Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Doc. 12117 Add
25 July 2010

The situation in the Middle East

Addendum to the report
Rapporteur: Mr Piero FASSINO, Italy, Socialist Group

1. Addendum

1. In order to complete and update his report, and to hear the arguments of the two parties, the rapporteur carried out a fact-finding visit to Israel and the territories under Palestinian authority from 17 to 20 January 2010.

2. In the course of the visit, he met, on the Palestinian side, President Mahmoud Abbas, the prime minister, Salam Fayyad, the minister for foreign affairs, Riyad Al-Malki, the chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, the minister for prisoner affairs, Issa Qaraqi, several members of the Palestinian Legislative Council and a senior Fatah official, Dr Nabil Shaath.

3. On the Israeli side, the rapporteur met President Shimon Peres, the deputy prime minister, Dan Meridor, the deputy minister for foreign affairs, Daniel Ayalon, the Speaker of the Knesset, Reuven Rivlin, the Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, Naomi Turz, and several members of parliament and political figures.

4. During the visit he also met the ambassadors of certain Council of Europe member states and the European Union representative, who gave him their assessments of the situation and their views on recent developments.

5. Finally, the rapporteur had a discussion with the former member of the Parliamentary Assembly and Rapporteur of the Political Affairs Committee on the Middle East, Mikhail Margelov, who was in the region in his role as Chair of the External Relations Committee of the Council of the Russian Federation.

6. All these discussions and meetings enabled the rapporteur to improve his knowledge of the situation and afforded him a better understanding of the positions of the two parties concerned and a more qualified vision of the possible outcomes.

7. Despite the current impasse in relations between the Palestinians and the Israelis, there are certain positive factors that still leave hope for peace. The acceptance by the prime minister, Mr Netanyahu, of a "two states for two peoples" solution removes all theoretical obstacles to the creation, alongside Israel, of an independent and viable Palestinian state, based on the 1967 borders, possibly modified by negotiated and reciprocal exchanges of territory. Moreover, the Israeli Government's decision, even if it is partial and excludes East Jerusalem, to freeze new settlements constitutes a first step, which it is to be hoped will be followed by others.

8. There are also positive signs on the West Bank, such as the reduced number of checkpoints, an improvement in people's living conditions, economic growth and the handover of policing responsibilities to the Palestinians. All these developments demonstrate the capacity of Mahmoud Abbas and the Fayyad government to exercise power in an effective and credible manner.

9. President Obama's formal commitment and continuing American diplomatic efforts in the area, the 8 December 2009 declaration of the European Union foreign ministers, the Arab peace initiative and Russia's return to the scene are all indicative of the international community's commitment to and growing of the need for determined action to achieve a solution to the conflict.

10. However, the Palestinian authorities consider that all these positive developments do not offer sufficient guarantees that negotiations, once reopened, will not again result in deadlock, which would once more leave them open to criticism from their own political camp. They have therefore made a total freeze on settlements a precondition. They also want the Israeli authorities to accept that the 1967 borders should be the basis of any negotiations on the future Palestinian state, and that the status of Jerusalem and refugees' right of return should also be subjects of negotiation.

11. The Israeli authorities have a different view on all these points. They are willing to accept that the 1967 borders should be the reference point for the negotiations, but stress that the international community and the Palestinian side have already agreed that the frontiers can be altered by negotiated and reciprocal exchanges of territory. The Israeli side considers that the return of refugees is incompatible with the character of the State of Israel, which was established to give part of that land to the Jewish people. With regard to Jerusalem, the Israeli authorities, while insisting that Jerusalem must be the capital of the state of Israel, accept, however, that this, like all the other issues, must be the subject of negotiations, with no prejudice or preconditions.

12. While the Palestinian authorities' reservations are understandable, it must be recognised that the positive developments to which I have already referred offer favourable conditions for the resumption of negotiations.

13. The international community must therefore accept its responsibilities. All possible efforts must be made to overcome the mistrust and secure the reopening of negotiations. The Quartet must resume its efforts in parallel with the continuing involvement of the United States. The European Union must play a more active part. Russia seems to be more committed to direct participation in the process and its decision to organise a conference in Moscow following the one in Annapolis is of great interest. Arab involvement is also a very positive development that must be encouraged.

14. Time is not on the side of peace. On the contrary, the passage of time with no progress increases the frustration and despair. Nor can we ignore the presence of two radical elements – Iran and Islamic fundamentalism in all the countries of the region – that support Hamas and oppose any negotiated peace.

15. In addition, the negotiations between Hamas and Fatah have not so far borne fruit, despite the efforts of the Egyptians and Mahmoud Abbas' readiness to listen. The dramatic situation in the Gaza Strip is increasing the frustration and exasperation of the Palestinian camp and requires the Israeli authorities to reopen access points and take urgent steps to make people's lives less onerous.

16. The rapporteur's conclusion is that the current priority is to secure a resumption of negotiations, which means that each of the parties must take a positive stance and adopt coherent and disinterested measures that take into account the other side’s expectations. And each country, as well as international organisations, including the Council of Europe, must do all that is necessary for, and can contribute to, the resumption of negotiations.

Reporting committee: Political Affairs Committee

Reference to committee: mandate of the committee

Draft addendum unanimously approved by the committee on 25 January 2010

Secretariat of the committee: Mrs Chatzivassiliou, Mr Ary, Mr Chevtchenko, Mrs Sirtori-Milner