

MEIR SHEETRIT

Member of the Knesset; former Minister of Internal Affairs of Israel

Dominique Moïsi, Special Advisor, Ifri

The third speaker will be Meir Sheerit, an old friend of the WPC and a seasoned and experienced Israeli political figure, a Member of the Knesset for many long years who has occupied many ministerial functions.

Meir Sheerit, Member of the Knesset; former Minister of Internal Affairs of Israel

Good afternoon. I am glad to be here; the issue is very important, and it is very interesting to listen to all my colleagues, every one of whom provides an excellent possibility of changing views. The Middle East, as a matter of fact, is in quite a state of chaos. We have many countries without any connection to Israel which are falling apart, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and what is going on there is really unbelievable. There are a lot of terror organisations working there and active there, and every one of them wants a piece of Syria. There are more than ten different organisations in Syria alone, including Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, Al-Nusra, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah, every one with its own target and its own plan for Syria, and Israel can do nothing except open a hospital on the border with the Golan Heights and receive all of those who have been injured. It does not matter which side they come from; they can easily receive treatment in this hospital, and those who are injured are brought to Israeli hospitals. More than 300 people from Syria have been treated in Israeli hospitals, their families were brought with them, and they were amazed to find a very different Israel than the image they had before.

I was listening yesterday to Prince Turki, and I like how he spoke; I liked his sincerity and his frankness. He said yesterday that Iran is very involved in all the activities of those terror organisations, and if someone has to testify to that, I could do so. Israel faces the possibility of Iran having two big armies, Hezbollah in the north, in Lebanon, and Hamas in the south, in Gaza, both trained and armed by Iran. Many times we have stopped ships coming from Iran to Gaza, or other convoys of weapons from Iran through Syria to Lebanon. UN's decisions do not matter over there, and UNIFIL does not matter; Hezbollah has more than 100,000 different missiles, much more accurate, much more long-range and much heavier, threatening Israel, and the same situation was in Gaza as well.

Therefore, we are living in a very difficult neighbourhood, and what makes me wonder is that, in the situation we find ourselves today as Israelis, fighting together with many radical Islamic countries against radical Islam. Many countries at last understood that Israel was standing alone in fighting terror, and now we are fighting together against radical Islam. You see even Iran in some of the fight against ISIS, but many other countries now understand the terror threat not only to Israel but to each and every one of them. This situation could be a very good opportunity to have arrangements or peace with all those Arab states if we did not have the problem which is the main obstacle, the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian state.

I disagree with my colleagues who said at lunch today that it is impossible to come to a solution. I totally reject that. I believe that we have no other choice but to come to a solution and to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Netanyahu is even saying that, and Netanyahu and his party are considered to be leftist. He said in the Knesset many times that he is for a solution of two states for two peoples. The problem is that he is a better talker than he is a doer, and in this situation we have no other alternative. That is why I personally believe that the only way to do it is through the Arab Initiative, and I come again to yesterday's speech by Prince Turki Al-Faisal, and I agree with almost every word he said about it.

I do not support it not only today, but since the first time it was proposed in 2002, when I tried to convince Ariel Sharon to give up the disengagement from Gaza, call Riyadh and tell them we accepted their initiative and wanted to talk



about it. I was very glad to hear Prince Turki say last year in Monaco and again yesterday that they are willing to talk. Saudi Arabia, which originated this initiative, came up with a very ingenious way to solve the problem in my opinion. They are not only offering peace with the Palestinians, but to go back to the 1967 borders with a swap, and I said that there was no Arab leader in the League who believed that Israel could literally return to the 1967 borders, but all of them would agree to swap. I said this in 2002, and I am glad it came true.

The second thing he said was that we should find an agreeable, justifiable solution to the Palestinian refugees. I am quoting the Arab Initiative. 'Agreeable' means that Israel has to agree, and again, I do not believe any Arab leader believes that Israel will accept Palestinian refugees within the Green Line, but we have no problem with their coming to live in the Palestinian state if they want to, and be compensated. The reason I support the Arab Initiative so much and think it is the best solution is that there is no reason to pay the same price just for peace with the Palestinians if we can have the same prize, peace, with 57 Islamic countries, full normalisation, and that will be the end of the conflict. I am quoting again from the Arab Initiative.

Thirdly, this is the only way to guarantee the existence of that peace, because if we have peace and normalisation with all Islamic and Arab states, nobody will break it in that situation. It is also a way to bring Hamas back under the authority of the Palestinian Authority, because they cannot stand alone. Were they to stand alone without giving a damn about all the other Arab and Islamic countries, we would treat them like an enemy. Therefore, for all these reasons this is the best way to go, and I believe it could only be done if the Prime Minister of Israel called Riyadh and proposed talking about this initiative. That is what I believe, and that is what I would do, and I believe that we could reach peace with all the Arab states within a year, one year, if there were a will.

I am sorry to say that our partners are not easy ones. Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Arafat missed the opportunity with Barak and Clinton. Abu Mazen missed the opportunity with Olmert; he signed an agreement with him, asked for a few days and never came back. They also create very big obstacles on the way, and sometimes I have the feeling that the Palestinians do not really want to be a state. It is the best situation for them; they do not want to bear the responsibility of becoming a state. Today they are the focus of the world, and we are considered to be the bad guys. It is not true, and it is not really the situation; Palestinians live very well under Israeli authority, and all the rumours are not really true.

I listened yesterday to the Prince, who said that the Minister of Housing said in Washington that maybe we do not need a Palestinian state, that maybe we should annex the area. He represents at most three members of the Knesset, and is the very right wing of the political rainbow in Israel. It is like what Hamas says, he wants to wipe Israel. Iran said it wants to wipe Israel. We have no intention of going anywhere; we are there to stay, and the Palestinians are there to stay. I believe that this conversation should be between us and the Arab world. It should be done on a personal level. We have to understand the Arab culture, and we have to do it with respect.

We have to create trust between the sides, otherwise we end up nowhere, and I am sorry to say that the Americans, who take responsibility for making peace between Israel and the Palestinians, understand nothing about Arabs. They are making every possible mistake everywhere, and sometimes create damage. During the last negotiations under John Kerry, he was talking one way to the Palestinians and another way to the Israelis, but we were not talking to each other. I asked in the Knesset how you can make peace with someone you do not meet. Netanyahu never met Abu Mazen during the whole process. I do not believe it is possible to make peace with anyone without meeting him. I believe that to make peace with someone you have to know him very well and be very close and that could be done in our area.

It is my belief that Israel should negotiate by itself, and invite the US, Russia and Europe to participate in and support the process. However, we should do it ourselves, and I believe that could be done. Last but not least, we are facing an election now for that reason - Netanyahu decided to dissolve the Knesset and hold an election, and we are now trying to create a front of centre-left parties in order to replace this right-wing government. There would be a total change in attitude if that were to happen, and I hope it will happen.