



Press Release

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EXPERTS EXAMINE MEDIA COVERAGE OF ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Public Forum in Kyiv Urges Greater Role for Civil Society, Think Tanks, Academics

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

KYIV, 15 May — The alarming situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, called for urgent engagement by all sectors of the international community, the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Papa Louis Fall (Senegal), said as he opened the Public Forum in Support of Middle East Peace this morning in Kyiv.

In an address to participants meeting under the auspices of the Committee at the Institute of International Relations in Kyiv, he said the recently published Road Map for a final and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provided a fresh momentum for restarting the stalled peace process, and civil society should become active facilitators in implementing that plan.

Several speakers in this morning's round-table discussion expressed the view that media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was often one-sided, particularly in the United States. Because the media played such an important role in forming public opinion, it was important to examine how it operated. A number of experts called attention to the successful Israeli approach to influencing public opinion and the lack of countermeasures by the Palestinians. The Palestinians were encouraged to establish relations with media representatives, to lobby Congress and to get their message out to influential media groups, universities, church groups and others. It was not enough to just deny the negative portrayal made by Israelis.

Participants also called attention to the importance of language and the use of words. Several speakers stated that different language was used to describe similar actions by Israelis and Palestinians, with the more negative descriptions being applied to the Palestinians. Language could also present a problem in the translation of documents. The English phrase "Road Map" had significantly different interpretations in Arabic and Hebrew.

The importance of think tanks, academic institutions and civil society was also stressed in terms of raising public awareness.

Today's meeting was convened to give representatives of civil society an opportunity to discuss in greater detail their role regarding the question of Palestine. A round table of experts who had participated in the 13-14 May United Nations International Meeting in Support of the Middle East Peace discussed a number of themes, including public perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — the unchallenged media; the impact and educational responsibility of think tanks and academic institutions; and the role of civil society in raising public awareness about the question of Palestine.

Ukraine's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Valery Kuchinsky chaired the Forum.

Assistant-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Danilo Türk made a statement.

Chairman's Statement

PAPALOUIS FALL (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said the alarming situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, called for urgent engagement by all sectors of the international community. The recently published [Road Map](#) for a final and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provided a fresh momentum for restarting the stalled peace process. Although the initiative had been launched at the governmental level, and monitoring its implementation was officially assigned to the Quartet of the United States, Russian Federation, United Nations and European Union, civil society, including non-governmental organization volunteers, media organizations and other international representatives should become active facilitators in implementing the Road Map. Solidarity with and support for the Palestinian cause by the world community was of paramount importance to a just and lasting solution. Because of the stark disparity in the balance of power between the parties, the Palestinian people continued to count on the support and assistance by governments and civil society organizations.

He said there was a greater need for sustained and robust campaigns to inform public opinion about the root causes of the conflict and the legitimate rights of the parties, as well as to promote national and international action to support effective steps to end the crisis and to resume negotiations. Civil society should support initiatives such as the Road Map with a view to leading the parties back to the negotiating table. Providing emergency relief and other assistance to the Palestinian people and rehabilitation of the deconstructed Palestinian economy should be another important priority for civil society work. Given the dangerous situation, particular attention should be given to measures to protect the Palestinian people. Governments should be encouraged, through parliaments, non-governmental organizations and public opinion, to uphold the Fourth Geneva Convention and to live up to the Declaration regarding the occupied Palestinian territory, adopted by the High Contracting Parties in December 2001 in Geneva.

Round-Table Participants

Experts participating in the round table were:

Edward Abington, Political Consultant to the Palestinian Authority, Washington D.C.; Issam Makhoul, Member of the Israeli Knesset, Haifa; Geoffrey Aronson, Editor, Foundation for Middle East Peace, Washington, D.C.; Gabi Baramki, President of the Palestinian Council for Justice and Peace, Ramallah; Olesandr Bohomolov, Vice-Director, Association of Middle East Studies, Kyiv; Lucy Nusseibeh, Director, Middle East Non-Violence and Democracy, Jerusalem; Oleg Ozerov, Deputy Chief of the Middle East Peace Process Division, Department of Middle East and North Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow; Theodoris Papamargaris, Vice-Chairman, European Coordinating Committee for Non-governmental Organizations on the Question of Palestine; Ihor Semyvolos, Executive Director, Association of Middle East Studies, Kyiv; Yuri Skorohod, Professor, Institute of International Relations, Kyiv Taras Shevchenko National University, Kyiv; and Rema Tarazi, President, General Union of Palestinian Women, Ramallah.

Round Table

Public Perception of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Unchallenged Media

VALERY KUCHINSKY ([Ukraine](#)), Chairman of the Forum: Media coverage was often one-sided, particularly in the United States where a suicide bombing rated a major headline while the brutalities of Israeli occupation were not often portrayed. Because the media played such an important role in forming public opinion, it was important to examine how it operated.

