



President William Jefferson Clinton's address to the

**Saban Forum 2005
A U.S.-Israel Dialogue**

The King David Hotel, Jerusalem, Israel

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[As delivered]

Thank you

Thank you very much, Haim.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an enormous honor for Hillary and Chelsea and me, for all of us, to be here. I am profoundly grateful to Haim and Cheryl for their personal friendship to Hillary and me. To you Haim for your abiding loyalty to Israel, to your many contributions to your adopted home in the United States, and especially for the Saban Forum which gives us a chance to continue to talk as friends in an open and honest way.

I thank you for your continuing search for security and peace as embodied by the trip that so many took to Ramallah today.

President and Mrs. Katsav, thank you for being here. Mr. President, I thought you gave a wonderful address. And I applaud your courage and your vigor.

Mr. Wolfensohn, thank you for your commitment to redeeming the full promise of Prime Minister Sharon's courageous withdrawal from Gaza and I hope we will all be able to support you.

I thank the members of the United States Congress who are here, Mr. Lantos and Mr. Shays, my old friends, and the other officials. And Mr. Justice Breyer, thank you for being here. It is nice to know at least one person who has a lifetime job.

I have to tell you, you know, I once made a crack like that not long ago, in the presence of an African American bishop. And I looked at him and said I am really glad to be around someone who is not term-limited. And he said to me, "Oh, Mr. President, we are all term limited, it is just that most of us do not know when our term expires."

I say that to inject some levity into the situation, but also to remind us all that our time on earth is limited and we had best make the most use of it we can.

I want to talk a little bit today about yesterday, today, and tomorrow, here. It has been unbelievably ten years since that dark day that we lost Yitzhak Rabin and what I still believe was our best chance for a comprehensive and lasting peace.

Not a week has gone by in those ten years that I have not thought of him, his family, his allies, Israel's struggle. It has been five years since I left office and since Mr. Arafat committed what I consider to be a colossal historical blunder in walking away from the peace proposal I made at that time, which the then Prime Minister, Mr. Barak, accepted. It was the last chance we had up to this point, for a comprehensive peace.

I was thinking today about 1993 when I became President and Yitzhak Rabin had just been elected prime minister in Israel and then the accords with the Palestinians were signed in Washington in September and the world was so full of hope in the sense that we could make a new beginning.

We felt that way at home, too, in America. I had laid out this great scheme to make our country more prosperous and just and secure, a plan to make America, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the world's leading force for peace, freedom, security and prosperity. Including, of course, a just and lasting peace in the Middle East with Israel secure, with normal relations with its neighbors with a genuine partnership with the Palestinians against terror, and for a brighter future.

I felt quite good about that then, and in so many ways, we came quite close. Those were good years for America, and a lot of the world's problems seemed to be giving way to human effort.

There was a slew of international agreements from the chemical weapons convention to the conference test ban treaty to the indefinite extension of the non-proliferation treaty, to the Kyoto climate change accord to the international criminal court, and many others.

Ethnic cleansing was ended in Bosnia and Kosovo. Peace was reached in Northern Ireland; the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea ended. And for seven and a half years there was progress toward peace in the Middle East through a succession of leaders, even after Rabin was killed, including the Wye River Agreement under then Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Sharon.

In 1998, the only year in the history of the State of Israel, in which no Israeli died from a terrorist attack. There was the remarkable anti-terror conference in Egypt, with then Prime Minister Peres and all the Arab leaders. There was the serious effort on Syria and the efforts at a comprehensive peace from Camp David to Taba, and the withdrawal from Lebanon under Prime Minister Barak and of course, the United States concluded a remarkable and I hope prophetic trade agreement with Jordan – the first trade agreement that we ever made with another country that had included in the body of the trade agreement environmental and labor conditions, something that I think is important. I do not believe we can build a global economy without a global social compact and it is a great tribute to the king of Jordan that he embraced and understood that concept.

Since 2001 since I have been on the outside looking in, except for my occasional work as a caseworker for the junior senator from New York here. You know I love being out of office, I can just say whatever I want. Of course, nobody cares what I say any more, but it is fun to be able to say what you want. I do have to try to avoid doing anything that complicates Hillary's life but otherwise I go along.

There have been, as the president said, some progress in the larger world and in the region toward what I take to be our shared objectives. We have seen people that most of us will never know, all over the world, in intelligence and law enforcement to working together to shut down terror cells and prevent terrorist attacks.

