



Building Trust, Building Peace: Israel-Palestine and the Importance of Moral Consistency

Keynote address by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, President of the International Peace Institute (IPI)

Excellencies, Dear Friends:

My colleagues at the International Peace Institute (IPI) in New York and I are honored to be participating again in Geneva Peace Week, and we are grateful to the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and to all the partners for the invitation. We at IPI also look forward to hosting you in New York next month for “Geneva Peace Week Meets New York.”

As you have heard already from those who have spoken before me, we have before us, in the form of the latest crisis in the Middle East, a calamity, with events so extreme they leave us all stupefied, racing as they have to the front row of our global attention.

The pain on both sides is deep and real, and such was the shockingly brutal nature of the attack Hamas prosecuted against the Israeli military, and civilians of all ages, on the 7th of October—akin, as Yuval Harari reminds us, to the appalling crimes of the Einsatzgruppen—that it has generated in Israel not just the deepest sadness but also in many quarters a most frightening, almost feral resolve to end the threat from Hamas and make them pay the price.

The price, apparently, is to be understood as carrying interest, because the nature of the Israeli response when it comes to the Palestinian population, the civilian population of Gaza—the almost complete application of collective punishment in the form of a denial of food, water, and medical support and the scale of the killing and destruction of the civilian infrastructure—is nothing short of stunning and callous.

Yes, Netanyahu will destroy Hamas, but the price will also be footed by much of the innocent civilian population of Gaza. And this on top of 16 years of a near total blockade and military occupation of Palestine that, 56 years later, is still running its course and looking more like Apartheid with every passing day. And where, on the West Bank, Palestinians endure a palpable increase in settler attacks and the never-ending, it seems, settlement building.

All this needs to be condemned, and those responsible for violating international humanitarian law and international criminal law—on both sides—should be made to face justice, but justice through law, and only through law, and not a justice handed down by way of the vengeful twisting of a knife, the firing of a gun, the launching of a missile, or the detonating or dropping of a bomb.

I also find it tragic how we have all approached pain and focused on the centrality of “*my pain.*” When I or my community feel pain, I want the world to stand with me, and if others do not—do not side with me, without reservation or qualification—I find it unacceptable. In other words, we have now tribalized pain. And yet how many of us Arabs march or take to the streets for the Uyghur community suffering in Xinjiang or the Tigrayans suffering in Tigray? The unfortunate reality is we all practice double standards—in the Global North and in the Global South.

If we are to build trust and peace, we need to be as morally consistent as we can.

When it comes to the likely geometry of unfolding events, in the next couple of weeks, there are two outcomes: an escalation in Gaza with the violence contained largely there—where the bloodshed will continue to be abominable and thought-defying; or an escalation in Gaza and a broadening of the violence to the neighborhood, with ultimate destinations still unknown.

Fundamentally, what we are dealing with here is a giant coil, with a great deal of potential energy that is unwinding. The potential energy itself is in the form of now almost virulent hatreds, fueled by fear, which should never have been there in the first place yet have amassed over the passing years, which speaks loudly to the modesty of our collective efforts at prevention and peacemaking.

The rate of the unwinding itself—and I am in Geneva, and so I will borrow from horology—ought to be regulated by the escapement wheel—in other words, slowed down by the UN Security Council so the energy is released in small parcels.

We cannot know at this juncture if this is indeed happening, or the proximate causes for why Israel has taken so long to launch its ground offensive. That the US has to constantly defend its backing of Israel in the UN Security Council cannot be comfortable for the US, given the awkward inconsistency arising, for example, on the question of the destruction of civilian infrastructure, condemned in Ukraine but not in Gaza. Meetings of the sort we will be witnessing today in the Security Council could perhaps—and we shall see later today—apply some brakes. Against this, of course, is the fact that Israel has shown no inclination for a humanitarian pause, let alone the cease-fire envisaged in the General Assembly’s recent resolution.

And the broader concern is that after years of there being no criminal accountability for atrocities perpetrated in any direction, and no resumption of serious peace talks involving the Palestinians since 2014, and when these two points are combined with the vetoes cast by permanent members of the UN Security Council, whether over Syria, Ukraine, or Israel-Palestine, which are often deeply corrosive when it comes to the authority of the council, vetoes being the companions of moral inconsistency—all of it leaves the teeth on the escapement virtually worn out. And so, an explosive slippage may well occur, and the UN Security Council could well prove itself incapable of preventing Hezbollah from firing many of the 115,000 rockets it now has, or to stop the settlers from doing something outrageous—wherein an existing momentum is given

further impetus and what we will be faced with is a religious confrontation of an order never experienced before.

When added to the terrible Russian invasion of Ukraine and the long list of other conflicts churning away—which, as was mentioned at the outset of this session, should never be forgotten—the door to still more violent solutions elsewhere swings even wider.

And this slippage of the wheel has of course happened before: Manchuria 1930/1931, Abyssinia 1935, the Spanish Civil War 1936, the Rhineland 1937, the Anschluss and Sudetenland and annexation of Czechoslovakia 1938, and Poland 1939. The League of Nations' Executive Council and General Assembly were powerless to prevent them.

We simply cannot allow it to happen again!

Ultimately, the UN cannot continue to be an organization unconnected to its Charter. There are only two articles of the UN Charter that are foundational: Articles 1 and 2. The rest—critical as they may be—are only supporting articles, and many of those are being observed in the breach only. Two articles. What therefore separates us from a condition of global anarchy are two articles! They must be valued and embraced again. In other words, the teeth on the escapement must be reapplied and, if we manage to survive all of this, the mainspring should not be allowed to store up so much potential energy in the form of hatred and grievance, whether in this crisis or other crises. Easier said than done, I know, but the done part is preferable to the anarchy that will flow from those two articles of the UN Charter being sidelined.

Building trust and building peace can only be achieved if states hold themselves—and expect others do the same—to one set of rules applicable to all. It is that basic and elemental. And peacemaking must become a core part of what a new UN will look like. It has been lost and must now be recovered.

There is much work for us to do and the world is now becoming an open wound. Let us all apply ourselves to closing it together.

I thank you for your attention.