

“Does America Really Want a Palestinian State? Yes”

A round table discussion with Professor Walter Russell Mead

Attendees (without distinction):

US Consulate: Frank Finver, Suzan Nammari, Jennifer Billings, Cynthia Harvey

Palestinian civil society: Issam Arouri, Ghassan Khatib, Daoud Abu Libdeh, Maysoun Qaddumi, Nabeel Kassis, Jamil Rabah

MIFTAH Team: Joharah Baker, Ala' Karajeh, Sahar Rafidi, Julie Granurud, Bisan Mousa

Background

The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, MIFTAH in cooperation with the United States Consulate General in Jerusalem, organized a round table discussion with Walter Russell Mead, Professor of Foreign Affairs and Humanities at Bard College and Editor-at-Large of the American Interest. The meeting, which mainly targeted representatives from Palestinian civil society, focused on the question of whether the United States really wants a Palestinian state.

Opening remarks by Dr. Mead

I think the two state solution needs to be more “spontaneously popular” to the Palestinians in that it addresses all the sub-issues that are left unresolved such as the compensation issue for refugees. For the Israelis, it is a matter of trust and confidence. If the sub-issues are resolved the Israelis would feel less threatened because they would realize that the deal is now more attractive to Palestinians, which means there is a lesser chance of Palestinians being unsatisfied.

United States foreign policy has always been that everyone who considers itself as a nation is a nation and is deserving of self determination. The secular support for Zionism in the United States stemmed from the notion of Jews as a national group who should have a state. The United States supported this notion all the way back to the time of the Balfour Declaration.

Another factor that plays into why Americans are more sympathetic to Israel is that they have always seen the Palestinians as a sub-division of the Arab people. Today there is a clearer recognition of Palestinians as a separate identity and not just part of the Arab people.

The US believes the goal of any solution is to end the conflict. So why is the US not supporting the Palestinians' UN bid? The principle of Palestinian statehood is there, but is this the way to achieve it? This does not allow for the issues to be resolved completely. Such as, what will be the boundaries of the Palestinian state and who will control Gaza? These can only be resolved through negotiations.

Discussion

Participants asked why there is so much support for Israel among the Americans and sympathy for the Jews? Dr. Mead said that it is not an either/or situation always. There are plenty of Americans who are pro-Israel who also support a Palestinian state. Still, sympathy for Jews in the Middle East, he said was 3-4 times more than for Palestinians.

Participants also wanted to know why the American government supported the Arab spring but not independence for the Palestinians. Dr. Mead said the US does support independence, but that any state must know its territory and is responsible for any activities on its territory, something even the Palestinians are not able to provide. He gave the example of the split between the West Bank and Gaza as evidence that there was no one government in control.

In the end, Dr. Mead said the fastest way to a state is not merely getting a UN resolution and that is why the US cannot support the Palestinian bid. President Obama, he said, did not understand how complicated the situation was in the beginning and unintentionally drove the Palestinians in a trap they could not get out of. That is, demanding a full Israeli freeze on settlements. Today, that is why the Palestinians cannot backtrack on this demand.

The US, he said wants to help the Palestinians build a state and he has seen improvement in the Palestinians' state building process each time he visits. But the parties must resolve the issues and that is the track the US government will ultimately support.