



ISRAEL AND THE ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE

First of all let me say that I truly admire the kind of initiative and the work that you have been doing specifically since this center has begun to work early in 2000 and as a person observing the Middle East and living in the Middle East for the last generation, for 25 years, I am always interested when I see the rise of a new center. The conflicts in the region are nearly 3 generations old. From my perspective and I know this is the objective of the center, we don't need to wait for another generation before we can see a resolution to the Middle East problem especially to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Nowadays when you read the media and when you listen to the people talking about the Middle East we are sensing that there is a new hope, a new optimism in the air that maybe something is going to happen sooner or later in terms of the progress in the negotiations. One has to ask the question where this optimism comes from, what the basis for it is and I want to address some fundamentals about it. I think for the first time and especially the Arab states and specifically the leading states Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and others in the gulf have come to the conclusion that peace with Israel is not one of many options but is the only option and 2002 Arab Initiative is the product of that realization specifically by the Saudis. To bring Jordan into the mix and other Arab countries into the mix was critically important and I think this was a revolutionary transformation that took place in 2002. In more recent times like last year since Obama came to power I think we are seeing a greater sense of emergency to move the process forward because certain things now exist on the ground. Those who are interested and pushing for peace want to make sure that these conditions are taken advantage of because they are suitable to make progress and we have to keep in mind what these important conditions are. I think first and foremost think there is universal consensus that Israel cannot realize security without satisfying to some extent Palestinian requirements of statehood and Palestinians would never see the statehood until they meet Israeli requirement in terms of security. There is a linkage between the two. Over the years Israel has refused to make considerable progress because as long as it does not cover security ultimately. What achieved before 2000 that culminated in Camp David negotiations with the President Clinton were disappeared after the collapse of the negotiations that led subsequently the second Intifada. This was not just an event for Israel but this was nothing less than a major departure for it. Israel woke up a bitter reality in 2000 that is progress was made on the ground was basically dismissed and everything that has happened prior to 2000 was basically destroyed and reversed. Israeli withdrew from a great deal of territories and had to come back to reoccupy and the Palestinians' basic infrastructure in Gaza and in the West Bank began growing after the second Intifada. From Israeli perspective Israel needed something far more solid on the ground in order to make necessary concession needed to move progress forward. And there emerged an even

exaggerated sense of national security in Israel but from the Israeli perspective, this was normal because Israel is the only country Israelis have, it is the only place and future they have and they have to do everything that is humanly possible to protect that entity even at the expense of exaggerating the danger. But from Palestinian perspective; Palestinians realized there is an occupation going on since 1948 and the prospect of living free has been diminishing rather than improving. From their perspective Israel is an occupying force and sometimes a brutal force and they could not reconcile themselves with the reality of the state of Israel specifically as an occupier force. So due this perspective they have attended to do everything to undermine Israel as an institution. But this has changed since 1993. But the problem for is that even though some kind of a dialog has been going on between Israelis and Palestinians, not all Palestinians joined the process. And there are still extremist groups within Palestinians such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others who continue to advocate destruction Israel as a prerequisite for establishment of the Palestinian state. So it is that kind of mindset. That is to say looking at the problems of the Middle East we can talk about territory, Jerusalem, refugees, security but the biggest problem is not these issues on the table but it is this mindset. It is how these people perceive each other. That is the biggest impediment and continues to be the biggest impediment today. You can find the solution for refugees, even for East Jerusalem by negotiation but how do you change mindset? Or which one comes first? Do you need to change the mindset first in order to solve the problem or do you have to solve the problem to change the mindset? The truth of the matter is I don't think either has occurred yet. What is perpetuating this terrible mindset is unfortunately what the leaders on both sides are locked into. They are locked into a difficult position and they have been wedded into a political narrative that they cannot change. The political narrative is changing so little that is not making difference on the ground. So when we are talking about today where this optimism comes from, is there is a real chance of change, we have to think in terms of mindset. Is the mindset changing? What specifically has changed, what is needed in order to go further? And this is what I would like to address for a moment.

I feel that today there is perhaps a better opportunity than in the past at least since Camp David. Why? Let me go back to where I started; the recognition of Arab states that the time has come. The time has come to make a discernible progress because Israel is a fact of life and Arabs are going to deal with Israel in one day or another.

