

Statement by
H.E. Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister of the State of Israel
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Ladies and gentlemen, Israel has extended its hand in peace from the moment it was established 63 years ago. On behalf of Israel and the Jewish people, I extend that hand again today. I extend it to the people of Egypt and Jordan, with renewed friendship for neighbors with whom we have made peace. I extend it to the people of Turkey, with respect and good will. I extend it to the people of Libya and Tunisia, with admiration for those trying to build a democratic future. I extend it to the other peoples of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, with whom we want to forge a new beginning. I extend it to the people of Syria, Lebanon and Iran, with awe at the courage of those fighting brutal repression.

But most especially, I extend my hand to the Palestinian people, with whom we seek a just and lasting peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, in Israel our hope for peace never wanes. Our scientists, doctors, innovator apply their genius to improve the world of tomorrow. Our artists, our writers, enrich the heritage of humanity. Now, I know that this is not exactly the image of Israel that is often portrayed in this hall. After all, it was here in 1975 that the age-old yearning of my people to restore our national life in our ancient biblical homeland -- it was then that this was branded shamefully, as racism. And it was here in 1980, right here, that the historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt wasn't praised; it was denounced! And it's here, year after year that Israel is unjustly singled out for condemnation. It's singled out for condemnation more often than all the nations of the world combined. Twenty-one out of the 27 General Assembly resolutions condemn Israel -- the one true democracy in the Middle East.

Well, this is an unfortunate part of the U.N. institution. It's the -- the theater of the absurd. It doesn't only cast Israel as the villain; it often casts real villains in leading roles: Gadhafi's Libya chaired the U.N. Commission on Human Rights; Saddam's Iraq headed the U.N. Committee on Disarmament. You might say: That's the past. Well, here's what's happening now -- right now, today, Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon now presides over the U.N. Security Council. This means, in effect, that a terror organization presides over the body entrusted with guaranteeing the world's security.

You couldn't make this thing up.

So here in the U.N., automatic majorities can decide anything. They can decide that the sun sets in the west or rises in the west. I think the first has already been pre-ordained. But they can also decide -- they have decided -- that the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Judaism's holiest place, is occupied Palestinian territory.

And yet even here in the General Assembly, the truth can sometimes break through. In 1984 when I was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, I visited the great rabbi of Lubavich. He said to me -- and ladies and gentlemen, I don't want any of you to be offended because from personal experience of serving here, I know there are many honorable men and women, many capable and decent people, serving their nations here -- But here's what the rebbe said to me. He said to me, you'll be serving in a house of many lies. And then he said, remember that even in the darkest place, the light of a single candle can be seen far and wide.

Today I hope that the light of truth will shine, if only for a few minutes, in a hall that for too long has been a place of darkness for my country. So as Israel's prime minister, I didn't come here to win applause. I came here to speak the truth. The truth is -- the truth is that Israel wants peace. The truth is that I want peace. The truth is that in the Middle East at all times, but especially during these turbulent days, peace must be anchored in security. The truth is that we cannot achieve peace through U.N. resolutions, but only through direct negotiations between the parties. The truth is that so far the Palestinians have refused to negotiate. The truth is that Israel wants peace with a Palestinian state, but the Palestinians want a state without peace. And the truth is you shouldn't let that happen.

Ladies and gentlemen, when I first came here 27 years ago, the world was divided between East and West. Since then the Cold War ended, great civilizations have risen from centuries of slumber, hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty, countless more are poised to follow, and the remarkable thing is that so far this monumental historic shift has largely occurred peacefully. Yet a malignancy is now growing between East and West that threatens the peace of all. It seeks not to liberate, but to enslave, not to build, but to destroy.

That malignancy is militant Islam. It cloaks itself in the mantle of a great faith, yet it murders Jews, Christians and Muslims alike with unforgiving impartiality. On September 11th it killed thousands of Americans, and it left the twin towers in smoldering ruins. Last night I laid a wreath on the 9/11 memorial. It was deeply moving. But as I was going there, one thing echoed in my mind: the outrageous words of the president of Iran on this podium yesterday. He implied that 9/11 was an American conspiracy. Some of you left this hall. All of you should have.

Since 9/11, militant Islamists slaughtered countless other innocents -- in London and Madrid, in Baghdad and Mumbai, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, in every part of Israel. I believe that the greatest danger facing our world is that this fanaticism will arm itself with nuclear weapons. And this is precisely what Iran is trying to do.

Can you imagine that man who ranted here yesterday -- can you imagine him armed with nuclear weapons? The international community must stop Iran before it's too late.