EDWARD ABINGTON: United States attitudes are influenced by press coverage. For years, Israelis have tried hard to have an impact on that coverage, sending representatives to explain the Israeli viewpoint, and putting the Palestinians side in the worst light. They appear on television and radio and set up interviews with important papers and influential people. The Jewish lobby is active with letter-writing campaigns and lobbying Congress. On one occasion, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak met with the editorial staff of a Chicago newspaper and took them to task for articles they had printed on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Present at the meeting were important Jewish businessmen who threatened to pull their advertising. This pressure can have a strong impact on editors. The Palestinians have been relatively absent in presenting their point of view. They must talk to universities, newspapers, church and other groups to get their message out.

September 11 had a traumatic effect on the American psyche. At the time, he had explained to the Palestinian leadership that it would affect the American attitude and that the Palestinians must demonstrate immediately that they were on the right side of the issue, but that point has not been clearly made. The networks concentrate on suicide bombings which the Israelis parallel to 9/11. Suicide bombers are put in the same light as Al Qaeda. The Israeli campaign to sway the United States is countered by a relative vacuum on the other side. The impact of 9/11 allows the Israelis to delegitimize the Palestinian position.

OLESANDR BOHOMOLOV: The Palestinian case is often under-represented. However, it is not just a question of quantity; quality is important. It is not enough to say "No, I am not a terrorist." Palestinians must provide another picture which shows that things are not as the Israelis portray them. The Road Map's strong focus is on how the new Palestinian Government will address the subject of terrorism.

LUCY NUSSEIBEH: Journalists who write in support of the Palestinians pay a heavy price. They tend to be reassigned or heavily edited. It is important to be proactive and the international community must support the journalists who are willing to speak out. Conversely, journalists should try to enlist community support to preserve their right to speak freely. It was not enough to just deny guilt. Perhaps one should consider "paying the piper" or spending money to place ads in newspapers to make people aware of the humanitarian tragedy. If the Road Map is to work, the media must be engaged.

REMA TARAZI: One of the problems is the use of language. One must be careful in the choice of words. When Israelis commit violent acts, it is referred to as "excessive force". Palestinian actions are called terrorism. "Occupied territory" has become "disputed territory". When Israelis kill civilians, it is described as "collateral damage" or "mistakes", while the same acts committed by Palestinians are called terrorist acts.

ISSAM MAKHOUL: Actions are defined by perception. It is not so much a matter of what you do, but rather who does it. Violence and terror are stereotypical Palestinian behaviour. "Killed by mistake" defines Israeli behaviour. Palestinians have to deal with that question seriously because the Israeli leadership debates going to court to change the definition of their acts of assassination into "preventive actions".

THEOCHARIS PAPAMARGARIS: What is the role of government infiltration and influence in the distorted presentations of the media? Unseen, it is so-called background briefings by official spokespersons where the line of the administration is given to editors.

The representative of [Egypt](#): Through the years, American movies have shaped public opinion by portraying Arabs in a negative light, depicting them as less than human. By making them inhuman, it makes it acceptable to kill them. The example of the body count in Iraq illustrates that. The public is informed of every member of the Allied Force that is killed, but there is little mention of how many Iraqis have died.

Mr. ABINGTON: The largest group of Western journalists is in Jerusalem and the Israelis go to great effort to influence them. The Palestinians have to use the same methods. Palestinians need to understand who to talk to in the American media and to make arguments that appeal to Americans. Not all background briefings are bad. Some explained the Palestinian viewpoint. Palestinians need to have a strategy. They need to talk the language of peace. That puts the Israelis on the defensive. Abu Mazen needs a media person to orchestrate interviews on CNN, [The New York Times](#), and other influential media to get his message across to the American people and American politicians. Complaining about the media was not enough.

NASSER AL-KIDWA, Observer for Palestine: The international community has a serious problem with the current atmosphere surrounding the media. There was an increasing concentration of government influence, as well as the heavy ownership influence. Larger media conglomerations are owned by fewer people. Worse, the increasing government influence is open in terms of favours provided to journalists for "good" coverage or punishment for unfavourable coverage.

The Palestinian performance has not been the best, but there is a difference of opinion as to how important it is. It might not make much difference to change the approach. The Israelis have done a superb job with the use of words to shape understanding and deal with the subconscious. Israeli "invasions" have become Israeli operations. The Palestinians have to focus more on terms and their use.

A Ukrainian journalist: The idea of State control of press coverage is dangerous. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has refused to meet with Foreign Ministers who announce their intention to meet with Yasser Arafat. Can the United Nations facilitate journalists' coverage through its offices?

DANILO TÜRK: The United Nations provides training and education for Palestinian journalists. That is an important part of capacity-building.

The CHAIRMAN: The press should be free and independent. [The New York Times](#) might be sometimes critical of the United States Administration, but it never prints any article criticizing Israel.

