

PLO: Hopes Deferred, Hopes Renewed

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

(Chicago) - The Palestine Liberation Organization's Representative to the US, Afif Safieh spoke about "Hopes Deferred, Hopes Renewed" as part of a benefit dinner for North Park University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies.

For many years the campus has organized educational events about the Middle East, with a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From the Palestinian perspective, Safieh gave a historic overview of the conflict, and he encouraged the audience to continue their soul-searching regarding the US role in the conflict.

"I believe we all today have to respect the Palestinian people," Safieh said. "Their collective, courage capacity for enduring pain and suffering is beyond description."

Palestinians have been living under Israeli military occupation for almost 40 years. This occupation is considered "the longest military occupation in contemporary history," with 80 per cent of the Palestinian population knowing life only under occupation. "Most of our society has known injustice and oppression," he added.

According to Safieh there are an estimated 650 Israeli military checkpoints, and Palestinians lose approximately eight million working hours every day as a result of the delays at these checkpoints. Delays at border crossings have prevented Palestinian fruits and vegetables to reach their destinations, thereby rotting economic development within Palestinian society.

Although Israel transferred 8000 Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank in August 2005, Israeli occupation of Gaza today prevents Palestinians from using the air space and fishing in the water.

On March 17, 2007 the Palestinian Legislative Council announced the Palestinian National Unity Government - after a tumultuous 12 months. Safieh explained that the cohabitation of two different majorities was expressed in two different elections: the presidential elections in January 2005 and the legislative elections in January 2006. Half the members of the National Coalition Government are non-Hamas.

How this elected government will work together and represent Palestinian society is one of the challenges Palestinians face. Safieh pointed out that the evolution of political Islam in the Palestine model will be determined in the months ahead. Will political Islam in Palestine grow through constitutional democracy and pluralism? Also, will the future have diplomatic opportunities for historic peace compromises between Israelis and Palestinians?

"We passed through a difficult 12 months," Safieh said, "but today I am happy to report to you we have a National Coalition Government that represents 95 per cent of our electorate

and again we extended our hand of peace.”

According to Safieh just two weeks ago the Palestinian Unity Government offered Israel a bilateral total ceasefire involving the Gaza Strip, West Bank and Israel. Does Israeli leadership accept this Palestinian collective offer? Now, the Palestinians are waiting for the international community to trigger a diplomatic entity.

Is their political will for peace?

For the international community, the Quartet (EU, UN, US and Russia) is their political clarity as to their role and willingness in the peace process? Moreover, what is the role of Arab leaders and the Arab Quartet? This week’s Arab Summit and the revival of the Arab Peace Initiative (established in Beirut in March 2002) may shed more light on these diplomatic proposals and issues.

One of the most prominent issues of contention is the 1967 borders. Here is a broad summary: Israelis want to keep the Palestinian territory they occupied in 1967 and expanded with Israeli settlements. They say it is for security reasons and they continue expanding Israeli settlements around Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank today. The Palestinians want Israel to end the occupation and create a viable, Palestinian State based on pre-67 borders, meaning Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank (air space and water included.) This state would be 22 per cent of historic Palestine and would require Israel to withdraw its settlements from Palestinian Territory.

Safieh pointed out that Israel’s wall separates Palestinians from Palestinians by dividing Palestinian neighborhoods, villages, farmland, and wells from farmland. On several occasions he made reference to Former President Jimmy Carter’s latest book, *Peace Not Apartheid*.

Some highlights from Safieh’s lecture:

He believes the perpetuation of the conflict is not due to [Arab objection of Israeli existence but is due to Israeli rejection of Arab acceptance](#).

The Arabs are not questioning Israel’s existence but Israel’s expansion. How committed is America – politically and financially – to Israel’s continued expansion?

He asked: is the Quartet a Quartet or a Onetet? Safieh believes the Europeans are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the US superpower because it aligns itself with one belligerent player (Israel), which aggravates all the players in that region. He added that America’s decisive role is indispensable.

He believes the American Jewish community is a pluralist community with 70 per cent of the community in favor of a two-state solution. In Washington he sees many respected Jewish voices challenging The American Israel Public Affairs Committee by saying AIPAC does not have the monopoly of expressing the American Jewish community.

Finally, the unresolved nature of the Palestinian problem put America on a collision course with the Arab world by aligning with the Israeli preference. He believes America has been complacent in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.

“We are not inviting (the US) to sacrifice your traditional friends Israel, but we are offering

you as a friend Palestine.”

Journalist Sonia Nettnin writes about social, political, economic, and cultural issues. Her focus is the Middle East.

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