That would be a tragedy. Millions of Arabs have taken to the streets to replace tyranny with liberty, and no one would benefit more than Israel if those committed to freedom and peace would prevail.

This is my fervent hope. But as the prime minister of Israel, I cannot risk the future of the Jewish state on wishful thinking. Leaders must see reality as it is, not as it ought to be. We must do our best to shape the future, but we cannot wish away the dangers of the present.

And the world around Israelis definitely becoming more dangerous. Militant Islam has already taken over Lebanon and Gaza. It's determined to tear apart the peace treaties between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Jordan. It's poisoned many Arab minds against Jews and Israel, against America and the West. It opposes not the policies of Israel but the existence of Israel.

Now, some argue that the spread of militant Islam, especially in these turbulent times -- if you want to slow it down, they argue, Israel must hurry to make concessions, to make territorial compromises. And this theory sounds simple. Basically it goes like this: Leave the territory, and peace will be advanced. The moderates will best strengthened, the radicals will be kept at bay. And don't worry about the pesky details of how Israel will actually defend itself; international troops will do the job.

These people say to me constantly: Just make a sweeping offer, and everything will work out. You know, there's only one problem with that theory. We've tried it and it hasn't worked. In 2000 Israel made a sweeping peace offer that met virtually all of the Palestinian demands. Arafat rejected it. The Palestinians then launched a terror attack that claimed a thousand Israeli lives.

Prime Minister Olmert afterwards made an even more sweeping offer, in 2008. President Abbas didn't even respond to it.

But Israel did more than just make sweeping offers. We actually left territory. We withdrew from Lebanon in 2000 and from every square inch of Gaza in 2005. That didn't calm the Islamic storm, the militant Islamic storm that threatens us. It only brought the storm closer and made it stronger.

Hezbollah and Hamas fired thousands of rockets against our cities from the very territories we vacated. See, when Israel left Lebanon and Gaza, the moderates didn't defeat the radicals, the moderates were devoured by the radicals. And I regret to say that international troops like UNIFIL in Lebanon and EUBAM in Gaza didn't stop the radicals from attacking Israel.

We left Gaza hoping for peace.

We didn't freeze the settlements in Gaza, we uprooted them. We did exactly what the theory says: Get out, go back to the 1967 borders, dismantle the settlements.

And I don't think people remember how far we went to achieve this. We uprooted thousands of people from their homes. We pulled children out of -- out of their schools and their kindergartens. We bulldozed synagogues. We even -- we even moved loved ones from their graves. And then, having done all that, we gave the keys of Gaza to President Abbas.

Now the theory says it should all work out, and President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority now could build a peaceful state in Gaza. You can remember that the entire world applauded. They applauded our withdrawal as an act of great statesmanship. It was a bold act of peace.

But ladies and gentlemen, we didn't get peace. We got war. We got Iran, which through its proxy Hamas promptly kicked out the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority collapsed in a day -- in one day.

President Abbas just said on this podium that the Palestinians are armed only with their hopes and dreams. Yeah, hopes, dreams and 10,000 missiles and Grad rockets supplied by Iran, not to mention the river of lethal weapons now flowing into Gaza from the Sinai, from Libya, and from elsewhere.

Thousands of missiles have already rained down on our cities. So you might understand that, given all this, Israelis rightly ask: What's to prevent this from happening again in the West Bank? See, most of our major cities in the south of the country are within a few dozen kilometers from Gaza. But in the center of the country, opposite the West Bank, our cities are a few hundred meters or at most a few kilometers away from the edge of the West Bank.

So I want to ask you. Would any of you -- would any of you bring danger so close to your cities, to your families? Would you act so recklessly with the lives of your citizens? Israelis prepared to have a Palestinian state in the West Bank, but we're not prepared to have another Gaza there. And that's why we need to have real security arrangements, which the Palestinians simply refuse to negotiate with us.

Israelis remember the bitter lessons of Gaza. Many of Israel's critics ignore them. They irresponsibly advise Israel to go down this same perilous path again. You read what these people say and it's as if nothing happened -- just repeating the same advice, the same formulas as though none of this happened.

And these critics continue to press Israel to make far-reaching concessions without first assuring Israel's security. They praise those who unwittingly feed the insatiable crocodile of militant Islam as bold statesmen. They cast as enemies of peace those of us who insist that we must first erect a sturdy barrier to keep the crocodile out, or at the very least jam an iron bar between its gaping jaws.

So in the face of the labels and the libels, Israel must heed better advice. Better a bad press than a good eulogy, and better still would be a fair press whose sense of history extends beyond breakfast, and which recognizes Israel's legitimate security concerns.

