

THE MIDDLE EAST: PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Transcript of a talk by Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa
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ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT:

The Arab-Israeli conflict remains the central obstacle to stability and progress in the region and beyond.

We cannot go decade after decade with the Palestinian question unresolved. We see no reason to deny the Palestinians their right to statehood, to self-determination, to be an active component of the society of nations.

Some think that by spreading the cause for modernisation, the Arab people will cling to that and put the Palestinians on the backburner. They are mistaken. Things cannot be done the right way, the Middle East will not move from one stage to another, spring will not fully come, until the Palestinian question is resolved fairly and justly.

Gaza withdrawal

The removal of colonising settlers is undoubtedly a positive step, a step in the right direction. However, it can hardly be considered a major breakthrough, since the construction of settlements in the West Bank continues unabated, and Jerusalem continues to be encircled by the illegal wall.

I have never regarded the Gaza withdrawal as a major step, and I always called for all our nations to treat it as it is - just a step in the right direction. The Israeli government wants all of us to be thankful, grateful and satisfied. But the withdrawal from Gaza has been coupled unfortunately with the intensification of building settlements and the wall.

Celebration that the people of Gaza have gotten rid of all the settlers should not be denied. It is a good thing to liberate the territory of Gaza, but the fact remains that the policy of Israel has not changed. Current Israeli policy is based on one thing: give them something to keep quiet, give them just some peanuts to keep them busy.

But do not think we are fooled. They will have to withdraw from the occupied West Bank. They will have to agree with us on a solution for Jerusalem. They will have to negotiate the question of refugees. Without this there can be no peace. The Americans are fully aware of that, as they have come to be aware that for us to forget Palestine because of whatever carrots they are offering is a futile exercise.

Peace process

Today many around the world, and in the Middle East in particular, question the very existence of the peace process, and the prospects for the implementation of the roadmap. Such an atmosphere of despair augurs ill for the future of the region. We hope the international community will reinvigorate the peace process and press Israel to live up to its commitments under the roadmap, and to its obligations in compliance with international legitimacy as well as UN Security Council resolutions, and in accordance with the principles of land for peace. Only through a balanced peace agreement would the security of all parties to the conflict be guaranteed and peace would prevail.

We in the Arab world are ready to cooperate in the establishment of a just peace at the earliest possible date. We need peace to prevail, but peace cannot be worthy of the name without justice given to all parties, and justice for the Palestinians is a cornerstone in establishing peace and stability in the Middle East.

US role

We must tell America that stability in the region, the spring that they are talking about in the region, will not be achieved unless they really do their homework and play their role as the superpower of the world. The superpower should not follow biased or double-standard policies.

The conflict will continue until they understand that the Palestinians must have a viable state. For this state to be viable, the Israelis have to withdraw. But half solutions will not work. Half-baked proposals are not acceptable.

So the question is, before the departure of this administration, will President Bush make good on his promise of his commitment to see a State of Palestine and the State of Israel living side by side in peace and cooperation? If this is to be achieved, a solution has to be fair and just. This is a must. We are not going to change our position. America should play its role in realising a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Arab peace initiative

We in the Arab world are committed to a balanced and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This positive Arab vision was put forward by the Arab states in Beirut three years ago, and one to which the Arab world remains fully committed. The Arab peace initiative commits all Arab countries to accept peace and normalise relations with Israel, and puts forward a balanced, lasting solution to the conflict. It provides for collective security guarantees, for an end to the occupation, and the creation of a viable, sovereign Palestinian state. It calls for an agreed solution to the refugee question, a fair solution for Jerusalem, and the process that leads to a comprehensive peace, comprising all tracks: Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese. Many Israelis, perhaps not the majority, are for this. Unfortunately, the current government did not cooperate.

One-state solution

If people are not going to accept that Palestinians have the right to their own viable state, there is no other solution but one state for all of them. It is either this or that. Israel cannot continue to have this apartheid kind of policy and it cannot rule over the Palestinians for long. There will be resistance and another bloody phase will come. Peace is a must on the basis of two states, but if it does not work, then one state with equal rights to all citizens: Jews, Muslims and Christians, Israelis and Palestinians. It is basic in the thinking of many of those who follow the Arab-Israeli conflict and how to solve it.

