

The US role in light of current developments in the Arab world and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

Attendees (without distinction):

US Consulate: Frank Finver, Suzan Nammari, Nasser Ideis, Pedro Martin

Palestinian civil society representatives: Arnan Bashir, Jamileh Abed, Hossam Izzedin, Mousa Qous, Rami Mehdawi

MIFTAH Team: Ruham Nimri, Lily Feidy, Harriet Grecian, Bisan Abu Ruqti, Ala Karajeh, Joharah Baker

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 US Consul for Press and Cultural Affairs, Frank Finver. The meeting, which mainly targeted representatives from Palestinian civil society, focused on the US role in light of the current developments in the Arab world and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Opening remarks by Mr. Finver

There is no crystal ball to see into the future after the changes that took place in the Arab world but for the Palestinian-Israeli issue, we always have hope. We have no other choice but to work together. The US wants an agreement to be reached. It is a strategic interest for us. However, with the current situation, we are all frustrated but frustration is not a strategy nor should it be a prevailing attitude. There are always ways to move forward.

There is no doubt that a Palestinian state is being built. The Palestinian Authority and the international community have been working hard together. There are changes on the ground, buildings and institutions that keep growing.

Politically, the situation may seem to be in a sort of holding pattern because of the impasse in negotiations but there is still a lot of activity. USAID has had on the ground presence supporting the West Bank and Gaza since 1994. Since then, they have obligated approximately \$3.7 billion for development and humanitarian assistance.

Development is taking place at an astounding pace. But while much has changed, one thing that hasn't is the US commitment to peace here.

This is a perfect time to talk about non-violent protest because of the changes and revolutions that took place in the Arab world. The US shares many of these themes in its history. We have had to evolve over time, for example from when African-Americans were subjected to discrimination. But it takes time to rectify injustices in history, hence the civil rights movement.

Resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is still a major foreign policy objective. The conflict is not insurmountable however its solution may not be on our timetable (or even in our lifetime) -- but it will occur.

Discussion

Participants said that while the US says it is committed to the region, on the ground the Palestinians have lost confidence in the United States especially after the US veto of the draft resolution on settlements last month. Mr. Finver commented that the entire situation was unfortunate but that the US has always maintained the conflict must be solved by the parties. The UN was not the venue for solving the problem.

Mr. Finver also said that his government has always opposed settlements with or without the veto. We now have to talk about the post-veto situation on how to get the parties back to resolving the issues, he maintained.

Another question posed by the participants was whether the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would remain a priority with the US after the changes in government in Arab countries. Mr. Finver said the US has the capacity to focus on several things at once, even as they quickly evolve. The US realizes that people in the region want change and democracy and the US supports that. He said it remains to be seen if these changes in the Arab world would take away the focus on the Palestinian issue, but that it is doubtful that would happen for long. Right now, tremendous resources are needed for the changes in the region because the world is being called on to help rebuild economies there.

Palestinians are in relatively good shape in this regard. There is progress in the areas of rule of law, security and stability and there is the semblance of a nascent state. The growth pattern is impressive. Now it is the time for young people to be heard, for their needs to be met.

One participant asked how the US could change the perception of many Palestinians who believe that the United States is the real enemy because of its alliance with Israel. Mr. Finver replied that the situation here is complicated even though he did concede to the fact that the US's commitment to Israel is unshakeable. He said that while things have changed, there are still difficulties and challenges but that President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad offered a great deal in terms of negotiating a solution.

Mr. Finver said that people should take responsibility for their own destinies and set goals for themselves and keep focused on them. What Palestinians need is an outreach strategy that would tell Israel something like, “We are not going anywhere, we are stuck together in this place and we need to learn to live together.”

One participant also criticized the US for embracing universal values but not doing enough to manage the conflict here. She said that all the American involvement and money is only superficial and that Palestinians continue to get the short end of the stick, saying the US has always been very biased towards Israel. The US is actually helping Israel to maintain its occupation of Palestine while the ground is being pulled from under the Palestinians. The core problem, she said, has yet to be addressed. She asked Mr. Finver why the United States would not impose a just solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict even though it has imposed solutions elsewhere to end conflict.

Mr. Finver responded that it was never the United States’ intention to “dull Palestinian senses” or take away their dignity, adding that they deserve statehood. He said past agreements such as Oslo and Camp David floundered perhaps because of a lack of trust but that US envoy George Mitchell was still very much involved. “Perhaps the right formula is there but we just haven’t tapped into it yet,” he said.