

Speak at CEMOFPSC Conference
International Conference Middle East, fragmented societies, What future?
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Good afternoon.

It is my great honor to be here today and to take part in this important international conference, together with the many other speakers from around the world. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for inviting me to speak today.

Although the Center for Middle East Studies was established less than two years ago in 2007, I am impressed that the Center is already very active and involved. Particularly, the Center raises discussion on issues that are very relevant and influential to the lives of millions of people, as well as the important social projects that the Center supports in the Middle East.

In preparing for this important conference, I reviewed the content and summary of the first conference that was held in April 2008 on "Religion: the missing dimension of Diplomacy and Politics in the Middle East." I must say that I agree with the central statements and conclusions of the previous conference, that through commonalities of religion and belief, gaps can be bridged, people can unite through common belief in humane values, and an open dialogue based on the values of mutual respect and the building of a freer society can be pursued.

I am personally involved in inter-faith dialogue in Israel, and recently participated in the Pope's visit to the Holy Land, and attended all the major religious and ceremonial events in honor of his visit.

Those that live in the Middle East know very well that they live the daily influence of the conflict and political struggle, yet I am able to express to you that I, Nadia Hilou, born in the State of Israel to an Arab Christian family, originally from Palestine, am a proud citizen of the State of Israel. I served in the Israeli Parliament in the previous candidacy after I was successfully elected to the national list of open primaries by the general public, both Jews and Arabs.

It was very important for me to receive the legitimacy of the general public, because I have committed my whole life, even before I entered into politics, to advancing the equality of minority populations. I did not contend for the place of Arab spokesperson of the Israeli Labor Party, nor did I chose to contend to be part of the Arab Party, who receive votes only from Arab citizens, rather I wanted to be elected freely and openly, as an equal player amongst equals.

It was very important for me to contend for the same starting-point as everyone. I believed, and still believe that through the ruling government party we will be able to have a greater influence on the making of decisions and to initiate real change -and not just through protesting.

I would like to add that I was a member of Israeli Parliament, the only Arab women in Parliament amongst 120 members of Parliament, and the only amongst the Arab citizens, that since the establishment of the State, succeeded to be elected in a direct, free and equal vote in the open Primaries in the Labor Party, and not through reserved

seat. I will not expand further on this subject, as it is a subject that itself could take up an entire speech, so enough on this subject, and now let me focus on the subject of this conference - the political reconfiguration of the Middle East.

To discuss the important question – is this a utopia or a reality, it is important to highlight that in the Middle East we have many players that influence the political situation. As we know, the United States are a central player, and we cannot ignore the international community, the influence of Europe. The central question that concerns both Israelis and Palestinians is: are we facing a new initiative that in the end of the process will fail or freeze, as all past initiatives, or are we facing a new period?

There is no doubt that the Middle East is going through a process of rapid change:

1. The new government in Israel that is a right-wing Government
2. The strengthening of Hamas in Gaza and the weakness of Fatah in the West Bank
3. The election in Lebanon in June, and whether Hezbollah will have a bigger influence on the Lebanese Government
4. The Iranian elections and the nuclear arming of Iran
5. The intervention of the Arab States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Arab League
6. Whether or not Syria is serious about peace

Sixty-one years have passed since the establishment of the State of Israel. Throughout this period the region has gone through many wars, struggles, conflicts, and there have been many victims and much blood-shed.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to and influential on the entire Middle East and I am here not to recite history, but rather to focus on what is occurring now and how we can move forward into the future.

The Middle East today has changed a lot and in recent years we have witnessed two main trends:

Among some more moderate and pragmatic regimes, there is a growing realism. There is a will to benefit from Western prosperity. These countries are ready to recognize Israel's continued existence, and in addition, to normalize relations with Israel. This is the meaning of the Saudi plan adopted in 2002 by the Arab League, and known since then as the Arab Peace Plan.

On the other hand, we see a return to religion and to tribal politics. Religion holds more and more attraction, especially to young and desperate people who see no hope in life. So it is not by chance that the Islamic Party won the elections in Turkey, or that Hamas won the elections in Gaza - and to our regret, we see more people drawn to religion in Israel and in the West Bank too. The tendency is indeed towards fragmented societies, and politically, big parties like the Baath' in the past, do not hold the same power.

In view of this growing tendency, nurtured greatly by Iran, who exports both ideology and the means to propagate it, many of the pragmatic Arab countries find that they share a common interest with Israel in wanting to fight against these factors, which stand to, and are able to destabilize their regimes.

This then, is an hour of opportunity for Israel, it is a reality – and not a utopia. Israel's strategy must be to reach peace agreements and normalize relations with those countries that are ready to do so, while it is still possible. Even if Israel must pay a price, the gains in the long term are infinitely more important.

