agreement, a peaceful agreement, with all our neighbours before Iran turns to nuclear power. It was 1992 and I said that a wave of Muslim fundamentalist terror will overwhelm the whole Arab world. I was not a kind of prophet, but it was clear even then and we tried, Rabin tried, Paris tried, Ben Netanyahu in his way tried in his first term. I have tried, I do not want to say courageously, but I was ready to go to the farthest extent to do it, Olmert tried, and until now we could not succeed.

In the meantime we pulled out from the old area of Lebanon just to find there 45,000 rockets and missiles. We pulled out from every square inch of Gaza to find there Hamas government. Some Israelis in the best of their minds said 'do not lose your senses, you are playing with something too abstract, you might try something totally unilateral'. If this is the only reason that we are holding something of their dream, if this is the only reason for the whole conflict, probably by unilateral gesture you can solve it, you can take the steam out of it.

However, if the real intention is to see Israel out of the map and out of the region, then that will not help and you will just accelerate the problem. That is the reason why so many young Israelis, in a way that our generation does not fully come to grips with, demand that, first of all, the Palestinian movement will say out loud and clear, 'we want this and that from Israel but we recognize their right to be there as a neighbour as a legitimate state, as a legitimate Jewish



democratic state within the region. We are ready, once an agreement is signed, to make it sealed by the paragraph saying and this agreement, being mutually agreed, is the end of conflict and the end of any mutual claims'. Thank you.

Steven ERLANGER, Paris Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*

I am sorry. I promised to keep to time and our time is up. This is a man of great courage. He has proved it in the past. I am hopeful, as are many people here, that you and your government will muster more of it. I just want to thank you for your patience and the discussion today.

Ehud BARAK, Former Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel

Thank you.