

UOF Europe and the Middle East ILC 2022: Session VI

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August 5, 2022



Larnaca, Cyprus

Larnaca, Cyprus -- Session VI of the 2022 Europe-Middle East International Leadership Conference was titled "Outside the Box – Taking a New Look at Peacemaking across the Middle East."

The Europe-Middle East (EUME) ILC was one of the International Leadership Conferences organized worldwide in the summer of 2022 on the overall theme "Towards Peace and Security on the Korean Peninsula: Building a Global Culture of Peace."

The first two EUME sessions were held in Berlin on July 26; sessions 3, 4 and 5 were held in London on August 4; and sessions 6 and 7 were held in Larnaca, Cyprus, and Tirana, Albania, both on August 5.

For the Larnaca session on August 5, UPF Middle East invited four former parliamentarians from the eastern Mediterranean to explore issues related to peacemaking in the region. Held in the E-Hotel in the village of Pervolia, the discussion also was available online to UPF's international network.

Against the backdrop of UPF's series of webinars assessing the benefits and potential of the Abraham Accords, this meeting took a different approach, providing an opportunity – in the context of a wider regional discussion which included Cyprus itself – to understand the Palestinian perspective. Following four brief presentations, a lively discussion focused on the common factor of occupation as well as seeking solutions that can benefit all the people of a land.

David Fraser Harris, the secretary general of UPF Middle East, was the moderator of the session.

Hon. Zouheir Bahloul from Israel, a former member of the Knesset, a well-known sports broadcaster, journalist, and Arab politician, shared his conviction that something can be done, that change can happen.

Conflicts have been going on for thousands of years in various parts of the world. "Is there a place without confrontations?" he asked. This event is very significant because we are dealing with trust, he said. Being an Israeli, he wondered what could be done to resolve the Palestinian issue. He felt hope because of initiatives such as the Abraham Accords. He referred to Father Moon saying that it doesn't matter whether you are in government or opposition in politics. What is important is to make the change within oneself, within one's family.

Explaining the importance of making a change, Hon. Bahloul pointed to a positive one that is coming from the East, from Korea. He expressed his appreciation to Mother Moon and UPF for setting such an example of positive change in the Middle East region. Hon. Bahloul said he felt hopeful: Even though in Israel there have been four elections within three years, surely changes will come, not just in Israel but everywhere.

Hon. Kais Zayadin from Jordan, a former member of the Jordanian Parliament, emphasized the rule of law and advocated separating religion from politics.

Peace depends on justice, he said. The conflict in the Middle East cannot be compared to the one in

Korea, where the same people share the same land. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be better compared to the conflict in Cyprus. It is about the occupation of land. It is not religion that is the issue; we are talking about equality.

All religions disagree with killing, Hon. Zayadin said, but the question is how to achieve equal living standards for everybody in the land. For example, the continuous building of new settlements only worsens already difficult relationships. Referring to the actual situation as apartheid, Hon. Zayadin suggested treating all people as equal and applying the democratic system.

The third speaker, **Hon. Taleb Al Sana** from Israel, is an Israeli-Arab Bedouin who studied law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is a former member of the Knesset. To illustrate his point, he told the story of two brothers who had a great relationship, but after forming families found that their children began to fight. Later, their wives joined the quarrel, and finally the brothers themselves came into conflict. They decided to build a separation wall between them, and the elder brother called an engineer to build it; but the engineer built a bridge instead. When the younger brother saw the bridge, he was so moved that he repented in front of his brother, and they reconciled.

"What we need is people who build bridges, not walls," Hon. Al Sana said. While the general consensus in the case of Palestine has been to separate the two peoples – the two-state solution – Hon. Al Sana proposed a different approach, one that emphasizes education. It would be better to educate people to live peacefully in one single state.

The Abraham Accords, he said, didn't provide a solution for the Palestinians. He suggested the creation of a political party that will include Arabs and Jews together and would have peace as a core value: not the occupation of the land, but people living together in peace. This is the beginning of much needed change, a one-state solution, Hon. Al Sana said.

