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I thank the Australian Institute of International Affairs for the opportunity to speak to you today.

The aim of the two-state solution, a secure peaceful and sustainable Palestine side by side with a secure peaceful and sustainable Israel, enjoys support from influential parties in the global, regional and local arenas, including the United States, the European Union, The United Nations, Australia, China, Russia and the Arab League in addition to the Palestinians and Israelis.

All peace lovers and seekers have moral and political responsibilities to seize this international consensus to consolidate the efforts and resources necessary to achieve a lasting and sustainable solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The inconclusive results of the three-way summit between Condoleezza Rice, Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert has resulted in speculation that the two-state vision is unlikely to materialise and accordingly this is the end of hopes of reviving an active peace process in the Middle East.

If moderate, realist forces in the region fail to provide a viable peace process we will establish a ready-made platform on which radicals and extremists can function and flourish; we will be giving radicals and extremists a clear opportunity to shape the region according to their objectives and win out over moderate political realism.

I do not believe this scenario is the objective of the reasonable and responsible organisations and bodies in the international and regional arenas. I do not believe radical and extremist positions represent the objectives and aspirations of the Palestinian and Israeli people.

To avoid this, immediate action is required. This is to propose and progress a decent and credible peace process in the region, based on international law and legitimacy, and on the United Nations Resolutions 242, 338, and 1397.

Is there an opportunity within the common situation to establish a decent and unique political process grounded in decent international standards? My answer is yes. If all parties demonstrate leadership, sincere political will, moral spirit and uphold international laws this will provide an excellent opportunity to initiate and establish a believable and reasonable political process in the Middle East.

If there is a genuine interest from all parties in achieving a genuine and sustainable peace in the region under President Bush's vision of a two-state solution, the Arab Initiative and The UN resolutions, what are the main constraints to this vision?

The main issue is the disagreement between Israel and Palestine regarding the final outcomes of the peace process. Israel agrees to establish a Palestinian state but what about its position towards Jerusalem, refugees and other recognisable Palestinian rights? What does a Palestinian state mean?

This leads to the most central question: what is the foundation for a believable peace process? Is it international law and legitimacy or an unequal balance of powers between the two parties?

Let us investigate further the main aspects of the disagreements between Palestine and Israel.

One: Palestinians insist that East Jerusalem is an integral part of its territories occupied in 1967 and should be the capital of a future Palestinian state. Israel insists that a united Jerusalem is a permanent and undivided capital of Israel. Maybe we should start working on the concept of Jerusalem as an international city open to all religions. However, there may be other creative diplomatic solutions.

Two: Palestinians insist on the total dismantling of all Israeli settlements and the Separation Wall, as each is in clear violation of international law. Israelis insist on keeping the largest settlements on the West Bank with the land annexed to the Israeli state. This would mean the extraction of more than 40 per cent of the Palestinian territories and the undermining of the geographical continuity of the potential Palestinian state. This would make a Palestinian enclave impossible to succeed.

However, the Palestinian position is that settlers on this land may be accepted as Palestinian citizens if they choose to remain. This option would strengthen the Palestinian state through an experiment in multicultural diversity.

Three: Palestinians believe that a just solution to the refugee issue based on the international resolution 194 should be proposed and implemented. Israel refuses totally the right of return either on the theoretical level or the implementation level. Palestinians have softened their position, proposing an appropriate compensation scheme whereby refugees will return to the Palestinian state rather than Israel.

At the same time a symbolic return, proposed during the Camp David talks in 1999 between Bill Clinton the late President Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Palestinians ask the Israelis to recognise the concept of the Palestinian right to return, without actually implementing it.

Four: Palestinians insist that Israelis should withdraw to the 1967 boundaries. The Israeli position is that they should withdraw to secure borders. This term is vague, it is obvious, according to the latest map produced by the Israeli Ministry of Defence that Israel will keep almost 10 square kilometres along the Israeli-Palestine border in addition to the settlements in the so-called expanded Jerusalem.

This will leave the Palestinians with less than 50 per cent of the West Bank on which to establish their state. It would leave them expected to create the Palestinian state on only 12 per cent of historic Palestine.

