



MEMO International Conference

Palestine and Latin America in the 21st Century

Keynote Address
Senator Peter David

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Cover: *The sun sets behind the minaret of Hera' mosque, in Jalazoun refugee camp, West Bank. Photo by Shadi Hatem (Apalimages)*

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Palestine and Latin America in the 21st Century

Senator Peter David



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Keynote Address: Palestine and Latin America in the 21st Century

I am quite heartened and honoured to be here at Westminster and to address this August gathering of advocates for a better world; advocates for a world that presents the same opportunities for all of humanity whether you live in the Gaza Strip, Tel Aviv, Beijing, New York, Buenos Aires, or Caracas.

Also allow me to thank my Grenadian comrade Dr. Daud Abdullah for inviting me to participate in this conference at a time when, I believe, we all need to muster our collective efforts and energies on behalf of the Palestinian people.

I also want to congratulate the *Middle East Monitor* for the work it has done and continues to do as an ardent campaigner in raising awareness for lasting change for a peaceful and stable Middle East.

British Philosopher Francis Bacon identified four issues (Bacon's four idols) that tend to get in the way of our correct reasoning:

1. Idols of the Tribe: human tendency to "see" more consistencies than there are in the theories they are used to, because of preconceived ideas.
2. Idols of the Cave: human tendency to favor one or another explanation because of personal taste, limiting our objectivity.
3. Idols of the Marketplace: human tendency to mix language used in scientific inquiry and words used in everyday life, causing confusion in our logic.
4. Idols of the Theatre: human tendency to subscribe to dominant dogma, causing us to ask less critical questions about them.

I am of the considered opinion that arguments justifying the withholding of the fundamental human rights of the Palestinian people would easily fall into one of the above categories.

Let us begin with probably the most juvenile of tactics, the unfounded accusation of anti-Semitism. Arguments in favour of Palestinian rights tend to be reduced to accusations of anti-Semitism. Such accusations unsettle the best of us and force us to tread carefully in our advocacy for the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Palestinian people.

I begin with this “Idol of the Theatre” as Bacon would call it, because I do not wish for any point made here today in favour of Palestinian rights and freedoms to be interpreted as a point against the rights and freedoms of the Israeli people. Indeed, I am pleased to say that Grenada maintains diplomatic relations with both Israel and the State of Palestine and the Government of Grenada firmly believes that a two-state solution is indeed possible.

We must henceforth also be wary of any simplistic attempts to associate Palestine to ISIS for political gain. Other traps ‘of the theatre’ certainly await us and we must be prepared to expose them before they take root.



In an “Idol of the Tribe” (human tendency to “see” more consistencies than there are in the theories they are used to, because of preconceived ideas), commentators like Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* attempt to highlight similarities between the Kurds of Northern Iraq and the Palestinians of Gaza, as if to suggest that there is some fundamental flaw in the basic unit of organization (political and social) of the Palestinian people.

The argument made is that after the end of formal military redeployment, Gazans should have built a stable, economically prosperous democracy that could eventually achieve recognition from their Israeli counterparts, much like the Kurds of northern Iraq did when they were given an autonomous zone in 1992. Instead, they chose to become a 25-by-7-mile launching pad for rockets.

This analogy, however, dismisses the fact that Gaza never had this chance. As *Haaretz*'s Peter Beinart points out, the Israelis never gave Gaza the autonomy necessary to choose their economic destiny. Israel and Egypt had complete authority over the strip's borders, and a security perimeter within Gaza was erected by the Israeli army that blocked entry to some of the best farming areas in the entire strip to ordinary Gazans.

In other words, the occupation NEVER ended!!

To put this into perspective, we have confined more than two million Arabs to the 2,323 square miles of the so-called West Bank, and squeezed another million into the 141 square miles of Gaza and are expecting them to thrive economically in the face of an economic blockade with their most prosperous neighbor.

And this is a “Segway” into my next point. Now even the most generous of us note that Hamas' tactics pose a problem to the negotiated settlement that we are seeking. However, an objective analysis would recognise that Hamas' ability to engender sympathy from its people is correlated (if not caused by) Israel's chokehold on Gaza.



Indeed, while western conservative media vilify Hamas as the entity with effective control over Gaza, cooler heads observe military maneuvers like the following observed by *MSNBC*'s Chris Haynes:

"When Hamas fires rockets and launches attacks in Israel, it gets results from the Israeli government. After the 2012 skirmish between Israel and Hamas, the Israelis gave Hamas an expanded nautical mile range for Gazan fisherman and loosened border restrictions, according to the Washington Post, in exchange for halting the rocket fire."

