

Russia and the Middle East

A. Saltanov

***Q:** Aleksandr Vladimirovich, allow me to begin our conversation with a topic that comes up as soon as the Middle East issue is raised. What is the status of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process? How effective is the “road map” and what part of the road has already been covered?*

A: Let me start with the “road map.” It is a real legal document approved by a UN Security Council resolution and it underlies all practical steps aimed at achieving a peace settlement in the Middle East. This primarily refers to the search for a solution to a key issue – i.e., the Palestinian issue, which is the root cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the “road map” also provides, at subsequent stages, for a way toward a comprehensive solution to this complex problem.

The “road map” is not a document specified by degrees, minutes and seconds. It is, rather, an outline of the stages that should be given special attention in the course of the negotiating process. The “road map” does not spell out concrete solutions. It is a document that lays the groundwork for negotiations, because all issues should be addressed – and this is a generally accepted view – in the framework of the negotiating process.

Unfortunately, it has to be said that very little of it has been fulfilled. I would even say, very little with regard to the first stage outlined in the “road map.” This refers to an array of measures designed to facilitate the negotiating process as such. For example, the Palestinians are to fulfill all obligations concerning security arrangements, the reorganization of the Palestinian security forces, and, naturally, ensuring security for Israel. Considerable efforts have been made and continue to be made in this respect, which is acknowledged practically by all parties con-

Aleksandr Saltanov, RF Deputy Foreign Minister, special representative of the Russian president on the Middle East, has been interviewed by *International Affairs*’ Editor-in-Chief **Armen Oganesyan**.

cerned.

There is another important factor here – the termination of Israeli settlement activity on occupied Palestinian territories. Although it was not a precondition for negotiations, the issue of settlements – due to the situation on the ground – has become a serious impediment to the Palestinians and Israelis entering into a direct dialogue, into direct negotiations. That is why the UN secretary general, Russia and a number of our partners express deep concern in connection with the decision by the Jerusalem city planning committee with regard to building new facilities in the occupied part of that city.

To repeat, a large number of obstacles have arisen along the path of restoring the negotiating process. The history of the Middle East shows that as soon as the negotiating process, the peace process stops, other, disturbing factors come into play, which often lead to serious instability in the region. This is why we believe that no effort should be spared to restore direct dialogue between the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the Israeli government. This situation regrettably does not allow us to speak about even a tentative time frame for holding a Moscow conference on the Middle East. The need for it is generally recognized by the parties directly involved in the process, our “quartet” partners, and the international community as a whole. However, we – and not only we – act on the assumption that a conference for the sake of a conference is unnecessary. Furthermore, it could even be counterproductive to hold large-scale international meetings that produce no results.

Q: It is known that there is no consensus either in Palestinian or Israeli society over ways of resolving the conflict. Do these circumstances complicate the efforts by international and Russian diplomacy?

A: They certainly do. To minimize these complications, Russia supports the restoration of Palestinian unity and the signing of an Egypt-drafted agreement on inter-Palestinian conciliation. For our part, we are helping Egypt as a state that is playing a key role in resolving this issue. As you know, we also have contacts with Hamas, and we use them to convince the leaders of that movement as to the need to rise above any considerations that do not lead to the fulfillment of the genuine, legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people. Needless to say, we are in close contact with all political parties involved since we believe that without Palestinian unity on a platform responding to the legitimate interests of

the Palestinian people and the needs of the peace process as such, it is very difficult to speak about finalizing the status of the Palestinians.

Q: One of the foreign policy priorities declared by U.S. President B. Obama's administration is the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the handover of power to a democratic Iraqi government. What is the situation in that respect?

The history of the Middle East shows that as soon as the negotiating process, the peace process stops, other, disturbing factors come into play, which often lead to serious instability in the region.