Palestine has presented a negotiating position on this issue where they will recognise Israel's security and will be flexible and exchange some of the land in the West Bank for other similar Israeli land equal in quantity and quality.

Five: Palestinians insist on their water rights, particularly in the West Bank where most of the water is situated. Israeli is currently utilising most of the Palestinian water resources, including the transfer of water from the West Bank to Israel. This is a highly politicised issue but we believe there can be a negotiated solution.

These are the issues which creates a lot of disagreements between Palestinians and Israelis. The Israeli Government would like to see the establishment of a Palestinian state with provisional borders, a flag and a national anthem. Israel refused to negotiate on the most critical and complex issues I have outlined without which no final status can be reached.

Israel insists on the dismantling of what is, according to Israeli terminology, terrorist infrastructure. Yet what specifically constitutes this infrastructure and what Palestine must do to carry this out, is not defined by Israel. Even so Palestine must fulfil this before Israel will embark on final status negotiations.

From a Palestinian perspective and based on bitter experience during the period of the Oslo Accords it is not possible to trust Israelis on such matters. In spite of Palestine's commitment to Oslo, in 1994 to 2000 Israel continued to build settlements, yet it has been Palestine that has been blamed and held accountable for the failure of Oslo to deliver fully on its promise of peace.

From this bitter experience Palestinians believe that Israel does not want and is not ready to seriously negotiate and reach solutions regarding Jerusalem, refugees, borders and settlements.

Hence what we have is two conflicting concepts on how to proceed with the peace process. Israel insists on a gradual process starting with the dismantling of terrorist infrastructure, the establishment of a Palestinian state with provisional borders and then, if Israel is satisfied with the performance of the Palestinian temporary state, it will begin negotiations on the final status issues such as refugees and Jerusalem.

On the basis of their previous experience, Palestinians have refused this approach and instead insist on a comprehensive solution, grounded in international law and processes. Palestinians are not willing to wait another 100 years and I believe this is also the position of the Israeli people.

In this context the most significant threat to the two-State solution is Israeli unilateralism and its convergence plan, proposed by Olmert, which is another unilateral solution like the Gaza withdrawal.

Israeli wishes to implement a unilateral plan whereby it withdraws from certain areas of the West Bank, drawing the borders with the wall, refusing any negotiations on borders.

For Israel to do this would be to create the perfect situation for the continuation of violence. The unilateral approach in Gaza has not brought Israel peace and has instead resulted in violence and misery among Israelis. Unilateralism and convergence has created greater insecurity and violence for both Israel and Palestine.

Another significant constraint is the position of some Palestinian groups in calling for a long-term truce and ceasefire without entering into serious negotiations to find a final peaceful agreement. This is the position of Hamas, based on the assumption that the balance of power may change in the future and Palestine may be stronger.

They feel we are not now in a good position and need time to rebuild our forces, when we can reach better agreements with Israel dealing with the final status issues. The political mindset is similar to the Israeli unilateral mindset in that it undermines the possibility of achieving lasting solutions to the conflict.

The other aspect of this position is the call to establish a one-state solution in historic Palestine which is democratic, secular or Islamic. Some Palestinian groups still do not believe that Israel as a Jewish state should exist. An example of this is the perspective of some Islamic movements that Muslims in principle should not provide legitimacy for the occupation of Palestinian land after the war of 1948 through which Israel was established.

Accordingly these groups reject the United Nation Partition Resolution 181 which established Israel. Other Palestinian secular groups believe that the two-state solution is not feasible any more based on Israeli practices on the ground. Accordingly, they call for a secular state for all the citizens.

Despite the good intentions of this group, its view is not realistic. In fact it may bring harm to the Palestinians as we may be placed in the situation of becoming a minority indigenous people.

In spite of these positions various Palestinian forces are recognising the reality and most of them accept the concept of establishing a Palestinian state on the basis of the territories occupied in 1967. So that is a position that is considered to be halfway to formally recognising Israel.

Let me get back to my basic assumption which is in spite of all the constraints and current pessimism, it is clearly possible to begin a political and diplomatic process in the region. I believe there is a prospect to begin a peace process. Why?

