

# THE ROLE OF THIRD PARTIES

Speech delivered by Afif Safieh at the Annual Dinner, Medical Aid for Palistinians,  
Park Lane Hotel, London on Thursday May 23, 1996.

The keynote speaker was Secretary of State  
the Rt. Hon. Malcolm Rifkind MP.

Secretary of State  
Excellencies  
My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a privilege for me to be invited to speak again at MAP's annual dinner. A very successful British-Palestinian charity, to us all, MAP is a constant reminder that politics is not only about power but mainly about people. Throughout the years, your annual gathering has undeniably become a major social event for the Arab community in London and for their British friends. Our presence here tonight is a tribute to the remarkable work undertaken by MAP's dedicated staff and volunteers. Allow me today to single out one individual: the late Dr Riad Khreishi. Riad incarnated MAP's spirit and philosophy. His love and devotion for his country and his community were unparalleled and I will always regret that my arrival in London coincided with his physical decline depriving me prematurely of his valuable advice and guidance. I can still remember how during his last weeks he would frequently drag himself painfully to my office to share with me in his own way, his political testament of lessons drawn from his active and eventful life.

Today, all our wishes for success go to Saida Nuseibeh and I am fully confident that she will be faithful to a distinguished and long family tradition in public service.

Ladies and Gentlemen, today's event takes place a few weeks after the outrageous aggression against the Lebanese people, a few days before the Israeli general elections, 10 days before President Yasser Arafat's visit to the United Kingdom, and a few weeks before restarting decisive negotiations on final status.

For us, Arabs, there will always be "before Qana" and an "after Qana". From 1948 until April 1996, Arab casualties were at best simply figures, just numbers that would even sometimes go unmentioned as though they were faceless, nameless, fatherless, motherless, childless . . . worthless. Whether there is one mankind or different kinds of men and women seems to be an issue that has not yet received an adequate answer. In interviews with the Israeli weekly, Kol Ha'ir, Israeli soldiers were quoted saying that they had no regrets over killing more than 100 civilians sheltering in a United Nations base because the dead, they said, "were just a bunch of Arabs". To raise morale apparently, a commander gathered his troops after the shelling and told them "anyway

there are millions of them”, them being “Arabushim”, a Hebrew derogatory term which, fortunately has no English equivalent.

How often have we heard: “this time Israel has shot itself in the foot?” But it seems that Israel has many more than two feet to shoot at since miraculously it keeps getting away with almost anything.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we should spare no effort in conveying the message that we are definitely not children of a lesser God and that our tears and blood do also count.

In the midst of horror in Lebanon, Prime Minister Shimon Peres, paradoxically our partner in peace, in his attempt to prove to the Israeli electorate that he is not unlike his predecessor Rabin, he started to resemble General Sharon. One is tempted to say “with a dove like that, who needs hawks”. If I speak with passion it is because we, the Palestinians, have a special bond with the Lebanese people. We are greatly indebted to Lebanon for having carried with us the burden of our national resurrection.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have no doubt that the Israeli political class left, right and centre – and the Israeli public at large – aspire to achieve peace, yet it seems to me that they still, to varying degrees wish it to be a reflection of Israeli intransigence. American alignment, European abdication, Russian decline, Arab impotence and, as a result . . . Palestinian resignation. How this peace is expected to be lasting, durable, final permanent, I have difficulties to comprehend. And I dare not utter the words brave, honourable, equitable, just, or even just acceptable.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Israel will be ill-advised if it were to confuse Palestinian realism with resignation and it is high time that the Israeli society underwent a much-needed soul-searching exercise, an ethical debate revolving around “what price Israel?” – about the human and political cost paid by us the Palestinian people, individually and collectively since four generations.

Israel was supposed to be an answer to what was called the “Jewish question”. As a result we became the Palestinian question, a problem that awaits an equitable and satisfactory answer. I have not despaired yet that one day, hopefully soon, our people will hear expressions of remorse that will help pave the way for authentic reconciliation. Such an ethical undertaking seems indispensable if we are to move away from power politics, military preponderance and regional hegemony.

Such a soul-searching exercise is today possible because Israel is in a strategically comfortable situation. It enjoys nuclear monopoly in the area with all that this exclusivity implies. It has overwhelming conventional superiority vis-a vis any possible Arab coalition. And thirdly it enjoys an “unwritten alliance” with the only remaining superpower which seems to be more advantageous than a formal written alliance since it does no require responsible behaviour from the junior partner that can freely operate as an “undisciplined ally”.

Ladies and Gentlemen, a sovereign independent state is undeniably a Palestinian right. It is also an Israeli duty, an Israeli moral obligation, a Jewish ethical responsibility.

Today the electoral victory of Shimon Peres seems to be an international concern. To that effect Peres was offered a spectacular summit in Sharm El-Sheikh which was diverted and hijacked from its initial purpose. He was offered excessive understanding towards the multiple closures inflicted on Palestinian areas literally strangulating the society and the economy. He was offered embarrassed silence during the initial phases of aggression on Lebanon and, in spite of all that, he was offered a warm reception at the White House where . . . shared values were again stressed. Some might even

interpret my heavy-handed criticism of Peres as a modest but subtle contribution to help him rally right-wing undecided voters.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have my doubts on whether a policy aiming only at helping Peres translates necessarily in support of the peace we all aspire to see achieved. Shimon Peres has a tendency to believe that he can set the parameters of the possible and of the permissible. The transitional agreements were accepted only because of their temporary nature. I hope that after Israeli elections negotiations on final status will start in a new mood, a new environment, a new mentality.

I personally believe that the best way, today, to support the peace process is to have major actors of our contemporary international system send an unequivocal, unambiguous message to Israeli public opinion, preferably now in an election period, that whoever they elect on May 29 is expected to comply with certain internationally accepted principles and abide by internationally adopted resolutions. Such an international attitude will help liberate the Israeli political class from a hostage situation vis-a vis a public opinion that they helped fanatise throughout the last decades. In that way, the Israeli voters will express their preference on May 29 on the basis of the experience or inexperience of the candidates, their charisma or its absence and socio-economic policies and not on how much land and peace they are willing to condescendingly restore to their legitimate owners. Peace is too important to be left to the Israelis alone to decide upon . The “Oslo Channel” should encourage external actors for a more decisive, visible and assertive role. If the Oslo connection has not yet put Palestine fully on the map, it has, for sure, put . . . Norway on the map.

Secretary of State, we feel privileged to have you among us today. For us Palestinians, the United Kingdom is a very important interlocutor. You were the Mandatory Power in Palestine present, to say the least, at the creation of the Palestinian problem. You are a permanent member of the Security Council of the UN and we are not resigned to its total absence in our quest for peace. You are a major pillar of the European Union and enjoy special relations with Washington where you have often played the role of an inspiring Athens to what seems frequently as an unsophisticated contemporary Rome.

With all these factors in mind, President Yasser Arafat will come to London early next month.

Secretary of State, we have a dream. A dream only you can make come true. A dream of a Rifkind Declaration . A Declaration that takes the lead in spelling out support for Palestinian aspirations and Palestinian rights. A Declaration that addresses the principles, conditions and contours of the desirable peace.

I know, some sceptics, some cynics, might say that Britain in this *fin de siecle* is not what it used to be at the turn of the century, but I am sure that British public opinion will “view with favour” that Britain again “punches above its weight”.