

## **The 57th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs**

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### **REPORT on WORKING GROUP 3**

*The Middle East. The role of Europe and of Mediterranean cooperation*

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Within the Working Group, the discussion mainly focused on the Palestinian – Israeli conflict, the situation in Iraq and the position of Syria and also Iran in the region, both related to those issues and in the broader context of the Middle East. The role of the US and Europe came up where relevant in relation to those discussions.

#### **Palestinian – Israel conflict**

The situation and conflict between Israel and the Palestinians was presented by both sides. The coming Middle East Conference - to be held in Annapolis, Maryland, aimed for in November - was elaborated upon and both hope and scepticism were expressed concerning the prospects of its success. The situation on the ground in the Palestinian territories was presented, e.g., by showing the combined effect of policies such as the building of the wall and the location of settlements in the West Bank, to which some degree of disagreement remained relating to facts and terminology. The situation in Gaza and the position and involvement of Hamas were also discussed.

Six main points of apparent agreement, in relation to both the Middle East Conference and the peace process at large, were:

1. There needs to be a clear outcome from the beginning that shows the end of occupation; there is no need to start all over again, but continue from where the negotiations stopped.

2. The 2-States solution seems to have the support of both parties and their populations.
3. The Arab Initiative can serve as a base to the Conference and peace negotiations, accepting the pre 1967 borders and recognising Israel's place in the region.
4. The peace and the peace talks need to be comprehensive, including also Syria and Lebanon.
5. There needs to be an end to the violence, which will require reciprocity.
6. Time is of the essence.

General agreement on these points seems to exist, and might provide optimism for the peace process. Pessimism seemed to mainly relate to problems in further defining and applying these points. Issues relating to the six points just mentioned that arose, included the following:

1. The lack of trust in peace processes all the more requires clarity on the outcome and final status from the beginning of the Conference on. It needs to be clear that it will result in the end of the occupation. From there, e.g., negotiations and the implementation of the Roadmap is to take place – including issues such as the refugees, the Golan and security. Scepticism is largely present for a series of reasons, including the failure of earlier peace processes and the practice on the ground such as violence against civilians from both sides, continuance of settlements and other measures contradicting the expressed intentions. As a result, trust in the other party and in the leaders that already have a weak position is little. If the Conference would fail or only produce general principles, the position of the ones that still hope for a peaceful solution of the conflict will be further undermined. Moreover, the US as the facilitator is complicating the process, since they are part of the conflict instead of a third party viewed as neutral by both sides. A call for stronger commitment and involvement of the UN and Europe was expressed.
2. The 2-States solution was the one solution mentioned by all sides. The difficulties lay in defining the two States: although the general agreement on the pre 1967 borders can be at the basis for acknowledging two States, the actual borders still need to be defined. These borders remain disputed and will have a huge impact on the negotiations, their results and their acceptance. There is some acceptance by both sides of land-swaps, but major issues on the size and the quality of the land swapped need to be overcome. It was agreed in the discussion that the Palestinian split into two by the situation in Gaza requires a solution

that has to be decided upon by the Palestinians themselves and that others need to support and stimulate such a solution.

3. There seemed to be agreement that there is no need for Hamas to recognise Israel since Israel does not need that recognition as a State; the acceptance of the Arab States of a place in the region seems much more important.
4. It was agreed that a comprehensive peace requires the involvement of all relevant parties, including Hamas and also Syria. The Conference can focus on the Palestinian – Israeli conflict, which seems more than enough to deal with at this specific Conference, but for the larger Middle East peace process other issues such as the Golan need to be taken in as well. The current exclusive structure of the Conference and the position of the US and Europe toward Hamas stand in the way of the comprehensive peace required and complicate successful implementation of whatever outcome of the Conference.
5. Violence against civilians was clearly condemned by both sides. The trouble there seems to be who is going to be the first to stop targeting the civilians, whether it be the rocketing of the Israeli civilians or the killing of Palestinians. Respect for the human rights of the other party and implementation of humanitarian law remains problematic in a situation where the violation by the other seems to serve as a reason not to live up to own duties as well. Disagreement remained on violence used against the occupation such as against Israeli soldiers.
6. Time is of the essence; both Palestinian and Israeli people are tired of the conflict, plus the idea of the 2-States solution is now accepted, which might not be the case if the present opportunity for peace is not taken up.