First the signing of the Mecca agreement between Fatah and Hamas is a significant development. Hamas for the first time expressed its readiness to comply with all the resolutions of the Arab summit, and to accept all the previous agreements signed by Israel, in particular the Oslo Agreement and the road map. This is a dramatic political development and a radical change within Hamas.

Hamas is an integral part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the largest and the most influential religious movement in the Islamic Middle East. It is totally different from Al Qaeda and Islamic Jihad. It has always been against the nationalism and the radicalism in the Arab world. It is a very grass root-based organisation.

If this movement has virtually recognised Israel, it will be considered a remarkable achievement. This will lead to an historic reconciliation between Islamism and Judaism.

For the Islamists, historic Palestine is a religious entity, this means no person or organisation can sell it or donate it. It cannot be traded or given away. It exists for the benefit of all. That is how it exists in the Islamic eyes.

Hence Hamas has undertaken a huge risk by signing the Mecca Agreement. Israel and all Western countries will be committing a fatal mistake if they do not recognise the enormity of this and support the emerging Palestinian national unity government instead of boycotting and imposing sanctions on the Palestinian people.

Confrontation and marginalisation of Hamas will not lead to any constructive outcome. The international community should adopt an inclusive attitude and instead open channels with Hamas as an organisation representing a large proportion of the Palestinian people.

A continuing boycott by Israel and the US would be a short-sighted position and will not serve the best interests of the US and Israel.

The consequence of the Mecca Agreement is that it includes for the first time a written recognition by the Hamas movement that a viable Palestinian state should be established within the 1967 borders. Palestinians now have one position and with this beneficial reality Israel should not continue to declare that she does not have a Palestinian partner for peace.

Israel appears to be recognising after the war in Lebanon that military solutions are not effective. Instead it leads to retaliation and counter measures. The military solution has not achieved peace for Israel. It appears to have begun to realise that any lasting peace in the region should be reached through bilateral and multilateral initiatives in conjunction with its Palestinian partners.

There is a new political thinking emerging in Israel, and based on the experience of the last six years Palestinians also have started to believe that violence will not achieve their political goals, and start to realise the importance to return to non-violent strategies. One important example of this is the participation of Hamas in the Parliamentary elections of 2006.

Secondly, based on its analysis of the current political developments in Iraq, Iran and the whole region, the Americans are eager to accelerate the peace process to avoid further complications. There is a lot of pressure on the US from the moderate Arab states to accelerate this and find a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

Progress in this area will increase support for the moderate regimes and moderate political positions in the Arab world, strengthening the moderate allies of the United States against the Iranian influence.

Solving the Palestinian issue will bring more peace and stability to the region, in this regard we should see the self interest from the EU countries in supporting the peace process in order to maintain and preserve peace and security on their Mediterranean borders.

In conclusion, the Arab Initiative constitutes a strong base and an excellent start to a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. It integrates and combines the Palestinian interest and the Israeli interest. It guarantees the right of Israel to exist and to have normal relations with the Arab world.

At the same time it guarantees the right of a viable Palestinian state to exist. It rejects the use of violence as a means of achieving political aims on either side.

We need to translate this initiative, with its ground-breaking implications, into a final and comprehensive political reality, respecting Palestinian rights concerning Jerusalem and the refugees. At the same time recognising and guaranteeing a secure Israeli state.

There is now an elected Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas who has shown he is ready and willing to take risks in order to achieve these goals; it is my hope that the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Olmert, will also show the leadership necessary to bring a two-state solution into reality.

As one of my colleagues said, 'Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in six days, now they can withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza in six days, then on the seventh day they can rest. Thank you.

QUESTIONS

Does the demographic factor, the growing percentage of Arabs in proportion to Jews, mean the clock is ticking for Israel?

We cannot ignore this demographic factor; it is a very important element in any future political plans. Because of it Israel was not able to annex the West Bank because by 2020 the Arabs would have been the majority within Israel and it would no longer be a Jewish state.

If Israel refused to give full citizenship rights to all its citizens then it would cease to be a democratic country, so it was a complicated question for Israel.

