

PEACEKEEPING AND THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A presentation to the USI of the ACT

by

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I'm going to tell a brief story about peacekeeping in the Middle East and then give my thoughts about the prospects for peace in that region.

There are four separate peacekeeping missions in the region, some overlapping. I can start the story in the days after the Ottoman Empire had collapsed and Britain was the mandated authority in Palestine. The British mandate ended on 14 March 1948 and immediately David Ben Gurion declared independence for Israel. The next day Israel's Arab neighbours began their war with Israel.

Several weeks after the conflict started the UN Security Council appointed a Swedish diplomat, Count Folke Bernadotte, to mediate the conflict. The UN Security Council agreed that he should be provided with a 'sufficient number of military observers' and it was then peacekeeping in the Middle East began. The Mediator started with some 35 observers and by the end of that year, 1948, Count Bernadotte had over 500 observers. Their job was to supervise a truce between Israel and her Arab neighbours. The military observers were formed into the UN Truce Supervision Organisation which came to be known as UNTSO.

Count Bernadotte was assassinated by Israelis in September 1948 and in 1949 his deputy and successor Dr Ralph Bunche negotiated armistice agreements between Israel and her neighbours: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. The UN observers continued to supervise the Armistice arrangements and kept the name UNTSO.

During the 1973 war, the Israelis forces pushed across the Golan towards Damascus. UNTSO had been on the Golan since 1967, supervising the dividing line between the Israelis and the Syrians, but in 1974 the UN Security Council decided to establish an armed inter-positional force between the Israelis and the Syrians on the Golan. It was called the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). On the Golan there is now a zone separating the two sides called the Area of Separation. It was agreed that the establishment of UNDOF would be without prejudice to the mandate of the already existing Truce Supervision Organisation so the UNTSO observers occupied positions on either side of the Area of Separation and were subsequently placed under the operational control of UNDOF. Now there were two peacekeeping missions in the Middle East.

After the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon the United Nations Security Council decided to place a UN force in Southern Lebanon to supervise the withdrawal of Israel forces. They UN called it the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). UNTSO was already occupying observation posts along the demarcation line between Israel and Lebanon so it was decided to place the UNTSO observers under the operational control of UNIFIL. Now there were three peacekeeping missions.

Let's move forward to 1982. UNTSO had been occupying observation posts in the Sinai and with the peace between Israel and Egypt the Israelis and Egyptians agreed to create a new peacekeeping force. Though not a UN force, it was called the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO). However, it was agreed that UNTSO would retain a small presence in the Sinai to reflect Egypt's support for the on-going quest for a long-lasting and comprehensive peace across the whole region.

Now there were four peacekeeping missions in the Middle East – UNTSO, UNDOF, UNIFIL and the MFO. As the head of UNTSO one of my biggest concern was for the health of the relationships between UNTSO and the three other missions who were in UNTSO's mission area and whose mission areas we occupied. It required constant diplomacy, cooperation and goodwill. I was extremely fortunate that the heads of the other three peacekeeping missions were so professional and generous. We made it work because we knew that without our efforts the situation could become quickly unworkable.

I'll move on now to my thoughts about the prospects for a comprehensive and long lasting peace in the Middle East.

When I was approaching the end of my two years serving with UNTSO I wanted to clarify in my own mind what I thought the prospects for peace were. I'd been carefully avoiding judgments about the rights and wrongs of the various parties – the UN's job was to observe and report only. To discipline my thinking and encapsulate my ideas I decided to set myself the challenge of writing one sentence about the prospects for peace in the Middle East. It was this:

The prospects for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East cannot be separated from the question of a future Palestinian State, and this is in turn affected by the mistrust, fear and hatred between Israelis and Palestinians, the gulf that exists between Israel and her Arab neighbours, and the inconsistent and divisive approach to the region taken by the international community.

I can draw from this my view of the factors that act as blocks to peace. The first is the question of trust. I was at a UN Conference in 2008 and having a conversation

with the UN Head of Mission in an African nation, in a country that had been beset by inter-communal violence. This very experienced official said that he'd never witnessed such deep levels of mistrust between communities. He then said that, for him, restoring trust was the key thing that was needed for the sides to move towards a long term peace.

He said that to restore trust they needed three things. Firstly, they needed a common language with which to talk about their past. Secondly, they needed a shared vision of their future together, and thirdly he said they needed some mechanism for reconciliation to deal with what they'd done to each other.

I thought then about the Middle East and it seemed to me that those three elements for restoring trust were not well established at all. Take for example the matter of a common language. Many Israelis that I met call the war of 1948 the War of Independence: the Palestinians call it the Nakba – the Catastrophe.

