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A moderate Israeli leader visits the LSE

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A moderate Israeli leader visits the LSE

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[Alaa Tartir](#) [1] 16 March 2010

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In the audience of a London School of Economics panel chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi to discuss the findings of the Goldstone Report and peace in the Middle East, a Palestinian student ponders the contribution of Admiral Ami Ayalon

Under unusual security arrangements with a high level of anxiety at the LSE, the panel assembled on March 8, 2010 before a packed audience of several hundred people. Organized by [LSE Global Governance](#) [9] and chaired by Ambassador [Lakhdar Brahimi](#), [10] this panel brought together former head of Israel's internal security service, Shin Bet, and Knesset member Admiral Ami Ayalon; two members of the [Goldstone](#) [11] fact-finding mission, Professor Christine Chinkin and Colonel Desmond Travers; and Karma Nabulsi, Director of the Civitas project at Oxford University and a former PLO representative.

Christine Chinkin gave a brief presentation on the mandate and methodology of the Goldstone report and Desmond Travers followed with a detailed explanation of the legality and effectiveness of the use of certain weapons in the Gaza war. Ami Ayalon took the podium announcing, 'War is horrible. There is no ideal war'. With such a promising introductory statement, I assumed that the speaker, billed as a 'moderate' leader, would argue for a better world based on justice and peace. However, a frightening prospect for the future of any peace process was soon opened up when he set about declaring that international law cannot bring peace, that meetings and diplomacy should come later, and that there is no need to look for justice. Can such views be dubbed 'moderate' and issue from an Israeli leader who, claiming to be a peace-keeper, launched the People's Voice Peace [Initiative](#) [12] jointly with Professor Sari Nusseibeh? Surely this raises many more questions than it answers: not least, what hope is there for peace?

Before coming to London, Admiral Ayalon had [declared](#) [13], 'I would not go to London to debate the Goldstone Report, which I think is one-sided and incorrect. I am coming to debate the Goldstone Report and the peace process. Goldstone is written in the language of blame. I believe the only way to respond is with the language of responsibility, and the dictionary of the future'. In his speech at the LSE, Ayalon repeated his position against the mandate of the panel, stating, '...we can't discuss peace and the Goldstone report in the same panel, because they are two different cultures and atmospheres. To discuss the Goldstone report, we have to bring legal experts and international law and civil rights experts here. But those people can't create peace. Those people use the language of guilt and blame. This is all they know. They only deal with past events. We need to jump to the future. We even need to imagine that we have peace and then go backwards from there. We need to have a different dictionary, a dictionary of responsibility. We should not look for justice: we only need to look for fairness and honesty'. Such arguments were swiftly countered by the other panellists.

Chinkin replied that, without question, one of the core functions of law is to allocate responsibility, while Nabulsi argued that international law is central to bringing peace; the crisis continues precisely because international law is being ignored, while the actors instead rely upon naked power. She concluded by saying, 'I strongly recommend you use a different way'.

In his ten minute talk, Admiral Ayalon expressed his various views in a disjointed, contradictory manner, jumping from one topic to another and making sure to emphasize the oft-repeated 'danger' of Hamas and Islamic fundamentalism. In the end, he said very little on the Goldstone report. Perhaps a former commander-in-chief of the Navy may have been expected to be out of his depth. He said as much himself, '...for me, I know nothing about international law. But I was in the battlefield for the last 40 years. I know Hamas and Muslim fundamentalists. I met terror everywhere. I was against the war on Gaza, I did my best to stop it, not because we don't have the right to defend our people, but because I know Hamas' strategy, and it is not a secret to know Hamas strategy. Just go to their website and it is written there in Arabic, English, and Hebrew. They have a clear strategy, which is to draw the Israeli army into the populated areas - where, simply, they can use their people as shields. And because of that Israel failed in allowing the killing of civilian Palestinians to take place'. He continued his arguably irrelevant presentation by arguing that Israel has to use power to defend itself. But that also, in order to defeat Hamas, Israel has to create a peace process. As evidence for this, he cited one of the last speeches of the Hamas leader, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, who had admitted to being, 'afraid that Palestinians will believe that freedom and the end of occupation can be achieved by using diplomacy.' Yassin, Ayalon concluded, feared a political process, since it is estimated such a process could shrink support of the Palestinian population for Hamas by as much as 18%. However, the problem remains a profound communication gap. Palestinians need only freedom, a better life and economy. The majority of Palestinians and Israelis want peace: however, 'they believe that the other side doesn't believe in peace'.

