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**Conference notes IRRI-KIIB**

Lunch conference chaired by Christian Monnoyer,
Dep. Director General, Bilateral Affairs, FPS Foreign Affairs, Belgium.

***"Gaza withdrawal and the future of the Palestinian state"***

**Mr. Maen R. Areikat**Director General of the Negotiations Affairs Department of the PLO
Brussels, 20 June 2005

MAEN R. AREIKAT:

"Thank you very much. It is a pleasure to be in Brussels. The Negotiation Affairs Department of the PLO was established in 1996 to oversee the implementation of the agreement between Israel and the PLO. It was also given the mandate of preparing for final status negotiations between the two sides, which were supposed to have been concluded in 1999.

You all know what happened in Camp David and during the last year, we haven't seen much political progress between Israel and the Palestinians.

I am the Director-General of the PLO's Negotiations Affairs Department (NAD) which follows directly to the authority of the chairman of the PLO Executive Committee who is currently also the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas.

The Negotiations Support Unit (NSU) provides legal and technical support to the Palestinian negotiating team in the final status talks with Israel. Among its members are my colleagues here: Zeinah Salahi is our legal expert on borders. She is currently involved in coordinating the Gaza evacuation with the Israeli's and Minister  Dahlan. Leila Hilal, is our legal advisor. Our policy expert on settlements and the wall including Jerusalem is Mr Khaled el-Gindy.

The purpose of this visit is to brief the EU and Belgian officials on the progress of Gaza coordination and on the flip side of the disengagement plan which is the continuation of the construction of settlements and the wall in Palestinian areas that if continued will actually threaten the possibility of a two-state solution as an ideal solution for the Palestinian-Israelian conflict.

Remember that we are coordinating the evacuation of Israeli soldiers or settlers from Gaza, but we are not coordinating the disengagement plan. This plan is purely an unilateral Israeli plan that the Palestinians did not design and did not agreed to coordinate with the Israeli's. It includes the flipside, the continuation of expansion, the construction of the wall and controlling the West Bank and Jerusalem. This includes also preventing the Palestinians from realizing their national aspirations of establishing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

You did ask me to talk about the relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, a very complex subject. The PLO is the highest executive political body of the Palestinians. The PLO is the party that signs agreements with Israel on issues such as the Oslo agreement. The Palestinian National Authority was an interim arrangement to take charge of the Palestinian population inside the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The PA is not a permanent authority. Once we achieved full Israelian withdrawal, maybe there will be a different authority to take over. Maybe there will be an extension of the existing one. Politically speaking, the PLO is the highest reference in terms of taking executive decisions and making policies for the Palestinians. The Palestine National Council (PNC) is the highest legislative body and includes Palestinians from both inside occupied Palestine areas and outside in the Diaspora.

PNC and the PLO are the highest legislative and executive bodies of the PLO. The Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Council are the interim arrangements to deal with the interim agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. For example, our representative in Brussels, Mr. Armali, is appointed by the PLO, because the PLO remains in charge of all foreign relations and agreements with foreign countries. There is actually an overlap sometimes between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority due to the fact that the PA has expanded its activities such as areas that the PLO traditionally covered in the past. But we try to make a distinction between the two bodies.

I don't want to speak too much. One great advantage of creating the Negotiations Support Unit is that we at the NAD stop to talk too much about issues we rather leave to experts to explain them. Now, we will talk about the positive aspect of the situation in Palestine / Israel which is a coordination for the Gaza withdrawal going on between the two sides with the assistance of the Special Envoy of the Quartet, Mr. Wolfensohn, who is in the region talking to the two parties to try to facilitate the evacuation of Israeli's from Gaza. The US secretary of State was also in the region two days ago trying to push the process forward. Some other parties, regional and others, are trying to facilitate the process.

Zeinah Salahi will give a presentation on the coordination for the Gaza evacuation and the other aspect of this disengagement plan which includes the Israeli actions on the ground, the settlements and the construction of the wall.

Thank you again.  I hope you'll enjoy the presentation."

ZEINAH SALAHI:

"I'll speak about three different aspects of the coordination. First, there are the preparations by the Palestinians. A lot of aspects are technical and need internal preparation in order to properly coordinate with Israel. The second aspect concerns key issues that are being discussed with and which are sticking points. Finally, I'll talk about what needs to happen to make the evacuation a success.

I'll be talking about the positive part of the disengagement plan which is evacuation. Preparations are organized through two committees: one is the Ministerial level Committee chaired by the Prime Minister and includes all the stakeholder ministries of Palestine. The Minister of Civil Affairs, Mr Mohammed Dahlan, is heading a Technical Coordination Committee, which consist of 6 working groups for internal preparation.

