“Necessary Conditions for Successful Political Process Examined at United Nations Meeting on Israeli-Palestinian Peace”

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MOSCOW, 1 July — The steps that needed to be taken by all parties to implement the two-State solution, a halt to Israeli settlement activity, the plight of Arab Israelis, Palestinian reconciliation and a new international framework to advance the peace process were discussed this afternoon as the United Nations International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace held its first plenary session.

Entitled “fostering conditions for a successful political process”, the session followed the opening of the two-day Moscow meeting, convened by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Addressing the plenary session were Vitaly Naumkin, Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow; Ahmad Tibi, Member of the Knesset and Head of the Arab Movement for Change from Jerusalem; Nidal Foqaha, Director-General of the Palestinian Peace Coalition–Geneva Initiative in Ramallah; and Gadi Baltiansky, Director-General of Geneva Initiative–Israel, based in Tel Aviv.

Mr. Naumkin warned that by putting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the back burner in order to focus on Iran, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, global and regional Powers were dimming prospects for peace and security between Israel and Palestine, as well as the wider region.  Israel’s continued occupation of Palestine was exploited by extremist terrorist groups — notably the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Sham (ISIL/ISIS) — to recruit more youth.

Those groups were a real threat to Israel and Palestine, he said.  While not currently responsible for attacks in the area, they may launch them in future.  In fact, militant groups associated with ISIL already had claimed responsibility for several recent terrorist attacks in Gaza; if there was no progress in advancing the peace process, ISIL’s influence over Gaza, and the radicalization of the enclave’s youth, would only grow.

Reconstruction of Gaza and the Palestinian Government’s control over the enclave was urgent, as was reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, he said.  United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov’s stated intention to work with the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to ensure delivery of much-needed construction materials into Gaza was encouraging, as were supportive efforts towards that end by the Middle East Quartet.

Many States, particularly Qatar, were committed to fund Gaza’s rebuilding.  But if destroyed infrastructure was rebuilt and the blockade of the coastal strip continued, there were real prospects for renewed violence.

Noting that a Hamas leader reportedly had received a proposal from Israel for a five-year freeze on hostilities, he said Israel’s move to conduct indirect talks with Hamas was intended to perpetuate the split and undermine the leadership of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

To create an independent State, Palestinians must speak with one voice, he said, stressing that continued fragmentation was a “bonus” for destructive forces to pursue goals which have nothing to do with the interests of Palestine.  Implementation of the April 2014 landmark Fatah-Hamas agreement to form a Palestinian Consensus Government was vital, as were confidence-building measures to overcome mistrust between the two parties, and required the active support of the United Nations, other Quartet members and regional actors.

Mr. Tibi said the Netanyahu Administration in Israel was the most radical Israeli Government to date, and it was slowly killing the two-State solution.  On the eve of Israel’s parliamentary elections in March, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would never permit the creation of a Palestinian State, only to retract that claim after being re-elected, with a pledge of support for a disarmed Palestinian State.

But the Prime Minister’s latter claims were disingenuous, Mr. Tibi asserted.  What Mr. Netanyahu and his Likud Party really sought was a weak Palestinian State or no State at all.  Recent attacks on Palestinians in Bethlehem, the escalation of violence in occupied East Jerusalem and attempts by right-wing members of the Israeli Knesset to limit Muslim prayer time at the Al-Haram Al-Sharif (Temple Mount) to make way for Jewish prayer were a testament to the Netanyahu Administration’s real aims.

He said Israel’s occupation had been the longest in history, because it had not been expensive for the occupier and the international community had failed to impose international law on Israel.  The Likud Party and the Zionist movement viewed the one-State solution as a nightmare, preferring instead to maintain the status quo and deepen their reach so that the Israeli apartheid became systematic.  The plan by Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon in May to ban Palestinians from riding the same buses as Israeli settlers in the West Bank illustrated that point.

So did a recent Israeli Supreme Court decision that opened the way for State authorities to raze homes in the unrecognized Palestinian Bedouin village of Umm al-Hieran, in Israel’s southern Negev desert, in order to make way for a Jewish settlement, he said.  Many Palestinian homes in the village had already been destroyed; others were threatened with demolition.

The plight of Arab Palestinians living inside Israel was harsh, he continued, as they struggled against racist Israeli policies that excluded their rights in the economic, social and political spheres.  Last week, Israel’s Deputy Interior Minister, Aron Mazuz of the Likud Party, called on Arab lawmakers in the Knesset to return their Israeli identify cards after those lawmakers asked the Parliament to revoke a provision in the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law that banned family unification between Israeli citizens and their West Bank or Gaza spouses.  Mr Tibi said “We are the rightful owners of the country, we are not guests.”

Mr. Tibi commended all States, businesses and organizations that supported the movement to boycott Israel and called on the international community to adopt a legal position to end settlement expansion in the West Bank and the Judaization of East Jerusalem.

