**Give peace a chance**

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Thirty years ago on September 13, 1993 Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin shook hands to seal the ‘Oslo Accords’, which were supposed to lead to a permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within five years.

I remember feeling at that time the hope of finally seeing an end to the already decades long Arab-Israeli-Palestinian tragedy. In 2023, what is left? There is neither peace nor peace process. Hope has turned into resentment and despair, and this anniversary went virtually unnoticed.

On the ground, the conflict is heating up once again. This year already saw more than 200 Palestinian and 35 Israeli fatalities. Terrorist attacks, both by Palestinian militants against Israelis and by Israeli settlers against Palestinians are back at record levels. Israel continues to expand settlements in the West Bank: at the time of the Oslo accords, there were 280,000 settlers; today there are more than 700,000. Settler violence, the separation barrier, demolitions, and other measures are gradually pushing the Palestinian population off their land in many areas of the West Bank, while the humanitarian disaster in Gaza continues unabated, with no end in sight.

Meanwhile, domestic support for the internationally recognized Palestinian leadership is at an all-time low, compounded by a growing lack of funding. In contrast, Israel has become a thriving ‘start-up nation’, in spite of an imperfect security environment. The need to change the status quo is not felt as acutely in Tel Aviv as it is in Ramallah, but the conflict is not going away: the idea that Israel could go forward without making peace with the Palestinians is a dangerous illusion.

The continued violation of UN Security Council resolutions and of some of the most fundamental principles of international law is eroding trust in a rules-based international order, not just in the region but across the globe. It is therefore more necessary and urgent than ever for the international community to reaffirm its commitment to, and mobilize for, peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

For years now, we – the EU and the international community – have been defending a two-state solution with the State of Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, sovereign State of Palestine, living side by side in peace and security with Jerusalem as the capital of both states. Because of Israel’s fait accompli policy, this solution may seem less and less viable on the ground. However, which other alternative could allow Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side in peace? Nobody is able to articulate any other plausible answer.

The establishment of diplomatic ties between some Arab States and Israel, vital as it is for regional peace, has so far not brought Israelis and Palestinians closer to peace. Therefore, together with the League of Arab States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, we have decided to make a joint contribution to help revitalize the two-state solution.

On September 18, at the United Nations in New York we jointly launched the ‘Peace Day Effort’. It was a success with the participation of more than 50 countries and organizations. We intend to ‘reverse engineer’ the peace, putting together a ‘Peace Supporting Package’, which will maximize benefits for the Palestinians and Israelis if they are able to reach a peace agreement. This initiative builds on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and the 2013 EU ‘package of political, security and economic support’, both of which have foreseen such incentives to the conflict parties if they achieve peace, while also taking inspiration from existing relations between Israel and some Arab states.

We aim to gather what all of us can contribute, when there is actual peace, real open borders, and substantial regional cooperation in the Middle East. What political, economic and security perspectives could we offer? What energy, climate, water, development, and other projects would we launch? This Peace Day Effort is not just an Arab-European endeavour: all international partners are invited to contribute, and in New York, many offered their support. On November 13 and 14, we will start to work together in Brussels to make this Peace Supporting Package precise and concrete.

This initiative cannot of course be a substitute for a genuine peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. And the Peace Supporting Package alone will not be sufficient to overcome the many obstacles to peace, but it can provide an incentive to go in this direction – not only by the benefits it offers, but also by reminding the conflict parties that only a negotiated solution is a viable and acceptable strategic option.

While our Israeli and Palestinian friends are not yet negotiating peace, we have embarked on this journey to help keep the two-state solution alive, hoping that, together, we can bring it within close reach. As remote as peace in the Middle East may appear today, echoing the words of Nelson Mandela that ‘‘it always seems impossible until it’s done”, we will keep trying.

For the sake of the legitimate rights of Palestinians, of sustainable long-term security for Israelis, of peace and development in the region and of the credibility of the international rules-based order, the world cannot afford the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be forgotten.

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