The second block to peace is the cultural gulf between the Arabs, and the Israeli people. I want to read to you extracts from two books to illustrate this gulf. The first is a book by David Pryce-Jones called *The Closed Circle*. He writes this about the Arab peoples:

As a western democracy unable by reason of geography to extract itself from the Arab connectivity, Israel is in a predicament. Routinely obliged to arbitrate by force or fruitlessly pleading for democratic procedures of compromise and civility, to resolve a conflict that would be redundant, indeed would never have assumed its historic form if such democratic procedures had been available in the first place.

Now let's go across to the Israel side. There's a book called *The History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson. He writes:

. . . human confidence . . . if it is strong and tenacious enough, is a force in itself which pushes on the hinge of events and moves them. The Jews believed they were a special people with such unanimity and passion, and over so long a span, that they became one. They did indeed have a role because they wrote it for themselves. Therein perhaps lays the key to their story.

The next point I want to talk about is the role of the international community. My view is that the international community in many ways created the situation in the Middle East and it's the international community that needs to help resolve it. The states of the international community invariably act with their own interests at heart and I believe that the role the international community plays has been, and continues to be, one of the reasons why peace seems so elusive. There's a quote I have from a

book by (former US President) Jimmy Carter titled called Palestine: *Peace not Apartheid*. He writes this:

With the exception of one bold move by Norway in '93 (the Oslo accords) history has shown that progress is possible only if the United States assumes its historic role as honest broker. To play that role, America must not be seen to be in the pocket of either side. It must enjoy a degree of trust and respect from both sides. We must always make clear our commitment to the security of Israel but we cannot be peace makers if American government leaders are seen as knee-jerk supporters of every action or policy of whatever Israeli government happens to be in power at the moment. That is the essential fact which must be faced.

Now I will deal with the question of the occupation of the West Bank. By occupation I mean the Israeli people or settlers as they call them, who have taken up residence in the West Bank. Inside the West Bank (a geographic term) or Occupied Palestinian Territory (a political term) there are in the order of half a million Israeli "settlers" supported by a large Israeli security force. Now I want to read to you from a book by a British journalist about the Six Day War in 1967. His name is Jeremy Bowen and he writes tellingly of the question of the occupation. He says:

The settlements (the Israeli settlements) have expanded enormously – more than half a million Israelis now live in land occupied in 1967, they are heavily defended at great cost and are the focus for violent Palestinian action against the occupation.

He writes about the Israeli Government's response:

Successive Israeli governments have not accepted that they are occupiers at all. They say that the West Bank and Gaza were not part of any sovereign state before 1967. The territories therefore are administered and not occupied. Israeli's interpretation is not accepted by the UN Security Council, the International Red Cross and most of the rest of the world, but Israel defends its position fiercely because if the territories are legally classified as occupied land, its settlement activities since the end of the Six Day War amount to multiple serial violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The question of borders is one of the most difficult problems and Israel is currently building a barrier which is within what the international community considers to be the pre-1967 border of a future state of Palestine. So the question of where the border will be located will be an important component in a future peace agreement.

Then there are the refugees – there are about half a million Arab refugees in Lebanon, about half a million in Syria, and countless Palestinians who live in Jordan. I am told that some 60% of the people who live in Jordan are of Palestine extraction. Many Palestinians have a very uncertain future. The half million or so Palestine refugees living in Lebanon know that it is most unlikely that they will ever be granted Lebanese citizenship. There's another great book by an Israeli called Benny Morris called *Righteous Victims* and he writes this about the question of refugees:

The vision of return is what kept them (the refugees) going, the be all and end all of their political existence, a major part of their identity during the previous half century. Without doubt the refugees who are so prominent in the ranks of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah are in the front lines of the Al Aqsa Intifada and are at least to a degree motivated by this dream of a return and the desire to prevent its removal from the agenda.

I'm now going to talk about security. One of the first places I visited in Israel was Yad Vashem – the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. When I had finished my tour my Israeli liaison officer said to me: "General, I wanted you to see this because I want you to understand us." He said: "It will help you understand why we'll never trust our security to anybody ever again."

I want to read to you an exchange between (General) Moshe Dayan, who was then the Israeli Defence Minister and the Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, when they were talking about the fact that, after the 1967 war, Israel started to occupy the West Bank. This is what Jeremy Bowen writes:

Moshe Dayan, in keeping with his views that the Israelis and the Palestinians were in a perpetual war saw what was coming. He predicted to Foreign Minister Abba Eban that the Palestinians would use terrorism to fight Israeli rule. When Eban asked him how he knew, he said – 'Because that is exactly what I would do if I was in their place'.

Jerusalem. This is not the last topic, but it is often left to the end of the agenda, because it's such a difficult question.

There are some 38,000 people that live within the old city wall in the heart of Jerusalem. Of them it is estimated that about 32,000 are Arabs. Within the old city walls is the Al Aqsa Mosque compound, Al-Haram al-Sharif or the Noble Sanctuary, with the famous dome of the rock, the Golden Dome.

