



MEIR SHEETRIT

Member of Parliament, Israel

Jim HOAGLAND

Our next speaker is Meir Sheetrut from Israel, he is a Member of Parliament and has been to this conference before and given us reason to ask him back.

Meir SHEETRIT

I would like to thank Thierry and all WPC staff for the extraordinary organisation of this conference this time, and to thank you for having me here in the panel and in the conference.

Yesterday was the memorial day of the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, who was assassinated in November 1995. He was not assassinated by an Islamic terrorist, but by a young Jew, who came from a radical extreme part of the society of Israel. The assassination happened after a big demonstration of more than 100,000 people on a square of Tel Aviv Municipality. Immediately after Rabin finished the convention, he went down, and the guy shot him. The one who shot Rabin wanted to stop the peace process.

We had two big leaders in Israel who really changed the history of the Middle East. One of them was Menahem Begin, who made peace with Egypt by withdrawing from Sinai and made peace with Anwar el-Sadat. The other one is Rabin, who signed the Oslo Accords and made peace with Jordan, signed the peace agreement with Jordan and Clinton. The question is, have we arrived at a deadlock, and is hope for peace in the Middle East, between Israel and Palestine lost? I am from those who believe it is not; we are not in a deadlock, and there is hope for peace if we act in the right way, as I will explain.

First let me explain why we are stuck, why we are not making any movement. We have had at least two opportunities of peace with Palestine, final peace, which, I am sorry to say, were rejected by the Palestinian leaders. One of them was when Prime Minister Barak, with Clinton, offered Arafat almost everything the Palestinians asked for, in order to have peace; most of the West Bank, the old city of Jerusalem, and Gaza of course, but Arafat refused. The second time was when Prime Minister Olmert came to an agreement with Abu Mazen, where he signed the agreement, and Abu Mazen asked for a few more days, and did not come back to sign. I ask myself, why do they not sign? Why are they not finalising this peace? Do they not want a Palestine State? Having been in politics, in the Israeli government in different capacities for many years, I have concluded that in order to achieve peace we need two partners; one was demonstrated by the government of Israel, by Prime Ministers, who offered the price required for peace, and the other is the Palestinian side. The Palestinians have to make a very tough decision in order to have peace, which is to give up what they call the right of return. It means that the refugees cannot come back into the Israeli territories after the peace with Palestine, they can come back to the Palestinian State but not into Israel. In my opinion, no Palestinian leader will accept this decision, they cannot do it alone.

I believe the only solution to reach peace with the Middle East is through what we call the Saudi Initiative, or the Arab Peace Initiative. I am a big supporter of this initiative, since 2002 when it came to the world, I have fought to explain it and convince the Prime Ministers of Israel, the government, the Knesset, to go in that direction. Why do I believe this is the solution? The Arab Peace Initiative proposes that if you make peace with the Palestinians, by going back to the 1967 borders, and find an agreeable, justified solution to the Palestinian refugees, 57 Islamic countries are willing to make peace with Israel, with full normalisation, and that will be the end of the conflict. Fantastic. I believed in it so strongly that when Prime Minister Sharon wanted to disengage from Gaza, I suggested he did not disengage from Gaza, but instead to pick up the Arab Initiative, call Riyadh, talk to them, negotiate this initiative because it can really bring us to peace for four reasons. First, if we make peace through the Arab Initiative, we are in a situation that we have a guaranteed existence of peace because we are making peace with 57 Islamic countries, not just with Palestine. The people say that if you make peace with Palestine, somebody tomorrow will come and tear it up, like what



happened with Gaza when we disengaged, they will make it out of Hamastan. Secondly, in my opinion, this is the way, to contend with the problem of Hamas and Fatah, to bring them together. Even now, there is progress because of the positive and aggressive activity of President el-Sisi of Egypt, which has brought about the situation that they are now trying for reconciliation. Thirdly, it is the best way to transfer this agreement to the public of Israel, because if you come to the people of Israel with an agreement not only with Palestinian authority, but with 57 Islamic countries, making full normalisation, it will change the world, it will change the Middle East, it will be easier and faster to pass it in the Knesset and in the public.

I am positive and optimistic because many things have happened in the Middle East. The interest of the Arab States has changed, they find themselves in the same situation in which we were fighting radical Islamic terror, now we find Egypt fighting against the Brothers of Islam, Iraq, everywhere we go, they find themselves in the same situation as us. That is the reason why we are more connected today with the Arab countries, even if we do not have a diplomatic relationship with many of them, we have very good cooperation today, fighting terror. Secondly, the Iranian threat of nuclear weapons is not against Israel, I do not accept that, they would be stupid to attack us. They want to have nuclear weapons in order to be the strongest part of the Arab world, and it is making all the Arab states around Iran very worried, including Saudi, Kuwait and all the Gulf countries and others, they do not want Iran to have nuclear weapons. In this case, our interests are together, we do not want them to have nuclear weapons. Thirdly, Saudi is changing. You have seen what is happening now, the new Governor of Saudi, the Crown Prince, is doing things we could not have imagined, just a few weeks ago. The changes he has made show that he is taking his position seriously as the next King of Saudi. He has changed all the people in government, he is currently host to Hariri, who has left Lebanon in fear of his life and he wants to build a beautiful, modern city: he is changing Saudi Arabia. Secondly, he is very supportive, Saudi became very supportive of the peace process, in fact, it is their initiative. Last but not least, there is some contribution of Trump. When he visited Israel, he passed through Saudi, and he made a change in the attitude of Saudi and other Arab countries to work for peace with Israel. There are now many elements supporting the possibility of achieving peace.

Last but not least, people ask themselves how can we make peace if the Prime Minister of Israel is of an extreme, right-wing party, which is against peace, and does not want to give anything up? I am saying, in Israel we have the paradox that I call the hawks of peace and the doves of war, meaning that only hawks can make peace with a national consensus, and only the left can make war with a national consensus. Begin made the greatest peace ever with the biggest Arab country, Egypt. If somebody in the Likud said, before Begin became Prime Minister, that he would give up Sinai, they would have drummed them out of the party, yet Begin passed it easily in the Likud, because automatically he got the support of the left, and vice versa. The same today, yes we have Netanyahu who is quite extreme, and it is not yet comfortable for peace, but if he is brought, maybe by Trump, to a point to decide to make peace, he can pass it, because it is coming from the right-wing, it would pass, especially if it comes through the Arab Initiative.

I believe that the problem is an Israeli-Arab problem. It is not an American problem. Americans do not understand Arabs, I am sorry to say, but in my opinion, the two do not understand each other. We should solve it ourselves. If we had negotiated Oslo with the Americans, there would never have been the Oslo Accords. Oslo succeeded because we negotiated personally, Israelis and Palestinians, in Oslo, confidentially until everything had been signed. I am sorry for just one thing, that they did not conclude everything in that agreement, and did not take it in stages, which, in my opinion, was the biggest mistake of Oslo. They did not finalise, from the beginning, like we did with Egypt, all the agreements and do it in stages. I really hope that we will get there, and I keep fighting to get there. I believe that we will.

Jim HOAGLAND

Thank you Meir, for letting us know that there is hope for the Middle East, there is hope for Israel, there is hope even for Bibi and Trump.