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Report on WG3: Prospects for the Peace Process in the Middle East

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[This Report was prepared by the Rapporteur as her summary of the working group discussions, and does not necessarily reflect the views of all working group participants.]

The working group had 5 sessions on the political repercussions of the war and the present opportunities for promoting peace and security in the region, the Palestinian situation, the Israeli situation and the Lebanese situation respectively, and the role of the international community. On the whole the mood of the sessions was pessimistic although it became slightly less so by the end of the discussions.

General discussion of chances for peace

In the recent months the situation in the Middle East in general and in the Israeli-Palestinian context in particular have been deteriorating fast. The embargo imposed on the PNA has had a very negative impact. The Arab states keep silent perhaps due to incapability, the Europeans are ignoring the conflict and on the agenda of the Bush administration the Israeli-Palestinian issue is ranking 6th or 7th only, its focus being increasingly Southwest Asia. While it is wrong to look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the main cause of all the problems over the region, it does figure directly or indirectly in most issues.

Although the Arab peace initiative (2002 Beirut) is generally considered a solid foundation for negotiations by the Arab political elites, in the eyes of Israel, but also of the Arab street, cannot lead to a solution. The elements of peace are clear: end of occupation including settlements; 1967 borders as basic lines; fair solution to the Palestinian refugee problem and recognition of the right of return on the basis of international law and UN resolutions. The war between Israel and the Hezbollah may have created an opportunity in the sense that it put back the Arab-Israeli conflict on the international agenda. Some Israeli leaders, for the first time, say they might consider the Arab peace plan.
One of the biggest repercussions of the war is the disclosure of the division among the Arab countries between moderates (i.e., those trying to make peace) and non-committants. While there were differences among the Arab states in the past, they tended to show a unified profile on the Palestinian issue.

The Lebanon war has moved the Arab-Israeli confrontation onto a new level: it proved that the military is not an answer any more and raised questions for Israel about its own military might.

The war demonstrated the linkage between the conflicts in the region, including the connection between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Lebanon-Syria-Iran. For some, the Palestinian issue is the core issue, but for others (the US) the core issue is Iran, subordinating the Palestinian issue.

There was a perception that the Lebanese war did not leave much space for a new opening, since it was a failure for Israel, leaving the Israeli leadership too weak to make any concessions toward peace.

The Bush administration has had 6 years of deeply established behaviour, rejecting Clinton’s approach of being involved. The main effect of 9/11 was to push the USA and Israel closer to each other than ever before. In spite of the recent changes in the Congress, Bush will remain sceptical about the effects of diplomacy and will refuse to talk to „bad guys“. The democratic Congress will not be enough to change Bush’s set rules.

**Discussion of the Palestinian scene**

In January the elections in the Palestinian territories were free and democratic and went without any problems. People were enthusiastic and turned out in great numbers. However, the result were not accepted by either the US or Israel or in the end by Europe. All aid was stopped which led first to the general strike by the 160 thousand government employees, then to the breakdown of the government. Ghaza has become a prison. Unemployment reached 80%. Israel withholds some 500 million USD VAT and taxes. Over 300 people, most of them women and children were killed. 46 thousand Palestinians applied for permission to expatriate from Ghaza and the West Bank and 10 thousand received the permission.

Hamas realized that they had the first and the last opportunity to form a government unless they change themselves. But there is also a realization among Fatah that this is the opportunity to come back to government. The national unity government, therefore, is a mutual interest of both and may become a mutual survival government, which may control further political processes in Palestine. The question was raised if such a national unity government means that future elections are excluded.

It is as yet not clear who the members of the new government will be, but the candidates do not necessarily will be party members. It is understood that Mahmoud Abbas must have received enough guarantee from the international community that in case of a national unity government the embargo would be lifted. It was concluded that the US/Israel/Europe have won this battle of
wills, however, there was much pressure from the inside as well, by President Abbas and the Palestinian people.

In the Hamas interpretation the victory was God’s will and the reflection of the will of the people. At the beginning they tried to minimize the effects of the international boycott by turning to Arab and Islamic countries to compensate for lost revenues, but when that was not a viable option they introduced a new tactic and called for sacrifices. While people were in the beginning passionate about it, their seriously deteriorating living circumstances made them increasingly change their minds about Hamas’ ability to govern. In the end the living conditions of the Palestinians will be the decision-makers over Hamas.

It was noted that while usually only Fatah is mentioned as an alternative to Hamas, the people who stayed away from the elections (out of the 1.8 million 1 million voted) mostly did so because they were frustrated by the options. The idea of an option like that by Sharon was raised, namely that Mahmoud Abbas with the young and „clean” elements of Fatah and with the prisoners and Marwan Barghouti could form a new party in order to win the next elections.

The prisoners’ document while was there at the beginning of national unity negotiations, but Hamas amended the original ten points by further three, so in the end the agreement reached is different in many aspects.

