**UN Special Envoy: No Peace With Arabs While Ignoring Palestinian Statehood**

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Israel can’t build ties to the Arab world based on the common regional threats they face without also resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov told The Jerusalem Post.

“The Palestinian question” remains “a very emotional issue for the Arab public,” said Mladenov, who will be appearing at the Post’s Diplomatic Conference on December 6.

“I do not believe any Arab leader, whether a king or a president, can go to their own people without saying something on how the Palestinian question is being addressed,” Mladenov said.

He spoke with the Post last week, as Israel has increased its outreach to moderate Arab countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, which are banding together to oppose Iran.

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman has called for moderate Arab leaders to visit Jerusalem to form a coalition against Tehran with Israel.

IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot gave an interview to a Saudi newspaper, explaining that Israel was ready to share intelligence against Iran with moderate Arab countries, including theirs.

Infrastructure Minister Yuval Steinitz told Army Radio on Sunday: “We have ties that are indeed partly covert with many Muslim and Arab countries, and usually [we are] the party that is not ashamed.”

Mladenov said that Israel and the moderate Arab countries “have a clear common threat assessment,” but that this was not enough.

The former Bulgarian foreign minister, who has been in his current job for the last two years, arrived in Israel after spending time as the US special representative in Iraq. His time there allowed him to understand how the consciousness of the Arab world has undergone a sea-change when it comes to the threat from radical groups such as ISIS.

“The realization in the region that they have to stand up for moderation and fight radicalism is something that happened very recently,” Mladenov said. If they had understood this earlier, “we might not have seen the collapse of states and the emergence of ISIS.”

Already in 2013 and 2014, it was clear to the UN in Iraq that ISIS would seize control, Mladenov recalled.

“We literally knew the date that Mosul would fall and this is the UN speaking. If we knew, others should have known far in advance of us,” he said, adding that the region’s interest back then to stand up to such a threat “was close to zero.”

Whole communities in Syria and Iraq collapsed because they were disenfranchised, marginalized and isolated from authorities, he said.

Mladenov recalled a 2013 protest about housing and health in Ramadi, Iraq, just before Christmas.

Instead of addressing these concerns, the government sent in troops and many people were shot.

“Within the next two to three months, the peaceful protest that had been in place was overtaken by ISIS, and the agenda changed completely,” Mladenov said.

“Within six months, Ramadi, Fallujah and the whole area was in the hands of ISIS.”

“Fifty years ago, the Middle East was threatened by war,” the UN special coordinator said. Now, the danger comes from “collapsing states and imploding societies” that are vulnerable to “outside interference and meddling and radical agendas,” he warned, saying this was the case in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen.

Initially, Middle Eastern leaders thought the threat was localized, assuming it was specific to the country in question, and would not impact them, Mladenov said.

Now they know the entire region is susceptible to the toxic mix of radicalism and the meddling of outside forces. There is a danger in allowing sections of a country to be ungoverned and thus fall prey to outsiders, he pointed out.

He also emphasized that the depth of the problem was underscored by the quick growth of ISIS and “the massive amount of territory it was able to take over very quickly with very few fighters.”

In addition, groups similar to ISIS appeared in other countries in the region, including in Sinai.

As a result, Arab leaders are now focused on strengthening the region’s ability to stand on its own, he said.

“This process is starting to happen, enabled by the Trump Administration. The policy that has come out of Washington, to focus on a partnership with the region to fight the threats to security, has helped put these issues to the forefront, which was not the case until now,” Mladenov said.

“The international community has to find ways to strengthen the legitimacy of governance instigations in the Middle East so that they do not fall prey to radical extremisms.”

The fall of ISIS in the Middle East, he said, increased the risk for Europe and other countries around the globe.

“The more you push ISIS out of territory it controls, that increases the risk of terror attacks outside of the territory it controls,” he said.

Fortunately, he said, “what we have seen in Europe is a growing sense of awareness of this threat – increased cooperation between European countries in intelligence sharing.” There has also been “increased cooperation between Europe, Israel and the US to address this threat.”

With regard to Israel’s northern border, Mladenov said that, “the presence of outside forces in Syria – be they state forces or nonestate forces like Hezbollah – is dangerous.”

“It is of paramount interest to restore the stability and the unity of Syria on the basis of a government that is freely elected by the people and that keeps the country together,” Mladenov said.