The second important thing is in conflict resolution, in any kind of conflict you have to ask yourself what perpetuates the conflict. What are the elements within any given conflict that creates the intention to continue to fight? At what point of time the parties can realize that continuation of the conflict would no longer put them in a good position and they reach a point and say we can fight for another ten or twenty years but we are not able to change the fundamental dynamics. What are the fundamental dynamics here? What will happen if they continue to fight for another decade? There is the fact that there will be an Israel and there will be a Palestine and the narrative that has been evolved in last two years particularly about two-state solution is not one of many options but perhaps only real option on the table. When we look at the Palestinian Israeli conflict we could hardly say this even five-six years ago specifically after second Intifada erupted. I see discernable change in terms of the people's thinking on both sides. They say that how much longer we can fight with the fact that we cannot improve our position. So this second point is very important, a point of departure for the conflict itself.

The third point is when we talk about Israeli requirement for security it is not discussed or invented. For Israelis it is very real. What the Israelis have come to see whereas they were saying there is no partner, under certain conditions they can create a partner among the Palestinians. What former Prime Minister Olmert regarded about more than two years ago and fortunately Netanyahu is continuing today is improving the conditions in West Bank. Certainly not as far as the Palestinians would mind but a considerable progress has been made economically and in terms of security. So when you go to Israel, Israel says the Palestinians have showed us for the first time in 6 decades that they are capable of maintaining order and security. For Israeli this is nothing less than a revolutionary transformation because in order to make concession, they want to make sure that Palestinians can deliver on security and Israel saw that. The second thing that has happened perhaps less important but nevertheless it is a security related matter, is Israel's ability to develop technology to intercept short range of rockets and this system is being deployed basically will give Israel a maneuver opportunity if and when there is new varieties of rockets coming from Gaza or the West Bank, Israel today has the air defense system to intercept short range rockets. That two gives Israel the opportunity to make more concession which they could not do even six months ago because this system in fact will be deployed in a few months By June it will be deployed completely which is going to encourage Israel to make more concessions. So the improvement on the ground is critical which basically for the Israelis send a message that more moderate Israel policy works and for the Palestinians; they also understood now that if they continue to demonstrate that kind of moderation and efficiency in terms of security, they are going to receive more and more from Israel.

The fourth critical point I think that we are seeing change is that almost every American administration was in support for peace process going back to Clinton, Bush, going back to first Bush who immediately in 1992 pushed the negotiations after the Gulf War. However the biggest difference between those administrations and Obama administration is the fact that Obama decided that this is a conflict that has to stop immediately. And two days after he became the president he deployed an envoy and two days after he immediately began a process. This is very significant because that change sent a clear message to all parties that this administration is committed to the resolution of the conflict. The previous administration occupied Iraq and Afghanistan and basically put the issue to the backburner for years. This is very significant as well.

The fifth dimension, some Arabs acknowledge it or some Israelis support it, but the point remained that there were two wars that took place in 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah and in 2008 between Israel and Hamas. Notwithstanding the international outcry about the destruction and loss of life both in Lebanon and Gaza and despite the fact that there are no words for me to use to justify a war but what happened has happened. From my perspective one must look at the tragedy to see if anything comes out positive. There are some people who may disagree but I say that the tragedy has already happened, we cannot reverse it. Has Israel any idea or plan for what Israel was doing in Lebanon and Gaza or was Israel forced into the wars? We can talk about Israeli motivation for hours but what matter is this; Israel needed to send a clear message to Hamas and Hezbollah that continuing provocation cannot be tolerated. Simple retaliation by Israel for every provocation was no longer enough. In order to send a clear message, something more dramatic was needed however painful and

costly. I base my agreements on the reports I have seen that coming from various very reliable sources which say that both Hamas and Hezbollah came to the conclusion that a future provocation of Israel is not something that they can do without very careful thinking about the consequences. And the fact that there is hardly any violence today in northern border and border with Gaza is without any question must be attributed to the result of these wars. Basically this point is critically important to keep in mind if these two conflicts produce today nonviolence and there is no violence today, this is the prerequisite condition to build peace. As long as they continue to fight each other there will be no substantial negotiation to take place. If they want to negotiate they have to have a quite atmosphere and there is quite atmosphere today to capitalize on. That is the fifth condition that exists. Whatever happened in last 3 years however tragic, it has created a certain situation today that must be capitalized on.