A: We can say that the U.S. administration is already moving toward the goals it has declared. The Agreement on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq has been signed. A part of this agreement is already being implemented. U.S. troops are leaving city streets and redeploying to special bases. That has already been done. A significant share of responsibility for security in Iraq has been transferred to the Iraqi government and its security forces. I can even provide personal testimony to that effect because I recently visited Baghdad and saw that the streets of the capital city are completely controlled by Iraqi military units. But of course that is only a beginning. A great deal has yet to be done to consolidate the potential of Iraq's security and defense forces and continue the process of the formation of national power structures. Parliamentary elections have been set for January 2010. As a result of these elections, a new government will be formed. These are in fact elements of the political process that should lead to the full restoration of Iraqi statehood and national control across the entire Iraqi territory. The recent terrorist acts in the streets of the capital and other cities show that the underground, opposed to the process of stabilization and normalization in Iraq, is still active. It has substantial capabilities to carry out attacks time and again.

Q: What is your view of the development of Russian-Iraqi relations in general and cooperation in the energy and oil sectors in particular?

A: We hope that our traditionally friendly relations with Iraq will continue to develop. These friendly relations go back decades, if not more. They

existed even before Saddam Hussein. We are sure that they will develop with the present, new Iraq for the benefit for both countries and both nations. It would probably be very difficult to destroy these traditional ties. Quite a few major facilities – industrial, agricultural and energy – have been built in Iraq with our assistance.

For the most part, our companies in Iraq operate in a sector that is vital for Iraq – energy, the power sector. Russian companies were present there both during the difficult times of war and the past several years. A priority today is to restore a part of the country's power plants – restore and resume their operation at full capacity. There is no doubt that our Iraqi partners are interested in cooperation in this sphere.

Technopromexport, a well-known Russian company, operates in the power sector, while such majors as Gazpromneft, Rosneft, LUKoil, and Tatneft are active in the oil business. They have been licensed and they participate in tenders.

Q: What would you say about security problems with regard to Russian nationals working in Iraq?

A: Needless to say, this is a highly sensitive issue. As far as our Foreign Ministry is concerned, we will do all we can to ensure that no Russian national comes to harm. Our goal is to get our Iraqi partners to take appropriate measures. Most importantly, the Iraqi side is ready to discuss security conditions, and is already doing so. We will continue working in this direction.

Q: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays an important role both in the Middle East and in the world as a whole. This country has the largest proven oil reserves in the region. Considerable importance is attached to its political position. Saudi Arabian religious leaders have strong influence in the Muslim world. How important is Saudi Arabia's balanced policy to Russia?

A: I would like to stress that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a very large and important partner of Russia. We and the Saudi leadership share common approaches with regard to global processes. This refers, among other things, to the building of a new system of international relations based on polycentrism and greater democracy. Incidentally, this also applies to such an important topic as the promotion of dialogue between different

cultures and religions. Here, our initiatives are closely related to the initiatives advanced by Saudi Arabian King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, and we cooperate on these matters. Another important segment is our shared striving to facilitate the resolution of conflict situations, primarily the resolution of such a large-scale conflict as the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moscow and Riyadh are in a very intensive dialogue on the issue: This includes an exchange of letters and the dispatch of envoys on either side. I am convinced that this positive and constructive movement forward will continue.

We also take into account such an important fact as the kingdom's considerable role and weight in the Islamic world as a whole. After Russia became a permanent observer at the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 2005, the field for our dialogue expanded even more. We are convinced that Saudi Arabia's policy is an important factor not only on the regional but also on the international level, as well as a significant factor of stabilization. Let us consider, for example, energy security issues: We have plenty in common with Saudi Arabia. We act on the premise that issues related to oil and hydrocarbons, energy and raw materials should be addressed by taking into account the interests of both producer and consumer. This is conducive to the stabilization of energy markets, which also responds to Russian interests.

Q: What is the status of bilateral Russian-Israeli relations?