I believe that in serious peace negotiations, these needs and concerns can be properly addressed, but they will not be addressed without negotiations. And the needs are many, because Israel is such a tiny country. Without Judea and Samaria, the West Bank, Israel is all of 9 miles wide.

I want to put it for you in perspective, because you're all in the city. That's about two-thirds the length of Manhattan. It's the distance between Battery Park and Columbia University. And don't forget that the people who live in Brooklyn and New Jersey are considerably nicer than some of Israel's neighbors.

So how do you -- how do you protect such a tiny country, surrounded by people sworn to its destruction and armed to the teeth by Iran? Obviously you can't defend it from within that narrow space alone. Israel needs greater strategic depth, and that's exactly why Security Council Resolution 242 didn't require Israel to leave all the territories it captured in the Six-Day War. It talked about withdrawal from territories, to secure and defensible boundaries. And to defend itself, Israel must therefore maintain a long-term Israeli military presence in critical strategic areas in the West Bank.

I explained this to President Abbas. He answered that if a Palestinian state was to be a sovereign country, it could never accept such arrangements. Why not? America has had troops in Japan, Germany and South Korea for more than a half a century. Britain has had an air base in Cyprus. France has forces in three independent African nations. None of these states claim that they're not sovereign countries.

And there are many other vital security issues that also must be addressed. Take the issue of airspace. Again, Israel's small dimensions create huge security problems. America can be crossed by jet airplane in six hours. To fly across Israel, it takes three minutes. So is Israel's tiny airspace to be chopped in half and given to a Palestinian state not at peace with Israel?

Our major international airport is a few kilometers away from the West Bank. Without peace, will our planes become targets for anti-aircraft missiles placed in the adjacent Palestinian state? And how will we stop the smuggling into the West Bank?

I bring up these problems because they're not theoretical problems. They're very real. And for Israelis, they're life-and- death matters. All these potential cracks in Israel's security have to be sealed in a peace agreement before a Palestinian state is declared, not afterwards, because if you leave it afterwards, they won't be sealed. And these problems will explode in our face and explode the peace.

The Palestinians should first make peace with Israel and then get their state. But I also want to tell you this. After such a peace agreement is signed, Israel will not be the last country to welcome a Palestinian state as a new member of the United Nations. We will be the first.

And there's one more thing. Hamas has been violating international law by holding our soldier Gilad Shalit captive for five years.

They haven't given even one Red Cross visit. He's held in a dungeon, in darkness, against all international norms. Gilad Shalit is the son of Aviva and Noam Shalit. He is the grandson of Zvi Shalit, who escaped the Holocaust by coming to the -- in the 1930s as a boy to the land of Israel. Gilad Shalit is the son of every Israeli family. Every nation represented here should demand his immediate release. If you want to pass a resolution about the Middle East today, that's the resolution you should pass.

Ladies and gentlemen, last year in Israel in Bar-Ilan University, this year in the Knesset and in the U.S. Congress, I laid out my vision for peace in which a demilitarized Palestinian state recognizes the Jewish state. Yes, the Jewish state. After all, this is the body that recognized the Jewish state 64 years ago. Now, don't you think it's about time that Palestinians did the same?

The Jewish state of Israel will always protect the rights of all its minorities, including the more than 1million Arab citizens of Israel. I wish I could say the same thing about a future Palestinian state, for as Palestinian officials made clear the other day-- in fact, I think they made it right here in New York -- they said the Palestinian state won't allow any Jews in it. They'll be Jew-free -- Judenrein. That's ethnic cleansing. There are laws today in Ramallah that make the selling of land to Jews punishable by death. That's racism. And you know which laws this evokes.

Israel has no intention whatsoever to change the democratic character of our state. We just don't want the Palestinians to try to change the Jewish character of our state. We want to give up -- we want them to give up the fantasy of flooding Israel with millions of Palestinians.

President Abbas just stood here, and he said that the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the settlements. Well, that's odd. Our conflict has been raging for -- was raging for nearly half a century before there was a single Israeli settlement in the West Bank. So if what President Abbas is saying was true, then the -- I guess that the settlements he's talking about are Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jaffa, Be'er Sheva. Maybe that's what he meant the other day when he said that Israel has been occupying Palestinian land for 63 years. He didn't say from 1967; he said from 1948. I hope somebody will bother to ask him this question because it illustrates a simple truth: The core of the conflict is not the settlements. The settlements are a result of the conflict..

