
Tony Blair on the Middle East: "It is possible to get this conflict resolved"

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"It is possible to get this conflict resolved, but we are racing against time," Quartet Representative Tony Blair told the EP's Working Group on the Middle East on Tuesday. The group was discussing the situation in the region since the December 2007 Paris donors' Conference. Norway's Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre and Jean-Pierre Jouyet, French Secretary of State for European Affairs, also took part.

Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament and Chair of the Working Group appealed to all parties in the conflict to act "so that a peace agreement can be achieved by the end of this year". The EU - a major international donor - "should act as a broker for peace", he said, recalling that the Parliament had been represented at the Paris Conference by Michael Gahler (EPP-ED, DE), vice-chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Bridging the credibility gap

According to Tony Blair, "the essence of the conflict is a credibility gap", explaining the distance between what the two parties want - a two state solution - and what is perceived as achievable by the Israeli side and the Palestinian side. The former UK Prime Minister's strategy is to "change that context" to allow politicians of both sides to convince their own people of the necessity of a peace agreement.

Passing this "minimum credibility threshold" required "significant confidence-building measures in the West Bank and an upgraded security environment in Gaza". This would ease the suffering on the two sides - rockets launched at Israeli territory and the disastrous humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip - he said, in response to questions from Joseph Daul (EPP-ED, FR) and David Hammerstein (Greens/EFA, ES).

EJ Involvement

Tony Blair argued for EU greater involvement in the peace process. "There is a greater willingness to have the EU engaged", he said. Norway's Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said that "Europe's time is now" to engage more in the Quartet". Both were responding to Hannes Swoboda (PES, AT) who wanted to see Europe take an initiative on the Middle-East question.

Jean-Pierre Jouyet - replacing French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner - supported a stronger and more organised presence of the EU in the Palestinian territories, exceeding the current EUBAM force deployed in the region. On Jerusalem, he said that he hoped that "this city could be the capital of two States in the region".

Hamas and Gaza

"Is it wise to neglect that Hamas exists?", asked Mr Gahr Støre, who said that at the time concerned, "Norway talked to the National unity government, including to its Prime Minister. The International Community could have done more to give that government a chance." The situation in Gaza has a profound impact on Palestinians, with "70% of the population fearing that the separation will continue" added Norway's Foreign Minister. The question of new settlements acting as an obstacle to peace was also raised during the debate.

Guests and MEPs alike reiterated their support for Salaam Fayed, Palestinian Prime Minister as a leader "committed to reform", and for Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority.

Working Group on the Middle East