The two-state solution will solve the problem for Israel, apart from the question of the Israeli Arabs which number about 1.2 million, with an annual birth rate of five per cent, while that for Israelis is 1.7 per cent. This will continue to be a problem for Israel.

However, I think this will be solved if we reach a peace agreement. Maybe then there will be awareness among Arabs within Israel that they are really Israeli citizens and should concentrate on ensuring their own citizenship rights.

What is the alternative? Trying to deport Palestinians from Israel. There is a lot of discussion in Israel about these issues, especially after the Israeli Arab leaders presented a document to the Israeli Government talking about equal citizenship, demanding to know why they are second-class citizens.

In 2020 the Jews will be 60 per cent of the population of Jerusalem and the Arabs 40 per cent, so I am not sure what will happen about this over the next 30 or 40 years.

Can you expand further on Hamas' attitude to Israel?

They are halfway to recognition of Israel. Because they recognise the establishment of a viable Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, it is a new political position for them. Because in the past they refused the establishment of a Palestinian state under those circumstances.

So through an inclusion process, with the help of the West and the pragmatism of Hamas, this will work to a position where there can be recognition of Israel. Hamas will be encouraged to go further if Israel offers further optimism to Palestinians.

This is the problem now – the egg and the chicken – Palestinians say if we can agree on a framework for settling the final status issue, we can establish a democratic Palestinian state and renounce violence. But Israel has said no, we will start from the beginning, by dismantling terrorism and then we will negotiate.

But Palestinians want to know the final destination. As Dr Rice said, it is the right of Palestinians to know where this process is leading, then we can wait for another 10 years, but we want to know now about Jerusalem and the refugees and so on.

What drives Hamas' support base? Is it anti-Israeli sentiment or the demand for an Islamic lifestyle?

Hamas won the election of 2006, not because of a platform based on the destruction of Israel, but because of the corruption of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. People waited for more than 10 years to see some fruitful results from the peace process. From 1993 when we signed the agreement with Israel to 2000, nothing happened. The peace process lost its credibility because Israel built more settlements. This undermined the dream of a viable Palestinian state. So this was one reason for them to say they did not like the political performance of Fatah.

They also felt that there were a lot of privileges for these political decision makers while the people continued to suffer. The mission statement of Hamas during the election campaign was 'Change and Reform'. They have told the president that he has a free hand to negotiate with Israel, but any outcome should be subjected to a referendum.

The lifestyle of Palestinians is not Islamic. It is a very secular country. Palestinians are not like Egypt or Morocco, many of them have lived abroad and been subjected to other influences, so Hamas' rise was really due to corruption and the failure to adopt a peace process in the region.

Please enlarge on the concept of an international Jerusalem?

Jerusalem should be accessed by all religions. Muslims, Jews and Christians all have their own holy sites there. Will it work as the Vatican works? We do not have a lot of detail, but in the Camp David talks of 1999 the three leaders considered a proposal to divide Jerusalem giving each faith responsibility for its holy sites.

The problem now is about political sovereignty. Israel regards it as the united, undivided capital of Israel. Palestinians believe that East Jerusalem, which was occupied in 1967, is an integral part of the West Bank and Gaza and should be the capital of Palestine.

So Jerusalem should be the capital of two states. Palestinians can agree on that but not the united undivided capital of one state.

Interactions between Israel and Palestinians are dependent on continuity and at the moment the Israeli Government is at risk. How can the process be advanced when Israel's political commitment may change?

This is a difficult question. We should depend on the pressure of public opinion on the leaders, because the Palestinian and Israeli people cannot afford the current situation to continue. It affects our economies; even the economic situation in Israel is bad.

Israelis do not believe that Olmert will achieve a genuine peace with the Palestinians because he is politically weak after the adventure in Lebanon. So it is complicated, but we do not have a choice other than to try and achieve something.

The threat is that with this lack of moderate leadership in Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu will win the coming election, and I am not sure then that we will be able to achieve a sustainable peace.

So both of us suffer weakness in leadership and I will admit that. We need some new visionary leadership coupled with efficiency and effectiveness to implement progress. Maybe this terrible situation will oblige the leadership to respond to the people's needs.