The fourth speaker, **Hon. Skevi Koukouma Koutra** from Cyprus, is a former member of her country's House of Representatives. She was part of a standing committee on human rights and worked on equal opportunities for men and women. She has been secretary general of the Pan Cyprian Federation for Women's Organizations since 2010, and the vice president of the Women's International Democratic Federation.

She also served on a committee for refugees. She described the suffering that followed Turkey's 1974 invasion of Cyprus and her efforts to see a solution to Cyprus' problems.

The insecurity that is felt in Cyprus doesn't allow people to live well and develop, she said. Unfortunately, there is no political will to bring a solution on the international and European level. Hon. Koukouma pointed to a double standard in that Europe applies sanctions toward Russia but has failed to do the same in the case of Turkey since 1974. To this day, Turkey still occupies 37 percent of Cyprus' territory, she said. The continuous influx of Turkish settlers not only changes the culture of the country, it also brings an unbalanced situation when it comes to elections.

The solution is the creation of one single state, not two, she said. There are Greek Cypriots who want to return to their homes on the Turkish side; they live poorly now, but they had land and business in the northern part. Because so many have migrated, a fair solution would be to have elections by zones.

"For 48 years we have lived in a state of 'no war, no peace,'" she noted. "We want to reunify our country."

We are one people, she said, even though we speak different languages. People are suffering on both sides, not only the indigenous people but also the settlers. Yet, just as we long to unify Cyprus, we still see unresolved and emerging conflicts around the world. She hopes that UPF will continue to throw light on such issues, thanking the organizers for this initiative.

Asked about the role of women in peacemaking, Hon. Koukouma declared that women should be involved in conflict resolution and the peacemaking process. "We have a new road to pave," she said. "We must admit that it takes both men and women of courage to change our society. Education is needed to change our mentality and help people to become peace-loving people. We must seek justice and democratic values for all people. We must do away with discrimination based on race, gender, etc."

"We are working on solutions to our Cyprus problems, contacting women from the Turkish Republican Party. And we are working with the U.N. to expose crimes and sexual violence carried out during wartime. After all, not only the perpetrators should be brought to court but also those who promote or accept hateful speech."

Hon. Bahloul noted that women all over the world have yet to receive the recognition and status that they deserve.

The discussion turned to education, and how we can improve the education system in a way that will guide our society toward peace.

Hon. Bahloul spoke of the cities in Israel, such as Haifa and Acre, where Arabs and Jews live together. "However, after 74 years still we don't have schools where the two cultures are brought together. We have Arab schools, and we have Jewish schools," he said. "We need to have schools where the two cultures are integrated. It is not possible to achieve a multicultural society without knowing each other's culture. It is my life goal to achieve this."

Hon. Kais Zayadin emphasized the importance of practicing what is taught. The influence of an international political sphere that condemns one aggressor and not the other is not a good one. There is a need to be genuine if we want to teach our children.

After commenting that in reality most people prefer to teach their children within their own culture, Hon. Al Sana brought up once more his earlier proposal for the creation of a mixed party with Arabs and Jews together – the purpose being to eliminate any feeling of superiority on the part of one side or the other.

Meanwhile, Hon. Bahloul spoke of his participation in an upcoming project, taking children from both communities to experience friendly soccer games in San Marino. This program was created to allow children who attend separate schools to get to know each other and become friends.

Other points raised in the discussion and reprised in the speakers' final remarks included the role of religion and the importance of justice. More than one speaker pointed to the historical fact that Muslims and Jews lived together peacefully everywhere in the Middle East, and that the problems we are facing are political and related with occupation of territory.

Hon. Bahloul said that people should consider the most important issues that everyone has in common, namely well-being and having a good living standard.

Hon. Koukouma said that one cannot talk about peace without dealing with justice. In the case of Cyprus, the solutions to the problem must consider the benefit to the entire population.

Hon. Al Sana said that he has a good relationship with both sides. However, often leaders make agreements without taking into consideration the people's sentiments. If we are to build bridges and not walls, we must trust each other, change our attitude, and realize that what is good for me is also good for my neighbor.

Hon. Bahloul concluded by asking what it is that we are looking for. We can trust each other and live together with love. Let's resolve our conflicts, because we have a bigger problem which we have to tackle together, and that is the climate crisis.