

US President Barack Obama's June 4, 2009 speech in Cairo

Attendees (without distinction):

US Consulate: Frank Finver, Suzan Nammari

Palestinian Civil Society Representatives: Rabi Hantouli, Benaz Batrawi, Rami Abu Khalil, Tammi Rafidi, Shaker Khalil, Shahnaz Jubran, Arnan Bashir

MIFTAH: Joharah Baker, Ala Karajeh, Arwa Jaber, Bisan Abu Ruqti, Lily Feidy

Background

The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, MIFTAH in cooperation with the Public Affairs Office at the United States Consulate in Jerusalem, organized a round table discussion with Public Affairs Officer, Mr. Frank Finver. The meeting, which mainly targeted representatives from Palestinian civil society, focused on US President Barack Obama's June speech in Cairo and its significance vis-à-vis the US position towards Palestine/Israel stands today.

Opening remarks by Mr. Finver

In his June 4, 2009 speech in Cairo where he addressed the Muslim world, President Obama "basically said what had to be said." The President emphasized that the speech heralded a "new beginning" which is what we are seeing now in terms of the new culture the president brought with him. However, reality is something we all have to face, especially here in Palestine.

While the President is dealing with a number of foreign and domestic issues, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is at the center of the administration's foreign policy. They are very concerned and involved with the developments here even though there is a certain level of frustration because of how complex and difficult the process is. However, the US is impatient to make headway. He stressed that the creation of a Palestinian state has and remains to be a priority for the US.

Obama's speech in Cairo and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent speech in Doha are both good starting points for discussion with the Arab and Muslim world. Obama's speech had within it an action plan for moving ahead. Similarly, US officials have concrete ideas for moving forward here.

The Cairo speech mainly outlined US positions on the two wars the US is engaged in and the elements of "violence and extremism". Americans voted for a conclusion to the Iraq war, which the Americans are in a process of doing now, scaling troops back for a full withdrawal by this summer.

As for Israel/Palestine, the US wants to become a positive force for people in the region. Evidence of this is that on his second day in office, President Obama appointed George Mitchell as the US's special envoy to the region, which is not "a

part-time job." The US's position is that we need to do whatever it takes to promote stability and to set the groundwork for the restart of negotiations, which the Administration believes is the only way forward. One thing for sure is that the approach of this administration is very different than the one of the last administration, especially in terms of Syria and Iran. The consulate is more involved with cultural exchanges, outreach programs and scholarships with Palestinians and is looking for ways to cooperate more with NGOs universities, organizations, etc.

Discussion

Palestinian participants first asked if the Israeli-Palestinian issues are really central in US politics. Mr. Finver reiterated that it is a main focus of the administration and that there are daily communications in this regard between American officials. However, he added, domestic issues such as the economic situation in the US have preoccupied the President since he took office and that the US has put a mechanism in place to push the peace process forward once it takes off. However, this mechanism is "in neutral" at the moment because the parties are not engaging in the process as they should be. The sooner the parties get back to negotiations the better.

In response to the question of what the US was doing to pressure Israel into restarting to negotiations, Mr. Finver said the US believes it is now up to the Palestinians to decide even though it is understandable why President Abbas is hesitant to return to negotiations. Israel, he said, seems to be ready to return and has taken the step of declaring a moratorium on settlement construction, even though this is not exactly what the US had hoped for. "Perhaps we set the bar too high when we called for a complete freeze of settlements," Mr. Finver admitted. The US is constantly pushing Israel to do more. For example, when Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak was in Washington, he was pushed by Secretary Clinton on Gaza and on how to alleviate some of that suffering there. The US is trying to convince Israel that it is in their own interests to ease the pressures in Gaza and to work towards a Palestinian state.

In response to a question on how much the US is influenced by the pro-Israel lobby within the States, Mr. Finver said that although this lobby is powerful, it is not a monolithic thing in the US now, especially with the creation of J Street and other voices that are being heard. Still, the US operates according to its own national and security interests even though Israel is a strong ally. There is no doubt Congress is very supportive of Israel but many now believe it is in Israel's interest to have a Palestinian state.

Mr. Finver maintained that US policy towards settlements has remained unchanged and that it constantly calls Israel out on some of these settlement activities, calling them unhelpful and not conducive to peace. However, when asked about the US position on the Goldstone report, its reactions to Israel's measures on the ground and the accusation towards the US about trying to bar national conciliation, Mr. Finver answered that the US continues to support a Palestinian state and publicly tells Israel when its actions are considered "counterproductive." The US does not want to bar Palestinian conciliation but he said the US would not deal with Hamas unless it agrees to the Quartet conditions. As for the Goldstone report, the US maintains its position that the report was flawed and that the parties should conduct their own investigations into alleged war crimes.

One attendee asked what the Palestinians could do to move forward in the eyes of the US. They could work on their image and public relations, which they are not very good at, Mr. Finver said. They need to state facts without exaggeration, facts which speak for themselves, especially in a place like Gaza. Mr. Finver also the Palestinians should be directing their messages at Israelis, creating dialogue in every possible venue.

Mr. Finver reiterated the US' commitment to the creation of a Palestinian state and said the Palestinians have a lot of allies, themselves included. He also said the US did not "intentionally" finance the occupation when asked about the large flow of funding Israel gets each year from the US. The US realizes that the shelf-life of a two state solution is not unlimited and that the window might be closing, but that no one could impose peace. The parties would have to reach peace themselves.