Working with Jewish groups

We have never walked away from any understanding with Jewish organisations. I am aware, and many of us are aware, that there are Jewish organisations which are working and struggling to establish peace. We cannot and should not accuse Jewish people of having the philosophy or the desire to occupy lands or subjugate people. We differ with Israeli policy because we accuse that policy of being coercive and not really working for peace. This does not apply to all those people who are of Jewish origin or all Jewish organisations. We will have to work with them and we are working with them.

European role

We want the Europeans to continue to have their just position when they refused to import settlement products and insisted on certificates of origin if they come from settlements. They do not buy them, they do not receive them. Some change is occurring recently, but at the same time the Arab world will have to intensify its work. More work needs to be done to stop any change in such positions that were so helpful in telling Israel that not everything it does will be accepted.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem itself could be one city, but it is for East Jerusalem as an occupied territory to be returned to a Palestinian state. A Palestinian state without Jerusalem will always have something missing. Do not think a Palestinian state can be declared without East Jerusalem as its capital.

REFORM:

In the Arab world

A definite reason for optimism is the programme of reform. Reform in the Arab world is a priority, and is essential for the life of our region and the future of our next generations.

The basic document issued by the Arab summit in Tunis last year, known as the Tunis Declaration, is entitled Reform, Change and Modernisation. Through this document, Arab governments committed themselves to pursuing reform and modernisation to keep pace with rapid global changes, consolidating diplomatic practice, larger participation in political and public life, fostering the role of all components of civil societies including NGOs, and empowering women through participation in the political, economic and social areas.

This year, I submitted the first progress report on the implementation of this document to the Arab summit in Algeria, and I will be submitting the next report to the upcoming summit scheduled to be held in Khartoum next March.

Reform is indeed under way in the Arab world. The people want reform, and it is incumbent upon us to strongly push to achieve this reform and to link up with the 21st century. The spirit of reform is sweeping and flourishing in the Middle East.

For reform to succeed, it must emerge from within the societies concerned, and this spirit has indeed emerged from our societies. The consensus among the people and governments alike for such reform is emerging in support of freedom and tolerance, in favour of transparent, responsive, accountable and good governance, respect for human rights, gender equality and the rule of law. I believe the wheel is moving and there are no u-turns. We know it is costly, but it is necessary, and without it we shall all suffer.

But one cannot develop sound, stable reform where violent shockwaves are constantly churning. For societies to develop and for reform to progress, peace and stability are needed. There is a link between the political agenda and the reform agenda. One does not depend on the other, but one needs the other.

This morning, I participated in a conference in Chatham House about the Mediterranean, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Barcelona process that brings together all countries around the Mediterranean including Arab countries. I called for the enlargement of that process to bring in other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan and others.

But we are faced with other major initiatives such as the Greater Middle East, the Neighbourhood Policy, that have been launched without due consultations with Arab nations and governments. No policy will succeed if it is imposed, if it is not the product of a consensus among all concerned.

We need reform in all aspects of life: politics, economics, human rights, education, women and so on. As for reforming religion, those who talk about religion or in the name or on behalf of our religion, need to come up with different arguments, but it is not reform of religion that I can talk about. It is reform of how to address people and to live in the 21st century.

Of the Arab League

We have a programme for the reconstruction of that organisation. I am going to convene the first meeting of the first Arab Parliament in December. The formula is an amendment to the Charter of the Arab League, adding the establishment of a Parliament to the governmental bodies that encompass the Arab League. For the first five years, it will be a Parliament of a transitional nature with equal representation, four deputies elected from each and every Parliament, with 88 members in all. After that, the Parliament will be elected directly by the people.

Also part of the new vision in the Arab League is to open the organisation to civil society groups, to NGOs. Starting next February, they will have consultative status within the Economic and Social Council of the League.