It is worthy to note however, that Israel frequently breached this very fishing zone agreement and continues to harass fishermen trying to eke out an existence. In the course of this harassment boats are destroyed, crew detained and some are even killed.

On the other hand, there is the argument that while this may seem a concession the Gazans actually have the right to fish in a much wider area offshore.

So in a sense, much like Pavlov's experiment with the ringing bell and the salivating dog, Israel deliberately or not, and because of control over Palestine (with the US' Solidarity), can probably illicit a rocket or two from Hamas anytime it wishes (if it so wished).

I make no apology for the insinuation as it is intended ONLY to provoke thought, and not as an assertion.

A new Bloomberg Politics poll found that - US Republicans by a ratio of more than 2-to-1 say the US should support Israel even when its stances diverge with American interests. This is a clear example of the type of cognitive dissidence typical in the "idol of the cave" (human tendency to favor one or another explanation because of personal taste, limiting our objectivity.)

It is precisely this objectivity that I feel Latin America and the Caribbean can have (in general terms) on the Israel/Palestine situation. We are, in many ways, so comfortably detached from the situation that emotion or narrow strategic national interests do not dampen our reasoning.

I believe what we see is a people that are not being allowed to sink or swim on their own. What we see are families being destroyed, children growing in fear which later turns to hate - all of this while Israelis are given economic incentives to continue encroaching on Palestinian territory (as per UN resolution on the partitioning - 181 of 1947), and live in first-world comforts.

According to Steen Lau Jorgensen, World Bank Country Director for West Bank and Gaza: "Gaza's unemployment and poverty figures are very troubling and the economic outlook is worrying. The current market in Gaza is not able to offer jobs leaving a large population in despair particularly the youth," He went on to say "that the ongoing blockade and the 2014 war have taken a toll on Gaza's economy and people's livelihoods. Gaza's exports virtually disappeared and the manufacturing sector has shrunk by as much as 60 percent. The economy cannot survive without being connected to the outside world."



Gaza's population suffers from poor access and quality of basic public services such as electricity, water, and sewerage. Nearly 80 percent of Gaza's population receives some kind of social assistance, and nearly 40 percent of them still fall below the poverty line. While shocking, these numbers fail to fully convey the difficult living conditions that nearly all Gaza's residents have been experiencing.

“Even more shocking is the reality that most of Gaza's 1.8 million residents are confined to an area of 160 km² and are not able to travel beyond this area without permits. According to the Washington-based Center for Mind-Body-Medicine, as many as one third of Gaza's children showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder even before the 2014 armed conflict – and now even more.”

What will it take for the Palestinians to be given a fair opportunity to carve their own destiny?

I will say little on religious arguments tied to the Israel-Palestine situation. Only to say that if we are unwilling to question the legitimacy of two of the world's biggest religions (as well we should be); and both the Jews and the Muslims make arguments in support of their claims, then those arguments should not sway an objective and legitimate debate on the subject. The use of religious arguments by either side, reminds me of an "idol of the theater" (human tendency to subscribe to dominant dogma, causing us to ask less critical questions about them).

Latin America and the Caribbean must continue to try to bridge divides, and to speak objectively on the human rights of the Palestinian people. History will judge us, fate will curse us if we play politics with the issue.

UN voting records will suggest that - over the years - many abstain or absent ourselves from voting on matters relating to Palestine because in many cases there is a whip over their backs. That is slowly changing as things change in Washington and as progressive leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean take decisive positions in support of the Palestinian people.

Should Washington change its mind, the same arguments that led to any policy shift are ours to keep (should we ever need to explain ourselves).

In recent times Latin America has stood emphatically against the oppression of the Palestinian people - albeit at different levels.

Evidently, over the last decade indigenous movements across Latin America have been among the most vocal supporters of the rights of the Palestinians to exist as a people and a state.

The last offensive of the Israeli military on the Palestinian people and territory in 2014 invoked an unprecedented level of solidarity and camaraderie from Latin American leaders as well as their citizens resulting in five Latin American countries - Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, El Salvador and Chile - to recall their Ambassadors from Tel Aviv. And Chile and Brazil suspended trade talks with Israel.

Moreover, Venezuela and Bolivia and Ecuador qualified Israel's actions as genocide whilst Bolivian President Evo Morales imposed visa restriction on Israeli citizens entering Bolivia.

In Caracas, during the offensive the following recording of the late Hugo Chavez (may his soul rest in peace) was aired across the Bolivarian Republic:

"Lets advocate for Palestinian's right to be full members of the United Nations. We want peace. We want the aggression on the Palestinian people to stop".

