

Beyond Zionism: Hope for Freedom & Democracy in Palestine/Israel

Institute of International Relations, Prague

Speaker: *Miko Peled, an Israeli writer and a peace activist, the author of *The General's Son – Journey of an Israeli in Palestine* (2012).*

Chair: *Pavel Barša, Researcher at the Institute of International Relations and Professor at Charles University*

Discussant: *Tomáš Kraus, Executive Director, Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic*

Pavel Barša opened the floor. He presented the topic of this session and introduced Miko Peled as an activist with a very personal perspective. Mr. Barša stressed the importance of the Israel/Palestine issue. He talked about Miko Peled's book *The General's Son – Journey of an Israeli in Palestine*, which contains both stories about the author's family and discussions of important political affairs.

Mr. Barša also introduced the discussant of the lecture – Tomáš Kraus, who is the Executive Director of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic and who was to add another point of view to the discussion of the Israel/Palestine issue.

Miko Peled started his speech by expressing his appreciation for the high amount of interest in this topic. He said that his perspective was considered to be radical, especially in Central Europe. Mr. Peled commented also on the question of the peace process in the Israel/Palestine issue. According to him, the plan for the peace process was not properly designed and it will not solve the problem of Palestine. To resolve this problem it is necessary to respect human rights, and to bring freedom and democracy to Palestine. That is what he sees behind the topic of the lecture – “Beyond Zionism”. Discussing the future of Palestine, Mr. Peled said that in the situation of Palestine, there are three people talking about land which has no representative here. He pointed out that this is quite typical. It was not the Palestinians who decided to give a part of their own land to the Jews, and it is not Palestinians who are discussing the future of Palestine.

The reality in Israel/Palestine is quite confusing now. The peace process looks like Europeans and Americans trying to do something about this issue and solve it but they are going in the wrong direction. The only way to resolve this whole issue, according to Mr. Peled, is to be critical of Israel and Zionism. Miko Peled talked about the claim that criticizing Israel means being anti-Semitic. He considers it as an absolutely absurd claim because criticizing Israel is about criticizing specific issues (thousands of political prisoners, discrimination, access to water, and different rights for Israelis and Palestinians). According to Mr. Peled, there is no way for Israel to argue for its own legitimacy.

He said that the peace talks are just a “facade” that makes it appear as if something is being done in regard to the issue. Mr. Peled stressed again that the country of Israel/Palestine cannot be understood as two separate states. It is just one state with two names. To resolve this issue freedom and democracy are necessary.

Miko Peled then went back to the roots of the whole conflict and attempted to explain them. He mentioned the UN Resolution on the Partition of Palestine. The Palestinians (the natives) got the smaller part of the country in the partition. Thus, since the date of the resolution, two absolutely different histories have existed in Israel/Palestine. In the “Western” one, Palestine accepted this partition of the Jewish homeland. Later the Arabs attacked, but fortunately the Zionist army was prepared, it won and Israel could be established. Mr. Peled considers this story as absolutely wonderful, romantic and idealistic but with some inaccuracies in its details. There were almost no Arab armies in those days and there was definitely no Palestinian army, so who were these attackers?

The second history says that Zionists started the conflict with their own attack and in the following 12 months they conducted massive terrorist attacks with the aim to complete the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and steal the land. During those 12 months, towns were burned, people were forced into exile and the country was conquered. And thus Israel was established. This story is not so romantic but these pieces fit the puzzle.

Mr. Peled stressed that Palestine is not just West Bank and Gaza. The establishing of Israel was considered as a heroic event but for Palestinians it was the start of a catastrophic process. This process began in 1947/1948 and has lasted until today. Currently over 4 million Palestinians live in refugee camps in very bad living conditions.

Miko Peled also talked about his book. The family history contained in it is related to the establishing of Israel and Zionism, and also to the story of Palestine. He mentioned the story of his mother and her experience in Jerusalem in 1948. In those times the people who had lived there were forced to leave their homes. These homes, which were very nice and had desirable locations, were then offered to Israeli families, even though sometimes there was still a cup of hot coffee on the table. Mr Peled's mother refused such a flat and even today she comments the decision with the same words that she used much earlier: "How could I possibly take the home of another mother?"

He also mentioned a certain Zionist narrative about the "homeland". In this narrative the country is whole for the Jews but they agreed with the partition and the sharing of the land with Arabs. However, even though the Jews asked the Arabs to stay, they left and abandoned their houses. So there was nothing wrong with giving those empty houses to people who needed them. There was no moral dilemma. These Zionist narratives were also used for explaining the Six Days War as a pre-emptive attack because Israel was faced with an existential threat. But the Arab army was not prepared for the war against Israel, as was admitted even by the Israeli generals themselves in the material from their meetings.

