

Speech for the 9th CEMOFPSC Conference

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First, allow me to thank the organizers for inviting me to this important conference. This is not the first time I have participated on behalf of this organization. In the past, I took part in two other conferences that were held in Madrid on other important topics connected to issues in the Middle East. In general, I think that international involvement in the Middle East is important and essential, in the past as well as in the present.

There is no doubt that the Palestinian issue, over the course of very many years, has been, and remains, the key issue in our region and in the Middle East. This is true even though over the years, and especially in recent years, the Middle East has been confronting other issues—the Iranian nuclear issue, the Arab spring, the war in Syria, the events in Egypt, and others as well.

Over the years, and to this day, with all the initiatives that were proposed and the diplomatic talks that were held, the international community has always been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—the United States and the countries of the European Union, including Spain.

History teaches us that the start of the contacts for meetings between Israel and the Palestinians began toward the end of the intifada that broke out in 1987. These contacts ultimately led to the convening of the Madrid peace conference on October 30, 1991, where, for the first time, Israelis met with a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

This conference paved the way for direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and the signing of the first Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993, when the two leaders, Rabin and Arafat, took the bold step of shaking hands and signing a historic agreement aimed at bringing an end to the conflict.

This agreement included:

- Recognition of the PLO as the legal and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.
- The immediate establishment of a Palestinian Authority to govern Gaza and Jericho.
- An initial transfer of authority to the Palestinians in the West Bank with free elections to be held for the Palestinian council every five years.
- Withdrawal of the Israeli presence from the Gaza Strip and the area of Jericho.
- Palestinian recognition of Israel's right to exist in peace and security.
- Acceptance of resolutions 242 (land for peace), and 338 of the UN Security Council.
- Formal commitment by the PLO to abandon violence and terror.

(Please note that this agreement did not include an "end game" result).

The first step of the peace process came with the signing of the Oslo Accord twenty years ago. The Oslo Accord was a historic turning point in Israeli-Palestinian relations. This was the first time Israel acknowledged recognition of a Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinians hoped this agreement would bring an end to the occupation and be the first step towards establishment of a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli one. In my opinion, the principles of this agreement, even though twenty years have passed, are the basis for every negotiation, treaty and peace initiative that has taken place since.

In the end, this agreement has been only partially fulfilled, since many unresolved issues remain. These issues have been difficult to resolve because of the atmosphere of:

- Mistrust and suspicion
- Lack of sympathy and charged relations, and
- Popular pessimism on prospects for success of the process

Since this agreement, we have continued to see international involvement in the peace process, including by Spain as an independent country and also as part of the European Union.

And in this context, let us recall the roadmap agreement, which began with the involvement of the EU, and then the Americans also adopted it, and on June 24, 2002, it became the Quartet's proposal when President George W. Bush presented an outline for the renewal of the diplomatic process.

The defined objective of the roadmap agreement was a final, comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, as with other agreements, even though the two sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians, accepted the principles of the roadmap with certain reservations, ultimately, its stages were not implemented.

Since the Oslo Accords nearly twenty years ago, there have been many attempts to reach agreements, to bridge the gaps, and to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

- The Cairo agreement of May 1994
- The Taba agreement in 1995
- The Hebron agreement in 1997
- The Wye agreement in October 1998
- The Camp David conference in July 2000
- The Clinton parameters in December 2000
- The roadmap in June 2002
- The Annapolis conference in November 2007

Nonetheless, all these attempts have failed and, instead, they have been replaced by the second intifada and an ongoing political stalemate.

Barack Obama's first term began with his prominent speech expressing clear support for the "two states for two peoples" solution. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu followed suit with his own talk at Bar Ilan University in which he, too, endorsed the two-state principle. Still, nothing moved, and the process went into an extended freeze. With Obama's reelection to a second term, the United States resumed its involvement in the peace process between the Israeli and the Palestinians.

This process of restarting direct talks intensified after the Israeli elections of January 2013. Minister of Justice Tzipi Livni was charged with heading the talks.

The Obama administration has played a crucial role in this most recent effort. Without the mediation of Secretary of State John Kerry and the intensive U.S. involvement, these talks would probably not have taken place. Both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, had no intension, or ability, to renew these talks by themselves, without a mediator.

These talks have a declared time frame of nine months, and to date their progress (or lack of progress) is confidential.

Public opinion on both sides (with a majority of around 70% on the Israeli side) supports a resolution of the conflict that would establish a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli one.

And among the findings of the latest poll conducted by Dr. *Khalil Shikaki* and presented nearly two weeks ago at the INSS conference, a majority of nearly 60 percent noted that if Abbas achieves a peace agreement, they will support it.

The big question is how to get there. Yet significant gaps remain, on a number of issues:

- The status of Jerusalem
- The Palestinian right of return
- The acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state
- The settlements and precise borders

Some 400,000 settlers currently live in the West Bank, and even during the current round of talks settlement expansion has continued. The continued settlement expansion constitutes an obstacle to the success of the talks and threaten their progress.

The nine months allocated to negotiations are supposed to end in April. We are now seeing numerous reports in the media about the outline to be proposed by John Kerry. It is not clear to either side where this will ultimately lead.

The government in Israel today also includes rightwing parties that oppose a settlement and create difficulties concerning the negotiations, and in my opinion, they could torpedo them.

One of the questions preoccupying Israeli public opinion today is whether the government will survive and whether progress in the peace talks will lead to the departure of some in the government and the dissolution of the coalition.



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Undoubtedly, the international community's involvement in the process is necessary, and its input will be constructive. In addition to the United States, the EU, which includes Spain as well, is continuing its involvement in the process. In April 2013, Spanish foreign minister José Manuel García-Margallo y Marfil visited Israel for the first time, where he met with President Peres, and in Jordan he met with the chairman of the Palestinian Authority. The foreign minister emphasized that Spain sees tremendous importance in the renewal of negotiations and that his country can be depended on to provide any help needed by the two parties that will promote peace.

It should be noted that the assessment is that any outline that is ultimately presented will be based on mutual concessions and on variations on the roadmap agreement, and its implementation will require the continued support, assistance, and involvement of the United States and the Quartet.

And finally, in spite of the fact that there are also pessimistic assessments that the current diplomatic process may fail, allow me to be optimistic nonetheless and to continue to believe and to hope that in fact, we are finally going to see a historic breakthrough and a diplomatic process that will lead to the end of the conflict, the end of the occupation, and to peace, because we all, Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, must think about and focus on how to build the future for our children and grandchildren and for our people.

Thank you very much.