

His Excellency
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The Future of the Middle East

I think that the story of Israel in the last 57 years is the story of a Jewish state which wants badly to live normally, side by side, with its neighbors and is finding difficulties on its way to attempting this. In my view, our story is the strife for normalization. Normalcy was the dream of the founding fathers of the Zionism movement more than 100 years ago. They were very modest people; they were very different than the freedom fighters and the nationalists of the 19th century. They were just people who were persecuted and who thought there would not be room for Jews in Europe and that they had to find somewhere else where Jews could become the majority and live as normal people

Israel, in many aspects, is a success story, but not in the most important aspect which is fighting for its existence. This is crazy. I mean there are so many other countries that were born after us and their existence is something that is obvious to them even if they do meet violence here and there. Still, the question of their mere existence is not very high on their agenda. They may have many other problems and some of them may be tough, but Israel is almost unique in the world in its quest for peace and normalization. There are, of course, people in Israel itself who don't believe that we deserve normalcy or that we will ever get normalcy. They believe that we don't have a better chance, that our neighbors will never comply with our existence.

But things happen. I mean, today the big majority, people on the right and on the left, and believe that we have to make peace and that to pay the price for peace is worthwhile. The debate in Israel has changed a lot. If you came to Israel 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago, the big debate was between those who said that we should keep Greater Israel and not give up on the West Bank and Gaza and those who said, "Yes, we have to compromise." Today, the big debate is whether we should do things unilaterally, whether we should go for long interim solutions, or whether we should go directly to a permanent solution. The idea of compromising or having a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, of talking to the PLO, this idea is shared by the mainstream parties in Israel on the right and on the left. This is, of course, a very important ideological victory for those who have preached for it since 1967.

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I think that without a permanent agreement with the Palestinians it won't be possible for us to normalize our lives. I also believe that such a permanent solution is possible. It encouraged me to begin the talks in Oslo at the end of 1992. To continue these efforts requires negotiations with Abu Mazen, who is now the president of the Palestinian Authority. It's not that if we had peace with the Palestinians all our problems would be solved. It is always wrong in public or private life to believe that only one component, if achieved, is going to change your life. Life is never so. For me, it's just kind of a precondition for normalization.

For many others, a precondition is establishing a constitution in Israel. It's inconceivable that after all these years we don't have a constitution. Changing the matrimonial laws so that people will be permitted to marry in civil marriage and not only in religious marriages and many other things which are very, very important for our internal lives are always pushed aside because of security, because of the war, because of all these things whose existence will always, always be more important than the normal issues. But things which we prevented, a terrorist attack, or God forbid, if we did not prevent a terrorist attack, are our news, and have been our news for too long.

What happened to us in 2000 was disastrous. It began with a belief of Ehud Barak that he could make peace

with the Palestinians, the Syrians and the Lebanese in 15 months. This was his commitment when he became Prime Minister in May 1999. At the time, this was too ambitious. He wanted very much to prove that he could do it against all odds, and then we had the talks at Camp David in July 2000—Clinton, Arafat and Barak. Those 15

understand how amateurish all the parties were—the Israelis, the Palestinians, and the Americans. When they approached this moment, they didn't understand what might be the negative ramifications of a failure. They believed that if it failed, that they could continue the talks, meet again perhaps after a month or two, and

something like this. So the only thing that we agreed upon officially was to meet after the election and to continue the good work. In our press communiqués we said that never before were so many problems breached between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

continue the work. There was a gap between the euphoria in the Middle East, when we all witnessed what was happening in Washington, at Camp David, and the frustration which was the result of this summit and which was conducive to the deterioration of the ground to the infamous visit

Then something very strange happened and there were gaps between the subjective thoughts of the negotiators and the way it was perceived by the public, in the world, on the Palestinian side and in Israel. When I was interviewed after the end of the Taba talks, I said that if we'd had two more weeks we could have signed a formal agreement. This was my subjective feeling then. I might have been right or wrong. It didn't happen. But many people said, "If, the most moderate government in Israel could not sign an agreement with the Palestinians, it means that the problem is insolvable." A moment of truth. The Palestinians may run away because of the Palestinian refugees; Israel may run away because of Jerusalem, because these are the two most delicate, most problematic, issues on our agenda. So maybe there's no solution. And the whole question of accusations—was it because of Arafat? Was it because of Barak? Was it because Clinton did not put his plans then, in Camp David, but rather five months later in December when the intifada was in place and it was very difficult to pass the most important plan that any American president had put on the agenda of Israelis and the Palestinians ever?

days between 10-25 of July, were critical days, which changed the Middle East. If there is one lesson, it is that you should never, ever do something like this without knowing in advance what the result should be.. The truth is that the whole world was sure that they knew exactly what they were doing, that when they finished the job there would be a nice press conference and they would announce white smoke. Even people who were knowledgeable and privy to the story said, "Well, it can't happen that the leader of the world is meeting with the Israeli leader and the Palestinian leader resulting in open-ended negotiations." Now, if you happen to read what's published about these 15 days, you'll

of Sharon at the Temple Mount.

