



MANUEL HASSASSIAN

Ambassador from Palestine to the United Kingdom; former representative at the Ministry of Higher Education and at the Association of Arab Universities

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

Mr Ambassador, what about the Kerry paper as a path to interim negotiations?

Manuel HASSASSIAN, Ambassador from Palestine to the United Kingdom; former representative at the Ministry of Higher Education and at the Association of Arab Universities

Let me make some general remarks before we proceed. We must put the conflict in the right context. This means that the discussion should end up between two partners to the conflict that have to overcome the hurdles and the challenges emanating as a result. This is an important factor to be considered in any kind of negotiations. We have to note that this conflict has been a protracted conflict, between two epistemic communities, that transcends the boundaries of fighting over a piece of territory.

Today, the struggle between Palestinians and Israelis is a struggle for existence and it is also the struggle to maintain the national identity, the geography and the demography of the Palestinian people. It is important to bear in mind that we cannot continue the dialogue as we did for the last 22 years, because it proved to be a dismal failure. Why? It is due to the simple fact that the Palestinian side was not considered on a parity level. We have been in a situation where the top dog is constantly dictating the terms of reference to the underdog. Unfortunately, Jim, I have to say that the third party, which was supposed to be an honest broker for peace, unequivocally supported the top dog over the underdog. That created a disequilibrium in the entire process of dialogue and negotiations.

Mr Rabinovich and I know for a fact that there are six permanent issues. I have led 52 second-track negotiations and I have met with Israelis at all levels. These include ex politicians, top military brass, professors and what have you. We have our friend Meir Sheetrit, with whom I had at least 6-7 11nd track negotiations, where we have agreed on the parameters of how to solve this conflict. The problem is in the state of mind of the Israelis.

There is a crisis of leadership in Israel. We do not see that bold move coming forward in the context of concession, which I hate as a concept, because Israel is not conceding. Israel is denying the right to self-determination to Palestinians who have been under occupation for so many years now. If you ask me today, I totally agree with Mr Rabinovich. We are stuck today, Palestinians and Israelis, between the historically inevitable and the politically impossible. We have tried time and again, in Annapolis, and we have continued all the time. This is with a President like Mahmoud Abbas, whom I think should be listed as the author of pragmatism in the Webster Dictionary.

He has been choosing between constraints all along, and for that reason, I do not think that Mr Abbas is a weak President. It is the fact that disempowerment of President Abbas by the Israeli stubbornness in negotiations and leadership has led to the rise of Hamas and to all kinds of extremism. The desperation in the peace process has led to the rise of such militancy among Palestinians, who think the only way towards a solution is through using convulsive violence. I say we will never be able to find a military solution to this conflict. Israel has won five major wars in the Middle East, but it has failed dismally in bringing security to its own individuals.

The Kerry paper and other papers that have been submitted show time and again that we have to change our attitude and our strategy for negotiations. Unless the Israelis look eye to eye at the Palestinians at the negotiating table, nothing will move forward. As long as we have such a fascist regime today in Israel, controlled by the settlers and the extreme religious wing, we do not have any chance for moving forward in the peace process. We have people like Meir and Rabinovich, who have long-standing experience in understanding the psyche and the mentality of the



Palestinians in the negotiating process. They appreciate our history and our struggle, so I can tell you then that I am hopeful.

With the current regime in Israel, I think it is hopeless. I believe that Netanyahu is the most moderate and pragmatic in this present Government. If he is the most pragmatic in this Government, how on earth can I sit and debate with one of his cabinet ministers rather than debating with Rabinovich? I can agree with him at least 80% on a way of solving this problem. We Palestinians have to maintain our stand and our resilience. The problem does not lie in how to move forward with the negotiations, it is the lack of will on the part of Israel to move forward.

One important factor that has shaped this conflict is the mutual distrust and fear. If we do not transcend that psychological burden of fear and distrust, let alone the added dimension of religion in this conflict, which scares me to death, we will be back into the zero-sum conflict. This means their gains are my losses. I believe that the Palestinians today are ready to go back to the negotiating table. We have not opted for violence, because violence is a recipe for disaster. We have no other choice except to go to the international organisations. We believe that the role of honest broker of peace cannot be continued by the United States. It has proved its failure for the last 22 years, because its approach was always focused on crisis management rather than conflict resolution.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

Let me be sure I understand you. Are you calling on the United States to withdraw from its mediating role?

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I am calling on the United States to be more proactive and to be unequivocal in its support to a balanced process of negotiation. It should give some room to the European Union to stop being payers for this conflict but to become proactive players in the political process. This is what I want to see. I do not want to see the United States hijacking this political process in the Middle East, where we have witnessed 22 years of deterioration and exacerbation of violence.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

It is interesting, because I do not think any of the critics of President Obama that I can think of have accused him of harbouring some secret desire to hijack the negotiations. In fact, the term used around the White House is strategic retrenchment from obligations overseas. I am not quite sure, but to put it as a question to you, why not accept the Kerry paper as a starting point?

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The Kerry paper falls too short for the aspirations of the Palestinians. As I said earlier, there is a problem with this conflict and the deterioration of this conflict. This is the fact that Israel, to a certain degree and approved by the United States, have continued incrementally to disempower the moderate powers within the PLO, i.e. President Abbas. This is what is happening today in the Arab world. We have to bear in mind that there is the failure of the peace process and the lack of resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the fulcrum of peace and stability in the region, and it has been totally derailed by looking at the tragic phenomena that are the culmination of the failure of the peace process. We have seen the advent of extremism, like Daesh, Jabhat Al-nusra and what have you. These emanated from the fact that they have seen corruption within the moderate, secular regimes in the Middle East. And that they have seen the failure of the peace process and the failure to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This is the essence and the fulcrum of stability in the region resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.



Regarding that particular fact, why should we deal with the results rather than going to the root cause of the problem. I am so happy that Mr Thierry de Montbrial made a point yesterday after having a long three-hour discussion on the Middle East. He talked about the culmination of the failure of the peace process and gave us the chance to talk today for 45 minutes about why the Middle East is so troubled. We have to move forward in finding plausible solutions to this conflict.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

That is exactly what we are trying to do in this conversation and I do not want it to degenerate into a back and forth over whose leadership crisis is most severe.

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I will tell you what we have to do.