For his part, Mr. Foqaha called for an overhaul of the peace process initiated in 1991 into a “meaningful” process with clear terms of reference and the international community acting as monitor of both sides’ compliance.  The lack of such terms had contributed to the failure thus far of the peace process.

Moreover, whenever there was a change of Israeli Government and a stop to negotiations, the Palestinians found themselves at square one, making it very difficult to build on the progress in previous rounds, he said.  “A process that doesn’t lead to the end of the conflict deserves to be substantially revised, especially when its authenticity in the eyes of the public is at stake.”

Under those terms of reference, 1967 borders must be the basis for any future borders between Israel and Palestine, taking into account the “land for peace principle”, in order for the peace process to succeed, he said.  There must also be a complete settlement freeze in all parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the gradual release of 6,000 Palestinian prisoners currently in Israeli jails.

Future negotiations, he stressed, must focus on borders and security for both sides, the establishment of East Jerusalem as the Palestinian State’s capital, a just settlement for Palestinian refugees, water rights, and the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative.  An international conference, attended by permanent members of the Security Council and other relevant stakeholders, could develop an effective framework to oversee negotiations.

Also essential were concrete steps to advance the two-State solution before a final agreement was reached, as people’s daily lives hung in the balance.  He called for the gradual redeployment of Israeli troops and for measures that could foster the creation of Palestinian State institutions and development of the Palestinian economy, such as easing restrictions on Palestinian projects planned for Area “C”, which comprises 60 per cent of Palestine’s territory.

In Gaza, a return to normal life, fulfilling long-term development and economic needs, as well as ensuring Israel’s security were key, he said, urging an end to the split between Hamas and Fatah and for the unified Palestinian Government to assume responsibility for Gaza.  He also suggested the establishment of a pre-approved inspection method and an accompanying international monitoring mechanism as a way to facilitate the lifting of the naval blockade.

In closing, he stressed that most Israelis and Palestinians supported the two-State solution, but that support should not be taken for granted as it was gradually eroding and a commitment by both sides was essential to sustain it.  Moreover, the one-State solution was not feasible.

Mr. Baltiansky agreed that the conflict needed urgent attention.  But he disagreed with Mr. Tibi that the Netanyahu Administration was the most radical one Israel had seen, asserting that the administration of Yitzak Shamir during the 1980s was more extreme.  Still it had entered into a peace process with the Palestinians and Mr. Netanyahu could do the same.  But even if an accord was signed tomorrow, it could not be implemented because the Palestinian Government did not have control over Gaza — a restriction Palestinians must work towards rectifying.

It was clear that the current Israeli and Palestinian leaders would not sign or implement a permanent status agreement in the coming years, he said.  The immediate challenge was to reduce obstacles as much as possible.  Prime Minister Netanyahu’s claims of support for a two-State solution were merely lip service.  His concept of two States — which involved Israeli soldiers stationed within the Palestinian State — was a non-starter.

A viable way to bring him to the negotiating table and take steps in the right direction was to suggest some transfer of land in Area “C”, currently under Israeli control, to Area “B” under Palestinian control, Mr. Baltiansky said.  That transfer could include the removal of three to five of the Israeli settlements that most seriously harmed Palestinian livelihoods.

In addition, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas should have publicly condemned the recent killing of an Israeli by a Palestinian, he said.  Mr. Abbas’ failure to do so had only deepened Israelis’ doubts over his commitment to peace.  The international community would be right in encouraging the Palestinian leadership to strongly condemn and act effectively against such attacks.

The Arab Peace Initiative, he continued, was very important and must be implemented, but in stages, as it was unrealistic to expect Israel to implement it all at once.  “I don’t have the illusion that Israel can make a real breakthrough with Arab countries and achieve normalization without achieving progress on the Palestinian track.  But we should not be bound by every word [of the initiative],” he said, stressing as an example that given the ongoing war in Syria, Israel would not agree to withdraw from the Golan Heights at this stage.

Regarding France’s initiative for a Security Council resolution that called for a final status agreement within 18 months — and to involve more actors in the process — he said the French delegation should not wait until the draft had the support of both parties before presenting it to the Council.  Acting now could launch an internal debate in Israel over the two-State solution.  Moreover, the international community should support steps to change Israel’s policy on settlements, and encourage reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas — as well as a dialogue between Hamas and Israel.

Hamas’ end to terrorist attacks should be a condition for negotiations, but its formal recognition of the State of Israel and its compliance with Palestine Liberation Organization’s agreements could wait until a later date, he said.

In closing, he warned that defeatist public attitudes towards the peace process should not be allowed to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.  An early 1998 public opinion poll had revealed that most Irish felt there would be never be peace in their lifetimes.  Yet a few months later, the Good Friday Agreement was signed.