The sixth element is the fact they have the Arab Initiative in place. It is critically important that it is the most important initiative coming from the Arab world going back to 1948. It is unfortunate that the Arab Initiative has not been officially embraced by the US and certainly not by Israel. In my view it is a critical document that can provide a frame of reference in any future negotiations between Israel and the Arab states. There is no better document that can provide a frame of reference and everything in it is subject to given thing without any question. When you put all these elements together we have to say that it is the time to do something about urgency of problems. There are still a number of problems that cannot be wished away. For example within the Israeli government there are conflicting parties on how to proceed on the issue of settlements. Israel is democracy but Israel is a multiparty system. It is coalition government. There seven parties today in the coalition government. And it is extraordinary difficult to get a consensus. Whereas democracy as a political system is an admirable system but it is also not very effective sometimes. However we love it and we care for it. So we have this internal political conflict within Israel as a society. The majority of Israelis want peace but they don't have political capacity to translate that public wish into practical step to move forward. What Palestinians have demonstrated in terms of the capacity to keep the calm and security helps Israel to overcome these very difficult obstacles. The PNA in West Bank is fully cooperating with Israel but there is Hamas and there is serious discord between Hamas and the PNA. I always ask if the peace is possible unless Hamas and Fatah reconcile their differences or at least agree on some kind of a formula whether to go election and whoever wins to form the new government and be able to start negotiation. Nevertheless regardless of the difference between Hamas and Fatah, Hamas also has gone a long way and changed its colors and position. I think Hamas is really converted in every respect, in terms of action, political position, attitude and mentality. From destroying Israel, it came to the conclusion that Israel is there as a fact of life.

It is not something that Hamas can wish for. Hamas started to talk about the possibility of 1967 line, two-state solution, and ceasefire for 50 years. We know that there is discernable change. Although we have difficulties I think the common denominators, the common positive elements are far stronger. Hence this gives us now a feeling of optimism that there is opportunity to make a serious progress.

I want to talk about two more subjects than I will conclude this aspect of my position. Today Palestinians came to the conclusion that nothing happens now, the prospect of something to

happen in future would diminish rather than improve. There is a window of opportunity now however there are mistakes for example the US started with the freeze on the settlements while also asking Arab states to make some concessions to built confidence between the two sides but it did not insist, not put enough pressure on Israel to proactively force Israeli government to stop the settlements. Nevertheless ten months moratorium is very helpful. Even though Mahmoud Abbas still demands of freeze I suspect and I really feel very strongly that maybe in next couple of months the negotiations will resume. Egypt as well as Syria realized the time is right and they have to take advantage of the situation. In my recent article I defined four-five steps for Obama administration. Without any question Obama has to get back into the process and to look at what the people formerly agreed upon. There so many things that were agreed upon and we do not need to start from the scratch. Obama administration could use the Arab Initiative more effectively. It can lean on the EU to be more supportive with specifically on the question of Palestinian refugees. So they have to come up with a specific plan and I hope they will come up with a specific plan in order to push the process forward. It seems to me they are ready for it.

The importance of Hamas and Discord between Hamas and Fatah for the Resumption of Negotiations

Hamas is very important. Hamas and Fatah have to find some kind of a formula. People talk about unity government. I don't talk about a unity government. I talk about agreeing on some kind of election, the results of which will be accepted by Palestinians and international community. Many mistakes happened in 2006. We cannot go back but we need to create a new situation. Many things have changed in Hamas' thinking and infrastructure. There is opportunity. Egypt tries hard to reconcile Hamas and Fatah. Germany has been involved. I have been personally been advocating and will continue to advocate Turkey's involvement not because I am in turkey but because I believe that Turkey has a good relation with Hamas. Turkey can be directly influential in persuading Hamas. Hamas and Fatah do not have to agree with one another in terms of policy but they need to agree in terms of coexistence as two political parties and let the public decide who ever they want to chose to rule the government. If neither party wins an outright majority than they may form a unity government. But if one of them comes out with majority than it should form the government and allow the other party to be opposition. And the US and the international community are to be quite clear that they will accept the result of the election. Otherwise it is foolhardy to try to persuade the Palestinians or Hamas to go to an election. The US demands form Hamas to recognize Israel and the prior agreements. I absolutely believe that the requirement of Hamas to recognize Israel in advance and accept the prior agreements is necessarily the right thing. But instead of demanding that from Hamas, I would like Hamas to accept the Arab Initiative. I have been saying and writing and preaching that there are 19 Arab states who do not recognize Israel yet. Israel is not making this demand in advance of any negotiation so why do we have to make a demand from Hamas which is only a political party not even the state. Any political party could hold any kind of views as long as they do not use violence as a mean to advance their political agenda. And Hamas has stopped at least for now to use violence. We need to capitalize on it.

