

The Right Honorable Tony Blair at AIPAC Policy Conference 2010

Transcript

Thank you very much, indeed. That's — it's amazing how nice people are to you when you stop being prime minister. It's a tremendous pleasure to be here and I was just backstage listening to Pastor DeeDee and — wow. I mean — I mean, I've got a new suggestion, we just get everyone else out of the Middle East and put Pastor DeeDee in there. I don't think they'd dare do anything else to make peace.

So anyway, it's a great pleasure to be with you. And Lonnie, thank you. My job is to — to try to get agreement between Israelis and Palestinians for the quartet, which tries to get agreement between the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia. I thought after being prime minister of Britain for 10 years I should try something easy. I am always described as a friend of Israel.

It is true, I am and I'm proud of it. And I'll tell you why I'm proud of it. Israel is a democracy. The politicians are in fear of the people, not the people in fear of the politicians. Citizens are governed by the rule of law, men and women are recoiled before the law.

In Israel, where you can worship your faith in the way you want or not as you choose. There is freedom of thought and speech. Israeli society is vibrant, its art electrifying, its culture open. In many respects, the Middle East region should regard Israel not as an enemy, but as a model.

I admire the fortitude of its people. I remember attending Independence Day at Mount Herzl. I met a young man; five of his family had been killed in a terrorist attack. He had been blinded, but there he was standing tall and strong and proud to be carrying one of the twelve torches of the tribes of Israel. Israelis and Palestinians are not destined to be enemies to each other. I regard myself as a true friend of both and month in and month out I spend with my team my time in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Sderot, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron, Jericho in small villages and towns down in the valley of the River Jordan, up in the hills of Sabastia, even in Gaza.

I speak to the business people, the local mayors, the security chiefs, the generals, the political leaders and of course, the people themselves. In most, not all, but the overwhelming majority I find a deep yearning to discover the path to peace and I believe with a passion that the only solution that works is one that delivers security to Israel and dignity to the Palestinian people —

A state for the Jewish people, a state for the Palestinian people. It means that once there is an agreement on the contours of a Palestinian state, that is that, the end of all claims, a settlement that is final. It means the Palestinian state has to be viable, independent and democratic.

This is the two-state solution. It's not a slogan. It is the only path to lasting peace and it can be done, but only if we understand the nature of the challenge. It isn't that sensible, well-intentioned people could not sit down and negotiate their way through issues of the borders —

Well, I always knew there were going to be some things about AIPAC I didn't quite understand, but — and I think it was — it was either Winston Churchill or Oscar Wilde, and there is a difference — who said that we were two peoples divided by a common language. But anyway, as I was saying — it isn't that sensible, well-intentioned people could not sit down and negotiate their way through the issues of borders, refugees, even Jerusalem. They could.

Most people on both sides have a sense in their head of what the answer could be. The challenge is not simply about what happens in the elevated heights of the negotiating chamber. The challenge arises from the breakdown of trust and that is about what happens down in the street in the daily experience of the people. When I try to describe this issue to outsiders I say first look at the map. You could fit the whole of Israel and the Palestinian territory into New Jersey. On Sunday, I flew by helicopter from Jordan, across the West Bank and landed by the Knesset for a meeting with the prime minister.

It took me less than 10 minutes. See how closely people live to each other, remember the history then realize the simple truth that Israel will not and cannot agree to a Palestinian state unless it is sure that state will be securely and properly governed.

I wouldn't take risks with my country's security. I don't ask Israel to take risks with theirs. Israel can't afford what happened in Gaza in 2006, happening in the West Bank in 2012. Rockets from Gaza, yes, with difficulty it can survive. Rockets a few minutes from Ben-Gurion it cannot. So when Israelis say they doubt if they have a partner for peace, it is not only about whether Palestinian leaders want peace, but whether they can deliver peace.

The tragedy for Palestinians is that the penalty for the extremism of the few is paid by the many in checkpoints, searches, permits, demolition, security measures that are often heavy and sometimes oppressive. Then they see that though they cannot build an area C, which constitutes 60 percent of the West Bank settlement expansion continues in disputed territory. So what do we do? First, start negotiations, right?

The Israeli prime minister said at Bar-Ilan he wants a two-state solution. The Palestinian president says he wants a two-state solution. So begin negotiating about it. Put all the issues on the table and talk. Senator George Mitchell, someone with whom I work closely and successfully making peace in Northern Ireland is now using all his considerable wisdom in this process. President Obama, Secretary Clinton are fully behind this endeavor. Reward their efforts. Get the negotiation going face to face, direct, prime minister to president and as soon as possible.

Secondly, however, let us acknowledge what has changed since the failure to reach agreement in the year 2000. Until the year 2000 and with the heroic attempts of President Clinton we attempted to achieve an agreement first and then shape reality around it, but it was not to be. After that came the Intifada; thousands died. Then came the withdrawal from Gaza. Israel got out; it took 7,000 settlers with it. In Israeli eyes it received violence and terror in return. The occupation deepened. Gaza was isolated. Faith in the peace process collapsed. Ten years on that faith now has to be restored. It can't be done in a summit. It has to be done patiently and over time on the ground.

It can't only be negotiated top down. It has to be built bottom up. Peace now will not come simply through an agreement negotiated. It must come through a reality created and sustained. It means building institutions of Palestinian government, not just well equipped loyal security forces, but civil police, courts, prisons, prosecutors, the whole infrastructure of the rule of law.

