

XXI Conferência Internacional de Lisboa

State-building and the quest for peace in the Middle East

This panel dealt with the issue of “state- building and the quest for peace in the Middle East”. Miguel Angel Moratinos, former EU representative for the Middle East Peace Process stressed that despite all its difficulties, the good news was that no one questioned the need for a two state solution and that by 2005 there would be a real hope of Israel and Palestine living together in peace and security. Even Sharon has broken the taboo and acknowledged -both publicly and privately-, that a Palestinian sovereign state will become a reality in the near future. What Europeans wish for is to have a viable, democratic and peaceful Palestinian state, a state that can be geographically, politically and economically viable, where the Palestinians can have full control of their own resources. As for the democratic issue, Moratinos praised the draft for a future Palestinian constitution as an example of modernity, where a real separation of powers would be guaranteed, together with freedom of religion. The need to promote an Arab internal debate was emphasized, such that the construction of the EMP (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) cannot go ahead without attacking the heart of the problem, support for political reform. The second speaker, Uri Avnery, a well-known Israeli peace activist and leader of the Gush Shalom, began by addressing the question of the nation-state, and its dominant role in the history of the last two centuries, both as an idea and as a reality. Although admitting that the nation-state is today giving way to multi-national structures, Avnery conceded that nationalism is still flourishing. Speaking of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Avnery admitted that Ariel Sharon and his political team simply want to integrate all of Palestine into Israel, leaving the Palestinians, some isolated, Bantustan-like semi-autonomous enclaves. On the Palestinian side, however, the demand for their own state is now stronger than ever. Now that there is a worldwide consensus in favour of "two states for two people", with Israeli and Palestinian public opinions strongly supporting the same concept, Avnery stressed that the building of a viable Palestinian state side-by-side with Israel was the only means of achieving a lasting peace in the region. As a final comment, Avnery voiced his disappointment over the fact that the world community had not criticized the building of the separation wall more sharply.

Ahmed Khalidi, a former Palestinian advisor to the Madrid and Washington peace talks between 1991 and 1993 focused on what he called the “three illusions” that had marked the Oslo peace process since 1993. Although the concept of a slow paced, “gradual” approach to peace, based on the building of trust between partners had been adopted, Khalidi considered that gradualisation became a basis for distrust, which resulted in the stalling of the peace talks. As Khalidi argued, by the year 2000, Israelis and Palestinians were still discussing the same issues as in 1993, thus showing that no tangible progress had been achieved, and that gradualism does not necessarily lead to peace. The second “illusion” was that of “ultimate reconciliation” while the end game was still ill-defined, most notably with the constant postponement of the most important decisions. Finally, the third “illusion” was that the conflict had to be resolved purely on a bilateral basis, rather than with suitable assistance from abroad.

As Khalidi mentioned, the Palestinians had already accepted the two-state solution in 1988, as a mean to end this enduring conflict. He stressed that both Palestinians and Israelis first needed to go through a period of “divorce” (the two-state solution), in order to be able to ultimately live together (in an ideal one-state solution). Khalidi also vehemently opposed any Israeli interference in the choice of a Palestinian leadership, stressing that Palestinians should have exactly what Israelis have: the freedom to democratically choose their own leaders. Speaking of the road map, Ahmed Khalidi said it could become a punitive trap for the Palestinians, insofar as the borders of the future state would be still provisional. Its interim status will only fuel Sharon’s wish to maintain the status quo in the long term.

In his concluding remarks, Khalidi once again reiterated his rejection of the gradualist approach behind Oslo, opting for the “Big Bang” approach instead, in which all the most important pressing issues are dealt from the start, with the support of the European Union and the United States.

The debate came to an end with Miguel Angel Moratinos vigorously contesting both Avnery’s and Khalidi’s remarks on Europe’s behaviour over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Whilst Uri Avnery clearly stated his utter disappointment with Europe, - going as far as to consider it “scandalous” as a consequence of its lack of firmness toward Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories- Khalidi, on the other hand, mainly focused on the shortcomings of European intervention in the peace process. Miguel Moratinos was clearly disturbed by with what he had heard, and in a heated response, rebuffed these accusations by stating that, if Europeans had not been able to do more, it was mainly because they faced insurmountable barriers within both the Israeli and the Palestinian administrations, with the former privileging its links with the United States (he pointed out that only the Israeli government could change American conservative attitudes toward the peace process), and the latter undermining European support by not creating a more transparent and democratic regime in the Palestinian territories.