Current Opportunities versus Obstacles for Peace

The US administrations including the George Bush administration were always in support of peace between Israel and all Arab states including Syria as we have seen the last time;

Syrian-Israeli negotiations began in October 2007 through Turkish mediation. The sides could not reach a conclusion due to the crisis of Olmert regarding corruption issue and later Gaza war but they were close to peace. I don't think that anything has changed in any dramatic way. I had conversation with both parties; Syrians and Israelis as recently as a week ago and I can tell you they are ready willing to sit down and negotiate. I have seen enough pessimism and skepticism all my life. In my view if optimism does not get you anywhere it is certain that pessimism and skepticism don't get you much far. I do not construct my optimism on wishful thinking. I am looking at the reality on the ground. There is more opportunity today to do something than before. The question is shall we do something about it or shall we say that there are too many problems so it does not worth it. There are problems and I acknowledge them but I also look at the public sentiment. There is difference between political and public sentiment. I have not seen a single poll that is taken in last 10-15 years that consistently showing the majority of Israelis and Palestinians under all conditions are talking about the only solution is peaceful coexistence. That is the fact. The public is exhausted, they want to end the conflict and they also know they cannot wish each other away.

From a political perspective there are also positive signs. One may think when you have a right wing government including Likud, Shas, Yisrael Beiteinu, there is no chance to make peace. I look from entirely different perspective. When you look at the government today there two leaders; Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Barak. There will be no peace unless right wing or central wing parties are involved in the process. Israeli public do not only trust the Labor. They want to see a consensus. Israel trust Barak, in any negotiation he won't let Israel down the river and trust Netanyahu that he has certain ideology that is going to be necessary in order to push the process forward. If there is going be a breakthrough you are going to need left, the center as well as the right. And it has been Likud that deliver more concession historically speaking. Likud party gave the Sinai, Gaze, Hebron, and 13 percent of the West Bank. Not Labor, with the exception of Rabin who started Oslo process. So right wing government is an asset, not a problem. These are the conditions that are why I see the creation of the current government in Israel as positive. I do not like personally Netanyahu. He sometimes acts like demagogue. He is too ideologically focused. But truth of the matter you are going to need him in order to make any discernable progress in peace negotiations. So it is a positive element rather than negative as far as the Israeli politics is concerned. That is the reason of my optimism. If any government can deliver any kind of peace it is going to be a government with two strong leaders coming from left and right like Barak and Netanyahu. For example the public do not trust Tzipi Livni. I feel the US and the Arab states feel that they can do business with Netanyahu. Egypt especially nowadays feels very positive about Netanyahu. The message that he gave Mubarak a few days ago was very clear; we are ready to make necessary concession because we know there is no option. I am not suggesting that tomorrow there will be peace. What I am saying that there are conditions on the ground that we have to take advantage of.

The Situation in Gaza

The situation in Gaza is another issue that I have recently addressed in my articles. Israel is planning a prisoners exchange. There is discussion in Israel about pros and cons of the exchange. From my perspective prisoners exchange must be seen from a much wider perspective including for example reopening the crossing and allowing other commodities cross to freely to Gaza, building material and other materials. I think it is absolutely critical.