It can be concluded that during the discussions, agreement seemed to exist on the urgent need for a comprehensive peace that is based on the 2-States solution, with an outcome clear beforehand. To an extent, disagreement remained on both facts and perspectives, such as on the chances of success for the coming Annapolis Conference. For the Conference to have a good chance to succeed, it needs to include all parties and needs to have a clear outcome, not just principles. The urgency of reaching such an outcome was strongly emphasised by many participants in the discussion. All agreed that the focus needs to be on the future and that both parties have a large interest in and wish for peace, but it also became clear from the working group that bridging the remaining gap requires third party involvement. There was some feeling that Europe, not the

United States, would be a more appropriate third party. Pugwash could play its role in this by continuing and strengthening its efforts to bring both sides together, facilitate dialogue and underline common grounds and shared interests.

### Syrian-Israeli relationship

Participants of the working group agree that the Syrian-Israeli relationship is an important part, one of the main tracks of the Middle East peace process. But the problem of involvement of Syria to the talks on the Middle-East issues which are to be held in November, 2007 in Annapolis, Maryland (US) still exist. This and stopping of the Syrian-Israeli talks is one of the important issues (tendencies) of the political process in the region. The main problem is that neither Syria nor Israel wants to undertake any gestures, or concessions, to another side on the questions which might be put on the agenda (return of the Golan heights, cooperation between Syria and Iran, Syrian ties and financing of Hezbollah, Palestinian refugees in Syria, etc.).

*Israel* is reluctant to initiate peace talks with Syria because the present situation in the Golan heights is stable, there is no violence or clashes, the Israeli boarders at the side of Golan are comparatively safe (it is Syria that provides nowadays such stability and security). In this situation Israel from the one hand continues to built new settlements on the territories of Golan plateau (most of the 30 Israeli settlements situated there were built in the 1990-ies), and from the other hand prefers to keep status-quo in relationship with Syria offering instead of it only measures on regulation of Palestinian-Israeli conflict. That is why as some experts regard at present day it is almost impossible to explain to Israeli society the necessity of talks with Syria. *Syria* also nowadays doesn't want to implement any steps to promote dialogue with Israel. Syria feels itself isolated. Syrians have no allies in the region at present day and that is why they have to turn to more close cooperation with Iran. Besides Syrian authorities continue to consider Israelis as invaders who captured the heights, and they cannot agree on concessions with Israel on Lebanon issues because of importance of "Lebanon question" for Syrian policy. As some experts warned, if Syria will express less tough and more open positions in relationship with Israel and the US it may lead to weakening of positions of president Bashar Assad and to political instability in Syria.

Nevertheless the peace process in the Middle East cannot be implemented without regulation of Syrian-Israeli relationship; otherwise Israel could not manage to prevent further attacks from Hezbollah, the situation in Lebanon would remain instable and possibly would run out in new

clashes, fall of Lebanon government, etc. Besides there are some tendencies that may be favourable for promotion of peace process. For example, as some participants recognise, the structure of possible peace regulations between Israel and Syria may be more simple than between Israelis and Palestinians. Also Syria may be regarded as a reliable partner that fulfils punctually conditions of treaties that it signs.

During the sessions of the working group some *recommendations* were offered according to which the Israeli-Syrian bilateral talks and inclusion of them into the agenda of the Middle-East process could be possible. First, Syria and Israel should both be able to offer each other beneficial measures that could promote the peace process. These measures should include: a) elaborating of mechanisms of return of Golan heights to Syria or dividing of the lands; b) some guarantees from Syrian side that it will not support anti-Israeli activity of Hezbollah and other radical groups in Lebanon and will not maintain ties in this sphere with Iran.

