

UPF's IAED: The Quest for Mutual Prosperity as a Path to Middle East Peace

Thomas P. McDevitt
October 28, 2021



The Middle East - The peacebuilding potential of economic cooperation between Israel and Palestine was explored in an online conference titled "Playing the Business Card: The Quest for Mutual Prosperity as a Path toward Peace in the Middle East."

The webinar, held on October 28, 2021, was a joint effort of the Europe and Middle East branch and the North American branch of UPF's International Association for Peace and Economic Development. An international audience of nearly 40 attended the online event, which was part of the IAED Middle East Peace series.

The discussion focused on how Israel and Palestine both can benefit from economic cooperation; how international partners can help; and how this can contribute to peace in the region.

The key speakers were:

Dr. Akram Hasson, the president of Carmel College, Israel; chair, Druze Research and Publications Institute; member of Knesset (Kulanu) (2012-19);

Thomas P. McDevitt, the chair of The Washington Times, Washington, D.C.; global coordinator of IAED.

Each of the speakers presented a hopeful vision based on his experience.

Hon. Dr. Akram Hasson told how he as a Knesset member persuaded the Israeli minister of finance to meet with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas with the specific aim of boosting the Palestinian economy. "It's dangerous," he said, "if you have a neighbor who has nothing to lose."

Regular visits followed, and the results were policies that really helped the Palestinian economy, such as offering 120,000 Palestinian workers the chance to work in Israel, where they can earn \$1,500 per month, a salary that compares very favorably with salaries of \$50 to \$250 in Lebanon, Jordan or Syria.

Thomas P. McDevitt started his presentation with the reminder that our most important "wealth" is human beings. He spoke of his visits to the Holy Land with the UPF Middle East Peace Initiative and his sense of the preciousness of the home of the Abrahamic faiths.

He highlighted the good news coming out just one year after the signing of the Abraham Accords, including a clearer intention of the Biden administration to expand the normalization process.

Quoting a recent study, he pointed to one great obstacle to the development of trade in the region: Intraregional trade is less than 10 percent of the region's total trade. What is needed, he said, is a "sustaining architecture for cooperation."

Mr. McDevitt proposed that UPF, with its global network of experts, is well positioned to assemble these experts from different fields and come up with proposals that can advance the prospects of peace in the region.

Moderator Dr. Franco Famularo, the president of UPF-Canada, then opened the question-and-answer session, in which the speakers were joined by Dr. Michael Jenkins, president of UPF International.



Dr. Hasson spoke of the great potential opening up following Israel's agreements with Arab states. For example, the United Arab Emirates agreed to provide \$2 billion for the building of factories in the West Bank to support the Palestinian economy. Dr. Hasson hopes there soon will be approval for 100,000 more jobs in Israel for Palestinian workers; this will raise the living standard of every Palestinian family.

In addition to this, however, they need education and greater democracy, he said. All this can be helped by economic development, but to take this forward, more help is needed from the European Union, which seems to be hanging back, leaving everything to the United States. UPF can play a significant role in promoting cooperation, Dr. Hasson said. "In the end, we are all one family. We must believe we are partners," he said.

Dr. Jenkins pointed out that the real potential is in the Palestinian people themselves. "The literacy rate in Palestine is 96 percent," he said. "In the USA it is 80 percent."

He pointed to the amazing potential of Gaza, which he has visited many times, leading delegations of UPF's Middle East Peace Initiative. With its beautiful location by the sea, Gaza easily could become an international destination.

And he spoke of the hope signaled by the Biden administration's increased support for the Abraham Accords and expanding normalization.

Asked how Europe can help with the process, Dr. Hasson recalled a proposal he once made to an ambassador of the European Union: namely, to have each European nation come together with Israel and Palestine to develop one joint project. This could result in many projects every year.

Asked which areas would most benefit from help, Dr. Hasson suggested agriculture (thousands of Palestinian families are farming families), high tech and the construction of hospitals.

Dr. Jenkins recalled the previous webinar in this series, which had focused on cooperation in the medical field.

Mr. McDevitt built on his earlier comments on the need for a framework for economic cooperation, highlighting the great potential for the development of entrepreneurship engaging Palestinian youth. He referred to other UPF areas of focus: the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP), the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP), and the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD).

As time began to run out, it was clear that the ideas were only just beginning to come together. Dr. Jenkins emphasized that these discussions will continue, and Dr. Famularo reminded the audience that they will continue on a monthly basis.