In the last few weeks we have witnessed much political activity, President Barak Obama meeting with Israeli leaders, Palestinian leaders, leaders of the Arab world and we are ahead of the Lebanese and Iranian elections. These are all critical to the process of determining how the Middle East will look in the years to come.

The new administration in Washington gives Israel this new opportunity because of its attitude. The idea of advancing on several fronts, whilst aiming for a regional agreement makes a lot of sense. It can also strengthen the Palestinians and give them backing in the difficult decisions that they will be called to make.

Since the election of President Barak Obama, he has expressed a clear message to the leaders of the region, that he intends to be a central player, and that he intends to intervene immediately and intensely. On the other hand, in Israel, we have a new right-wing Government, which through its election expresses a clear message that it is against two States for two nations.

There is an expectation of President Obama's upcoming visit to Egypt, that he will present his plan for peace in the region. He is also expected to focus on the relationship with the Arab and Muslim world. (A new beginning)

In Israel, these days, meaningful American intervention is expected and there is a political dynamic. After Netanyahu's visit to the US, he is ready to go to Paris and his foreign minister and defense minister will travel to the United States.

The impression is that something is changing, that the new US government will bring Israeli leaders to new action and full coordination with the US Government.

The special US Envoy Mr. George Mitchell will arrive to the region to discuss the issues and details relating to the dismantling of the settlements and the easing of the restrictions and improvement of Palestinian daily life.

Further than the will of President Obama to make progress with the Middle East peace process, he is interested in gaining the support of Arab leaders, which is dependent on taking real steps, not just declarations. The Obama Government highlights the need to stop the building of settlements as the major green-card into positive relations with the Arab World.

Also, the defense minister Ehud Barak, announced lately, very clearly, and I personally hear him, that he will not allow new settlements to be built and that he will dismantle illegal settlements. Israel understands the might of US pressure, since the beginning of Netanyahu's term 70 days ago, he has not taken any provocative steps, no new settlements have been built – no permits have been given, even though it is a right-wing government.

The US is pushing for a two state solution with clear and recognized borders. When we talk about two States, we are talking about the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian State, just as Israel is a sovereign state.

Another current issue which characterizes all the discussions that have been had and will be had in the future is the issue of Iran. The US made the gesture to continue the dialogue and to end the discussions by the end of 2009, here lies a disagreement and different perceptions – Israel declares openly that it does not give these discussions any chance, that these discussions will not result in the ceasing of Iran's nuclear program, however Israel is left with no choice, but to wait for the day that the discussions fail.

In relation to the changes in the reality of politics today, in accordance to what I have already mentioned, President Obama wants to prove that in regards to his foreign policy, that he is interested in bringing dramatic change, he sees a clear need and interest for a pragmatic Arab coalition. He also needs this coalition in order to withdraw from Iraq. This coalition will be able to unite only if the American administration will operate it, in a decisive manner, for the benefit of peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and peace with Syria, and this will be achievable only by through active American partnership. Therefore the policy should be characterized by dialogue and avoid the deterioration of relations with Iran.

President Obama has stated he is interested in appeasing the Arab world. This will be possible only through the advancement of a Middle East peace process, and furthermore - the process can not be conducted from afar, like throughout the Bush Administration, but rather by the appointment of envoys and direct and straightforward discussion, to try and arrive at an agreement that addresses the following issues:

- Peace between Israel and the Palestinians
- Peace between Israel and Syria
- Peace between Israel and Lebanon
- A cease-fire between Israel and Hamas

This strategy depends on the initiative of the Arabs and on the promise of the Arab States to establish Diplomatic relations with Israel – A regional peace.

Is this the question – Utopia or reality? Is there hope this time, or only disappointment? In my opinion, the reality does not lack difficulties, and the challenges are many. President Obama, in contrast to President Bush, has made it clear that he has no problem continuing the Annapolis Process, or any other positive processes. However, he also has no problem to renounce obligation to processes that appear negative and unproductive (for example-the road map). It is important to note that President Obama today is the beneficiary of wide-spread support, and on this basis is able to allow himself to undertake dramatic procedures that President Bush avoided for 8 years of office, and this is the reality – not a utopia that will influence the advancement of procedures and avoiding standstills.

The United States Middle East Policy

The government policy in regards to the Middle East is clear, on the one hand the President highlights the strong connection and responsibility between the US and Israel, and on the other hand, he clarifies very clearly, his intention to actively and steadfastly work towards a solution of two states for two peoples.

In relation to the new government in the US, the new Israeli Government looks quite right-wing, lacking the belief that it can reach any permanent arrangement with the Palestinians, and a government that whilst in office, will "waist time".