At the same time as some experts recommended, Syria should be more flexible in international politics and especially in issues of relationship with Israel, Lebanon and Iran, and also Syrian leadership need to demonstrate to international community more clearly their willingness to start peace talks (by means of mass media, in speeches of Syrian officials, etc.). Israel, on the other hand, as some working group participants argued, ought to draw up peaceful dialogue with Syria. From this point of view, Israel should convince Washington of the necessity of starting of new round of talks with Syria, and the initiative of such talks should proceed from the US administration. From another point of view, Israel and Syria may start consultations on peace process on bilateral basis without involving the US in talks. In particular, as some experts recommended, Syria should draw more attention to improving relationship with European countries and involve them more widely in the peace process.

#### Situation in Iraq

Problems of political development in Iraq secured a special part in consideration of political processes in the Middle East. During the session of the working group the participants turned their attention to the questions of electoral processes and development of democracy in Iraq, political clashes and tensions and sectarian problems within the Iraqi society, growth of number of Iraqi refugees, problems of possible withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and low effectiveness and activity of Iraqi security forces, possibilities of Turkey operation in the Northern Iraq against Kurds, etc.

Many experts acknowledged that situation in Iraq has deteriorated in the last two years (2006-2007). These tendencies may be confirmed by high increase of refugees who fled from Iraq because of spread of violence (the number of refugees to Syria and Jordan already exceeded 2 million), and the strengthening of sectarian tensions in Iraq.

In discussion on causes and different kinds of violence in contemporary Iraq most of experts agreed that it is necessary to divide violence of different Iraqi groups against occupation forces, violence between sectarian groups (Shiit and Sunni), criminal violence (including kidnapping), and political violence. In this connection some experts pointed out that often the importance of sectarian tensions in Iraq is overexaggerated, and besides the political and social causes of increasing violence are underestimated (for example, "Al-Qaida" can "hire" a potential suicide-bomber in Iraq for \$100). From the other hand, as some participants argue, sectarian factors still exist and possibly the significance of them will even grow. Thus, many people Iraqi people perceive the violence as a sectarian matter (they blame for murders and killings of their relatives Shias or Sunnis). As many experts affirmed, the role of sectarian factor may also grow because of a wide involvement of different countries of the region in Iraqi political processes. Among the key players in Iraq the participants of working group mentioned Iran, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. In a whole as it was emphasised the role of these countries and the balance of forces in the region in the last years significantly changed: Iran strengthened its positions due to close ties with Shias, Arab countries, on the contrary, lost the previous role and faced with new problems of widespread of instability and violence, refugees and others.

As for Turkey-Kurdish issues specifically, many experts expressed deep concerns that tendencies oriented on further federalization of Iraq and separation of Kurdish territories from it alongside with the growth of anti-Turkish terrorist activity of Kurds will remain in the region.

On the questions of possible terms of withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and strengthening of Iraqi security forces many experts within the working group had quite different visions. They agreed that demolition of Saddam Hussein army and security forces in which Sunnis played the main role had led to many negative consequences in the Iraqi security sphere, which is one of the reasons why it is very difficult nowadays to improve security situation in the country. In discussion about positions of American forces in Iraq many experts agreed that they definitively have lost a credit of trust of Iraqi people and might be therefore right now withdrawn from Iraq and replaced by international forces. However some of the WG participants argued

that withdrawal of troops will lead to more negative development of situation in Iraq (to civil war and raise of sectarian clashes, to turn of Iraq into a huge terrorist base and headquarters, etc.).

Among the recommendations on situation in Iraq that were offered by working group participants must be mentioned the following:

1. On the problem of Iraqi refugees it was suggested that a special document should be elaborated to determine general priorities of rendering assistance to Iraqi refugees in different countries (Syria, Jordan, etc.). This act should include means of improving life conditions of refugees, provide social assistance, assistance in getting jobs, etc. If it would not be done, as some experts affirmed, we may face in the future a possible repetition of the Palestinian scenario with the Iraqi refugees;
2. Many WG participants also emphasised the necessity of adoption of special UN resolution on assistance in unification of Iraq. This document should define some conditions of promotion of further peace process in Iraq, fix the principle of indivisibility of Iraq, and also include some necessary obligations of neighbouring countries on non-intervention in Iraqi affairs.