The situation of Gaza is more than tragic and horrifying. International community has remained silent for the last year and done practically nothing about Gaza. Gazan people are suffering without any doubt. Hamas has been trying very hard on bargaining but we are saying that the time has come. Turkey may become extremely helpful in this regard. Egypt is jealous and sensitive, does not want Germany or anybody to be involved. It feels that Gaza is its domain, its issue considering it as more a domestic problem. Turkey has good relationships and it enjoys a unique position in the Middle East following Davutoğlu policy of “zero problem with neighbors.” Turkey is friend with Syria, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt. Without any question Turkey can play some kind of role in terms of putting pressure on, persuading Hamas. Hamas trusts Turkey more than it trusts Egypt because Egypt has its own agenda when it comes to Hamas. Egypt does not want to see Hamas as a governing authority due to the domestic problem with the Muslim Brothers. So in order to do something for Gaza, a quick prisoner exchange may be a good action in terms of winning the hearts and minds of Gazans. By talking you cannot win them, action is needed. I also feel very strongly that the US has to change very specifically its tone with Hamas. Hamas is a grassroots movement and Hamas is a fact of life. The PLO till 1988 has always destruction of Israel as a prerequisite in their charter. The years went by and the PLO recognized Israel in 1988. There was a letter exchange between Rabin and Arafat and led to 1993 Oslo process. Now the PNA is committed to a solution to the conflict through diplomacy rather than violence. The realization that they cannot change much in dynamics anymore on the ground forced parties to rethink their position. For example Sharon decided to withdraw from Gaza and created Kadima because it realized that occupation cannot continue because it would eventually lead one state solution which in turn causes Israel to lose its Jewish majority overnight or it had to be an apartheid state. That is not acceptable. Israelis do not want kind of a regime. So they have one choice; to relinquish West Bank and Gaza. This is the conclusion that even Netanyahu has to come to. He has no choice. I am not suggesting you that this is an easy matter. This is a conflict that goes on more than six decades and everybody is expecting to resolve it overnight. It is going to take time. Nobody for example would expect in 1973 that Egypt would come along that far and make peace only a few years later with Israel. But when one looks at the way the war was conducted in 1973 and the way the war was completed it was signaling that it is going to lead negotiations between Israel and Egypt. I am not saying this to you now, we said it in 1974. We need to look carefully and watch what is happening on the ground and take advantage to the extent possible. Peace between Israel and Egypt is sustainable, that is a fact for 30 years. The peace between Israel and Jordan is a fact and it is sustainable. There had been negotiation between Israel and the Palestinian back and forth. This is just a fact. There had between Israel and Syria twice and they almost reached an agreement. That is a fact. So you can look at it both ways; negatively because nothing realized or can say that we had some progress and help it to move forward. My business is to move it forward.

There is a final point that I want to address. You know that I was reading and listening to you about your Center, ORSAM and the importance of the Center as well as your objective. I think your objective is very important, critical and needed. In the last few weeks I have been reconsidering my own situation and own feelings about what is going on. If you ask me why I came to Ankara, one of my objectives is the Arab Initiative. I know that your Center is one of the best in Turkey. I have been trying to organize a conference about the Initiative for a year. I have tried it in Israel, Bahrain, Morocco; I talked to the Syrians, Egyptians, and Jordanians,

almost everyone. Syrian ambassador to the UN said to me the best place is Turkey to organize such a conference. I believe that it is good to write about, to argue or to preach about the issue, it is good to make presentations or issue publications, they are all necessary but we need to take a step further. We need to see the certain reality on the ground is not going to change. There is a universal consensus about the Palestinian refugees. They are not going to back to Israel. There is a consensus about the West Bank that most of the West Bank will go to Palestinians. There is consensus that Israel needs to return the Golan Heights. What I am saying is that the time has come instead of preaching to do something about it. The Arab Initiative addresses all the necessary issues. This is a frame of reference for negotiations. The Initiative was carried out but then the Arabs did nothing about it. Similarly the US is stuck to the Quartet and does not want to do anything different. My mission is to try to make a conference whereby every single representative from all Arab states as well as Israel would participate. If it is organized in Jordan, in Egypt many Israelis will not come. If it is organized in Israel many Arabs will not come. Turkey is the best place that academics and think tanks can convert their Works into action. We academics agree on two state solution and we know how the two states going look like. We have to focus on positive denominators rather than the problems. I believe that ORSAM can take the lead or help us in this respect. In cooperation we may create a favorable public opinion and pressure on the parties. I think we must be an academic in action or a think tank in action to help change the dynamics on the ground.