

Madrid +15 Must Lead To a New Peace Plan

Brig. Gen. Yossi Ben Ari (res.) was a participant in the Madrid +15 Conference. He served in the Israeli Defense Forces as a senior military intelligence officer, and is a former co-director of the Strategic Affairs Unit of IPCRI (Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information).

EIR: Could you please tell us the significance of the Madrid +15 meeting?

Ben Ari: I think the most important outcome of this meeting was a common agreement among all participants—the Israelis, Arabs, Europeans, Americans, and other participants—that as a next step, a core group or a steering committee should be organized to push forward a new peace plan based on the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002.

It seems to me that there is significant intent and sufficient background to make progress, at least within this framework, which, to my understanding, is a unique one. It's true that most participants were not formal representatives of their governments; Yet, in the case of the Arab members, most probably they are guided, instructed by the decision-makers in their countries, who knew of this initiative and gave a hand in supporting it.

The Europeans, to my understanding, will take the opportunity and, in the absence of a United States formal representation, will take the lead in initiating something new. As for the Israelis, it is a bit different because they were not a homogeneous group which shared common political ideas. As they declared, they represented only themselves, and none of them enjoyed the support of the Israeli government or the Israeli Prime Minister. Yet, the common agreement among the Israeli participants, that efforts should go ahead on the basis of the Arab initiative, represents and reflects, to my understanding, the basic will of a large part of the Israeli people.

Now, I believe if this steering committee moves fast, gets down to work, and comes up in a short period of time with a coherent peace plan, there's a good chance of getting all the governments involved in action to turn this civil society initiative into a Track I conference, a real Madrid II-type meeting, where governments are directly involved and interested in accomplishing a comprehensive peace agreement.

Although the American Administration today is not interested in such an initiative, I believe that if there is a coherent peace plan, a well-cooked dish, so to speak, that would be



Courtesy of Yossi Ben-Ari

Yossi Ben Ari thinks that if a core group from the Madrid conference organizes a new peace plan based on the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, other governments would support such a comprehensive plan, making it difficult for President Bush to ignore it.

delivered to the White House, it would be very difficult for President Bush to ignore it. So I believe there are chances for progress. It just depends on how quickly the steering committee will be organized, and how determined they will be in moving things forward. The European Union must lead such an initiative and get the support of all other participants. I am optimistic.

EIR: As you know there is a big fight between Congress and the Bush Administration over the Baker-Hamilton report to end the war in Iraq, through a comprehensive regional political diplomatic effort that seeks to resolve not just the Iraq problem, but the Arab-Israeli conflict as well. It seems to me that a new peace plan that could come out of Madrid +15 could positively impact that debate. What is your view?

Ben Ari: Baker was invited to take part in the meeting last week, but unfortunately could not make it. Not surprisingly, the conclusions which came out of Madrid +15 were quite similar to those of the Baker-Hamilton report, especially the need to replace the violence with the negotiating tables.

Now, in answer to your question: If the steering committee will come up soon with a coherent, comprehensive peace plan that would be presented to the American Administration, Congress, and public, I think it would inflame even deeper the debate that already exists there. I am not sure it's the right thing to do. If there's a real will and interest to implement such a plan, it must be presented, first of all, to President Bush in a discreet way; otherwise he would ignore it, as he did with the Baker-Hamilton report. The Congress and the American public should be involved only later.

EIR: Were the tensions concerning Iran taken up at the conference? There is great concern that Bush will attack Iran.

Ben Ari: It came up here and there. Some participants suggested that attention should be paid to Iran, which is an important component of the Middle East conflict, if not immediately, then later.