

It is Time for the People to Have a Say

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Less than two weeks and more than 12,000 miles will separate the Middle East peace conference, to be held at a US naval base located at Annapolis, Maryland, from the Forum for a Just Peace in the Middle East, to be convened throughout five municipalities south of Madrid, in Spain. Yet the differences between those two gatherings go significantly deeper than mere time and space.

Many fear that the conference of heads of state in Annapolis will simply be yet one more fruitless gathering, unable to resolve the rift dividing Palestinians and Israelis.

For example, in an op-ed article that appeared in *Haaretz* (8 October 2007), Professor Ephraim Inbar, Director of the conservative Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University, claims that peace between Israelis and Palestinians is not possible in this generation. Inbar writes that "Palestinian politics are ideological and maximalist in ambition" and adds that Palestinian demands for an Israeli retreat to the pre-1967 borders, the return of refugees and Palestinian sovereignty over the "Temple Mount," are unacceptable to Israel.

This prognosis, albeit not the analysis, is shared by the Palestinian negotiating team. Senior Palestinian negotiators claim that the gap between Palestinian and Israeli positions is too wide. Moreover, Avi Isaskharov of *Haaretz* (10 October), reports that Palestinians and Israelis cannot even agree on the nature of the joint declaration to be signed at the conference. Israelis demand that the document represent only the beginning of negotiations, while Palestinians demand that it will be a declaration of intentions that frames the final agreement.

However, there are also those who believe that the Annapolis conference may succeed and the US will force Israel and the Palestinian Authority to reach a compromise as a prelude for war against Syria and Iran. They claim that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is needed in order to mark the line between the moderates (read: those who support American policies in the region) and the extremists (i.e., those who oppose American policies in the area). [\[1\]](#)

On the other hand, two weeks after the heads of state meet in Annapolis, a conference of equal importance will convene in the southern suburbs of Madrid: The Forum for a Just Peace in the Middle East.

The value of this conference should not be underestimated. Here, European, West Asian and North African civil society representatives will gather in an independent forum to discuss a just and peaceful and resolution to the conflict in the Middle East.

True, in the past there were meetings, conferences and gatherings with the presence of European and West Asian representatives of civil society. Yet in most of these meetings, civil society had no independent voice and was used to legitimize an unjust political agenda. In those gatherings, civil society was supposed to exert pressure on the Palestinian people to surrender its national, collective and human rights, as legitimized by international law. It goes without saying that these initiatives failed.

There were, however, other types of meetings, in which civil society gathered and developed an

independent agenda. At the World Social Forums and the European Social Forums, Palestinian, Arab and Israeli representatives of civil society noted that war in the Middle East is a direct outcome of Israeli colonial policies and declared that there will be no peace if peace means that oppressed nations must surrender their legitimate national rights.

Telling the truth to power was also at the root of the declaration signed at Bilbao by dozens of Palestinian, Israeli and international civil society organizations. [2] This is a simple truth: “that peace between Palestinians and Israelis can not be achieved in contravention of the political, social, economic, cultural, civil and human rights of Palestinians and Israelis.” And that “no lasting peace can be achieved in contravention of United Nations resolutions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These resolutions address the illegality of Israeli settlements, the end of the Israeli occupation, the right of the Palestinian people to an independent and sovereign state with Jerusalem as its capital, and the right of return of the Palestinian refugees, based on United Nations resolution 194.”

The prognosis shared by Palestinian and Israeli analysts that the Annapolis conference risks being a conference that will lead to war, enhances the importance of the Forum for a Just Peace in the Middle East. The forum will be the place where the peoples of the Middle East, together with the peoples of Europe, will say no to war, no to occupation, no to colonialism and yes to work for a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the principle that all humans have the right to freedom and dignity.

On the eve of the American war on Iraq, the *New York Times* claimed that there exist two superpowers in the world: the United States and international civil society. In Annapolis, the United States will attempt to impose its will by force. Two weeks later in Madrid, international civil society will proclaim that another world is possible and strive to make it real.

P.S.

* From

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Footnotes

[1] See for example Amir Oren, “Islam is the enemy,” *Haaretz*, October 10, 2007.

[2] For the text of the Bilbao Declaration and additional information about this initiative, see <http://www.alternativenews.org/the-bilbao-initiative-another-future-is-possible/the-bilbao-initiative/>