A: Bilateral relations between Russia and Israel are developing quite dynamically. Suffice it to mention that so far this year, if my memory serves me right, six Israeli government members have visited Russia, and I am not even talking about the visits by the Israeli president, the prime minister and the foreign minister. On our side, First Deputy Prime Minister V.A. Zubkov and a number of Russian high-ranking officials have visited Israel. There is a good foundation for the development of mutually beneficial cooperation and general ties with Israel. This mainly refers to more than 1 million members of the Russians diaspora living in Israel, who have not broken relations with Russia but, quite the contrary, are closely linked to Russian culture. They are interested in the further development of ties between Israel and Russia, which facilitates human contacts. Incidentally, an agreement on visa-free travel is a significant contributory factor here. Russia was the first CIS state to sign such an agreement with Israel.

However, there are some other important aspects of our relations as well. We are able to combine some achievements or potentialities of the Russian and Israeli economies. This refers in particular to cooperation in high-tech sectors, such as nano-technology and energy cooperation. We believe (and this view is also shared by our Israeli partners) that there are also very good prospects for cooperation in the agricultural sector, taking into account the high level of agro-technology achieved in Israel and Russia's significant potentiality. We can actively cooperate in space technology. A draft agreement is pending, which would open new opportunities for cooperation in this field. We can also effectively cooperate in industrial research and development, as well as a number of other spheres – e.g., medicine and modern education methodology, including distance learning. This is the potential that needs to be tapped, and the Israeli side is ready for this.

Q: Time and again, there are reports about China's growing presence in Africa and even its competition with other states in the region. What are Russia's positions in Africa today?

A: It is a well-known fact that China is very actively and energetically implementing its economic strategy on the African continent.

As follows from Chinese sources, the total volume of economic ties between China and the African continent has reached an estimated \$107 billion. This is a striking, very impressive figure.

Some countries are concerned by this. However, such are the laws of competition. We believe that Africa is so vast and so much in need of foreign assistance that there will be enough room for work on the continent, for cooperation with African countries, which would benefit all, primarily African countries. Our interests there are not advancing as actively as we would like, not as actively as our African friends would like them to. Needless to say, Russian President D.A. Medvedev's visit to Africa has provided a special impetus to the development of our ties with Africa. Yet I would like to recall that our political activity on the African continent has been growing for the past eight years. V.V. Putin, in his capacity as president, visited Africa, as did several Russian prime ministers. However, there is an obvious need for intensifying our efforts further. This realization exists among quite a number of Russian companies.

At the same time, Africa needs assistance. I would not describe Africa as a disaster area: It should not be forgotten that in the past several pre-

crisis years, average economic growth across the continent was around 5%. Not bad.

This does not mean that all issues are being solved. In fact, there are some disaster areas in Africa, but there are also growth areas there. Taking this into account, the international community, primarily the G-8, has elaborated a number of steps that are designed to help African countries embark down the road of stable economic growth. There is an official development assistance program, which, after some upgrading, should amount to around \$50 billion a year. This involves not only purely financial aid, but assistance or financing for national programs in Africa. Of course, the main responsibility rests with the Africans themselves, but, like I said, they do need assistance. An entire structure of foundations has been created, which are designed to help combat various pandemics, poverty, and illiteracy, build a modern education system, and so on and so on. Russia participates in all these foundations. Our contribution is quite significant. But I would like to say that they are actively participating – it would be even correct to say, we are among the leaders – in writing off the African countries' debts. In the past several years Russia has forgiven around \$20 billion. This alleviates the burden on national budgets and helps funnel financial resources into national development programs.

There is yet another obstacle to the full-fledged process of stable development – i.e., conflicts on the African continent. Unfortunately, there are still quite a few although some of them have already been resolved by the Africans themselves, but with active assistance from the international community. Russia participates in all peacekeeping operations on the African continent under the auspices of the UN. We train personnel for African peacekeepers, national security forces, and national armed forces, which could also participate in African peacekeeping operations.

Key words: Middle East, Israel, Palestine, Africa, Palestinian-Israeli conflict, “road map.”