

Peace in the Middle East
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Allow me to start by thanking the Bridge Forum Dialogue for giving me the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering. I would also like to thank His Royal Highness the Grand Duke, their Excellencies the Ministers, and all present for being here this evening.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon on April 14th and the letters of assurances between them might go down as one of the most misunderstood – and accordingly underestimated – episodes in modern Middle East history.

The spin around it makes it sound quite benign: an Israeli prime minister, in the middle of a war against the Palestinians, is taking a bold move that will jumpstart the stalled peace process. Despairing of finding a Palestinian partner to reach permanent peace with, and in the face of domestic political risks, he still opts for a dramatic move that will end the occupation for half of the Palestinian population. For this bold move, the US Administration simply reiterates what is already known: some settlements will be annexed to Israel in the final status peace agreement, and the refugees will return to the state of Palestine, rather than Israel. Of course, the Administration stresses that this does not prejudice the Roadmap. The US is satisfied with the changes to the course of the Wall – which only a few months ago was "snaking through the West Bank – and now it is no longer an issue as it is truly only a security fence.

So what's the big fuss all about? What more do we, the Palestinians, want? We get the end of the occupation in Gaza, we get assurances that a Palestinian state will be created.

Sounds good, but the only problem with this spin is that it is not quite true. For one thing, the Gaza withdrawal – if it happens – will not mark a qualitative change from the current situation. While the Palestinians will have more land in Gaza, Israel will continue to control the "airspace, territorial waters and land passages", and will continue to have freedom of military action against Palestinians. Israel will relive itself from direct domination while the Palestinians will remain under occupation. What is being built is eerily reminiscent of the Bantustans during Apartheid South Africa. Under these circumstances, any expectations of proper, sustainable economic or political development in Gaza will be unrealistic. Still, the world will be expected to continue to underwrite the occupation in Gaza.

In the meantime, PM Sharon has been given a free hand in the West Bank and Jerusalem. The new understandings have all but legitimized the settlements – or, as the new lingo has it, population centers. It is safe to expect the current Israeli government to keep the promises it continuously makes to its people to intensify settlement activities under the pretext that they are going to be annexed anyway. The Separation Wall has undergone cosmetic changes and now the US Administration will support its construction. Basically, what is being established is the principle that facts on the ground – irrespective of their legality – will determine the outcome of

permanent status negotiations. At the same time, new facts are being established in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem in a manner that endangers the whole two-state solution. In real terms, by the time we get to negotiating the Palestinian state, there will be nothing left to negotiate.

What we are seeing is the "Gaza first, Gaza last" scenario. The withdrawal from Gaza is slated to take place next year, after the Separation Wall is completed. Then PM Sharon will propose to wait till a "new Palestinian leadership" emerges, while doing everything to ensure that such a leadership does not emerge. In the meantime the occupation in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, will be strengthened. The Palestinian component of the "two-state solution", in PM Sharon's version, seems to be a nominal Palestinian state in Gaza and some West Bank Bantustans.

The implications of what is happening are quite significant, and not only for Palestinians. In terms of principle, some significant foundations of international relations and international law are being flippantly thrown to the wind. The principles of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of land by force and the illegality of settlements are ignored. Relevant UN Security Council resolutions are simply disregarded. The precedent being created of a lawless international regime is disturbing.

But the immediate concrete implications will be felt by the Palestinians, the Israelis, and the region. The world, of course, will not be spared the fallout.

The Palestinians will not only suffer from the continuation of the occupation. We will also have to deal with domestic political ramifications. In effect, what the Prime Minister is saying to the Palestinian public opinion is: "do not bother negotiating, you can get what you want if you use violence." We who advocate negotiations will be hard pressed to explain why we failed to get Israeli withdrawals while violence forced the Israeli army out. It will be hard for us to convince any Palestinian of the need for concessions when extremists have shown that you can get what you want for free. The perceived success of extremism will come with a big political and social price for us. Ironically, at a time when the US is advocating a new "Greater Middle East" based on democracy, pluralism, and human rights, they are handing a victory to forces in Palestine that advocate the exact opposite.

In terms of Palestinian-Israeli relations, the April 14th plan is a sure recipe for the continuation of the conflict. Even if all the benefits the advocates of the plan claim were true, unilateralism can never solve the fundamental issues at the heart of the conflict. Refugees, Jerusalem, final borders and security can only be solved by agreement between the two parties. As such, and until an agreement is reached, the conflict between us and the Israelis will continue, with a tragic price for both our peoples. Just as the Shabaa Farm has become a focal point for the continuation of the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, the Israeli so-called "security installations" that will remain in Gaza, along with the whole West Bank, will be our Shabaa Farms.