What role do the other Arab states have in the peace process?

In 2002 there was a significant Arab summit in Beirut where there was a declaration adopted called the Prince Abdullah Statement – he is now the King of Saudi Arabia. This is what I called the Arab initiative.

It is a significant proposal. It is not just saying that Israel must be recognised, because it believes Israel must be considered a part of the Middle East. Israel will only be legitimate if normal linkages are established in the social and economic spheres.

The initiative stated clearly that countries must normalise relations with Israel, not simply recognise it, in return for the full withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories of 1967.

This position includes Syria, so it is a golden opportunity for Israel. If I was an Israeli politician I would be grasping this and try to make it work. I believe the Israeli Foreign Minister mentioned that, saying that in any potential resolution we should take into consideration the Arab Initiative.

But we do need a more active role from the Arab states like Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, even Syria because the Baker Report from the United States on Iraq mentioned the need to include Iran and Syria in the discussions.

The Syrian position is different from Iran's because the Syrians are looking for the return of their own territories occupied in 1967. So Syria and Iran should be included in the process. I remind you of the Mecca Agreement signed under the auspicious of the Saudis and because of that there is a moral obligation on the Saudis to promote this agreement.

Some of the current refugees would be the grandchildren, even the great grandchildren of those dispossessed in 1948. Do they really want to return, or is it simply a political statement?

On the West Bank 70 per cent said they would prefer a viable Palestinian state to the right to return. It is not about implementation. If Israel was prepared to recognise the concept, but not the implementation, that would be accepted.

Palestinians virtually run the economy in Jordan. Some 70 per cent of the Jordanians are Palestinians. There is a division of power between Palestinians and Jordanians, with Jordanians responsible for security, civil administration and the army, and the Palestinians running the economy.

I am not sure the Palestinians there would want to sacrifice their whole lifestyle to come back to Israel; they would be second class citizens they would have to re-establish their businesses all over again.

Even in Lebanon where there are 400,000 refugees, Australia has around 25,000, and there are former Palestinian refugees in United States and Canada. Returning is not the problem. The principle issue is that we do not have one history book with the Israelis.

What happened in 1948? Many Israeli historians now recognise the moral responsibility of Israel for what happened then. Palestinians don't want to return to Israel. For many it is impossible. If we sent four million Palestinians back we would destroy Israel.

The issue is that Israel should recognise its responsibility and then Palestinians would be satisfied with a compensation scheme. The partition resolution talked about the right of return or compensation.

There is another solution which solves all these contradiction which was raised at the Camp David talks. A symbolic return. The Israelis accepted this concept, returning about 100,000 in a unification scheme.

The Palestinians were uprooted and expelled from their land 50 years ago, but Israel claimed the right to return after 3000 years. Every Jew in the world has the right to return to Israel now. Yet the Palestinians are barred from returning even though they were there only 50 years ago.

So it is a complicated issue, but I define to right to return as the right to return to the Palestinian state not to Israel. This is the very clear position of President Abbas. Our Palestinian leaders should be honest, because if they want to talk as politicians they seek the support of the refugees and say you will return. If they want to talk as intellectuals they will say no, it is not possible.

That is why there is the concept of a one-state solution because that would solve the problem of the refugees. I will tell you that if the two-state solution does not work, Palestinians will switch their support to the one-state solution.

Can you describe in very simple terms what human beings must feel if they are Palestinians?

It is the right to visit their own mothers without waiting for 10 hours, humiliated at a checkpoint. Another basic human right we are denied is to go to Jerusalem and pray. I live in Ramallah, 15 kilometres from Jerusalem, but for the past 10 years I cannot go to Jerusalem.

So there are a lot of human rights issues. The Separation Wall divides 400 communities. One girl tried to go to school and instead of waiting, a soldier opened the gate for her. There are a lot of examples.

A case was mentioned in the press. One pregnant woman on her way to hospital had to pass through a gate. She was about to deliver during the night and she was not allowed to go through until there were orders. She waited for two hours and was going to deliver there.

There is no hope with this military solution; we want to live like other people.