A third major amendment that is now awaiting the ratification of member states is putting an end to the rule of unanimity, paving the way for the rule of the majority. This also is expected in the near future, I hope.

We have also introduced amendments to establish a Security and Peace Council that would deal with problems of security facing all of us. It is not a question of conflicts between Arab countries. I hope this will be a thing of the past very soon. But we have major problems that concern all of us: the clash of civilisations, disarmament in the region, and new initiatives that come from East and West concerning our region. So we have to consider this within the framework of a Security Council that defends our interests and decides on how to deal with a new, globalised world of the 21st century.

By the Arab League

We have agreed on launching a free-trade zone among Arab countries. Eighteen of them have joined. This zone entered into force on January 1, 2005, and is aimed at building an economy based on trade, investment and economic cooperation. I hope the Arab free-trade zone will soon augment intra-Arab trade and investment.

We are negotiating a free-trade zone in services. Only five Arab countries are negotiating, with another five just participating or observing. This has ushered in a new era in the Arab world. We do not have to get the 22 countries to agree on each and every step. If we have a step with five, seven or 10 countries, we will go for it. Others will follow suit whenever it is convenient for them.

In the social area, we are also working. We have programmes of family planning that have become the example for other regional organisations. We are very much concerned with the issue of empowerment of women, children and families, and this will produce results felt by the individual Arab citizen and family. So the message is that it is not a lost cause at all. We have hopes, people, the will and determination, and the combination of all those components will help us chart a new road towards a better future.

Of the UN

I am one of the 15 people who drafted the report on UN reform. We have presented a comprehensive report with proposals to revitalise the UN, but the world today is living in a very flawed situation. We do not have an international order. We have one superpower imposing its will on all, including the Security Council. We want to establish the power of the nations of the world to join to participate in decision-making.

The UN will never move from one stage to the other unless and until it guarantees that major decisions concerning the international community are not decided by one power, but by the consensus of all nations through the General Assembly. This is a bit far-fetched under the present circumstances. That is why there is an impasse. Reform of the UN is on the table, but the only window of opportunity lies in accepting that the nations of the world – all of them – have a stake in the future of the world, and this view is not held by the superpower, unfortunately.

IRAQ:

We are witnessing a situation that is degenerating by the day. The Iraqi people need our help as they build security, establish effective, efficient and inclusive institutions, and rebuild their country.

Throughout its history, Iraq has been a homeland for Muslims and Christians, with all different sects and denominations, Arabs and Kurds and others. That is what made Iraq a pivotal pillar in the Arab world, with its rich civilisation and history full of prominent achievements, with a working formula of unity and diversity. In modern history, Iraq is one of the founders of the League of Arab States, and is a principle member of the Arab nation. The Arab and Islamic identity of Iraq can never be obliterated.

Because we know the ills and shortcomings of the situation in Iraq, it is not difficult to agree on what is needed: a viable, active, sincere reconciliation process that would bring together all Iraqis to establish a consensus among them on what kind of Iraq they want to build. They also need a sound political process towards democracy and unity. They need a timeline to end the presence of foreign forces. A role for the UN is a must, as is a role for the League of Arab States as a safety net and as the oldest organisation of which Iraq is a founding member. Last but not least, a sound, transparent programme for the reconstruction of Iraq.

Iraq for us is a principle country in our region and the Arab world, and as long as Iraq is in turmoil, the region will continue to be in turmoil. It has been said that Iraq should be the example for all of us in the region to follow. We hope that this will come true, but until now the turmoil I am referring to prevents us from following along the steps that are being taken, because we cannot build a society by recalling divisions among people.

For the first time, after decades and decades, we come back to talk about Shia and Sunni, Kurds and Arabs, Muslims and Christians. This is too much for us to swallow or accept. Iraq is the Iraq of all its people, regardless of their race, religion or sect. Iraq should be based on the true democratic principle of one man one vote, citizenship, and no privilege for one group over the other. If this is achieved, then Iraq will be the example to follow.