In Israel there is no prospect and no vision, the Israeli government is concentrating on survival only. The war was a deep shock for the population and exposed the Israeli government’s inability to defend its citizens from attacks both from Lebanon and Ghaza. In spite of the lack of trust and the widening gap between the government and the population, the stock exchange is at its highest peak ever. It was assumed that the trauma of not being able to rely on the army may have been a factor in the use of force in Ghaza to regain confidence.

For some years now the Israeli public is for a two-state solution: 60-70% would be ready to give up the settlements and 50% would be ready to share Jerusalem. Yet, because of the failure of the Oslo process and Camp David, the no-partner idea emerged, which led to unilateralism. With the elections this became a government policy including the future delineation of the border unilaterally.

The war in Lebanon changed the situation. The conclusion was that unilateralism (unilateral withdrawal) was dead: either because if withdrawal is completed without an agreement, there is no guarantee to security; or because withdrawal as such is considered a mistake. But since Kadima was founded on unilateralism, now the government is left without a policy. Looking for a government policy the first option – logically – could be talking to Syria, yet this is unlikely in spite of the fact that even influential members of the Israeli government have raised the idea. At the moment the US would not support such a plan, since it is unwilling to have pressure taken off Syria. The other option could be talking to the Palestinians, but it is not clear if Olmert wants to open any peace track at all. The war, however, demonstrated the regional implications of the conflict and, therefore, the preferred option could (should) be a comprehensive approach, including both Syria and the Palestinians, perhaps the Arab League Peace plan.
Discussion of the Lebanese and Syrian scene

In Lebanon the political situation is rapidly changing, tension is extremely high, there is a threat of a civil war. While it is a conciliatory democracy, the anti-Syrian camp has a less than 2/3 majority in the Parliament, but a 2/3 majority in the cabinet. The withdrawal of the Hezbollah and Amal ministers from the government is seen as a signal to Syria and later a possibility will be given for the ministers to come back...

The general assumption is that in the war the US/Israel/West faced the Hezbollah/Syria/Iran axis. Syria still has a lot of connections in Lebanon. Hezbollah, though established by Iran, has in the past years acted on its own. The Lebanese government has tried to convince Hezbollah out of this axis. Hezbollah did not want to go to a full-scale war with Israel, it was preparing for a situation in which the US and Iran confront each other and then Hezbollah would act. Since Hezbollah has been increasingly considered a Shiite political party, its aim was to reestablish its resistance movement identity. The capture and killing of Israeli soldiers fit into this pattern. Hezbollah wanted to repeat the 2004 soldier-prisoner exchange. After the war Hezbollah is exhausted and considers UNIFIL a force to protect them and give them the chance to pull out and re-group north of the Litani river. Yet, it is their biggest interest that the mandate of UNIFIL should not be extended to become a peace enforcement force. If there is another war, it will most probably concentrate on the Bekaa Valley. However, rearming will not be easy: the sea and the air-space is under control, as are the borders. At the same time the Lebanese army is experiencing a boost in popularity. In the next few years 0.5 billion USD will be invested in the armament of the Lebanese army.

Hezbollah started a very successful campaign to regain popularity: they financially helped families to rebuild their houses; started a PR campaign claiming that God was on their side, therefore it was a just war; accused the Lebanese leadership with conspiracy with the US and Israel against the Shiites in Southern Lebanon.

For Syria the priorities are security for the regime; getting international legitimacy; a role for Syria in the region and return of the Golan Heights, which would establish Bashar al-Asad as a leader. While the Syrian military intelligence has an interest in de-stabilizing Lebanon, there are circles that want to negotiate with the US, in this context even the idea of a roadmap was raised. There is a general desire in Syria to avoid – if possible – the disclosure of names involved in the Hariri killing.

Discussion of the international community

With regard to the role of the international community there was a general understanding that without a strong, high level, comprehensive international involvement the conflict cannot be solved. Since the stage-by-stage approach has failed, a package deal should rather be pursued. As to the question who is the international community, the weakness of Europeans and their subordination to the US was mentioned. For Russia, which tries to reassert itself as an international player, the Middle East is a field for economic and military cooperation opportunities, but its own Muslim population is another incentive. The role of the Arab League or the Arab countries as part of the international community was raised. The Arab countries
propose a regional conference with the participation of the Arab states, Israel and the UN SC permanent members. Taking this idea further the possible role of the UN was raised in a complex manner: the UN should make up a commission, which would organize and oversee an international conference, monitor the situation and the implementation on the ground and mandate an international force.

The exact mandate, form, functions and scope of such an international force is as yet unclear, but the Palestinian side would have no objection to accepting such a force as an interim measure. In fact, they have studied such an option carefully in the past two years. Israel for its part has already agreed to third party/international forces involvement at the Refah cross-border point (Egyptians) and UNIFIL-2 (in Lebanon), though not on its own territory. This agreement could be an important precedent.