In 1967 Israel created, in fact, a single state with exclusive rights for Jewish people. After taking the West Bank, Palestinians were forced into exile. It was called "finishing the job". According to Miko Peled, the idea of the two-state solution ended in 1967.

Mr. Peled also mentioned his father's story. Mattityahu Peled belonged to the General Staff during the Six Days War. He tried to solve the Palestinian question immediately after this war. He called for an end of the occupation because he felt that it would not bring peace. His aim was to maintain the stability of the state. This idea of respecting the equal rights of Palestinians is still being promoted.

Miko Peled then talked about the question whether Israel really wanted peace or not. From every side we can hear the argument that Israel wants peace and is open to peace processes but the Palestinians are terrorists. In mid-1970s an organisation for promoting the idea of peace and the two-state solution with equal rights for all was founded in Israel. After its foundation the organisation was contacted by the PLO, which was willing to start a discussion. Some meetings between the two sides took place, but in the 1980s these meetings were proclaimed to be illegal.

In the early 1990s the Oslo peace process began. The corresponding agreement between the two sides was signed with a hope for change in a new era. But there was no chance to create a new Palestine in the West Bank. In Oslo it was presumed that the final agreement would be signed in five years. In 2000 U.S. President Bill Clinton decided to close the deal and brought the parties to Camp David for this purpose. But the negotiations were not successful, and he blamed Palestine for the failure of the negotiations. In reality, the concession made by Yasser Arafat was not considered to be enough. On the other hand, the Israelis started to take more and more Palestinian land and increasingly reduce the rights for Palestinians, and they were successful in this.

Mr. Peled also talked about the issue of Palestinian political prisoners who are currently held in Israeli jails. The majority of these prisoners have not been charged with committing an act of violence. They are actually political prisoners because they fought for freedom and justice. Miko Peled mentioned, in connection to this case, the UN Resolution 3103 about the basic principles of the legal status of combatants struggling against colonial and alien domination and racist regimes. The chance to end the resistance is always in the hands of the oppressor who occupies the territory. When small states are oppressed by big ones, do they have any option besides terror?

Then returning to the stories of his family, Mr. Peled talked about the death of his sister. She was killed by a suicide bomber when she was 13. Reporters from the whole world came to ask who was responsible and how they would be punished. However, the family rejected any words about revenge in this case; they felt that it made no sense to kill people in response to somebody's death.

Miko Peled then spoke of the time when he joined a Jewish-Palestinian discussion group in San Diego. This was the first time that Palestinians had equal rights in terms of speaking about the conflict. Here he realized that there was another history and another narrative that were more real than the ones he previously knew. During this discussion process, there was more trust between the two sides, and the barriers started to fall.

Mr. Peled stressed that the question whether Israel/Palestine is one or two states is not relevant. The real question is only about the nature of the single state. Now we can either maintain the current situation of one state with exclusive rights for the Jewish population or struggle for one democratic state with equal rights for all of its inhabitants.

He ended his speech with summing up what it means to “support Israel”. According to Mr. Peled it means supporting a country with racist laws, a military regime, thousands of political prisoners and ongoing violence. However, he said that there is still a chance to change it. The hope is beyond Zionism. It is necessary for the Jews to respect other nations living in the same land, accept the coexistence of the different nationalities and provide equal rights for all. There is actually a bigger chance of transforming the state into a democracy in the Israeli case than there was in the case of South Africa in the 1990s. The societies in Israel/Palestine are actually quite similar to those in South Africa. But the only way for the peace process to be successful is by struggling for equal rights and putting an end to Zionism.

Mr. Peled then asked everybody to be an activist, and to be a part of this, because we are all going to be judges in this issue.

Tomáš Kraus started his part of lecture by agreeing that there is a historical paradox in the sense that two similar communities are now standing against each other. Mr. Kraus also agreed that the whole issue is about human rights and democracy.

On the other hand, though, Mr. Kraus had problem with Peled’s conception of Zionism. According to Tomáš Kraus, Zionism was a Jewish emancipating movement; and the idea of coming back to Palestine was just one part of it. He said that new rules and challenges were set up following important historical events such as the two World Wars and the establishment of the Soviet Union.

Mr. Kraus refused to label Zionism as something that is very bad. He said that only some extreme products could be considered to be very bad. He also disagreed with the idea of Peled’s conclusion because he could not imagine how activists would contribute to a one state solution in the current situation. He ended his presentation with the idea that the logical goal of all is to live in peace. For him the question is how to get out of the current situation, which was mainly caused by the political situation supported by the superpowers.

Pavel Barša then opened the floor for discussion.