It means treating those who commit acts of terror, not only as enemies of Israel, but enemies of Palestine. It's about the economy, jobs, living standards, aspiration, ambition. It's about education, about children, taught in modern classrooms by good teachers and taught peace in order to live peacefully.

It's about human rights, equality, freedom, democracy. These things are the substance of statehood. The form of a state may be about its borders. The lifeblood is about what happens within those borders.

This is the work my team and others, like the United States and the European Police Mission are engaged in. And here is some good news. Prime Minister Salam Fayyad under President Abbas is trying to build the state from the bottom up. Over the past two years the Palestinian Authority has taken militia off the streets. New courthouses are being opened. Proper prison facilities are being built. In the last year the judicial system handled more cases than in the previous 10. The Israeli chief of defense staff regularly says this to me, "Tell the Palestinians if they do more we can do less."

The Palestinians are and Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Barak, with whom I work closely deserve credit for the steps taken in response.

Many of the main checkpoints are now removed or open. Israeli Arabs are coming over the border. They're helping reflate the economy. I can tell you today the latest figures. In 2009, not a good year for the world economy, the Palestinians economy grew by almost 10 percent. In 2010, for the first time Palestinians revenues will top \$2 billion.

Donors will provide only one third of the budget down from half in 2008 and hey, the Palestinians budget deficit will fall.

And the money, by the way, goes into a special treasury account certified by the World Bank and the IMF. In just over two months in Bethlehem we will hold the second Palestinians investment conference. Last year we succeeded in getting the single biggest foreign direct investment project Palestine has seen. This year we will showcase technology, financial services and tourism. Two years ago I could not have gone to Jenin. Now I go freely. There in the northern point in Palestine we will soon open a new industrial park at Jalame where some months back I sat on the Israeli side of the line talking with the mayor of Gilboa. My interpreter, since the mayor only spoke Hebrew, was his Arab deputy mayor.

My point is this: yes, the obstacles remain huge, of course. The distance to go is immense. The mistrust is still deep, but what you see nightly on your television screens is only one part of the story. Too often we see the hate. There is also the hope.

Now, sometimes people say to me, "You used to be prime minister of a great nation and now you spend your time examining earth mounds in obscure parts of Palestine arguing why hospital workers should be able to travel into East Jerusalem or getting electricity and water to small villages around Kalkilya." They think I've gone down in the world, they kind of — kind of feel sorry for me. But this one thing I learned in all the years of painstaking peacemaking in Northern Ireland, details matter.

They — they may seem trivial to us, but to the people who live them they are the difference between paralysis and possibility. So what I ask of Israel as its friend is not to risk its security, but to know that in changing the lives of the Palestinians who want peace and if empowered can deliver it, Israel's security is not forfeited, but enhanced.

Learn from we have — what we have done and let us do more, even in — in Gaza. Gilad Shalit's captivity is a disgrace. He should be released forthwith. Ordinary Gazans, many of whom are opposed to Hamas should have clean water and sanitation. Legitimate people, not the tunnel merchants should be able to do business and children, half the population there, should get the care they need. This I ask of Israel. What I ask of the Palestinians is to realize one thing above all else, the two-state solution begins not with a state of land, but a stand of mind.

The mentality has to move from resistance to governance. There can be no ambiguity, no wavering, no half heart towards terrorism. It is totally and completely without justification and we will never compromise in our opposition to it or those that practice it.

This I believe is the way to peace, but over all of this undertaking, challenging and fraught as it is already, lies a shadow. We are not the only external actors in this drama. Iran has conceived a role also and it is not for peace. Its regime sees this dispute as part of a far bigger picture and in this at least it is right. They are clear in what they seek. We should be clear also. Iran must not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons capability. They must know that we will do whatever it takes to stop them getting it.

The danger is if they suspect for a moment we might allow such a thing, we cannot and we will not and this is not simply an issue of Israel security. This is a matter of global security, mine, yours, all of us.

Iran's regime is the biggest destabilizing influence in the region. Israel understands that, but so do the Arab nations. It's why the Arab peace initiative launched in 2002 remains their earnest desire. The Middle East region faces a struggle that goes far beyond its borders and encompasses much more than the dispute between Israel and Palestine. The population of the Arab world is set to double in the next decade, but what sort of future will it be? The far site of among them know that it should be a future not of narrow minds, religious bigotry and hostility to others, but one in which across the divide of faith and race and geography we pursue together with common purpose the good of all humanity.

This is a vision we share, one in which a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians can help strengthen, not because the conflict is the core of the extremism, but because its resolution would be such a powerful harbinger of hope.

No person of Abrahamic faith can stay long in Jerusalem without feeling they are in their spiritual home. Jerusalem should always be an open city for all people who wish to worship free and without fear.

And I like the fact that my young son's friends in London number Jews and Muslims and Hindus as well as Christians and I look at this nation of the United States of America, a patchwork of different races and faiths woven into one and I think, this is the right way for the 21st Century world, this is the world we want to pass on to our children, this is the world my father fought for when Europe was plunged into the nightmare of an ideology that sought to treat one race as superior to others, the ideology that brought us the Holocaust, the most wretched abomination in human history. What we learned then we should learn still that human beings are born equal and should live free. And it is in striving for that ideal that the State of Israel came into being.

If one day Israel can be secure, recognized, understood and respected by the nations which surround it, if one day the Palestinian people can have their own state and can prosper in peace within it and beyond it we will bring more than peace to people who've lived too long with conflict. We will lift the scourge of extremism and bring hope to the world. Now, that is an endeavor really worth dedicating one's life to. Thank you very much.