We have seen a dramatic increase in the world's willingness to fight against our common problems that disproportionately affect the poor like AIDS and malaria in the absence of economic opportunity.

We have seen growing demands for action on climate change, even in the United States.

We have seen, in the aftermath of the Tsunami, improved relations between America and the world's largest Muslim country, Indonesia which also achieved a peace in Aceh.

We have even seen some breaking of the ice in the attitudes of hard-line Muslims in the Kashmir region of Pakistan in the aftermath of the horrible earthquake, because so many people from around the world came and related to them as human beings and were seen, in turn, as human beings. And for the first time since 1971, free movement of Indians and Pakistanis across the line of control.

We have seen progress in Columbia against the narco-traffickers, where 13,000 terrorists have laid down their arms and rejoined civil society, and the production of coca and opium is down. And of course, we have seen the election of a genuine Islamic moderate, Mr. Karzai, to the presidency of Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 and the overthrow of the Taliban.

(Though he is not out of the woods because of the trouble that he faces in the far reaches of his country).

In the region, we have seen the election of Abu Mazen, if I may, without disrespect, continue to call him that, on a commitment, a platform for peace for the end of terror and fighting terror.

We have seen, as you have said, President Bush's roadmap and the acceptance of that roadmap by Israel.

We have seen two efforts from Israeli and Palestinian citizens to flesh out the details of what a comprehensive peace might look like.

We have seen the liberation of Lebanon from Syrian influence after the horrible murder of Mr. Hariri who was a friend of many people in this room, including me.

We have seen 58% of the Iraqis voting in a presidential election after the deposing of Saddam Hussein. And I always like to tell my fellow Americans, we patted ourselves on the back, Republicans and Democrats alike, in 2004 because we had an enormous turnout, 54%. The Iraqis did better with their lives at stake, and so it gives us some hope that that enterprise still might produce a genuinely representative, functioning government, capable of defending itself.

And we have seen Prime Minister Sharon's courageous withdrawal from Gaza, along with continuing constructive relations with Jordan, whose king has developed a modern economic and social policy, which I earnestly hope and pray, will prevail.

Having said that, we have also suffered some in the world since 2001. Osama Bin Laden and Mr. al-Zawahiri are still at large four years after September 11 and al-Qa'ida really now does have a base of operations in Iraq, with horrible consequences for our brothers and sisters in Jordan. Most of those who were killed, cruelly, were also Muslims, people who believe they are true to their faith.

Iran is now saddled with a conservative populist who made those outrageous remarks against Israel and the West. I do think that it is worth pointing out, in another one of the twists that are so cruel in this region, that he was not elected because of his hatred for Israel or the West. He was elected because of the economic distress of ordinary Iranians, which he promised to relieve by giving them direct financial assistance, or in the common parlance of American politics, he promised to cut them a check, each of them, and despairing of any other way of getting out of their situation, after having twice voted for a president, twice voted for a Majlis, twice voted for mayors who was moderate by 66-70 per cent margins they gave this guy a chance to write them a check and instead he wound up further isolating and dividing the Iranians in a disgraceful way.

In the region the Palestinians - after Mr. Arafat's historic errors - first in stoking the second *intifada*, and second in walking away from the peace proposal, which in another cruel irony, a year and a half later, he said that he would like to have. After he had an Israeli public who did not trust him any more and a government who would not give it to him. The Palestinians have elected a leader who has disavowed terror but may not yet be able to stop it. And may not be able to provide a government with sufficient capacity to maintain the confidence of his people.

In a classic example of the old adage that no good deed goes unpunished, Prime Minister Sharon's astonishingly courageous withdrawal of Gaza has generated a revolt in his own party which has placed his governance in question. And he has lost his partner Shimon Peres, one of the most visionary and brilliant leaders of this or any age.

Because the Labor party, at least the plurality, understandably, wants to pursue its economic and social agenda more vigorously, independent of the constraints of coalition government. And has chosen a leader, who quite admirably has spent his lifetime trying to advance the welfare of Israel's working families, and thankfully has promised to pursue and support reasonable efforts for peace.

So what are we supposed to make of all of this?

No Israeli artist in history could have written a political satire with as many twists and turns, ironies and dead ends, highs and lows, heartbreak and hilarity as the present reality in the last few years.

If you want me to say exactly where we are I am sorry, I can't do that.