The Working group "Land and assets planning" figures what we need to get in terms of an inventory. We've an "Infrastructure and public utility" Working group which deals for example with ensuring that water supply continues during and after the evacuation.
The Working Group (WG) "Gates and crossing points" deals with how to improve crossing points that are in the 1967 border.
An other topic is the internal gateways. We have the "Save Passage and territorial linkage" WG which deals with "how to connect the West Bank with the Gaza Strip immediately and in the long term. This is a very big issue for the Palestinians!
The "Transform and managing" WG deals with mostly productive assets -  what to do with fish farms for example - and with legal issues - transfer of land.

I will give you some of the important issues that are being dealt with during the coordination process.

As regards the Airport reconstruction, there are a lot of practical aspects, such as a runway that is about 80% demolished and needs to be repaired. On the other hand, there are the aspects to allow the airport to operate. This is a big sticking point.

The save passage includes two aspects, namely what will happen the day after the evacuation and what will happen in the long term? Any sort of infrastructure project will take at the minimum two years to five years. So, what between those two periods?

A huge problem is that the productive resources are in the West Bank, the political entity is in Jerusalem. How will Gaza have access to this? Concerning the Philadelphi area and the Rafah crossing point with Egypt, what about the control of the point post-evacuation which Palestinians have the right to do under Oslo?  For the moment, it is completely controlled by Israel.

The second part of that is the Customs Union. Israel gives us two options: one is to move it to the point where Egypt, Gaza and Israel meets which will allow Israel to maintain control. The second option is to abrogate the customs union in the Gaza Strip.

Right now, Israel and Palestine occupied area are under the customs union. This means that goods going from Palestine to Israel don't get taxed. You can have free movement. That is very important for the Palestine and Israeli economy. If Israel unilaterally abrogates it, they will impose a customs border around the periphery of the Gaza Strip. Goods going from Gaza Strip to Israel will be essentially double-taxed and also goods going from Gaza to the West Bank. This would decimate the Palestinian economy, especially when they are trying to build up their economy in Gaza.

Next issue is the "door-to-door movement of goods". Right now, there is a back-to-back system imposed on the movements of Palestinian goods both within occupied Palestinian territory and between this territory and Israel. That means that a truck carrying Palestinian goods, when stopped at a checkpoint within the West Bank, has to unload all of the goods and put it on a new truck, because Palestinian trucks can't move directly through all occupied Palestinian territory. This is extremely harmful to Palestinian economy. The reality is that there is very little correlation to security. Within the West Bank, most of the goods aren't checked in this transfer process. Thus, there is no reason to maintain it! Even the recent World Bank's report has said there is very little security benefit. This is another tangible point in the context of the coordination.

Concerning "internal closures", there are over  600 checkpoints, different sorts of impediments within the West Bank. That stops Palestinians moving within that territory.

Another question concerns the future of the assets (the houses, the green houses, the fisheries etc.) Will Israel leave or destroy them? With respect to the productive assets, there is still no decision made.

We still don't know how much of the West Bank Israel is going to evacuate from. We know they are evacuating four small settlements, not even with 500 settlers. But there are more than 400.000 settlers in the West Bank, in Gaza Strip including Jerusalem. We don't know what that means in terms of the military control.
What is going to happen to the territory that is evacuated from? Right now, most territories are designed as area C or B under Oslo which means that Palestinians have very little control. But if Israel evacuates, we need to have control in order to pave roads, provide water etc. Israel is right now unwilling to discuss movement of the administrative status of one of area A which would allow us to have that control.

Some aspects of  the program of evacuation - which includes essential the timetable and handles practical aspects - also have yet to be shared with us.

The last big issue is the sealing off of the Gaza Strip. During and after the evacuation, Israel is planning to seal off the Gaza Strip, both internally and externally. They are going to create securities around each one of the 21 evacuated settlements and around a perimeter of the Gaza Strip which will prevent Palestinians and the International Community from entering the Gaza Strip during the evacuation. This is a problem for humanitarian reasons and practical reasons: Gaza is dependent on external sources. And how to ensure a smoothly evacuation if the technical teams can't enter and if the International Community who is helping can't get in and the Palestinian ministries can't access the rest of the ministries in Gaza?

I've given you an overview of what is being discussed. Now, what needs to happen in order to make the evacuation process a success?
It has to be part of a political process. It can't be "Gaza first, Gaza last". Air and sea space are important.  There is an access problem. To give you an example, the Gaza Strip only has three outlets to the outside world that are not entirely dependant on Israel: the port, yet to be built, the airport and the Rafah crossing point with which we also have problems. 350 people are crossing in each direction for humanitarian or educational purposes.