Arab League role

We in the Arab League and in the Arab societies have stood firm in support of the Iraqi people. We are really sad to see what is going on in Iraq, but we shall continue to support one Iraq, its territorial integrity, its Arab identity, and to help rebuild this great country.

We are trying to help, and the Arab League gates are open for all Iraqis from all walks of life. The Arab League was visited in the last year by Kurds – none other than Jalal Talbani and Masoud Barazani – by Shia leaders, Sunnis, Turkmen, royalists and republicans.

We are doing what we can under dire circumstances. The UN itself is unable to do much because of the presence of foreign troops and the coalition, which is calling the shots in Iraq. So either we enter into war, which is a project nobody accepts, or we apply diplomacy, and that is what we are trying to do.

Constitution

We have been very busy following the drafting of the constitution in Iraq. We cannot be against drafting a constitution, but what we need, what Iraq needs, is a consensus among its people, so that the constitution would reflect the common will of all Iraqis and have them all on the same train towards the future.

Recently, the draft constitution stipulated that only the Arab people in Iraq are part of the Arab nation. The Arab League protested strongly, publicly and privately. This has proved to be productive and useful because the text has been changed. The Arab League did that. We discussed this for many hours with the Iraqi president, the prime minister, the speaker of the house, the deputy prime minister and the Americans.

This is an example of how the Arab League works and achieves results, so at least we are doing what we can.

Arab peacekeepers

Arabs could be sent to Iraq, but under different circumstances. We cannot be part of the coalition, and we cannot go without a formal request by a constitutional Iraqi government representing all the Iraqi people. We cannot go to coerce. We cannot go to help foreign plans or foreign schemes for Iraq. If and when we go, it has to be with the consent of the Iraqis and for a specific reason: to preserve unity and peace.

There was an initiative by Saudi Arabia last year proposing just this, that if you want us to send troops, the withdrawal has to be set, Iraqis have to request that, and the Arab countries have to accept it and determine the conditions under which they would send their troops. It is under consideration, but the conditions are not yet ripe for that.

European role

Many Europeans did not want to support the coalition forces and many were reluctant to support the invasion. Some are even vehement in opposing American policy in Iraq. What is happening there does not encompass European policy. They remain aloof.

Europe, the Arab world, and in fact the majority of the world are still very upset because of the policies followed over there. We have to increase that feeling. We have to work with the Europeans in order to strengthen the lobby that calls for all foreign forces to withdraw and leave the Iraqis alone.

SUDAN:

In Sudan, which is another important component of the Arab world, we see a glimmer of hope that would bring about a new, democratic and prosperous Sudan. There is a genuine opportunity for peace, unity and prosperity. This vast country, which is home to hundreds of ethnic denominations, is on the track towards peace.

Arab League role

We have deployed a lot of efforts to support the process of peace in that country. We played a vital role in bringing peace to the southern part of Sudan. I myself signed as a witness to the peace agreement between north and south.

The Arab League has also actively participated in the Darfur peace talks, and we succeeded, with the cooperation of the African Union and the UN, in reaching an agreement on the principles to solve the conflict in that region.

The first mission that was sent to Darfur was from the Arab League, a mission that travelled through the vast region the size of France, visited the neighbouring countries, talked to the rebel organisations, and came back with a report that played a very important role in determining the course of action as to how to deal with that problem.

Today, Darfur is witnessing definite progress towards peace and stability. There is no war, no bloodshed, but the process of negotiations, led by the AU, helped by the Arab League, and both are under the flag of the UN.

I invited all Arab organisations, technical organisations, foundations and funds to meet and hear the representations of the government of Sudan on how to rebuild the southern part of the country. There are now projects worth over \$200 million at work in southern Sudan under the flag of the Arab League. I invited the private sector. I told them Sudan is a rich country: oil, minerals, water, land, you name it. The best thing to do is invest in the country. Sudan would be very prosperous in a very short time. Arab investment activities should concentrate on, at least part of it should go to, Sudan as quickly as possible.

