

“Unheard Voices: Civil Society Perspectives on Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations”

Wednesday, October 2, 2013, 10:00-11:30AM

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Root Room, Floor 2

1779 Massachusetts Ave, NW Washington D.C.

The Project on Middle East Democracy and OneVoice hosted a panel discussion on Wednesday, October 2 entitled, "Unheard Voices: Civil Society Perspectives on Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations." The event featured two panelists: **Samer Makhoulf**, Executive Director of OneVoice Palestine; and **Tal Harris**, Executive Director of OneVoice Israel. **Stephen McInerney**, Executive Director at the Project on Middle East Democracy, moderated the event.

Samer Makhoulf began the discussion expressing that his work "is more than a job, it's a mission." Makhoulf mentioned that OneVoice Palestine's vision "is to create a movement." He explained that this type of movement sought non-violent activism that supported a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He added that OneVoice Palestine works under the Palestinian Liberation Organization's mandate that seeks a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders and one of OneVoice Palestine's major goals is to connect grassroots youth activists with Palestinian political leaders. Next, Makhoulf discussed the current negotiations between Israel and Palestine, which left him both happy and sad. He was happy because negotiations to establish two states in historic Palestine were underway. **He was sad because the majority of Palestinian youth were skeptical of the negotiations ability to succeed and angry the way negotiations began.** In particular, he emphasized the humiliation the leadership faced by returning to negotiations without acquiring a settlement freeze. Makhoulf finished his remarks explaining that his organization is focusing on answering questions like, "What if negotiations fail?" and "What are our alternatives?" and "What is the strategy if Abbas brings a peace deal back?"

Tal Harris mentioned the excitement he felt for the current negotiations, but discouragingly mentioned, "It is not very exciting for most Israelis." First, he describes the secrecy of the talks making it "hard to get on the peace train." He did preface that the secrecy played a positive role in the negotiations, but it made it difficult to motivate the public. Second, many Israelis see no partner on "the other side" and think, "negotiations don't work," according to Harris. Third, he suggested, that for many Israelis "negotiations don't matter," because they are "used to the status quo." Fourth, he argued some Israelis believe peace "might hurt Israelis," particularly those that support the concept of "Greater Israel." Next, Harris addressed the need to overcome Israeli's lack of excitement. **He emphasized the importance of including the youth voice in the conversation surrounding negotiations as the first step in overcoming the lack of excitement, and noted that OneVoice brings youth activists to meet with members of the Knesset to engage on this very issue.** Also important, Harris argued, is the need to frame the negotiations around issues important to the youth, like jobs and travel, as well.

During the Q&A, **Stephen McInerney** asked the first several questions. He led by asking the degree to which the youth led movements of Israel and Palestine interact with youth movements across the region. Harris responded by indicating that following the initial wave of protests across the Arab world, Israeli

youth led protests in Tel Aviv trying to change domestic priorities. **He noted that present in the protests were signs declaring, "We are Tahrir."** Makhoulf added that as a Palestinian he was jealous of the Tunisians and reminiscent of the First Intifada. **Palestinians, he argued, responded to spread of protests across the region by "looking internally" and focusing on reconciliation between the Hamas and Fatah.**

McInerney then asked what the panelists would like to see from international actors in support of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations beyond the U.S.'s efforts as a mediator. Makhoulf referenced President **Barack Obama's** remarks—during his recent visit to Israel and Palestine—where he cautioned the citizenry that politicians would not act without pressure from constituents. He indicated that pressure from the international community needs to be applied on all sides of the conflict to influence negotiations positively. **He concluded by stressing the need "to inject hope through non-violent activism," in order to empower "the silent apathetic majority."** Harris rhetorically asked the audience if the international community hears the "voice of the youth." Then he thought it was important to remind people why a resolution to the conflict was important and emphasize a "better future" was possible.

McInerney's last question focused on the perceptions Israelis and Palestinians have on the dramatic changes occurring in the region. Makhoulf suggested that many on both sides have entered "bubbles" preferring the status-quo, but time was running out on such perspectives. Harris initially stressed the enduring security cooperation with Egypt and the relative calm along the Syrian border; but implying the regions movement could be coming to the conflict, he argued that the occupation could end once Netanyahu's government decides to reach an agreement.

The remaining questions came from the audience. In response to a question on the work of OneVoice, Makhoulf indicated that a 2009 poll conducted by OneVoice showed overwhelming support for a two-state solution: 74% for Palestinians and 76% for Israelis, but a more recent poll showed that 52% of Palestinians now support a two-state solution. **He cautioned though that the support is not for a one-state solution—support for that being 25% in both polls—but rather apathetic to a resolution of any kind.** Harris reiterated similar themes suggesting that Israeli's think peace is not practical. As an example, he mentioned the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, but argued resettlement was "small potatoes" compared to the absorption of one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union. In addressing a question about Palestinian-Israelis, Harris indicated that OneVoice Israel continually addresses democratic concerns within Israel and reach out to more than just Jewish-Israelis in their youth engagement.

The panelists were then asked about re-inspiring the apathetic. Makhoulf suggested that OneVoice Palestine focused on the quality and quantity of its activists. He hopes to expand the current 700 members to 1,500 within a year and provide the activists with the tools to become active. Makhoulf concluded by providing an example of OneVoice Palestine bringing hope back to the population. **Makhoulf said they successfully organized 500 youth and the local community in an effort to combat Israeli land grabs by planting trees on the proposed land in order to stop the land acquisition.**