

Shimon Peres Conference at Sciences-Po Paris

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Anyone heading towards the *Institut d'études politiques de Paris* (IEP) on December 11th would have been surprised by the police barriers which blocked off both ends of rue Saint-Guillaume. Valid ID was mandatory for anyone wanting to get through, with officers suggesting to keep it handy as there were two more checkpoints and a metal detector up ahead. Though there were no snipers on the roof of the Sciences-Po library across the street, as it is rumored there were for Condoleezza Rice's visit in February 2005, it was clear that important security measures were being taken for a conference given by Israeli Vice Premier and former Prime Minister Shimon Peres. Mr. Peres was briefly introduced by IEP Director Richard Descoings, who took care to underline that in the spirit of openness valued by Sciences-Po, a delegate from the Palestinian Authority had also, in the past, held a conference at the institution.

Mr. Peres took the stand, warming the audience by announcing that "out of respect for the French language, I will speak English." He then took a more serious tone, stating that "the world is pregnant with a new age" in which science, technology and economics take precedence over war, armies and national square mileage. Just as "the Stone Age didn't end because they ran out of stones," the age of nation-centered politics and army-wielding countries is not ending due to the disappearance of these elements. Rather, these elements are evolving to form new dynamics of international relations. Well aware of his predominantly French audience's national pride and historical knowledge, he illustrated his idea by asking whether Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, or Napoleon, who "left only tombs and cemeteries" in his wake, had more impact on the future of France. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate added that the importance of national borders and governments is gradually being overshadowed by an ever-growing global economy. This neoliberal idea would underlie the remainder of his remarks.

It would be difficult to imagine an Israeli political figure delivering a speech without addressing terrorism and the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mr. Peres' comments on these matters, however, remained very general in nature until the question and answer period more accurately revealed his stance on the matter. He began by stating that the problem with terrorists (and Muslim extremists in particular) is that they protest but have neither a vision nor a specific goal to attain. Implicitly referring to the difficulties faced by American forces in Iraq, Mr. Peres explained how "armies are trained to fight armies, not terror." According to him, the ideological conflict opposing US democracy and extremist Islam is irrational and, more importantly, irreconcilable: the US is saying "you need democracy" while the extremists are saying "you need Islam." As a result, neither side will ever concede victory to the other.

The Vice Premier then returned to economic issues, citing the Microsoft and Google "empires" as positive examples of the dominance of economic 'states' over political ones. He explained how "they didn't cheat, they didn't kill" but on the contrary contributed to many charitable causes, a notable example being the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Mr. Peres also used China to illustrate his belief of the predominance of economics over politics. Indeed, "econom[ics] changed China the minute they became global" and resulted in the liberalization of both politics and economics, with a higher value given to individual merit. Mr. Peres later entertained the idea that introducing a modern economy to the Middle East would bring peace to the region, thus again implying that economic spheres determine political ones, and not vice-

versa. This suggestion explains his view concerning the fundamental problem with the UN, which he jokingly referred to as “the Disorganization of the Disunited Nations,” since the organization handles situations politically rather than economically, as Mr. Peres believes they should be.

Mr. Peres concluded his formal remarks by reminding his audience, which consisted almost exclusively of Sciences-Po students, that they represented the future generations of policymakers and therefore should learn “not how to remember but how to imagine.” In a world based on differences, everyone has “not only the right to be equal but also the equal right to be different.”

Though Mr. Peres undoubtedly presented an interesting approach to international relations, his speech remained a broad overview of political issues which were not specific to the many controversial matters he faces as Vice Premier of Israel. Obviously hoping that Mr. Peres would address some of these topics, the audience took advantage of the question and answer period that followed to bring them up. These questions brought out a much more personal side of the politician, who openly answered based on his personal experience and political convictions, thus leading to the most interesting part of the conference.

To no one’s surprise, most of the questions revolved around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and this summer’s war against Lebanon. The problem, as assessed by the Israeli leader, is that Lebanon and Palestine are divided: both lack a *single* government and a *single* army, which he deems are necessary for stability, but have *many* governments and *many* armies. Responding to a question about Israel’s relations with Palestinian political parties, Mr. Peres described Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas as “reasonable, a man of peace” who truly wants to find a compromise acceptable to both sides. Hamas, on the other hand, falls into the ‘protestors without a vision’ category mentioned earlier, bent only on the destruction of Israel and perpetuating the conflict. “We can make peace with the people of Hamas, but not with the ideology of Hamas,” he stated. When one student questioned this view seeing as Hamas was democratically elected, Mr. Peres replied that Hamas has a profound misunderstanding of democracy: “You can’t be elected and the next day start shooting!”

Another student, after indicating that he was Palestinian, aggressively questioned Mr. Peres concerning Israel’s negotiations with Palestine. The student felt these were unfair given that the land offered by Israel lacked adequate water resources, a concern which the former Prime Minister addressed by noting that Israel offered to provide water by building filtration plants in the region. “The Jordan River was always richer in public relations than in water,” he had noted earlier during his speech.

When questioned about Iran’s denial of the Holocaust and its attitude *vis à vis* Israel, Mr. Peres did not shy away from his beliefs. “My God, what a man!” he said of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a “terrible dictator” to a “poor, corrupted, unemployed and hungry” country. He referred to the Iranian conference on the veracity of the Holocaust as an “assembly of liars” and harshly criticized the Islamic regime’s attitude towards women, underlining that “the greatest achievement of the 20th Century was the liberation of women” and that Iran and other ‘Islamic states’ had fallen behind. He carefully noted, however, that his frustration was directed at the “terrible Ayatollahs” and not at the Iranian people themselves.

Almost two hours after being escorted into the Émile Boutmy amphitheatre by a six-person security detail, Mr. Peres thanked the audience and left the room to sustained applause. Some audience members stood while others hesitated, given the controversial nature of some of

the Vice Premier's comments during the question and answer period. It was nonetheless this part of the conference that truly sparked a much expected and desired debate about the complex political theatre in the Middle East in which Mr. Peres and his government play a lead role.

Regardless of political affiliation, Shimon Peres' visit to Sciences-Po Paris was of great value as it furthered discussion relating to one of the most important political situations of contemporary politics.