

Check Against Delivery

November 15, 2009

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Speech at the Saban Forum

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I see a lot of old friends here tonight. I especially want to welcome our distinguished guests from the United States: Former President Clinton, Governor Schwarzenegger and Senator Lieberman. And of course the founder of the Forum, Haim Saban and the Director of the Saban Forum, Martin Indyk. Welcome to Jerusalem. I am pleased to see you back here with us again.

The presence of so many prominent American leaders at this forum is an expression of the enduring friendship between the United States and Israel. This friendship rests on our deepest shared values – to nurture national and personal freedom, to defend these freedoms and the aspiration to live in peace.

Last week, in Washington, I spoke about Israel's commitment to peace with the Palestinians. I said that I want to begin negotiations immediately, that these negotiations should be a good faith effort to reach a final peace agreement, and that my government is prepared to make generous concessions in exchange for a genuine peace that protects Israel's security.

The way to achieve peace is through negotiations, cooperation and the agreement of both sides. This is true with regard to security and economic issues, and also with regard to a genuine political process. There is no substitute for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and any unilateral attempt outside that framework will unravel the existing agreements between us, and could entail unilateral steps by Israel.

Therefore, the only way to achieve peace is around the negotiating table.

For Palestinians, peace will mean the dignity that comes from an independent national life and living standards that skyrocket from cooperation in tourism, trade and industry. I believe that in the age of peace, we will see towers rather than missiles in Palestinian cities.

A prosperous Palestinian economy that creates thousands of jobs will help eliminate the scourge of poverty and desperation and will strengthen internal forces within Palestinian society that oppose terrorism.

Clearly a strong economy and a stable security situation helps in peace.

The easing of movement in the West Bank, and an improvement in the quality of life over the past seven months have made a tremendous contribution to a prosperous Palestinian economy, as has the improvement in the functioning of the Palestinian Authority's security forces. We must add the component of political peace to economic and security improvements.

For Israel, peace would mean the realization of a dream of ages. Our sons and daughters would not know the wars of their fathers. Our economy would benefit from a ubiquitous sense of stability and hope. And we could invest so much more in other areas of Israeli life, from infrastructure and education to science and culture – in short, in creating a better, more prosperous and complete life for ourselves and our neighbors.

The benefits of peace are clear. What would it take to advance peace? First of all, we need to start negotiations immediately in a positive spirit. I spoke of this in Washington. I am not setting any preconditions for negotiations. We have taken steps, and are willing to take further steps that would help launch a political process.

Tonight I want to discuss three challenges to Israel's security that must be addressed to achieve our goal of a lasting peace.

First, Iran must be prevented from developing a nuclear military capability. Second, a solution must be found to the threat of missile and rocket attacks. And third, Israel's right to defend itself must be preserved not only in principle but in practice.

Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons threatens our security, peace in the Middle East and global stability.

With nuclear weapons, its powers of destruction, already considerable, would grow immensely. The moderates in the Middle East would be weakened and extremists strengthened. Other countries in the region would join the race for nuclear weapons. An Iranian regime that pledges to wipe Israel off the map would work day and night to undermine any attempt to advance peace between Israel and its neighbors – whether it is peace with the Palestinians, with Syria and with anyone else.

In contrast, if Iran's nuclear ambitions are thwarted, peace would be given a dramatic boost. Hezbollah and Hamas would be considerably weakened and moderate forces within the region would quickly become ascendant.

This is why the fate of Iran's nuclear program is a true turning point in history. It would significantly influence our ability to achieve a stable and secure peace in the Middle East.

Last week, I discussed with President Obama his continuing efforts to mobilize the international community to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

I also heard from the American Senate leadership about their bipartisan efforts to strengthen sanctions on Iran – sanctions that could seriously hamper the regime's ability to import refined petroleum and its capacity to stifle freedom of information on the internet.

In Paris, President Sarkozy reiterated to me his determination to oppose Iran's nuclear ambitions, a determination shared by Chancellor Merkel, whom I will meet later this month in Berlin.

A growing number of world leaders are waking up to the dangers of a nuclear Iran but there is no time to waste. For the sake of peace and security, the international community must stand firmly behind its demands that Iran stop its nuclear weapons program, and must be prepared to speedily apply strong sanctions if those demands are not met, preferably in the framework of the Security Council. Alternately, strong sanctions may be applied outside the framework of the United Nations by a broad coalition of countries that understands the seriousness of the threat.

The second challenge to peace is the threat to Israel of missile and rocket attacks on Israel.

All it takes is one crude rocket hurtling through the air to sow fear in an entire city. Israelis have braved this intolerable threat for years, first in Kiryat Shmona and Sderot, later in Acre, Nahariah, Haifa, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Beer Sheva.