Right now, there is no link between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank that is functional. So, if Israel withdraws without alleviating any of these conditions, Gaza will be a prison and that is a huge fear.

Also, this has to include parallel steps  in the West Bank. Anything that is going on and any process imposed have to include both parts. We can't forget about that! It is important for symbolic purposes. We have to focus on the economic development and reconstruction of the whole occupied territory, because it is all interdependent.

Israel is seeking to disengage from the Palestinians. There are looking to cease all labour going into Israel by the year 2008. Now, for the Palestinian economy, labour in Israel is a huge source of income. We don't have the ability to develop a big enough economy to absorb that labour force. It is very important to focus on economic redevelopment.

A lot of people are discussing the idea that the evacuation from Gaza will end the occupation of Gaza. Now, the legal test for ending the occupation is to seize effective control. As you can see, the situation in Gaza is very far from one where Israel would have seized effective control. People can't get in and out. We have no ability to provide water, electricity, basic things. So, it is clear that depending on how the evacuation is implemented, it is hardly unlikely that it could end the occupation of Gaza.

Thank you."

KHALED EL- GINDY:

" I'll talk about the other side of the disengagement plan, the continued construction of the wall in the West Bank and the expansion of the Israeli settlements and the internal closures.

Let me first explain briefly the map that you are looking at upon the screen. This is the wall route as it was improved in February 2005. The black line - from the top, the north east of the West Bank extends from the river all the way down to Qalqilya - is where the wall has been constructed. The red line represents that part of the wall that has not yet been constructed, but has been finalised and is improved by the Israeli cabinet. The dotted red line is improved, but he exact route has not yet been determined. The blue lines that you see around the settlements blocks in the north central part of the West Bank are special walls and fences.

In order to understand the full impact, you have to look at the rest of the infrastructure which includes the settlements, settlement roads, closure regimes and the regimes inside those areas that are trapped between Israel and the wall.
So, looking at the numbers, a quarter million Palestinians will be situated between the wall and Israel itself, most of whom are concentrated in the metropole in the Jerusalem area. A significant number of Palestinians are losing their livelihood as result of the wall. About 37% of this route - which is almost twice as long as the '67 border - has been completed. Contrary to what a lot of people may be saying in Washington or Tel Aviv, only about 20% of the actual route is on and near the '67 border.

As regards the impact of the route on land, about 10% of the West Bank is immediately taken as result of the wall. When you factor in the settlement blocks that are east of the wall, between the wall and the Jordan valley, you have another 8%. The Jordan Valley constitutes about 28% of the West Bank. So, the number that Palestinians are left with is about 54% of the West Bank.

The settlement infrastructure doesn't end there. You have the laboured network of Israeli settlement bypass routes which you see here in blue, superposed over the red lines which are the traditional Palestinian road networks. So, you see how the grid of Israeli roads criss-crosses the West Bank and further fragments Palestinian areas into cantons and isolated conclaves.

On the top of this, there is the reality of Israelian imposed closures throughout the West Bank that Salahi referred to.  Now, a simple trip that used to take 15 minutes travelling from one town to another, in some cases may even take overnight, because trucks are waiting for checkpoints to open. The newest layer of control Israel is adding in addition to the wall, is the institutionalisation of these closures and the fragmentation of Palestinian life in order to accommodate these closures. The only reason that they would do that is if they thought those closures would become permanent. So, they are investing a lot of resources in building those separate roads and tunnels. Some roads are parallel to Israeli roads.

The wall is not just a physical structure, but a way of life. It is a regime for 50000 Palestinians who are trapped between Israel and the wall in the part of the West Bank where the wall already has been constructed.

The green area is where these Palestinians live and must have 'access permits' to go to their farmland or business, schools.
Another component is the gates allowing access in and out of these closed zone areas. These gates are two or three times a day open for about one hour each time - when they do open. Frequently, they do not. It depends on the mood of the soldiers who sometimes refuse Palestinians who have all the permits that are required. Of the 62 gates already built into the wall, only 25 are actually open for Palestinians and that number is decreasing. But Palestinians are only allowed to use certain gates. For example, your permit says "gate n°12", then you only can use this gate and not gate n°14.

Another trend we are seeing, most of the permits that are being rejected these days are not for security grounds. Now, by a factor of twenty to one, most of the permits are being rejected on land ownership grounds: they are unable to prove that they have a connection to the land. Those guidelines to prove ownership have become increasingly restrictive. Now, it is limited only to immediate children and spouses. Grandchildren have been eliminated. This threatens to seriously undermine Palestine property rights in the future. Through these actions, it is clear that what the wall really is about, is a 'land grap'.