I don't know enough about the realistic range of options available, and now without the authority of high office. However, since I love this country and have spent a lifetime trying to persuade people to reach beyond their anger, their fear, their hurt, their insecurity, to find common ground and our common humanity, I do have some observations which I offer as a friend.

I. If you live in a world where you cannot kill, jail or occupy all your enemies true peace and security can only come through principled compromise based on shared responsibilities and shared benefits.

II. If you work for peace and fail, fewer people will die than if you do not work at all. Since 2001 four times as many Israelis have been killed by terrorist attacks as perished in the eight years when we were all struggling for a peaceful solution. Eight years, which included 1998. Four times that many Palestinians have died in the same period.

III. If we fail to find a way forward, the inexorable demographic, geographic and political logic that drove Yitzhak Rabin to sign the 1993 accords in the first place will reassert itself with a vengeance.

The territories Israel has controlled since 1967, Rabin believed, do not protect it from missiles from without and make it more valuable to attack from within from terrorists and angry alienated young people.

The Palestinian Muslims will continue to grow in population at a more rapid rate than the Jewish Israelis. Confronting Israel with the Hobson's choice of permanently disenfranchising their neighbors, thus compromising its democratic ideals or losing its Jewish majority inconceivably putting in peril the ancient dream of a homeland.

If all this happens the United States will still stand by Israel and Israel will survive, but in a permanent state of anxiety with constant violence in varying degrees of intensity. In a region and a world with more and more terror as Palestinian misery and twisted theology are used by unscrupulous demagogues to justify the continued slaughter of the innocents.

Now, if you believe these observations are true then it seems to me it is obvious that now matter how difficult, three things have to be done.

First, the Palestinians have to use their opportunity in Gaza to do a better job of fighting terror and working with the Israeli security and military forces.

And they have to do a better job of giving their own people a capable, honest government, so that they can win genuinely contested elections.

Second, the leaders and the people of Israel have to find a way to organize their politics, so that the search for peace can continue no matter what the domestic policies are or the differences of detail are, in international affairs generally and the negotiations with the Palestinians in particular. Much remains to be done but everyone knows within a matter of a few degrees what the end will be.

Third, and most important here, the Jewish Diaspora and the friends of Israel and peace in the United States, Europe, and throughout the world, have a special responsibility to give financial, technical, and moral support to the Palestinians to help the Gaza gamble succeed and to the Israelis to give them time to sort through their political situation.

There is in Israel today a genuine and understandable debate given the fact that Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon under Prime Minister Barak which lead to a whole series of developments, which gave Lebanon a chance to be free and independent of Syria today and a genuine partner of Israel in the future.

Given the fact that under Prime Minister Sharon there was a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza which gives the Palestinian government at least some range of authority in an area where it has the chance to develop the capacity to cooperate against terror and improve the governance of its citizens. There is a genuine debate whether this policy should continue.

As a tactic, it perhaps should, I cannot make that judgment- that is a judgment for the people here. But as a strategy for the long term the idea that Israel can proceed unilaterally forever, without a cooperative relationship with a successful Palestinian state, it seems to me highly premature to make that concession for two reasons.

First of all the Palestinians also have a Diaspora, it is well to remember. I have met them all over the world. Outside the territories I have never met a Palestinian who is not a millionaire or a college professor.

Now, we can laugh about this, but they dominate the flour trade in Chile, they are the highest per capita income minority group in Ecuador. They have made terrific contributions to the United States.

If there were a partnership that worked with a government that was capable of fighting terror, committed to fighting terror, and able to govern its own people, it would not surprise me a bit that within 10 years after its commencement the economic power in the Middle East in an era of new energy policy would shift from the oil-producing countries to the mind-producing, mind-triumphing place here.

Second thing I want to say is unilateralism becomes a strategy rather than a tactic it would require a very high wall, and other good deeds may not go unpunished.

So where does this leave us, on this occasion when Hillary and Chelsea and I have come here to a place we love to honor the memory of a man I still miss constantly and painfully. A man who for all his eloquence valued deeds far more than words. I respectfully suggest that it is time for Israel and its supporters to do what Jews throughout history have always done better than any other group of people. Grieve the losses, laugh in the face of the

impossible difficulty of the present moment. Remember that in this life God gives no guarantees, only obligations. And get back to greening the desert of despair, one tree at a time.

Thank you and God bless you.

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