

Focus on the ongoing conflict in the Middle East –

Israel – Palestine: A New Chance for Peace?

International Seminar, 27 April 2017, Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain



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IED in collaboration with *Sabino Arana Fundazioa* organised the Seminar titled “[Israel – Palestine: a new chance for Peace?](#)” which took place on Thursday **27 April** in **Bilbao, Basque Country**, at the seat of Sabino Arana Fundazioa.

Speakers (in the order of speeches):

Juan Maria Atutxa, President of Sabino Arana Fundazioa.

Flaminia Baffigo, Coordinator of IED.

Jorge Dezcallar de Mazarredo, Ambassador of Spain.

Bassem Eid, Palestinian human rights activist based in Jerusalem.

Yaniv Schacham, New media and campaigning manager of “Peace Now” in Israel.



The conflict between Israel and Palestine is the **ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians over mutual recognition, borders settlement, control of Jerusalem, water rights and Palestinian right of return**. It is **one of the most complex and chaotic problems in the Middle East region which started in the mid-20th century and lasts until nowadays**. Although the latest round of peace negotiations were suspended in 2014, the conflict is now moving towards a new stage following the election of Donald Trump as the new president of the United States – the country which has a significant influence over the states in the Middle East. Based on the experience of past failed

attempts to bring the creation of the two states, the international seminar tried to deliver balanced responses for this never-ending problem whose resolution would represent a significant contribution for achieving peace not only in the Middle East but also for improving security situation in Europe and rest of the world.



The seminar was opened by the President of Sabino Arana Fundazioa **Juan Maria Atutxa** and the Coordinator of IED **Flaminia Baffigo**. Mr Atutxa reminded that **this year marks the 50th Anniversary of the so-called Six-Day War** which was fought on 5-10 June 1967 between Israel and the neighbouring countries of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The conflict ended by a decisive victory of Israel that captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem. **The outcome of Six-Day War has influenced the geopolitics of the region to this day.** He highlighted that history proves

that the situation in the West Bank is very complex and the solution will not be simplistic. “But we need to keep hope and find path for the solution because as the title of this seminar reveals, a chance is still there,” Mr Atutxa stressed. Ms Baffigo followed by expressing that the settlement of the **Israeli-Palestinian conflict is among the top current priorities for the European Union**. In her view, the only possible settlement that may bring peace and stability to the region is the two-state solution, one state living next to the other and respecting the right of self-determination.

International perspective of the problem

The first speaker, a Spanish diplomat and former Ambassador of Spain to the United States **Jorge Dezcallar de Mazarredo** reminded that **the Middle East is the most conflict area in the world today. The roots of instability in this region go back to the events following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922.** British and French power-politics, nationalism, religion and language issues, feelings of injustice and anxiety for freedom led to the creation of several artificial states; however, establishment of those states did not respect ethnic or religious considerations. The so-called “**Post-Ottoman Syndrome**” refers to **instability and inability of the Middle East countries to achieve a peaceful political settlement in their region. Precisely from these feelings of unfairness and injustice, the radical extreme groups such as Daesh emerged over the years.** “Geopolitics is like physics,” Mr Dezcallar defined, “when someone withdraws from somewhere, others immediately want to occupy that territory.” He analyzed that there are many issues that have an impact on the constant changes on geopolitics of the Middle East – this includes a high autonomy of military in the region, the presence of US troops and unpredictable policy of Donald Trump, the presence of Russian troops and uncertain foreign policy goals of Vladimir Putin and the conflicts among regional and religious groups. He stressed that “there is the major inability to achieve peace and all parties concerned are to be blamed for this deadlock.” Although Israel is a democratic state and the ally of the West but the multiparty system and constant



“There is the major inability to achieve peace and all countries concerned are to be blamed for this deadlock.”

Jorge Dezcallar de Mazarredo

changes in the governmental coalitions make the settlement difficult to reach; on the other hand, there is the Palestinian Authority which does not want to recognize Israel as the Jewish state and there are also problems to reach an agreement among Palestinians themselves. This creates the situation in which either Israel nor Palestine can formulate the clear conditions and demands. According to Mr Dezcallar, the international community is very careful when discussing the Israeli-Palestine conflict – reflecting the events happening during past years, **nobody wants to bring more destabilization to the Middle East, mainly with regards to Israel which is the only stable entity in the area.** As a result, the biggest initiative to find the settlement is expected to come from Israel and Palestine themselves.