The second stage was the talks in Taba. The talks in Taba took place in the midst of the intifada. The [intifada] was only beginning, but we then thought it was on the verge of the end. In these talks, many problems were solved, including the issue of territory, and some of the issues related to the Palestinian refugees. And we, the negotiators, felt that we were very close to an agreement. But it was also very close to the election and public opinion polls told us all that Barak would fail and that Sharon would be prime minister. We could not sign anything ten days before the election. It would have been crazy to do

About two weeks after the elections, when Sharon became prime minister, I met with Yasser Abed Rabo of the Palestinian Authority. Both of us participated in the Taba talks. While negotiating, and especially after the negotiations, we shared the feeling that we were on the verge of something big and that, had we had a little bit more



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time, we could have done it. This is my feeling, I'm an optimist. I believe that human beings can solve problems; I

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believe that there is a meeting of interests. So, I believe that we can do it. You believe that we can do it. Let us try.

When I was not in any official position I was ready to dedicate all my time to an effort to continue informally what we began formally in Taba and to prove to myself, and to you, that we can have an agreement that both of us can live with. Maybe we are too optimistic and when we get to the moment of truth, especially around the issues of refugees and Jerusalem. [Maybe] we will find out that we cannot have an agreement, which means that we have to go to something other than a permanent agreement, like a long interim. Our original idea was that we would have negotiations for several weeks or maybe months and finish this.

But reality is always different than your expectations, and what happened

was very different. First of all it became very cumbersome because more and more went wrong. For Israelis to go to Ramallah was forbidden; the Palestinian VIPs lost their privileges, so they could not come to Israel. It was made more difficult for them to get a permit to go abroad, so what we did was to meet at checkpoints and to negotiate there. We should write the story of our negotiations—one day we went to the checkpoint and it was raining. We kicked a journalist out of his own car and we negotiated there for two hours on this rainy day. Really, it was out of this world what happened in this period.

What we also did was to build coalitions. It was very important for Yasser Abed Rabo, who is not a member of the Fatah party but of a small party, to create relationships with people from the Fatah and businessmen and others, and the same was done by me. I brought into the picture people from the Likud, from the Shinui party, from the Labor Party, from my party, and people from the security establishment. As you know, in Israel if you have a former general involved in the peace process it's giving you the kosher stamp so that it is okay. We, the peaceniks, are seen as those to give up on everything, but if a former chief of staff of the army is saying, "Yes, it's okay" then it is like the kosher stamp.

So the negotiations took us two and one half years until we finished the job in October 2003 and inaugurated the Geneva initiative on December 1, 2003.

Now, it was very interesting to watch the development. At first we really did not know what kind of impact something like that would have. After all it was a private attempt and people could easily dismiss us. "These

hasbeens have much time and they can spend it on whatever crazy ideas they have, especially if they are ready to make peace. Why not? But why should anybody take it seriously?" But the reaction to it was very, very different. First of all, the media was very serious and I don't have to tell you the problems of the media. In fact, we didn't pay a penny to a PR company, but they took it because of the people who were involved. There were ministers from the Palestinian side, that were very famous on our side, people on our side were former ministers, former generals, former people of the leadership of the Mossad, and of the Shin Bet, the security service. So they had to take it seriously. Public opinion very shortly after showed that on both sides there was more than 40 percent approval for the Geneva initiative, which was twice my initial expectation.

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It was bigger in Israel in the Likud and Shinui party together, which means something. It means that people are sick and tired and want to have an agreement. They wanted something and we proved that mainstream people could live with an agreement, which referred to the details of the division of Jerusalem, the border between the two states, on the electromagnetic space, of the exact way to pay compensation to the refugees.

People took it seriously and Sharon took it seriously. He was asked last April 16 in a *New York Times* interview with Bill Safire why he was suggesting Gaza now. After all, he was elected prime minister in 2001 and he didn't suggest anything. There was no security on the political horizon and

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the feeling was that people were moving towards another year of terrorist activities and retaliation and terrorist activities and retaliation—a spiral that would never end, and when we came with a private initiative it was seen as if it was an official one because people wanted so much to put an end to the situation.