Benjamin Netanyahu is conceived as someone who believes "that the Palestinians are not ready for a historical compromise that will end the conflict."

The political reality indicates the gaps between the American government that promises change and rearranges its policy in the region, compared to the Israeli government. In order to cause specific small changes today, the new foreign policy needs to be designed in relation to the national process. This is important particularly in light of the little achievement of the Annapolis Accord and of the Israeli policy in Gaza since. Disappointingly, the new government of Israel is already establishing itself amongst the international community, as a right wing government with little belief in achieving peace.

If we want to be realists and not live under any misconceptions or illusions, Israel needs to formulate a relevant strategy, with clearly defined objectives and a clearly mapped out timeline. Such a strategy has the strength to design the national agenda and have an influence on American foreign policy.

A plan must be advanced that consists of two central ideas:

- 1) A new peace initiation that includes permanent agreement between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel and Syria
- 2) The creation of a binding linkage between a solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the Israeli/Syrian conflict, to the normalizing of Israeli relations with the Arab world. (this initiative must be based on the initiative of the Arab states).

Israeli foreign policy in regards to the Palestinians must be based on the following:

- a) the upgrading of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, in preparation for statehood
- b) the realization of the principle of two States for two peoples
- c) the commitment to existing agreements, such as Camp David 1979, the Madrid Process, the Oslo Accords and the Road Map. All of these agreements talk about bringing about the end of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinians whilst at the same time responding to Israeli security needs
- d) Freezing the building of new settlements until discussion of the agreed upon borders.

Israel is no longer able to manage its foreign policy without a peace initiative with its Arab neighbors (the Saudi Plan of 2002) and in conjunction with explicit American expression of a two state solution.

The initiative of the Arab League offers the normalization of relations with Israel with all the Arab States and end to the entire Arab Israeli conflict. In return, the request Israel returns to its 1967 borders, the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, and the reaching of a just solution and agreement to the issue of Palestinian refugees.

Israel can not remain indifferent and apathetic to this initiative in light of the new pace and energy of the United States, and especially in light of the new reality that is being created today - the strengthening of Hezbollah, the strengthening of Hamas and the threat of Iran.

Here I wish to add something personal. We cannot forget that Israel has a 20 percent Arab minority, who are originally Palestinian. The ongoing conflict with the Palestinians,

and the Arab States have influenced, and continue to have an influence on the relations within Israel, on Jewish-Arab relations, on majority-minority relations. Really, this is a situation that can be defined as "my country fighting against my people".

The Arab population of Israel is discriminated against and suffers from gaps in all areas of life. The commonly accepted opinion is that with the realization of regional peace, the situation of Arab Israelis will improve greatly too and greater equality will be achieved for minorities within Israel.

The new generation of Arabs that are born and grow up in Israel today can not continue to suffer from continued subjugation, discrimination and inequality. In my opinion, this sphere is even more important, since this inequality is likely to cause radicalization within Israel, and with that, to create an extra battlefield of internal resistance and opposition.

Today, if we want to be realists, and not live in under misconceptions, then there is a need to design of a new policy, in light of the little accomplishment of the Annapolis Accords. A new, more relevant strategy needs to be formulated with clearly defined objectives and timeframes:

1. The receiving of the Arab Peace Plan on the basis of negotiation. This initiative constitutes increased connection to peaceful relations between Israel and the Arab world, in return for a permanent solution with the Palestinians and with Syria.
2. A new American/International peace initiative that will be based on the Arab Peace Plan, which will benefit for wide international support.
3. The arrival at a permanent solution and not an intermediate agreement: experience shows that intermediate agreements that are taken as steps to permanent agreements fail. In light of this, a permanent agreement, like that which was made between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Jordan, needs to be reached, as these examples demonstrate that these agreements are possible, and do bring an end to conflicts and ten's of years of confrontation and war.
4. The arrival to a regional peace treaty:
 - Bringing together all the factors heighten above so that Israel can implement lenient steps in regards to the lives of the Palestinians, and manage a negotiation process with the Palestinians, to arrive at a permanent agreement, in accordance with Oslo and Annapolis, and not in accordance to the Road Map, which was based on the establishment of a Palestinian State with temporary borders.

The Middle East today is very dynamic. In the coming period, meetings and discussions between the leaders of the region will continue, and we will continue to follow them and to anticipate, that these discussions will, in the end arrive at peace.

Let us continue to hope, and believe in the realization of dream of peace, and each and every one of us, from theirs own countries, continue to be active and to influence, to advance, to request and also to pray for the reaching of peace throughout the entire Middle East.