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UN-SPONSORED ANTI-ISRAEL CONFERENCE DEMANDS FUNDING FOR THE HAMAS GOVERNMENT

In its latest anti-Israel propaganda barrage the UN's Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP) mobilized its April 26-27 conference in Cairo to demand international financial aid for the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA). It was, as described in AJIRI's earlier reports, one in a series of international meetings held under the UN umbrella about every three months for the single purpose of denouncing Israel.

This UN-funded conference, titled "International Efforts at Alleviating the Palestinian Economic and Humanitarian Crisis," pursued twin themes: (1) demanding resumption of international financing of the Palestinian Authority, now led by Hamas, and (2) denouncing Israeli security measures as the principal cause of the economic problems of the Palestinians..

Speaker after speaker repeated the mantra that because the elections were "free and fair," the Palestinians should not be "punished" by the withholding of assistance, and that Israeli measures safeguarding Israelis against terrorist attacks deprive Palestinians of their livelihood. No one mentioned Hamas's refusal to consider itself bound by prior agreements to which the Palestinian Authority had subscribed, its refusal to recognize Israel, to subscribe to the two-state solution provided for in the Road Map, or to end its commitment to terror and violence. There was no reference to the harm done to the Palestinian economy by Palestinians who destroyed greenhouses and irrigation facilities following the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the insecurity caused by the fierce battles fought in the streets between rival Palestinian factions.

Conference participants included representatives of 55 governments, 4 international organizations, 16 United Nations agencies, 8 non-governmental organizations, the UN "Observer of Palestine", and 31 media representatives. In addition, 13 "experts" participated in the event.

The following summary of the Cairo Conference proceedings is based on the official United Nations reports, Secretary General SG/SM/10434, GA/PAL 1005 and General Assembly GA/PAL/1006, 1007, 1008.

Statement of Secretary-General Annan

As is the usual practice at CEIRPP meetings, the session opened with a statement delivered in the name of **Secretary-General Annan**. That statement followed a well-established pattern in which the Secretary-General's remarks on the Israeli/Palestinian

conflict, as read to the meeting, suggest a moral equivalence between terrorist attacks and actions of defense against terrorism:

“I remain extremely worried about the intensification of violence, including Palestinian rocket attacks and suicide bombings, *as well as Israeli air strikes, shelling, and ground operations....* I reiterate my call *on both sides* to abide by their obligations under international law, and refrain from further actions that might escalate the situation and put civilians at risk.”

Regarding the Palestinian election which brought a terrorist organization to power, the remarks delivered on behalf of the Secretary-General used polite phraseology:

“Last January, the world witnessed the Palestinian Legislative Council elections, which marked an important milestone in the Palestinian people’s continued pursuit of democracy and self-determination. ... I call upon the Palestinian Authority to reaffirm Palestinian commitment to the principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel’s right to exist and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Road Map. These principles and United Nations resolutions underlie the efforts to achieve a two-State solution.”

In fact, since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in October 2000 (that is, for five and a half years *prior* to the Hamas election victory) there has been no evidence of a Palestinian commitment to non-violence or acceptance of the agreements and obligations assumed under the Road Map for dismantling the infrastructure for terrorism.

One might ask: is the Secretary-General not obliged to make a candid and forthright statement regarding the Palestinian breach of the Oslo accords and rejection of a two-state solution? Does not sweeping these matters under the rug encourage a cynical reaction by the Hamas leadership and thus further terrorist violence?

This gingerly approach to Hamas contrasts sharply with the Secretary-General’s harsh remarks regarding the newly-elected government of Israel, a government committed to attaining a two-state solution in keeping with UN Security Council Resolution 242:

“Israelis have also elected a new leadership. I urge the new Israeli Government to live up to its commitments, including those contained in the Road Map. I call upon Israel to cease settlement activity and other actions that could prejudice final status issues, and encourage it to recognize that a peaceful solution to the conflict cannot be imposed unilaterally or outside the framework of a comprehensive regional peace.”

Taking up the theme of the Cairo meeting, the Secretary-General’s statement criticizes the positions taken by the United States and the European Union:

“A combination of factors is coming together, which carry the danger of leading up to a serious humanitarian crisis. Key donors have discontinued direct support

to the Palestinian Authority; Israel continues to withhold tax clearance revenues it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, despite its obligations under the Paris protocol; and the contraction of economic activity is expected to reduce Palestinian domestic tax revenues. The irregular operation of the Karni crossing and the system of internal closures in the West Bank hinder the movement of people and goods, exacerbating poverty and unemployment. They also impose considerable daily hardship and humiliation on the Palestinian population, as does the continued construction of a barrier on Occupied Palestinian Territory, despite the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.”

