

“Strategic vision for the political system”

Attendance: (without distinction): Zahi Khoury, George Giacaman, Mohammed Madani, Nabil Kassis, Rima Nazzal, Hisham Kuhail, Kameel Nasser, Ahmad Harb, Azmi Shuaibi, Hanan Ashrawi, Lily Feidy

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Introduction:

This session is a follow-up of the first meeting entitled “The new Palestinian government and its challenges” and was held upon recommendation of the participants. The crisis in the political system because of a lack of vision and clear message at all levels has created a state of chaos. Hence, it seemed imperative to look deeper into this crisis and come out with an integral and complete strategic vision upon which to take action.

With renewed talk about negotiations being restarted between the Palestinians and Israelis under American sponsorship, it is clear that this must be addressed and linked to the regional changes taking place and the political developments in this regard, all of which have a direct impact on the entire political system.

Discussion:

Strategic vision in the political system

The absence of legislative monitoring due to the defunct Legislative Council [because of the internal split] is part of the crisis of the political system. In light of the conflicts of interests between the PA and the PLO and the difficulty in solving the reconciliation file at present in addition to the pressing need for a vision at the national level, there is also a pressing need to combine forces in order to come out with a clear strategy to face internal and external challenges and to take action accordingly.

The crisis in the political system is escalating; the system is unable to change itself and the national project is eroding and unable to lift itself off of the ground. Furthermore, the clear division between the presidency and the prime ministry in addition to the disintegrating PA and the setback in the role of the political and cultural elite and their failure to play their role in invoking the strength of the people, have all played a role in this crisis. This is over and above the PLC, which is not carrying out its role of accountability.

In the recent past, there have been some crucial changes locally and regionally, especially in Egypt after the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood’s regime. This will no doubt have an impact on the reconciliation, which has become even more complicated. Hamas’ position today is weak and will therefore not agree to reconciliation or elections; it did not accept these things even when it

was in a stronger position. Also, it is not willing to wage this battle for fear of failure. Even if Hamas won, it would fear a boycott. Hence, this political polarization between the parties on either side of the split has reinforced a negative image about reconciliation among Palestinians in general.

Furthermore, the American-Israeli alliance and pressure is pushing towards negotiations and away from reconciliation. The question however, is would going to elections without reconciliation serve the Palestinians' higher interests?

In the face of such a situation, the best way to describe what the government is doing is that it is 'dealing' with the situation; it is not even 'managing it'. However, this political vacuum cannot continue without turning into a battle on the ground and any Palestinian Intifada will have ramifications on the entire Arab public. At the same time, it will be a 'gift' to Iran and Syria, according to US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Returning to negotiations

With talk of returning to negotiations with the Israeli side under American sponsorship, important questions should be asked about the goals and justifications for this return given that there has been no change in Israel's policies on the ground. The Israeli government has continued to impose its strategic plans of annexation and expansion in the West Bank, Jerusalem in particular. The negotiations could lead to a mere transitional agreement in a bid to buy time and gain more leverage.

Furthermore, the regional scene is also imposing, whether in Syria and the absence of any prospects for a solution to the conflict, or in Egypt and the escalating crisis there. It remains to be seen how this will affect the negotiating and reconciliation processes in light of the fact that the President is solely in charge of the Palestinian decision making process. There has also been a setback in the influence of Arab countries along with increasing American and Israeli pressure.

Still, we must build up our capacities on the ground both demographically and economically and connect with the Palestinians inside the Green Line. The developments today are merely "good will gestures" the purpose of which is not to reach a final agreement or treaty. Hence, it is imperative to look for ways to add to this strategic "credit" at a time when maintaining the status quo is still being posed as an option.

Because Israel has always insisted on not putting things in writing in all of the negotiations, each new round begins from square one. This is because there is no Israeli leadership that wants to end the Zionist strategic project or find a compromise between the Israeli and Palestinian projects. Hence, the Zionist project is never-ending because it is based on a lack of recognition or acceptance of borders on the land.

In light of these crucial changes and developments, information is still concealed from citizens; there is neither openness nor candidness between the people and the leadership. Rather,

there is a gap between them. Hence, everything is left to speculation – there is no specific media source in spite of the importance of accurate information in the lives of the people. This shows the state of indifference between the PA and public opinion; the people conceded their right to apply pressure and accountability while the leadership disregarded the people's opinions and inputs at a number of levels. This is true for the current government as well; regardless of the legality or lack thereof of the presidency and the government, salaries remain the major preoccupation of the average citizen. The government, furthermore, has taken on a ‘service-oriented’ nature and nothing more and continues to sideline the PLO in terms of political decision making.

Recommendations:

1. Calls for a national dialogue conference to discuss a political line, mechanisms for strategic change and the need for new blood.
2. Reviving civil society, national, private and public institutions in order to breathe life back into public opinion and revive their role towards citizens’ rights and community development.
3. Giving youth the space to exercise their role and take the initiative in creating a clear youth project that fits in line with the national program in order to escape the social exclusion and marginalization they suffer from.
4. The role of the PLO and its factions must be revived and restructured so it can play a role in the Palestinian decision-making process; also the revival of the PLC so it could play its monitoring role even under the circumstances of the current political split.
5. The leadership should not go to negotiations without proper and complete preparation and without having all the information necessary; also there should be a distinction between long-term issues and short term ones.
6. Attention must be given to the issue of Palestinian refugees who fled Syria whether in the context of the right of return or otherwise.
7. Adopting a policy of accumulated achievements in the service of our strategic goal and considering this the criteria for any current action.