The settlements have to be -- it's an issue that has to be addressed and resolved in the course of negotiations. But the core of the conflict has always been and unfortunately remains the refusal of the Palestinians to recognize a Jewish state in *any* border.

I think it's time that the Palestinian leadership recognizes what every serious international leader has recognized, from Lord Balfour and Lloyd George in 1917, to President Truman in 1948, to President Obama just two days ago right here: Israel is the Jewish state.

President Abbas, stop walking around this issue. Recognize the Jewish state, and make peace with us. In such a genuine peace, Israel is prepared to make painful compromises. We believe that the Palestinians should be neither the citizens of Israel nor its subjects. They should live in a free state of their own. But they should be ready, like us, for compromise. And we will know that they're ready for compromise and for peace when they start taking Israel's security requirements seriously and when they stop denying our historical connection to our ancient homeland.

I often hear them accuse Israel of Judaizing Jerusalem. That's like accusing America of Americanizing Washington, or the British of Anglicizing London. You know why we're called "Jews"? Because we come from Judea.

In my office in Jerusalem, there's a -- there's an ancient seal. It's a signet ring of a Jewish official from the time of the Bible. The seal was found right next to the Western Wall, and it dates back 2,700 years, to the time of King Hezekiah. Now, there's a name of the Jewish official inscribed on the ring in Hebrew. His name was Netanyahu. That's my last name. My first name, Benjamin, dates back a thousand years earlier to Benjamin -- Binyamin -- the son of Jacob, who was also known as Israel. Jacob and his 12 sons roamed these same hills of Judea and Samaria 4,000 years ago, and there's been a continuous Jewish presence in the land ever since.

And for those Jews who were exiled from our land, they never stopped dreaming of coming back: Jews in Spain, on the eve of their expulsion; Jews in the Ukraine, fleeing the pogroms; Jews fighting the Warsaw Ghetto, as the Nazis were circling around it. They never stopped praying, they never stopped yearning. They whispered: Next year in Jerusalem. Next year in the promised land.

As the prime minister of Israel, I speak for a hundred generations of Jews who were dispersed throughout the lands, who suffered every evil under the Sun, but who never gave up hope of restoring their national life in the one and only Jewish state.

Ladies and gentlemen, I continue to hope that President Abbas will be my partner in peace. I've worked hard to advance that peace. The day I came into office, I called for direct negotiations without preconditions. President Abbas didn't respond. I outlined a vision of peace of two states for two peoples. He still didn't respond. I removed hundreds of roadblocks and checkpoints, to ease freedom of movement in the Palestinian areas; this facilitated a fantastic growth in the Palestinian economy. But again -- no response. I took the unprecedented step of freezing new buildings in the settlements for 10 months. No prime minister did that before, ever. Once again -- you applaud, but there was no response. No response.

In the last few weeks, American officials have put forward ideas to restart peace talks. There were things in those ideas about borders that I didn't like. There were things thereabout the Jewish state that I'm sure the Palestinians didn't like.

But with all my reservations, I was willing to move forward on these American ideas.

President Abbas, why don't you join me? We have to stop negotiating about the negotiations. Let's just get on with it. Let's negotiate peace.

I spent years defending Israel on the battlefield. I spent decades defending Israel in the court of public opinion. President Abbas, you've dedicated your life to advancing the Palestinian cause. Must this conflict continue for generations, or will we be able our children and our grandchildren to speak in years ahead of how we found a way to end it? That's what we should aim for, and that's what I believe we can achieve.

In two and a half years, we met in Jerusalem only once, even though my door has always been open to you. If you wish, I'll come to Ramallah. Actually, I have a better suggestion. We've both just flown thousands of miles to New York. Now we're in the same city. We're in the same building. So let's meet here today in the United Nations. Who's there to stop us? What is there to stop us? If we genuinely want peace, what is there to stop us from meeting today and beginning peace negotiations?

And I suggest we talk openly and honestly. Let's listen to one another. Let's do as we say in the Middle East: Let's talk "doogri". That means straightforward. I'll tell you my needs and concerns. You'll tell me yours. And with God's help, we'll find the common ground of peace.

There's an old Arab saying that you cannot applaud with one hand. Well, the same is true of peace. I cannot make peace alone. I cannot make peace without you. President Abbas, I extend my hand -- the hand of Israel -- in peace. I hope that you will grasp

that hand. We are both the sons of Abraham. My people call him Avraham. Your people call him Ibrahim. We share the same patriarch. We dwell in the same land. Our destinies are intertwined. Let us realize the vision of Isaiah --(Isaiah 9:1 in Hebrew) -- "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light." Let that light be the light of peace.