This is the third holiest place in Islam after Mecca and Medina. It is revered as the destination of Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem and the location of his ascent to heaven. It is also the holiest site in Judaism. Jewish teaching holds that it was from

here that the world expanded into its present form and that this was where God gathered the dust he used to create the first man, Adam. The Torah records that it was here that God chose to rest His Name and Divine Presence and consequently two Jewish Temples have been built at the site.

According to Jewish tradition the Third Temple will also be located here and it will be the final one. In recent times, due to difficulties in ascertaining the precise location of the Mount's holiest place, many Jews will not set foot on the Mount itself. And holding up the western side of the Al Aqsa mosque compound is the remains of the Western Wall of the Second Temple. So, how do you divide this place which is at the one time unquestionably most holy for both Islam and the Jewish faith? There seem to be some many on both sides for who compromise in unthinkable.

Another block to peace I wanted to talk about is this question of negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. There was a saying which I heard which I think summarises some of it. I was once told that the heart of the problem is that the maximum that the Israeli government could offer the Palestinians always falls short of the minimum that the Palestinians could ever accept. For the Israelis, to compromise in the face of the strengths they now have would be very difficult and for the Palestinians to compromise from their position of weakness is for many Palestinians almost unthinkable.

So now that I've depressed you and me by talking about all the things which will stop a peace in the Middle East, let me tell you what I think is needed. My view is that for peace you need a long term, coherent and consistent position by the international community to assist both sides in making the most painful compromises that they could ever think of. Particularly important is the role that must be played by the United States, who is the one that has the most influence over Israel, but also the role of the Arab nations who need to help the Palestinians to make their painful compromises.

Now a few words on the United Nations. I've had the privilege of serving in three UN peacekeeping missions. I've got a thesis about why peace keeping missions work or don't work and I believe there are three things that are needed to make them work.

The first is that you need a strong or a coherent lead nation or nations. I've seen it work well in places like East Timor and I've seen it work well in Southern Lebanon. But the United Nations is compelled, or keen to, put as many flags as they can on the table. UNTSO had 23 troop contributing countries and UNIFIL I think had something like 35 countries. Every time you put another country in you compromise the integrity of the force. 35 nations are really good in some ways – it gives a great deal of moral authority but it takes away capability because there is

such a large mix of language, culture, logistics, tactics etc. These are massive discontinuities that compromise the effectiveness of a military force.

UNTSO had 153 military observers. It was a difficult job to get this organisation to work together when the Head of Mission had no real authority, certainly none of what we would call lawful authority.

The second thing the UN peacekeeping mission need is host country support. The host countries need to be committed to the success of the mission. I saw it work well in East Timor where the East Timorese government was committed to a peace: I saw it work badly in the Western Sahara where one of the host countries, Morocco, seemed to be doing things that worked against having the mission working well. I also saw it work badly in some places in the Middle East.

The third ingredient you need for successful UN peace keeping missions is the ongoing and consistent commitment by the member states of the United Nations. Many members of the United Nations effectively say: “Well, we’ve contributed our contingent – what more do you want us to do”? The answer is: “You have to stay committed’.

A good example was that I saw in East Timor, where Australia, New Zealand and other Troop Contributing nations were strongly committed, not only to providing a peacekeeping force but to making the Mission work well. They put pressure on the Indonesians and the East Timorese to make sure that the UN Security Council resolutions were being followed through and the progress towards mission success was being made. In the Middle East and in UNTSO in particular, the contributing nations seem largely happy to say: “Well, we’re doing our bit, we’re providing peace keepers.” When the member states of the United Nations take their eye off the peace keeping missions, then the host countries will have their way.

The UN as an organisation comes in for a lot of criticism and I’m happy to add my voice to the shortcomings of the United Nations. But whenever I was told, and it was many times: “You United Nations, you are not effective”, I was always able to say: “I’m not the United Nations, WE are the United Nations.” I would say to the Israelis, or the Egyptians or the Lebanese: “This is OUR United Nations, it’s not my United Nations, and if it’s not working it’s because you’re not letting it work. If you’re unhappy with the way that the United Nations is working, you go to the General Assembly and you go to the Security Council and you fix it, but you can’t blame us, the peacekeepers. We’re here doing just what you allow us to.”

The UN is a very difficult organisation to get right. But I don’t believe that the UN Secretariat or the peace keeping missions should carry the burden alone because I believe that in many ways the responsibility rests with the member states who so frequently block proposals for reform. I know a number of Secretary Generals of

the United Nations have pushed for reforms which are so hard to make because the interests of the member states come into play.

I've been privileged to serve with and alongside Australian peace keepers in three missions and one of the things which made my job most satisfying was working with the Australian peacekeepers. Wherever I went people would tell me how professional and hardworking the Australian's were. It was uplifting. This happens because of the way we prepare our people, because of the effort we put into training and ongoing development, and because we demand high standards. And it happens because we keep reminding our young Australians of what they have to live up to.