



A Conversation with President William J. Clinton

Moderated by: Nahum Barnea, Political Columnist,
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The Saban Forum Gala Dinner opened with a conversation with former President William J. Clinton, moderated by the Political Columnist for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Nahum Barnea. President Clinton spoke about the global economic situation, the peace process, and Iran. A full transcript of the conversation is available [here](#).

President Clinton began by saying that while the economy of the United States has been weakened by the global recession, the country's strength is still unparalleled, and its image has improved throughout the world. There was a brief period after the Cold War, President Clinton said, when the United States was the world's sole superpower. But now, the world is becoming increasingly interdependent, meaning that while other countries may gain power, the United States, by virtue of its freedoms and liberties, will be a positive and enduring force in the 21st century.

In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, President Clinton said that the United States cannot want peace more than the Israelis and the Palestinians want it for themselves. Because of this, the parties must take productive steps on their own; no outside party can effect change for them. President Clinton said that when he was in office, he benefited from the fact that Israelis and Palestinians had made a commitment to and started a process—the Oslo talks—prior to approaching the United States for assistance. He said that in contrast to this, President Obama took office at a challenging time—as Operation Cast Lead was ending, and the Israeli and Palestinians were far away from the negotiating table. Despite these challenges, President Clinton said, the Obama administration has shown a strong commitment to forging peace. He commended the administration for showing this commitment instead of telling the sides to “call us when you are ready,” as some have counseled, because both sides have taken productive steps—the Palestinian Authority has instituted capacity-building measures and Prime Minister Netanyahu has called for peace talks.

President Clinton said the Palestinian side should understand that the United States' commitment to Israel's security is unwavering, but also a productive element of the



peace process—it gives Israel cover to make important, and difficult, concessions. At the same time, he said, the Israeli side should understand that U.S. efforts to advance peace talks are not an antagonistic step against Israel. Rather, because the United States believes that the more time that goes by without a solution, the more difficult it will become to find a solution, it promotes the peace process when there are opportunities to do so.

Regarding Iran, President Clinton made clear that his opinions were his alone, and he was not speaking for the Obama administration. He said that one of the biggest concerns of Iran’s nuclear program is that if Iran gets a bomb, it will spark a nuclear arms race in the region. Such a nuclear arms race would pose a critical security threat; since it is difficult to secure nuclear weapons and the materials that go into producing them, someone could buy, steal, or give away the fissile material to an enemy of Israel or the United States. Given that the United States has received more support from Europe and Russia than ever before, the Obama administration should continue to pursue negotiations and if they fail, opt for comprehensive sanctions.

President Clinton said that the issue of Iran has created an opportunity in which the Arab world is almost united around the notion of forging peace with Israel. No longer does the Arab world need Israel as a “whipping boy to deflect popular discontent” within their societies. Rather, they are looking to address the Iranian threat by building a new coalition in the region.

President Clinton recounted mistakes he felt both the Israelis and Palestinians had made over the past decade, and said it is better for both sides to try to forge an agreement and fail than not to try at all. He said two things have not changed since the Oslo talks—geography and demography. The implications are exactly what they were then—Israelis and Palestinians are destined to share the land, and therefore must choose which future they want: one of compromise or one of constant battle. For Israelis, Clinton warned, the demographic issue is working against them. No matter how many Jews immigrate to Israel, the Palestinian population will still increase faster than the Jewish population. So, if Israel wants to be a democracy and Jewish state, it has no choice but to make a deal. In addition to these issues, the new issue of technology is working against Israel—it is only a matter of time until Hamas’s capabilities increase and their rockets become more accurate. For this reason, Clinton implored the Israeli audience to be committed to working toward a peace agreement.