After Israel withdrew unilaterally from South Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2005, both areas were turned into Iranian backed terrorist bases from which thousands of rockets were fired into Israel's towns and cities.

Peace requires that any future peace agreement have effective demilitarization measures that can neutralize the missile threat.

There has been much talk about the precise demarcation of the future border separating Israel and the Palestinians. Undoubtedly, that is an important question for both parties that can only be resolved through negotiations.

These negotiations must, as United Nations Resolution 242 clearly states, provide Israel with secure and recognized borders.

But we must also recognize that because of the threat posed by short-range rockets and mortars launched from contiguous territory, Israel's security is not merely a question of the future borders of the Jewish state. No less important, our security depends on ensuring that dangerous weapons do not pass through the borders of a future Palestinian state.

We have seen how a neighbor's porous borders can endanger our security. Look at the Lebanese example: despite Security Council Resolution 1701, Lebanon's border with Syria remains porous, and through them Iran and Syria continue to send weapons to Hezbollah. Today, Hezbollah has at least three times the number of rockets it had at the end of the Second Lebanon War.

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So far, the only thing that has proven effective at reducing the flow of these weapons is direct Israeli action. Just ten days ago, we interdicted a ship sent from Iran bound for Hezbollah with 500 tons of weapons on board. This is part of an ongoing broader Israeli effort to prevent weapons smuggling to areas controlled by Hezbollah and Hamas.

And with regard to Gaza: when Israel controlled the Philadelphi Corridor, we stopped most, though not all, of the smuggling from Sinai into Gaza. But after we left, hundreds of tunnels were dug, and the flow of rockets into Palestinian territory became a flood.

The lessons of Lebanon and Gaza cannot be ignored. Any peace agreement with the Palestinians must ensure effective security arrangements to prevent the flow of missiles and other weapons into the West Bank.

This cannot be left to paper agreements alone, however strongly worded or well intentioned. It must be backed by powerful concrete security measures on the ground. That is a prerequisite to an enduring peace.

In addition, we are working closely with the United States to develop missile defenses that may in time largely neutralize this threat. I appreciate the United States' continued support of these joint efforts.

The third challenge to peace is the attempt to deny Israel the right to self-defense. The UN Goldstone report on Gaza attempts to do that.

Before Israel left Gaza, many argued that the missile attacks would stop following the withdrawal. But even if they didn't, it was argued at the time, Israel would have clear international legitimacy to respond to those attacks.

Unfortunately, both those assumptions proved false. Thousands of rockets *were* fired on Israel. And when Israel finally responded, far from winning international legitimacy, it was accused of war crimes.

The Goldstone Report is a clear threat to peace in our region. Achieving a final peace settlement with the Palestinians will require territorial compromise. But how can Israel vacate additional territories if we cannot defend ourselves against attacks from that territory?

Be assured that this UN report is not Israel's problem alone. It threatens to handcuff all states fighting terrorism. For if terrorists believe that the international community will justify their crimes when they fire on civilians while hiding behind civilians, they will employ this tactic again and again.

Perhaps the most important moral distinction in the laws of war is that between the deliberate targeting of civilians and the unintended casualties that are the tragic consequence of wars, even those that are carefully waged.

Israel made this moral distinction in order to prevent harming innocent civilians. During Operation 'Cast Lead', the Israeli Defense Forces dropped more than two million fliers, made 165,000 phone calls, sent thousands of text messages and called off countless military operations to evacuate Palestinian civilians from targets from which the Hamas fired missiles and rockets on our cities.

In contrast, the Hamas terrorists wiped this distinction away. They embedded themselves within the civilian population, used Palestinian civilians as human shields, and targeted as many innocent Israeli civilians as possible.

A responsible government should always seek to minimize civilian casualties in territories controlled by the enemy. But they also have an obligation to defend their citizens.

So when terrorists embedded in civilian areas deliberately launch attacks on the innocent, governments cannot become paralyzed. They must respond with the minimal force necessary to end the attacks. The responsibility for the unintended civilian casualties such an operation entails should be placed squarely on the terrorists and not on the defending government.

This moral clarity is no less important for defeating terrorism than vigorous military action.

From my conversations with many leaders around the world, this observation is understood. That is why I have hope that it will soon become the prevailing norm.

Paradoxically, it is possible that the firm response of important international leaders and jurists to this morally twisted report will accelerate the re-examination of the laws of war in an age of terror.

These three challenges – preventing a nuclear armed Iran, neutralizing the missile threat and reaffirming Israel's right to self-defense – are critical for the pursuit of peace.

None of these challenges is insurmountable. Given that peace would provide immense benefits to Israelis, Palestinians and to the region, they are challenges that we must overcome. God-willing, we will.