Maybe it is not surprising that a former head of Shin Bet spent most of his time talking about Hamas rather than the panel topic. However, while he accused and blamed international law experts for being 'prisoners of the past', the admiral fell into the same trap. No doubt hoping that the ten minutes would end soon while the audience waited for him to discuss the Goldstone report, Ayalon began a story about a previous occasion in 2002 when the LSE invited some Israelis and Palestinians to search for better solutions to the conflict raging at that time. One of the Palestinians he had met and befriended told him, " 'Ami, finally we won!' So I asked, 'Are you crazy?' He replied, 'You don't understand us. All we want is to see you dying, to see you suffering, and finally now we have achieved a balance of power'". Ayalon claimed that this had so frustrated him that it inspired him to meet with Professor Sari Nusseibeh and to launch their joint peace initiative. He said '...we did that because we believe that what was missing during all previous negotiations is a clear vision of the future, before talking about Jerusalem, refugees, settlers, and security. However painful it is, we have argued for a two-state solution - Israel as a Jewish democratic state and a Palestinian state. This means that we have to give up the settlements ideas and all settlers should be outside the West Bank. We have to pass the law of return of settlers, and at least, I think, 30% would return to Israel and this will be a precondition for an improved atmosphere. On the other hand, the Palestinians also have to give up the dream of the return of refugees'.

How many from the audience, I wondered, bought into this prescription for the future? Admiral Ayalon concluded his speech by asserting that the Palestinians needed to create unity - 'until that happens, Israel will not be able to deal with a situation with two Palestinian governments'. He didn't forget to repeat his formula that 'there will be no peace by using power, but also international law is not the solution too'. And finally, in an attempt to satisfy the audience's need to hear some discussion on the Goldstone Report, he said, 'we have to investigate independently. I don't want Goldstone to tell me what to do: we know.'

When asked directly by Lakhdar Brahimi why Israel had refused to cooperate with Goldstone's fact-finding mission, Admiral Ayalon replied robustly, 'I don't know. I think that the Government of Israel had the impression that the report was written before the nomination of the committee'. Brahimi interjected here, 'no, it is not at all fair to say that'. This rescued the Admiral from blundering on in the presence of two members of the committee whom he had just accused of making up the report's findings. Here, the Admiral surely reflected the conspiracy-ridden environment of his Shin-Bet past. As he had noted earlier in his speech, 'People in the region believe

in conspiracy theories, and this is the main problem of the region, they believe that all is against them’.

There was one surprise, however, when the Admiral confessed that the Israelis missed a golden opportunity offered by the Arab leaders eight years ago in their peace initiative: ‘We made a mistake when we didn’t listen to the voices that announced the [Arab Peace Initiative](#) [14]. We don’t sufficiently understand the change in the Arab world reflected in the altered relationship between Khartoum and Beirut’.

In this brief report back, I have not addressed the important and relevant issues raised by the other excellent panelists. I have confined myself to relating in some detail the presentation made by an Israeli leader who claims that he is pro-peace. Sadly enough, this evening only confirmed that for him as well, Israel is above all of the rules that govern this world, and that international law is binding to all nations but Israel. It was shocking to hear a ‘pro-peace’ Israeli leader say that there is no need to look for justice! If the Admiral had some spare time, it would be good if he read what Professor Sen has written regarding ‘[the idea of justice](#)’ [15]. Maybe the meaning of ‘pro-peace’ has already been given its alternative meaning in those ‘responsibility dictionaries’.

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 About the author

Alaa Tartir is a Palestinian PhD candidate in Development Studies and Global Governance at the London School of Economics, researching the role of good governance in state formation in Palestine. His research areas include international aid and development, non-governmental organizations, public policies, and politics. He is also a research fellow at the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS.

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