

Declaration of the Preparatory Committee Of the Second Haifa Conference For the Return of the Palestinian Refugees And the Democratic Secular State in Historic Palestine

Endorsed by the committee in its meeting in Jaffa, 9/4/2010

The Preparatory Committee

The preparatory committee is a group of activists and individuals from different political movements and parties, human rights organizations, civil society and various sectors of public life such as the arts, academic research and culture. We have decided to work together to convene this conference out of conviction in the importance of its message.

Why we call for the Return of Palestinian refugees and the Democratic Secular State?

The Palestinian people suffer from the denial of their national and human rights, from ethnic cleansing, occupation, racism and siege. There is no end in sight to all this suffering. Suffering naturally leads to resistance, which is confronted with oppression. The result is a continuing

conflict, denial of rights and bloody wars. The prolonged conflict forms an escalating threat to the security of all inhabitants of the country and the peoples of the region, endangering world peace.

We believe that the solution to the conflict should be based on justice. For this reason we take first the point of view of the oppressed. The solution should provide all that is required for those whose rights are denied, to rebuild their life and assure their dignity and prosperity. Consequently, a true democratic society will be built; a society based on the principles of participation and for the benefit of all.

The Return of the Palestinian refugees

The Palestinian refugees, who lost all they had possessed during and since the ethnic cleansing of the Nakba, and who are dispersed in all corners of the globe, are the ones who suffer most from deprivation and

injustice among all sectors of the Palestinian people. We choose to put the return of the refugees at the center of the agenda of our conference as we see it as the first and basic component of any solution.

When we speak of al-Awda - "the Return" – we mean a concrete plan that will assure the return of the refugees to all the areas from which they were expelled. We want a genuine approach to the refugees' cause as the holders of rights, as part of the Palestinian people and as human beings. It is not enough to dismiss their cause by an abstract verbal recognition of their rights, without providing the practical framework for their implementation.

Democracy

We should get rid of the occupation, Apartheid, racism, oppression and discrimination.

We must put an end to the destructive effects of the policies of Zionist colonization before and after the Nakba (and the creation of the state of Israel). This includes abolishing all laws, policies, measures and systems of military and civic control that oppress and discriminate according to ethnicity, religious identity and national origin. We also emphasize the need to get rid of all the manifestations of marginalization and oppression against women. The system of government should be built on equality in the civil, political, social and cultural rights for all citizens. The regime should strictly apply justice in the name of all the people, with all their different identities.

We believe that the best solution for all is that all the residents of Palestine and its returning refugees will live in one democratic state, without discrimination. This state will ensure human rights,

equality, prosperity and full participation in building the new society for all its citizens. To ensure these rights, the prospective state will adopt a constitution that will prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, class or any other reason.

Secularism

The Zionist movement characterized Israel as a "Jewish State" and uses this racist principle as a pretext for ethnic cleansing, the denial of the refugees' right of return and the establishment of a discriminatory system in all aspects of life. Moreover, Zionism exploited religion as a mechanism for oppression in the hands of the state, in contrast with one of the basic principals of democracy, the separation between religion and state.

Our desire for a secular state is part of the general principles of democracy that guarantee full rights for all citizens regardless of their religious or ideological affiliation and guarantee freedom of worship and the protection of the holy sites of all religions. Given the multi-cultural and multi-religious nature of society in Palestine, we believe that the secular nature of the state is a necessary condition for ensuring the full participation of all sectors of the single society in the democratic process on an equal basis.

Along the same democratic principles, we reject the exploitation of secularism as an instrument of oppression and exclusion.

For the benefit of all

The democratic secular solution will unite all the Palestinian people, after decades of fragmentation and exile, through the realization of their right to self-determination by rebuilding their lives as a free people in

their homeland, free of all forms of oppression and injustice.

At the same time, this is also the best solution for the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, following the failure of Zionism to guarantee their peace and security, as they were falsely promised by consecutive

Israeli governments' history already proved that the exploitation of Jewish immigration to take over Palestinian lands caused permanent conflicts and wars. The democratic secular solution provides an opportunity for the Jewish inhabitants to get rid of their colonial privileges and their association with the colonial project and from the state of hostility that is caused by all those. Only then can Jews in Palestine really integrate in the country and the region as equal citizens and not as settlers.

A solution we can achieve with our effort

It is a real solution that handles the roots of the conflict and all its aspects. For this reason it can unite all Palestinians in the country and in exile and rely on the Arab support for the just Palestinian cause. As a democratic solution, based on the principles of Human Rights, it can expose the Israeli Apartheid system, promoting and consolidating international solidarity on both popular and institutional levels. It can also be the base for genuine partnership with the sincere advocates of democracy in the Jewish community, those who do not rely on fake "peace" to maintain their privileges but seek to join the struggle against the oppressive regime.

We don't propose "the democratization of the occupation" – we confront a regime that imposes itself by force and arrogance, depends on denying the fundamental rights of the indigenous citizens of this country and builds on the ruins of their lives. What we call for is the establishment of a new

order derived from the people and built for them. This means abolishing the Zionist project and laying the foundations for a democratic secular Palestine, by embracing rights and freedom and struggling for their accomplishment.

The goals of the conference

- Raise awareness of and interest in a solution based on the return of the Palestinian refugees and the democratic secular state, on both local and international levels.
- Provide a forum for the exchange of opinions and experiences between the supporters of the project, leading to common activities.
- In order not to end the conference as a passing airing of ideas, we will set aside its last day for consultations between those interested in following up the project.

There have been several conferences for the return of the Palestinian refugees and the democratic secular state. The Second Haifa Conference may form a turning point toward a permanent framework that works for these goals. For that reason we call upon all supporters of this cause to join the conference through attendance, written contributions and/or the organization of parallel activities.

Through these activities we aspire for the establishment of a comprehensive coalition of the supporters of the return of the Palestinian refugees and the democratic secular state.

Mechanisms of Work

The Preparatory Committee works through dialogue, cooperation and transparency between all those involved in the process.

The committee seeks to establish a consensus between all perspectives without favoring one over the other.

The committee aspires to open the conference for the presentation of all the different views that may promote the proposed solution. We encourage a serious and honest discussion of the main issues and the obstacles that impede the project.

The main mechanism of communication

between the members of the committee will be an email list.

The committee will hold periodic meetings open to all members in order to take decisions concerning the main issues, such as the program of the conference.

The Preparatory Committee will assign a coordinating committee to follow up on the practical questions between the various meetings and during the conference.