This one-sided statement set the tone for the conference.

Other Introductory Statements

In her opening statement the **Egyptian** representative, speaking for the host government, said that her "Government was against punishing the Palestinian people for their choice in free, fair and democratic elections." She decried the "continued imposition of Israeli measures which resulted in the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation.”

The **Chairman of the CEIRPP**, Paul Badji of **Senegal**, followed the same theme. He said that “a humanitarian catastrophe is imminent.” Economic and humanitarian development would not be possible “unless the occupation was brought to an end.” He called on the international community “to assist the Palestinian People and put pressure on Israel to end the occupation.”

Next came an introductory statement by **Nabil Sha'ath**, as “**Representative of Palestine**.” He said that Palestinians were being punished for holding “free, fair, and transparent elections.” Withholding assistance, he declared, was “immoral, unethical, and unjustified.” Sha’ath returned to this theme in a subsequent intervention in which he added that all donors must be persuaded to resume the implementation of their pledges. The money must be routed *as the recipients, not the donors, see fit*.

Statements by States and International Organizations

Cuba’s representative led off, as usual, with a complaint about the role played by the United States: "Washington has kept the Security Council hostage on this subject (Israel and the Palestinians) by making use of the veto 29 times." The "Palestinian people have democratically and fairly elected a government [and] the United States Government's answer has been financial blackmail...."

Cuba was followed by the **Arab League** representative, who said that the decision of international donors "to stop aid to the Palestinian Authority...amounted to collective punishment of the Palestinian people for voting in democratic, free and fair elections.” He appealed to the Quartet to respect the wishes of the Palestinian people.

The same note was sounded by the representative of the **Organization of the Islamic Conference**, who said that Israeli practices left the Palestinian economy on the brink of collapse. The elections, he said, had been free and fair. The “economic embargo” on the Palestinians contradicts humanitarian and international law.

Indonesia's representative was particularly vehement in his attack on Israel, calling for Security Council intervention against Israeli measures, even though these measures are clearly acts of self-defense. Repeating the conference’s basic theme, he said that the "outcome of the Palestinian democratic process ought not to be used as a pretext by countries to cease economic and financial assistance to the Palestinian people.”

Next came the representative of **Malta** (an EU member), who observed that an "important aspect of the Committee (CEIRPP) seminars was to maintain a constant awareness within the international community of the intolerable humanitarian, economic and social situation which Palestinian people have been suffering for decades.” The rest of his statement was moderate in tone, far more so than that of the UN Secretary-General.

China delivered a statement designed to ingratiate itself with the attendees of this conference. Its representative said that his Government respected “the choice of a country and the choice of its people." He repeated statements of other speakers that because "the Palestinian elections reflected the will of the Palestinian people...the international community should respect and recognize (it).” He boasted that China had provided "financial and material assistance to the Palestinians for development... refugees...scholarships and training programs for Palestinian Authority officials,” without attaching “political conditions.”

The African Union's representative noted that his organization included 53 countries, and while "they might not have the money...they had a sufficient political voice in the United Nations." He urged Israeli authorities to end activities that undermined social stability, and contended that the Israeli policy was one of suffocation.

The representative of Yemen condemned "attacks against the institutions and infrastructures of the Palestinian Authority.” He noted that Yemen “rejects collective punishment" and called on the donor community to continue its assistance program.

Senegal's representative said the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory “was beginning to look like a catastrophe” and urged the donors to continue their assistance.

Statements by “Experts”

A representative of the **Palestinian-European Chamber of Commerce** declared: "The United States imposition of sanctions was no surprise. What was strange was the position of the Europeans and others who complied with the sanctions that would bankrupt what remained of the private sector." The PLO, he said, “had concluded agreements with Israel and had gotten nothing in return.” Hamas was suggesting a new approach under which Israel had to make some concessions. Hamas, he alleged, “was

ready to accept the State of Israel when it ended the occupation and returned to 1967 borders.” The latter statement will undoubtedly be news to the Hamas leadership.