The other trend that reinforces the idea that the wall was never either intended to be temporary nor intended to security purposes, is the construction of massive permanent infrastructure at the wall. We see this in the case of industrial estates that are being built on the wall.

The wall is closely associated with Israeli settlement expansion; we see it on both sides of the wall. About 42 settlements are being expanded. The two major settlement expansion plans that have been announced this year are about 6400 new housing units for the entire West Bank for 2005 about half of which are located in the Jerusalem area. The other plan is the plan for the area called E1 to connect Ma'aleh Adumim with the settlements in East Jerusalem as well as in Jerusalem. If this plan is carried out, it will physically divide the West Bank into two cantons.

To give you and idea some of the local impacts of the wall, we can look at Bethlehem district which historically is always been tied with it sister city to the north of Jerusalem..... (The speaker gives explanation with map) .... Bethlehem's connection to Jerusalem is cut by Israelian settlements to the north and the other block to the west and to the south. When we add the layer of the wall, we see that if the wall would be completed, it would be devastating for Bethlehem.

Firstly, from psychological and cultural perspective, it would be the first time in hundreds of years that Bethlehem was physically separated from Jerusalem. From the perspective from the 19000 Palestinians west of Bethlehem in villages, they rely on Bethlehem for social services, education, jobs etc. They would be cut off by the wall from their urban hub. At the same time Bethlehem is cut off from its agricultural hinterland. It would suffer from the wall. So, this is not only a question of viability for those five or six village that are trapped in that area, it is really an existential threat for them.

Now, where the whole notion of viability or sustainability even completely breaks down is in the Jerusalem metropole area in particular. Jerusalem is the political, social, economic capital of Palestine. You notice that there is an unbroken chain of Palestinian development and habitation along the central ridge of the West Bank that goes from Bethlehem through Jerusalem, Ramallah and then northwards.

East Jerusalem Palestinians are separated by the settlements and by the imposing closures on Jerusalem preventing Palestinians from the rest of the West Bank to enter Jerusalem. Most of the wall you see, about half of the wall route in black has been constructed: in particular the areas north of Bethlehem and from Bethlehem northwards and the area north separating Ramallah from Jerusalem.

In addition to isolating both West Bank Palestinians from their socio-economic hub in Jerusalem and suffocating East Jerusalem Palestinians who rely on the West Bank for business, influx of students etc., the wall would effectively cut the West Bank in half.
So, the goal obviously is to move Palestinians out of Jerusalem, to limitate Palestinian presence in Jerusalem and to fragment Palestinian territory. Again, this is the plan for Palestinians that Israel would like to implement: to build a special road for Palestinians to connect now Bethlehem with Ramallah and to connect other areas that are isolated by the wall with each other.

The big issue, the big point is that without Eastern Jerusalem, even with 99.9% of the rest of the West Bank, simply a Palestinian cannot be viable, neither territorially, politically, socially, economically.

Thank you".

For further information, see:

- Mr Areikat: BIO: <http://www.americanarabforum.org/Maen_rashid_areikatbio.htm>

- MIFTAH. "The Gaza Disengagement Plan: how to make it work" - By Maen Areikat, Zeinah Salahi, and Khaled El-Gindy.
Date posted: April 29, 2005: see <http://www.miftah.org/Display.cfm?DocId=7320&CategroyId=5>

- Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies - POLICY Brief -
"Is a two-state solution still possible?" : <http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc372.html>

- Maps and reports on this subject by FMEP, see: <http://www.fmep.org/reports/overview.html> - Foundation for Middle East Peace.

- PLO Negotiation Affairs Dept. (NAD) official site:
on "Disengagement":<http://www.nad-plo.org/listing.php?view=disengagement>

\*for fact sheets: <http://www.nad-plo.org/listing.php?view=disengagement_Fact>
\*for maps: <http://www.nad-plo.org/listing.php?view=disengagement_Maps>

on "Israel's Wall": <http://www.nad-plo.org/listing.php?view=palisraeli_wall>

Extra:

- on EL GINDY's presentation with a map, look also at: [ NSUOCT05.ppt](http://www.fmep.org/resources/official_documents/NSUOCT05.ppt) - FMEP
<http://www.fmep.org/resources/official_documents/NSUOCT05.ppt>  •  Friday, 7 October 2005, 8:22pm GMT •  8681.9k

- on the "E1-plan" mentioned by EL GINDY, read also
"Jerusalem in the shadow of the disengagement from Gaza" - FMEP - Date: 1 August 2005: <http://www.fmep.org/analysis/articles/jerusalem_in_the_shadow_of_the_disengagement_from_gaza.html>

Summary made by Vanlauwe