A new Sudan is emerging. The Arab League really feels proud that it was very quickly present in southern Sudan, in Darfur, and in the positive changes that are occurring.

LEBANON:

We follow with great interest and worries what is going on now in Lebanon, but we have full confidence that its people will move ahead and put behind them the difficulties they witness today.

Democracy

We in the Arab world, in the Middle East and the international community, are invited to support a free, peaceful and democratic future for that country. Democracy is a tradition and principle well known to the Lebanese people, who have proved time and again that they can rise above all scourges of war, tragedy and differences. This makes Lebanon an exemplary society of coexistence, and an active, successful member of the Arab society of nations.

Shebaa Farms

All Arab countries recognise Shebaa as Lebanese land. The Shebaa Farms are part and parcel of Lebanon. The UN, in determining the lines that Israel should withdraw beyond, put the Shebaa Farms as part of the Syrian occupied territories. But Syria followed with a letter to the Secretary General of the UN stating that the Shebaa Farms belong to Lebanon, and this is what the Arab League has adopted.

The withdrawal by Israel from Syria's Golan Heights would liberate Shebaa, and by the Syrian determination that it is not their territory, it would be returned to Lebanon inshallah.

Resistance

We followed the role of the resistance in Lebanon with great admiration. As long as foreign occupation continues on any territory, resistance is legitimate. If there was a road to peace and quiet relations, no need for resistance would present itself.

TERRORISM:

We mourn the innocent victims of terrorism everywhere. Terrorism is an international plague that is not restricted to a single area or society. It has no religion and knows no nationality.

In London

We were all shocked and saddened by the terrible and tragic events of July 7. I would like to express my condolences to the families of the victims of the London bombings.

In the Arab world

We in the Arab world have been for quite some time now subjected to various forms of terrorism. This is why we have condemned in the strongest terms all forms of terror directed at innocent civilians, and we remain determined to adopt all measures aimed at curbing and combating this evil of international dimensions.

Definition

Terrorism is violent acts aimed at terrorising societies and doing harm to innocent civilians. We do not have to make any exceptions here. Some views mention or stress the exception of wars of liberations. I submit that wars of liberation fall under a different category. They have nothing to do with terrorism. They address forces of occupation. This is a different story. But terrorism is aggression against innocent civilians or against societies of different nations for whatever reason. An innocent man, woman, family or child walking in the street has the right to be safe. So terrorism is linked to the terrorising of societies or innocent civilians, including state terrorism. This is my definition and I believe it is fair.

SYRIA:

Syria is under threat, and punishing or attacking it would be a major mistake. We do not think Syria would be the next target because of the many complications that are present.

Syria has the right to determine its own future as a major state in the region. We have worked diligently, and continue to work to preserve Syrian territory and the Syrian nation from being attacked for whatever reasons, especially after what we have seen with Iraq where many, if not all, the justifications were false.

Therefore, the Arab countries and many other countries support the right of Syria to have its own policy and not succumb to pressures.

Vis-à-vis Lebanon

I was involved in the Lebanese-Syrian developments. Syria has withdrawn from Lebanon, and Lebanon is entering a new phase of its life.

Vis-à-vis Iraq

The Syrians have proved to the international community that they are not the staging ground for violence in Iraq. We have to work in order to avoid another war in the Middle East. We hope reason will prevail and Syria will be spared a policy that would burn up the Arab world and the Middle East, and might push it to the point of no return.

WESTERN SAHARA:

The parties to Western Sahara have insisted that only the UN would be the organisation that addresses this problem, neither the African Union nor the Arab League. So in accordance with their wishes we follow developments very closely, but we do not intervene. The parties wanted the UN to have it fully on its plate.

SOMALIA:

On our agenda of problems we have Somalia, which zigzags between conflict and conciliation, but we are actively pushing the Somalis to get back to the business of rebuilding their country. I hope that we shall succeed.

IRANIAN ARABS:

We are ready to listen, we are ready to talk to the Iranian government, and we are ready to consult about this in the Arab society of nations.