In an evident effort to demonstrate balance, the sponsors had also invited two Israelis, whose views are very clearly unrepresentative of Israeli public opinion. One of them, **Gershon Baskin, Director of the Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information in East Jerusalem**, came up with novel ideas, namely: Israel would withdraw from territories to the East of the barrier, with the area from which Israel withdraws being placed under the jurisdiction of a United Nations Interim Mission. The Mission’s military arm would replace the Israeli army contingents along the Jordan River, secure Israel’s borders in the West Bank, man all crossing points from Israel to the West Bank, and work directly with Palestinian security forces under a single command.

Roby Nathanson, the Chairman of the Israeli Institute for Economic and Social Research in Tel Aviv, suggested that "unilateral withdrawal was an option that might happen in the near future and was essential to the reconstruction of the Palestinian economy." He "did not recommend the model of Gaza in which the existing infrastructure was destroyed rather than used for the benefit of the future Palestinian state." He urged that the West Bank Israeli infrastructure be turned over to the PA. He also devoted some of his time to a discussion of Israeli settlement activity.

A professor at **Bir Zeit University** complained of the "stoppage of work on many projects and the halting of projects which had been supported by donor countries," as well as the "rising unemployment fueled by the closure of the Green line to Palestinian workers." He contended that the "economic difficulties influenced the increase in violence" and that "violence had repercussions on the economy," thus creating a vicious circle. He was followed by an economist from **Gaza**, who said that Western donors’ bypassing of the Hamas-led government will "undermine the Palestinian public institutions that the donors had helped to create since 1994."

The conference then heard from seven members of the United Nations staff, most of whom echoed the one-sided presentations made by the other speakers.

(1) The **Director of Operations in the West Bank for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)** placed most of the blame for the economic crisis on Israel. The "coming disaster," he said, was "man-made, a result of deliberate [Israeli] political decisions that strangled the economy."

(2) The **Head of the Research and Analysis Unit of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)** noted that the humanitarian crisis had resulted from the difficulty of access to basic services, which she ascribed in part to the "separation wall and bypass roads." She discussed closure measures but conceded that "restrictions were imposed for the security of Israel and to protect Israeli civilians."

(3) Her OCHA colleague, the **Communications Officer of the Advocacy Unit**, did not recognize Israel’s security needs. She said that the "budget crisis was caused by Israel's

withholding of \$60 million...along with the lack of aid...", and said that the "key solution was to improve access in the West Bank and [for Palestinians] to regain access to the Israeli market." She went on to insist that aid must be sent to the P.A., and that it "was imperative to work with the Palestinian Authority or ordinary people will suffer."

(4) The **First Economic Affairs Officer of the Assistance to the Palestinian People Unit of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)** spoke of the need to dismantle "the politics of asymmetric containment," a term that he used frequently. It would appear that he used the phrase to refer to Israel's self-defense measures. He did not mention that "asymmetric containment" could come to an end if violence directed against Israel from Palestinian territory came to an end.

(5) The **Head of the World Health Organization's West Bank and Gaza office** reported on a survey that concluded that the life of the Palestinians was "miserable from the physical, psychological and financial view points." The absence of donor aid, he said, would lead to a serious decline in health services.

(6) The **Senior Coordination Officer of the United Nations Office of the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process** noted that there was "a rapid and acute deterioration in the economic situation especially since the Hamas victory in the recent elections." In an acknowledgement of reality which undoubtedly took courage, she said that "the reduction in revenues was due to the moratorium on donor contributions because the new government did not subscribe to the principles of the Road Map."

(7) Following this refreshing observation, the **World Food Programme's Senior Regional Information Officer** returned to the prevailing themes of the conference. The current problems were due "to the restriction of movement of people and goods," he said, and conditions had "become worse after the cut in donor funding."

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the decline in the Palestinian economy has resulted in human suffering. Under the UN Charter, one of the goals of the UN is "to achieve international co-operation in solving problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character." The Cairo conference here described made no contribution to that UN goal. It served only a propaganda purpose that exacerbates political tensions.

There could have been an exchange of thoughts that might lead to constructive solutions. Instead, two days were spent in which speaker after speaker used slightly different wording to repeat the same demands, that the US and the EU should fund the Hamas government and that Israel should end the measures by which it defends itself against terrorist attacks. **That is most assuredly a misuse of the name and the resources of the United Nations. It demonstrates once again that closing the anti-Israel propaganda apparatus is critically important if the UN is to return to the principles spelled out in its Charter.**

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