For myself, the question was whether we should support the withdrawal from Gaza or not, knowing that it was suggested actually in order to contradict our work, to divert attention from our work. Our decision was very clear. Since it was Sharon himself who decided to withdraw from Gaza, we could not be there against him and we decided to support him. Now, this is not very simple. I mean, this is not just a private initiative to support Sharon and to say, yes, it's okay. The interpretation, the translation, of this

support is a political one because, as much as Sharon succeeded in convincing whole world, including the Arab world and the Palestinians, that he was doing something which was worthwhile—he got the support of the world for it and became very popular in the world only as a result of his withdrawal from Gaza, he lost his majority. He lost in the referendum that he initiated in the Likud Party while he had been sure that if he was asking his own party whether they should leave Gaza or not they would say “yes.” So, he's in a situation whereby he is leading a minority unity government, which is really crazy. He needs the votes of my party, the Social Democratic Israel Party, which has only six votes. Without us, he couldn't form his government, and in a month he would have to go. Without us he won't have a budget in a month and we'll have to have early elections by June. June is three weeks before the withdrawal from Gaza. So what happened was a very interesting development whereby we began a process to prove to the two peoples, and to the world, that we can have peace. The main impact of our work, besides educating the people that it is possible and besides becoming a reference point about the future permanent agreement, was the withdrawal from Gaza by Sharon.

The most important thing in my opinion right now is not whether or not Israel is going to withdraw from Gaza. My belief is that Israel will withdraw from Gaza. It's not whether we're going to have a civil war as a result of this. We are not going to have a civil war, because it is a huge majority that supports the idea. A minority is against it, but the people of Israel are not torn between those who love Gaza and want to remain there with the settlements and those who believe it was idiotic to put settlements in this tiny area which is the most crowded

place in the world in the first place. No, there is no civil war on the horizon. The question is, what will happen when Israel withdraws from Gaza? If you read Abu Mazen's interview in the *New York Times* last Monday, he said, “I'm not going to enter any kind of interim agreement again because this is going to strengthen the extremists on both sides who might torpedo a permanent agreement.” Meanwhile Sharon, is talking about a continuation of a long-term interim agreement.

The election of Abu Mazen on the Palestinian side is a huge opportunity. The question of who was Arafat and what his role was at Camp David is something that should be left to the historians. The question is whether we are going to use the opportunity when somebody like Abu Mazen—who was the most important Palestinian leader, who stood up against Arafat and said to him, “Stop the armed intifada”—when he is there, committed to fight against terrorism, saying what he's saying. After the last terrorist attack in Tel Aviv he was the Palestinian leader who said for the first time that it was a terrorist attack. They never said that in the past. Never ever. For them it was something that was forbidden, and he

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said, “it was a terrorist attack. We should fight against these people.” Now, if we are going to see the withdrawal from Gaza as a collision course between an Israeli prime minister who wants to have an interim agreement and a Palestinian president who is speaking about a permanent agreement, I think that it might be

another situation whereby we might miss, God forbid, this opportunity. The United States is to become the referee, to tell us what, in its view, is the right thing to do, what, in its view, is the right interpretation of the road map to which both sides are committed, whether the next step can be a permanent solution or whether it should be an interim solution.

People talk about our withdrawal from Gaza. The world is so happy that such an extremist like Sharon is dismantling settlements and confronting the settlers that they don't want to put any burden on him before time. My fear is that if we don't do something like this now we might find ourselves in a few months in a

confrontation again, and I don't believe that we can afford it. I think that there are solutions to this problem. How can the United States square this circle? For example, by sending a detailed letter to Abu Mazen which will be parallel to the letter sent to Sharon in April, telling the view of the president of the United States about a permanent solution and updating the dates which appear in the road map which are old because we have never met the deadlines of the road map. The road map is talking about 2003-2004 and a permanent solution by now. President Bush said that he hates artificial dates, but without a specific date, especially a date for the permanent solution, I don't think that we'll be able to proceed. I can

understand that he hates an artificial date, but I presume that all of us are engaged in agreements and covenants and treaties at other points in our lives with dates which appear to be artificial—in one year, in two years, in three years, what are the natural dates? When summer comes? When it is raining? Usually these sentences do not appear in our agreements, and even if one hates artificial dates I believe that one should decide upon them in order to tell us both—Israelis and Palestinians—that we are no different than others, and even if we have our differences and even if we have distrust and mistrust and hatred and feelings of revenge, eventually we are human beings who can solve problems.

Thank you very much.

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