Point of view of a Palestinian activist

The second speaker, a Palestinian human rights activist based in Jerusalem *Bassem Eid*, calls the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians as “an unsolved conflict. “We did a lot of mistakes over years and I am more and more convinced there cannot be the solution,” Mr Eid said. **Different interests of various players including Israel, Palestinian Authority, Hamas and Egypt make it difficult to achieve the solution.** This is clearly visible on the example of inability to reach the solution over Gaza, which is also a part of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. As a Palestinian himself, Mr Eid criticized the current leadership of President of the Palestinian

Authority Mahmoud Abbas. In his view, Abbas represents just himself and his family and not Palestinians and consequently, the majority of Palestinians lost trust in their own leadership. He is convinced that the current Palestinian leadership wants to keep status-quo and keep Palestinians as hostages. Based on his own experience, Mr Eid highlighted that when we ask Palestinians what they want, their answer would be that they want jobs, education and healthcare. “They are not concerned with Palestinian state, they prefer dignity to identity,” he explained. He also questioned why the international community usually talks about the two states – Israel and Palestine – when the Palestinian state de facto does not exist. “The state has to be built before it is recognized,” he added, focusing attention on the fact that about **40% of Palestinians live as refugees in refugee camps.** He also does not believe that the new US President will bring peace to the region; but Mr Eid explained that Trump is very right in one point and that **the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a political dispute but a business conflict in many aspects.** “I agree that this conflict is about money and power,” Mr Eid stressed. With regards to the role of the international community, he believes that **the EU should also take responsibility and try to change the policy towards the Middle East because it should be in the major interest of the EU to have peace in the Middle East.** International community therefore needs re-evaluation of foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reach for a renewed peace process between Israelis and Palestinians; however, personally he is sceptical whether the solution lies in the recognition of the Palestinian state.



Perception of the dispute by an Israeli expert

In a deep contrast, the third speaker *Yaniv Shacham*, Media and campaigning manager of ‘Peace Now’ and expert on Israeli politics and society, believes that **it is not too late for the two states** and

that the two state-solution is very plausible. “The current status-quo is unsustainable,” he believes. He similarly emphasized that **this conflict has a tremendous impact on the whole world and especially on the EU**; as a result, the EU should be more active in the conflict resolution process. He reminded the importance of the Oslo Accords of 1993 that marked the start of the process aimed at achieving the peace treaty between Israel and Palestinian Authority but which, however, did not create the Palestinian state. According to Mr Shacham, the Geneva Initiative of 2003 that proposed to set Israeli’s borders close to what existed prior the Six-Day War is highly achievable. In return for removing most of the Israeli settlement, Palestinians would limit their “right of return” of refugees to Israel and put an end to any further demands. He also presented the results of opinion polls which show that Israeli public is more open to the two-state solution than Palestinian public – **while 54% of Israeli public is for the two-state solution, only 41% of Palestinians are in favour of it.**

“The current status-quo is unsustainable.”

Yaniv Shacham



According to Mr Shacham, the quote of the former US President Barack Obama who said – “I do not see how this issue gets resolved in a way that maintains Israel as both Jewish and a democracy if there are not two states” – summarizes the solution how to resolve the conflict.

In summary, the seminar managed to address – with the assistance of several outstanding experts on the Middle East –

future possibilities in terms of coexistence and good neighbourly relations between Israelis and Palestinians based on past events and present developments. The event was attended by representatives of NGOs, Embassies, civic society and media.

Main outcomes and proposals:

- the current status-quo in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unsustainable;
- the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would significantly contribute to achieve peace and stability in the Middle East and also to improve security situation in Europe and rest of the world;
- the international community needs to be careful in the negotiation because it cannot bring more destabilization to highly unstable Middle East region , mainly with regards to Israel – the only stable country in the region;
- Israel’s government and the Palestine Authority should deliver greater initiative in searching for the settlement;
- the EU and the international community should re-evaluate foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reach for a renewed peace process between Israelis and Palestinians;
- it seems that the only possible way how to resolve the dispute and bring peace and stability to the region is the two-state solution – one state living next to the other and respecting the right of self-determination

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Prepared by Adriana Ciefova (IED, 2017)

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