Mr. AL-KIDWA: The New York Times published a piece attacking the United Nations Secretary-General concerning remarks he made about the illegality of the Israeli occupation. Palestinians immediately responded, but the article was never published.

Mr. ABINGTON: The New York Times will publish articles critical of Israel, but timing is important. Editors publish what they think is at the top of the news agenda that day.

The Impact and Educational Responsibility of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions

Mr. BOHOMOLOV: The main problem with think tanks is that they are not as powerful as the military tanks. Think tanks are in a position to demonstrate neutrality and to find a global perspective, to examine what makes the Middle East conflict important to parties other than the Palestinians and Israelis. There are many similarities between the Middle East conflict, and other conflicts in the world, but none has attracted as much attention. The Middle East conflict is presented not just as one between the Arabs and the Israelis. Because it resonates with so many different people worldwide — for instance, in Muslim communities all over the world — it now influences relations between peoples in other countries. The conflict should be resolved if only for its capacity to influence relations between people in other parts of the world. Think tanks can contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem. They should try to broaden the range of discussion to make a case for more global concern. Think tanks could help policy-makers by trying to broaden their understanding and posing alternatives.

The parties to the conflict have developed a completely different vocabulary. There is a cultural dimension that is often neglected in political texts. To observe a kind of cultural blindness, one should compare the text of the Road Map in English, Arabic and Hebrew. The two translations of the English word project a different picture. In Arabic, the word used for Road Map means a single road. It also has a religious connotation — the one right road — and, unconsciously, invokes that image. The Hebrew translation implies “many roads”. The Americans should have chosen a less culturally loaded word because the Arabic text offers more than was intended. Another word that causes difficulty is “incitement”. The Hebrew word comes closer to the American meaning. The Arab word is very broad. Think tanks can make a contribution by clarifying language and translations.

GABI BARAMKI: Think-tank results are important because their findings are reflected in the media. In the past, Palestinians did not use think tanks well and they suffered in negotiations because they were not adequately prepared. They did not pay enough attention to the language and thus fell into traps.

Academic institutions are also important in influencing perceptions of the question of Palestine. Eighty universities now participate in a programme called PEACE in which young people, future leaders of the world, come together in a Palestinian city to learn the situation on the ground. When the facts are clear, one does not need to do much more to make the case, especially when there are human rights violations. Direct relations on a personal level provide an important tool.

Mr. ABINGTON: Think tanks in the United States and Washington are enormously powerful and are formed to push a political point of view. Often, the members of a new administration are drawn from think tanks. They do analyses of United States policies and present them in a public forum. More importantly, these analyses are e-mailed to hundreds of people, including various media, congressmen, policy-makers and congressional aides. It was important for Palestinians to meet with these groups.

Ms. TARAZI: One must stress the local importance of educational institutions where young men and women, the leaders of tomorrow, are taught to think and practice democratic thinking.

Mr. PAPAMARGARIS: To be credible, a think-tank or a university must have three things: a method of thinking — how they approach research or knowledge; absolute facts; and the ability to accept another point of view.

Ms. NUSSEIBEH: Palestinians have an instinctive respect for universities. In terms of reaching out and changing the language, it is possible for universities to work on this problem. Their importance should not be underestimated.

Mr. AL-KIDWA: United States think tanks on the Middle East focus on how to solve the problems facing Israel. Experts are always needed and it is essential to have the knowledge they provided, but one has to be careful because they can raise as many problems as they solve. Regarding language interpretations, one of the problems arises with the differences in languages. Things needed to be understood in the way they were intended in the original language.

Mr. MAKHOUL: The Israeli side did educate their people for peace. Without creating the context for peace, one could not progress. The Palestinian people have not addressed the Israeli people on this issue. They should create the context of peace for the Israeli public. The Israeli public is paying the price for the policy of its Government. Israel will not be a democratic State as long as its policy towards the Palestinian people continues. Think tanks are indispensable for providing new ways of thinking for policy-makers.

Role of Civil Society in Raising Public Awareness about the Question of Palestine

Ms. TARAZI: The Palestinians have asked for international protection through the United Nations, but that has not been forthcoming. The grass-roots organizations put together a group — Grass Roots Protection of the Palestinian People — and appealed to people from all over the world to come and witness what was happening. Many are in the occupied Palestinian territory now, risking their lives in an attempt to curb Israeli brutalities. The United Nations must raise its voice to protect those people who were coming to bear witness. Anyone who had the courage to dissent was under pressure. They who had come to protect Palestinians now needed protection for themselves.

Mr. PAPAMARGARIS: Civil society must distinguish itself from governments. A non-governmental organization is organized to convince governments to adhere to what they say their principles are. Non-governmental organizations on the question of Palestine have mobilized to raise awareness about the Palestinian issue and to state the facts clearly as opposed to what is being presented by the manipulated press. Public opinion within individual societies must be mobilized. Civil society can stand on the side of the Palestinians and on the side of those Jews and Arabs in Israel who have the guts to oppose the Israelis.

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