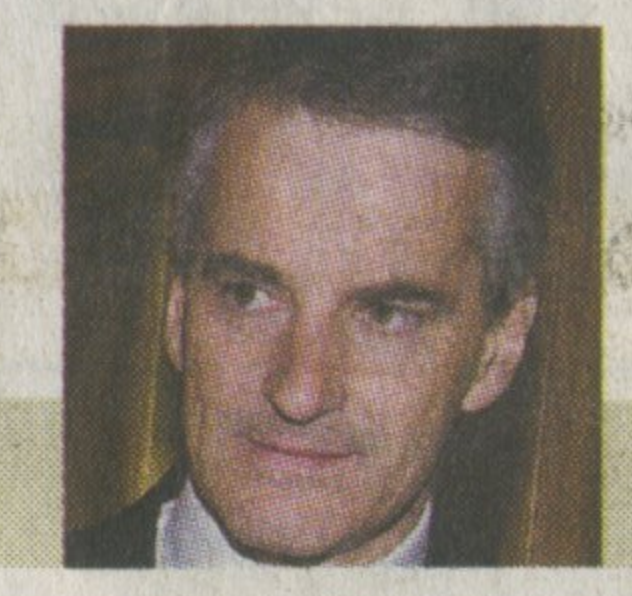


Gulf News 19/6.09

# Palestinian National Authority is key

If the building blocks of the Palestinian state-in-waiting are allowed to fall apart the prospects of peace too will collapse



BY JONAS GAHR STORE Foreign minister of Norway

In Cairo, US President Obama made an eloquent plea for peace in the Middle East, with a two-state solution at its heart. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded last week by endorsing a two-state solution in his speech. Netanyahu also presented demanding and problematic prerequisites for the establishing of a Palestinian state, but the fact remains that the scene is set for political negotiations on a final settlement between Palestinians and Israelis.

Obama has urged Palestinians to focus on what they can build. "The Palestinian [National] Authority must develop its capacity to govern," he said in his speech in Cairo.

The US president is right. But how is such development to occur? That is the question the international donor group known as the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) aimed to answer at a recent high-level meeting in Oslo. We assessed Palestine's dire economic situation, called on donors to live up to their pledges, and demanded that Israel lift restrictions that are crippling the Palestinian economy and the Palestinian National Authority's process of reform.

We know now, as we knew in 1993 when the Oslo Accords were signed, that a strong, viable Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is the foundation upon which a future Palestinian state will stand.

Palestinians are a hardworking people, and once there is an independent Palestinian state that can regulate commerce, have access to markets, and enable investment

and job creation, they will gladly do without foreign aid. But today, still under occupation, the PNA is dependent on outside donors — and the PNA is crumbling before our eyes.

With a projected budget deficit approaching \$400 million (Dh1.4 billion) over the next few months, the PNA is struggling to pay public salaries and cover utility bills.

And while it may be too soon to speak of donor fatigue, there is tangible donor frustration as the governance institutions we've worked so hard to build up are literally torn down in military operations in Gaza and the West Bank since 2000.

Make no mistake: If the building blocks of the Palestinian state-in-waiting are allowed to fall apart, the prospects for peace will collapse, too.

The billions of assistance dollars provided over the years since the Oslo Accords were intended to fortify the Palestinian economy and bolster a Palestinian state, not to keep the Palestinian territory's governing institutions on life support.

What must be done to save the PNA, and who must be held accountable? We need a new approach from every stakeholder in the peace process to rejuvenate commitment to a two-state solution and reverse the downward spiral.

From Israel, we need good faith. That means living up to the road map obligations, including a total freeze on colony construction

— provocative outposts on occupied land — and, just as essential, a readiness to engage in negotiations on a two-state solution.

Israel must also abide by its pledge to lift the blockade on Gaza. As long as the current conditions persist, there can be no economic development, let alone security and peace. The only local growth-industries will be tunnel trafficking and extremism.

From the Palestinians, we need unity of purpose and enhancement of security throughout occupied territories. The competing Palestinian factions must bridge the river of mistrust between them. Only a unified Palestinian national movement, ready to respect international norms, can credibly negotiate and implement a final status agreement with Israel.

From the international community, we need resolve — and we need pressure.

Western and Arab donors alike must urgently honour their past financial commitments. So far this year, international donors have cut their contributions to the PNA by as much as half compared with 2008. While we all agree on the imperative of Palestinian reconciliation, we must not hold our assistance pledges hostage in the meantime — for there will be nothing left to reconcile if the PNA falls apart.

The AHLC is the only body left that can facilitate the required cooperation among these stakeholders. For despite its name, the AHLC is anything but ad hoc: It is the last standing pillar of the Oslo peacemaking architecture that has enabled dialogue among the Israelis, Palestinians, and their international partners through all the ups and downs of the past 16 years.

Our goal remains unchanged: a Palestinian state, living side by side with Israel, both peoples secure and at peace. But the largest obstacle is unchanged as well: a crippling lack of trust.

And time is running out. If the PNA dies, there will be no second chance. Let the clarion call go forth from Oslo: Support the PNA now, or risk all prospects for peace.

— Christian Science Monitor



Illustration: NIÑO JOSE HEREDIA/©Gulf News