DISCUSSION

The first question went to Tomáš Kraus. The question was related to the main role of the superpowers in the Israel/Palestine issue, and in connection with this, it was mentioned that in the 1950s Israel had to fight to be the number one Middle Eastern state for the USA instead

of Egypt. **Tomáš Kraus** reminded the audience that at the very beginning Zionism was a leftist movement supported by the Soviet Union that tried to make Israel a communist state. The Soviets failed in this pursuit in the 1950s but we can see that the only real communism in the world is in the kibbutzim in Israel. **Miko Peled** just mentioned that the Zionist lobby had campaigned heavily for the support of the USA and the UK. According to him, Zionism created the idea of the Jews as a nation. In relation to this, Mr. Peled did not agree with the claim that Zionism is a neutral movement. The Palestinian land was stolen and given to the European Jews but this act did not have widespread Jewish support. **Tomáš Kraus** ended the responses to the first question by saying that the historical facts can be interpreted in different ways, and by discussing the definition of anti-Semitism.

The second commentator started his question by pointing out that all this is a very painful issue. Long discussions with different interpretations about the origins of the dispute can be held for years without finding a consensus. He asked the panel to answer the question of how to approach the current situation and how to get out of it. He also expressed his interest in the introduction by Pavel Barša about the hopeless attempt at a two-state solution.

The second commentator said that he considered himself as a two-state solution supporter but he agreed that now this solution is less and less possible. The idea of one democratic state with equal rights for all is a somewhat romantic and idealistic solution for him; he said that he cannot see how one can perceive the individual steps towards it. He stressed that the term “equal rights” could be a big problem because there is an asymmetric situation. He ended his comment with a question to Miko Peled: whether he could say on what he based the hope that the democratic idea is feasible and contrast it with the hopeless process of two states. **Miko Peled** started his answer by claiming that without idealism the world would be sad. According to Mr. Peled there are more reasons why the two-state solution is not possible. One of them is that it is against the idea of Zionism.

Miko Peled also reacted to the demographic issue by saying that there is no longer a Jewish majority in the region. He talked about the current reality, which is not sustainable, and he also pointed out that Gaza on its own cannot be a security threat to Israel but it is a threat to the legitimacy of Zionism. Mr. Peled repeated the claim that it is Zionism in its essence that makes the peace process impossible. To the question about where the hope is, Miko Peled said that he sees the hope in the current unsustainable situation, which is discriminative against non-Jews.

The third question was related to Miko Peled's claim that the only problem in this situation is the Zionist regime. The question was who is responsible for the rockets from Gaza. **Miko Peled** repeated that the Palestinian resistance had unarmed been for a long time but there are also aspects in which it is armed. He stressed that it is absurd to expect that people will be living in conditions such as those in Gaza without any armed resistance. But still Gaza is not a security threat to Israel; it is just a threat to its legitimacy. **Tomáš Kraus** then added a question: What is Miko Peled's opinion on the withdrawal from Gaza? **Mr. Peled** said that there is no withdrawal from Gaza. Ariel Sharon just needed to get the settlers out.

The next question was related to the current situation, which is very complicated. Israel is the receiver of a huge amount of U.S. help. The commentator stressed the asymmetry of the discussions; the parties are not equal because Palestine has nothing to offer. The question was whether the solution had to come from inside Israel or from Jews living all over the world, or whether another state should participate in it. What can we do to solve it? **Miko Peled** pointed out that the position of the USA is not the same as its interest. Israel is strong and very influential. But there exists a boycott of everything what is officially Israeli in the USA and also support for Palestine among American students and churches. The discussion is about equal rights, democracy and freedom. The principles of the Palestinian resistance are freedom and non-violence. The leadership of this resistance is very impressive and cannot be defeated.

Tomáš Kraus reacted to the words about Zionism by saying that it is an idea full of stereotypes and clichés. According to Mr. Kraus we just have the impression that Israel controls or influences the media and power. He posed the question whether such a view of Israel and/or Zionism is not a case of the same kind of "brainwashing" that Miko Peled said is used to support Zionism.

The next commentator stressed the importance of the necessity of a democratic state. She pointed out that to make this solution possible it is necessary to promote principles of democracy and also democratic thinking not only in Israel but also in Palestine. According to her, we cannot take the occupation and oppression as an excuse. For the future it is very important to promote democratic principles in Israel and Palestine too. **Tomáš Kraus** mentioned a case in which the EU gave Palestine money for education, and in the Palestinian textbook there were stereotypes about Jews. **Miko Peled** then added some details about the Palestinian education system.

The second to last commentator shared the optimism about the prospects of a democratic state but said that the current situation is far from such a vision of the future. And also the people are depressed about the situation. He said he remembered that throughout history the people of Israel and Palestine were living together and had very good relations with each other. The current situation is very complicated; Israel is a democratic state but only for the Jews. But everybody would be happy to have a solution to the conflict.

And the last commentator stressed the need for concrete solutions to problems such as torture or dignity. Such solutions should be the steps to democracy. **Miko Peled** agreed with this comment.

Pavel Barša then ended the lecture by thanking everybody for coming.