

*Remarks by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the
Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations*

“Just Say It: Just Say Yes to a Jewish State”

Transcript

September 20, 2010

Thank you, Alan. I want to wish you and all the participants in this phone conference *Shana Tova*, a year of security and prosperity and, G-d willing, peace.

A few weeks ago, we began direct negotiations on the final status issues. Now I'm eager to continue them, and eager to complete them. We've been calling for direct negotiations for 18 months. We have asked that these negotiations be conducted without preconditions, so we were very pleased when they began, and hope they'll continue without preconditions.

There are two things that I think made a great impression on me. One is the commitment of President Obama and Secretary Clinton to assist in the process in our quest for peace. And I share that commitment. We want peace. We know what peace would mean for our people. We know what it would mean for our neighbors. We know what it would mean for the region. The second thing that made an impression on me was what I said a minute ago: the fact that there was an understanding that we don't turn our disagreements into preconditions for talks. Because if we do, we'll never get anywhere. After all, we've been trying to solve this conflict and it's being going on for over 90 years, and we disagree on quite a number of things. Believe me, every day the Palestinians do things I don't like: whether it's incitement in the schools or media, or an international campaign that they back to delegitimize Israel.

Just yesterday, a Palestinian Authority court ruled that the sale of Palestinian land to Israelis is punishable by death. You know, all these things do not square well with me, and my colleagues often question why is it that we're staying in the talks. Some have even questioned why I'm having peace talks with President Abbas when half of the Palestinian people are controlled by Hamas, which is a terror organization that openly calls for our destruction. I'm mentioning all of these things – and there are many others that I could raise here – because these could afford me many reasons to walk away from the table. But I haven't walked away from the table. I want to give these talks a chance to succeed. And I very much hope that President Abbas will have the same attitude. I expect him to sit down with me even when we disagree, and to work with me through those disagreements in a sincere effort to forge an historic compromise, which I believe is possible.

We got rid of the preconditions before the talks. We can't reintroduce them five minutes after the talks begin. We have to sustain a negotiation. My goal is to reach a framework

agreement with the Palestinians within one year. I brought that up first because I believe it's doable. Now I know there are many skeptics, but the skepticism that I hear is less about the timeframe – that is a year – and more about whether the Palestinian leadership is truly prepared to make an historic compromise that will end the conflict once and for all. And again I stress – if I have such a partner who is prepared to make an historic compromise, as I am, I think one year should be enough time to reach a framework agreement for peace.

For negotiations to succeed, we both have to meet. The two of us will have to meet face to face and discuss the major issues with a degree of discretion. I think we'll have to build a relationship of trust that will enable us to grapple with the very difficult challenges we face. I suggested one-on-one meetings every two weeks over the coming year, and thus far we've had very substantive discussions. We've agreed, as part of the idea of discretion, not to discuss the details of our discussions. But I can speak to you about the principles that are guiding me in these talks. I laid out two of those core principles – two foundations for a lasting peace – in my speech last year at Bar-Ilan University. And these two foundations of peace are recognition and security. Let me speak briefly about both.

First about recognition: It's time for the Palestinians to do something they have refused to do for 62 years. It's time for them to say yes to a Jewish state. Now what does it mean to recognize the Jewish state, or the nation-state of the Jewish people?

It means that the Palestinians recognize the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in our historic homeland. I recognized the Palestinians' right to self-determination and sovereignty. They must finally recognize the Jewish people's right to self-determination and sovereignty.

And just as the Jewish state has granted Jews around the world the right to immigrate to Israel, a Palestinian state could decide to grant Palestinians around the world the right to immigrate to their state. But Palestinian refugees do not have a right to come to the Jewish state.

A Jewish state also means that no one has a right to carve out sub-states within the Jewish state. There are well over 1 million of citizens of Israel who are not Jewish. They have equal rights, civil rights, but they don't have national rights. They have a right to vote, to be elected, and to be full and equal participants in Israel's democracy. But they don't have a right to have their own separate state.

Why is this recognition important?

It's important because the Palestinian leadership must begin to make clear to its own people that they are making a permanent peace with the Jewish people, a people that has a right to be here, a right to live in its own state and in its own homeland.

Ultimately, there will be no getting around this issue. For someone who is prepared to make lasting peace with Israel, no statement could be simpler: I recognize Israel as the Jewish state, the state of the Jewish people.

Now, mind you I'm not demanding of others what I am not prepared to do myself. At Bar-Ilan University last year, I said I was prepared to recognize a Palestinian state. This is the essence of peace: the nation-state of the Palestinian people.

I think President Abbas has to decide. He cannot skirt the issue. He cannot find clever language designed to obfuscate or to fudge it.