On the regional level, this will ensure that the most potent source of instability will continue to rage. We have already seen extremist forces in the region citing the Palestinian cause as a rallying cry. Rather than depriving them of the continued use of this tool, what is being proposed by PM Sharon made sure that it remains as ever-present ammunition for anyone who wants to agitate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The whole premise around which unilateralism is built is the assertion that there is no partner for peace on the Palestinian side. It is understandable for the US

administration to demand strong Palestinian leadership that acts against terrorism and which will be a partner in the global anti-terror campaign. Prime Minister Sharon, on the other hand, has been fostering the "no partner" argument for less innocent reasons. After destroying the security capacity of the Palestinian Authority, he has consistently used this argument to avoid any pressure to negotiate. Basically, the argument goes as follows: President Arafat does not want peace and he supports terrorism, therefore Israel cannot negotiate with him. He, however, is in charge of the Palestinian polity. So, until a "new leadership" emerges, there is no one to talk to on the Palestinian side. In the meantime, threats and violence are used to paralyze Arafat. In reality, what Sharon is doing is ensuring that the "no partner" argument is a self-fulfilling prophecy. He does this because he knows that his proposed solution can never be accepted by any Palestinian partner and must therefore be unilaterally imposed.

He, however, overlooks the one consistent feature in the history of our region: Every attempt to determine the future of the Palestinians in the absence of their representatives has never worked. Previous attempts to do similar things, such as the Camp David I, accords have not only failed, but have also created regional instability the implications of which we still feel. History has demonstrated that unless we the Palestinians are partners in determining our own destiny, we will not simply lie down and accept the dictates of others.

The tragic irony this time is that this process of excluding the Palestinians in favor of an imposed arrangement is happening at a time when the permanent solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is at its clearest. Years of official and unofficial negotiations have shown us clearly the possible parameters of any future peace agreement. One thing that has emerged from all of these negotiations is that the only agreement that has any chance of success is one that consists of a package that shows what each side gives up and what it gets. This is what we did in the Geneva Initiative, and this is where the US Administration got it wrong. By selectively deciding to spell out Palestinian concessions on two issues without showing the big picture of the negotiation gains we will get, he reconfirmed the rejectionists' biggest scare mongering message: an agreement will compromise Palestinian rights without getting anything in return.

Dear Friends,

Despite all of these gloomy predictions, I still believe that there is a way out. Of course, we the Palestinians and the Israelis have a lot to do, but at this stage we cannot succeed without the help of the international community.

The first prerequisite for success is to ensure that the Gaza withdrawal is real. If the Gaza withdrawal is to be a positive factor rather than an impediment to progress, it must signify a real qualitative change in the situation in Gaza and a real, complete end of the occupation. This will require the withdrawal to be complete both in terms of its geographical scope and in terms of the transfer of sovereignty: no Israeli presence in Gaza, no Israeli control over our borders, skies, and waters. For us to be able to turn Gaza into the kind of prototype for our future state, we must have the tools to do so. Any remaining vestiges of the occupation will ensure the failure of any efforts we may undertake.

The second prerequisite is to make it part of the Roadmap. In this regard, mere words stating that it is compatible with the Roadmap are not enough. What is needed is a clear commitment to the various aspects of the Roadmap – most notably the concept of Palestinian-Israeli partnership in implementation, settlement freeze and the resumption of permanent status negotiations. If such a link is not provided, the

suspicion that Gaza first is Gaza last would be reaffirmed, and any action that will be taken in the context of the Gaza withdrawal would be viewed in this light and opposed by the Palestinian public. PM Sharon's recent statement that "the Roadmap is dead" is exactly the kind of thing that will destroy any potential for peace.

The third prerequisite is related to permanent status negotiations. We have long argued that once the end-game is defined, it would be easy for everyone to start taking immediate steps. President Bush's letter of guarantees opened up the opportunity to define the parameters of the end game. The international community must build on what he started and draw the parameters of the whole permanent status package. We, Palestinians and Israelis, have already done that in the Geneva Initiative. The international community must take the long-overdue step of stating the obvious and adopting a vision for the permanent status.

Colleague,

Absent these requirements, though, we will see a deterioration of the situation on the ground, the erosion of the credibility of negotiated political solutions, and an extended conflict that will remain a focus of instability for us, the region, and the whole world.

If these three prerequisites are met, the Gaza withdrawal can truly be a catalyst for peace. A negotiated full withdrawal will revive faith in the utility of negotiations, and if placed within the context of the Roadmap and of a clear endgame vision, it will facilitate revival of peace ideology and the implementation of our Roadmap obligations in terms of security and reform.