

MANUEL HASSASSIAN

Ambassador of Palestine to the United Kingdom

Bertrand COLLOMB

Manuel Hassassian, you are the ambassador of Palestine to London. You come from the Middle East, the borders of which have been so volatile and so difficult over many years. How do you react to that description, and what are you thinking about this evolution of a world order?

Manuel HASSASSIAN

I think I will make telegraphic remarks before I delve into answering your question. First of all, I think we have been living for the last 20 years in a state of a new world disorder. When we talk about new world order, I think we have to be daring enough to assume that there is an equilibrium in the international balance of power which does not exist today. This is because of the dominance of an unipolar power i.e. U.S. that has caused regional and ethnic conflicts. What we witness today is not a Middle East that is harmonious, but a Middle East that is based on ethnic sectarianism and total factionalism.

My second remark is the fact that everybody talks about the Middle East today, with the ongoing conflicts in Syria, in Libya, in Tunisia and in all parts of the Middle East. They are trying overwhelmingly to take these problems as being the basic problems of instability and insecurity. Let me remind this audience that peace, stability and security in the Middle East have been lacking for decades now. The simple answer to this is the lack of a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

I believe today, we cannot continue to relegate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the agenda of the Middle East to number 10 or number 11. We have to bear in mind that most of the regional conflicts and the emergence of fundamental ideologies have been based on using the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a façade for their ulterior motives. This is a major factor in creating these kinds of imbalances and insecurities. I must say that today, there is a misconception in the Western World. Islamophobia is becoming the current concern in the West. Meanwhile, there is a lack of an explicit distinction between Islam as a religion and Muslims. This is something that has created an image of warfare that has led to wedge between the West and the East.

I think it is also important to note that we have an unstable Middle East because of the lack of good governance and because of the failed states. Furthermore, the abject poverty and the lack of distribution of wealth is another added factor. Also, the high illiteracy rate and of the lack of empowerment of women in the Middle East makes it worse. All these combine to be conducive to objective conditions that led to what is called the Arab Spring.

When we talk about territoriality and borders, these are only cosmetic which solve certain issues that are not pertinent to the issue that should be at stake today i.e. the Palestinian Israeli conflict. When we talk about ISIL, we know very well what those conducive conditions were that led ISIL to be forthcoming. Consequently, ISIL has become one of the most unstable non-state actors in regional politics. You know exactly how to deal with this issue. It is not a question of trying more or less to eliminate ISIL militarily without having boots on the ground. This is an essential part of defeating ISIL.



However, the question that is challenging us today is about the ideology of ISIL, which has been very appealing to the Muslim youth. This is the idea of regenerating the new caliphate, the idea of puritanical Islam, which is becoming more and more conducive to the youth. This is the idea where the challenges of modernisation, economic development and sustenance will be formidably challenged by ideas of going back to the past.

Today, we are witnessing a new world disorder and a new Middle East. Hence Palestinians and Israelis today are stuck between what I consider the historical inevitable and the political impossible. That is why I think third-party interventions have been catastrophic, because third-parties like the United States kept on hammering on crisis management rather than on conflict resolution. One cannot be a third party when one is unequivocally supporting one party against the other. It is so unfortunate, that in the negotiating process, the so called negotiations, turned out to be power politics. It is the diktat of power politics that has really shaped this conflict into what we call zero-sum conflict.

I cannot perceive the elements that will dramatically or draconianly transform this zero-sum conflict into a win-win situation without having the international community take seriously the question of stability and security in the Middle East. This is in the context of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This is the longest occupation in modern history, and this is one of the longest conflicts that has been taking place in that part of the world now, for 100 years.

Next year, there will be the commemoration of the centenary of the Balfour Declaration by the British Government. The Balfour Declaration is a badge of dishonour that created the destitution and the forced diasporisation of the Palestinians in what we call the Nakba. When we talk to the British officials, they say, 'We are not celebrating, but we are marking'. They are marking the establishment of the state of Israel at the expense of the exclusion and the deportation of the Palestinian people.

It has been 70 years since the partition plan, since the Nakba. We have had 50 years of occupation and 10 years of siege on Gaza. Where do we go from here? What is required to bring the Israelis and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. We have to infer one conclusion from this conflict. This conflict has been based, all through history, on two most important factors. There is the factor of mutual distrust and the factor of mutual fear. We may not overcome the fear and the distrust alone. We may not exonerate ourselves from the religious dimension that has been a prime factor in bringing this conflict to what I call convulsive violence today.

If we cannot, I think this conflict will explode the entire Middle East. God forbid, given the instability and given the lack of equilibrium between the balance of power in the international community, I think this would lead to a major war. If we want to avoid this, it is very simple. There may be no military solution to this conflict, we must talk about a two-state solution where the international community shoulders the responsibility of creating a Palestinian state. If we fail to do so, then the options are very limited.

One option is, we have to forget about a two-state solution, because with the building of settlements today, it is a two-state delusion. If we do not talk about peace, then this convulsive violence will continue to be a major factor of insecurity and instability in the Middle East. Since there is no military solution, there should be a way out. That way out is going back to the negotiating table, not in the context of diktat politics, but in the context of eye-to-eye partners in conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. This is with an honest broker of peace and not a third party that has been unequivocally supporting the top dog over the underdog.

Bertrand COLLOMB

Your impassioned speech was a good example of the difficult problem that any change in the geopolitical situation in a region can cause.