He needs to recognize the Jewish state. He needs to say it clearly and unequivocally. He needs to say it to his own people in their own language.

Remember that famous commercial – Just Do It? I think for the Palestinian leadership, it's even simpler: Just Say It. Say that you recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Say that you recognize the Jewish state.

This is the first point, and I think this is the essence of the problem that we've been facing all these years, the failure or the refusal to recognize the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

The second problem we face is security – I'm going to speak briefly about that too.

We do not want a repeat of what happened after Israel withdrew from Lebanon and Gaza. Those territories were turned into Iranian sponsored terror bases from which thousands of rockets were fired at Israel.

We have to ensure that we have solid security arrangements on the ground. We have to ensure that we can prevent the import of weapons from territories that we would vacate as part of a peace agreement with the Palestinians. And we have to make sure that we can address the potential threats to peace that will inevitably come. The first one you've seen – you've seen it in Lebanon, you've seen it in Gaza. These are the attempts – unfortunately successful in both those places – to smuggle a massive amount of weapons: rockets, missiles and other weapons from Iran to its proxies in the territories.

And then there are other threats: the threats of the reemergence of a potential Eastern front or from an internal change in Palestinian politics, and also there are other threats.

Let me give you an example of a country with which Israel had excellent relations – we had diplomatic ties, trade and economic ties – very robust – cultural exchanges, security ties, you name it – that country was called Iran. Overnight, however, our relationship changed.

What we need to understand is that a peace agreement by itself does not preserve the peace. We need to understand that the only peace that will hold in the Middle East is a peace that can be defended.

I have made clear that in order to defend the peace we need a long-term Israeli presence on the eastern side of a Palestinian state – that is, in the Jordan Valley. I have also said

that while I respect the Palestinians desire for sovereignty, I am convinced that we can reconcile that desire with our need for security.

I have to say another thing: I don't believe that under these circumstances, international troops will do the job. Experience has shown that countries seldom sustain a long-term military commitment abroad in places where their troops are subject to constant attacks. This is not true in places where those troops aren't subject to constant attacks, but you can find many examples of these two kinds of deployments, and I leave it to your imagination. You can see what happened to the international forces that were placed, for example, in Gaza before Hamas took it over. There were European forces; they were called EU BAM, and when the Hamas took over Gaza, and the fighting started, these forces simply disappeared. They evaporated very quickly.

We live in a very tough neighborhood, and the peace will be tested constantly. The only force that will be prepared to sustain a long-term commitment is a force that is absolutely convinced that it is defending its own people from attack. And if we have learned anything from history, it's that the only force that can be relied on to defend the Jewish people is the Israeli Defense Force.

I've said that security arrangements can be reassessed over time, but to say that an Israeli long-term presence is unacceptable from the start, it is simply – I believe – not a serious proposition. It's a proposition that ignores all the experience we've had since the peace process began. It ignores the rise of Iran. It ignores the rise of rocket warfare. It ignores reality. And I think there is a serious problem with it logically. I'm not telling you where Israeli sovereignty will be and will not be, but if I take examples from other countries which have the placement of troops from other lands there, even for many years, nobody has seriously said that because Germany and Korea and Japan had U.S. troops on their soil, this was seen as an affront to their respective sovereignties. Quite the contrary. So the principle that is announced, I think is questionable, and more importantly, it's adaptation to reality, to the reality that we live in, is also questionable. I think it's just not compatible with the reality that has happened.

I think we've made enormous strides for peace inside Israel. I think the political landscape has changed. I think that we have shown great flexibility for peace, but at the same time, Israel has shown a great concern and even a hardening of its positions on security and I think this is warranted by the experiences we've had in the last decade in which the territories that we vacated were taken up by Iran's proxies from which they targeted us with suicide attacks and rocket attacks. We want peace, but it has to be a secure peace and it there have to be solid security arrangements on the ground to ensure the peace – for us and for our Palestinian neighbors, and maybe for the entire neighborhood.

I believe there's a way that we can resolve these difficult issues. I don't think they're insurmountable. I believe that an agreement is possible.

But to succeed, President Abbas and I have to be willing to stick it out even when we disagree. We have to be willing to address the issues with an open mind.

We have to be flexible and creative in finding compromises that are anchored in a realistic assessment of what is possible. I expect Palestinian flexibility, not the same positions they've held over the last 10 or 15 years, but a real change just as we've shown that change, because I think you get peace when both sides move to that point in the center where peace is possible.

And we always have to keep in mind the enormous benefits to both our peoples that would come if we can defy the skeptics and forge an historic peace. If it's up to Israel, that's going to happen. If it's up to me, it will happen.

Let me wish all of you a good year, a Gmar Tov and a chag sameach. Shana tova, a year of peace.

Thank you.