Ladies and Gentlemen, the late President Chavez stood resolutely in solidarity with his brothers and sisters in Palestine and defended their rights - to peacefully exist and build THEIR own nation on THEIR land - with passion and sincerity.

And true to form Venezuela cut all diplomatic ties with Israel back in 2009 in protest of Israel's continued offensive in Gaza. Bolivia and Nicaragua followed.



Today, President Maduro continues to lead the Latin American charge with similar passion and sincerity.

And whereas that in some Latin American countries their leaders led the charge, in others citizens' movements mobilized, advocated and pressured their governments to speak up against the human rights violations that the Palestinians are made to endure.

The Palestinian Federation of Chile - a pro-Palestinian civil society entity - has experienced high levels of popularity and has noted that, among Chileans, solidarity with Palestine is currently unprecedented. The group reports that today 95 percent of Chileans commenting online are in support of Palestinian statehood.

Friends, there are those who will stand - in the middle - not wanting to offend their powerful friends in the West and elsewhere whilst others posit that the solidarity movement is for the so-called progressives or leftists.

Notwithstanding this, in more recent times we have witnessed and are witnessing a drastic shift as we have observed Governments like Colombia criticising its ally - Israel and by extension Washington.

Comrades, if the progressive agenda is what it takes to bring peace and prosperity to the Palestinian people and by extension the Middle East and other parts of the World then let us accept the label and continue to build the alliances necessary to effect that change.

Comrades, on November 29 2012 the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to accord Palestine Non-Member Observer Status in the United Nations. All of Latin America - except Panama who voted against and Paraguay who abstained - stood with Palestine.

On that glorious November day Latin America called for and

recognised the need for a Palestinian state; on that day 138 countries, including Latin America supported Palestinians' legitimate desires for a sovereign, independent democratic and sustainable Palestinian State - living in peace alongside their neighbor - Israel.

Friends, the level of support and solidarity that we have witnessed in recent times on behalf of the Palestinian cause have never been stronger. We however, need to mobilise and advocate on different fronts.

The United Nations Security Council MUST be reformed if we are to make meaningful progress in this regard. I therefore urge our leaders especially in Latin America and the Caribbean to continue to agitate and keep the issue of UNSC reform relevant and on the agenda.

There is the argument espoused by many - including President Jimmy Carter - that while the vast majority of UN member states support the two-state solution the opportunities are fast diminishing based on Israel's unabated actions with ongoing settlement expansion and the denial of equal rights to the Palestinians.

Nevertheless Comrades, we have no choice but to be optimistic and continue to stand resolutely in defense of the two state solution.

Comrades, Friends - lessons can be learnt from the experience of the Grenada revolution (of which I was apart); a revolution that stood side by side with our South African brothers and sisters during their struggles with apartheid.

Indeed, the revolutionary Government in St. George's at the time could not ignore the cries - for help - from the ANC and South Africans. And in the true spirit of brotherhood and sincere compassion Grenadian passports were issued to the leaders of the ANC in order to facilitate their travel and ease some of the restrictions imposed by the apartheid regime and their allies.

In the current context, the Government of President Nicholas Maduro is offering scholarships to young Palestinians to attain formal tertiary education in Venezuela. This initiative is invaluable in terms of the development of the Palestinian youth and hence provides a beacon of hope that should be emulated by other Governments - not just in Latin America but internationally.

Certainly, such innovative measures can be quite useful in our current context. I urge our leaders in Latin America, the buttress of Palestinian solidarity, to consider such novel and creative ways to advance the cause.



The Palestinian people are counting on us; the Palestinian children deserve a better future and they are depending on our resolve, our determination to continue to stand in their defense; to continue to stand against the occupation; to continue to stand against the military might and aggression of Israel; to continue to stand against the economic blockade that is choking the Palestinian economy; and to continue to stand for a sovereign and independent Palestinian state alongside Israel enjoying peace, prosperity and political stability.

Undoubtedly, the Palestinians' recognise without a doubt that Latin America has been a devoted ally. In a meeting of the Palestinian National Council in 2014 its leaders noted that solidarity of Latin America with Palestinians is an inheritance of patriots like Jose Marti and Simon Bolivar.

Friends, let us join hands to build strength for the Palestinian people, let us not be divided on this grave issue of humanity. For Jose Marti once said that "everything that divides men is a sin against humanity".

Let us not perpetrate a sin against humanity.

I thank you.

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