



CONFERENCE OF PRESIDENTS

of Major American Jewish Organizations

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Vice Prime Minister of Israel
Address to the Conference of Presidents
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Ladies and gentlemen, I know the question on the minds of many people is “What will be considered a victory in the present confrontation in the Middle East?” I can answer in a pragmatic manner. First that Hezbollah will never return to the southern border of Lebanon, which is against the resolution of the United Nations. The Lebanese army, combined with an international force, [should patrol that area], so that Hezbollah will not be able to use the area to shoot at Israel or arrange ambushes take our soldiers hostage. The second will be the return of the kidnapped soldiers to Israel. The third will be to stop the shooting of missiles and rockets into Israel, its people, its synagogues, its restaurants, its houses. The fourth is to prevent the assembly of another arsenal of long-range missiles and rockets that were provided by the Syrians and the Iranians to Hezbollah. The fifth is to free Lebanon from the control of Hezbollah.

It won't be as dramatic as a military victory, because this is not a confrontation between two armies. Would it be two armies, we would be able to reach a decision clearly and earlier. It's for the first time in history a confrontation between an organized army of a democratic country with a disorganized group of terrorists, spread in four places: in two states, Iran and Syria, one state-in-becoming, the Palestinians, and one state-within-a-state, Lebanon.

I agree completely with the President of the United States, who just a few minutes ago said that just a cease-fire will not answer the purpose. There must be a change in the whole situation of the Middle East. There must be a sustainable peace, a more profound arrangement that will answer the real problems. I am not speaking on behalf of the President, but I want to explain what in my eyes it means. It is not just a confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel. There are two or three other issues at stake. One is the future of Lebanon. Will Lebanon be under the spell of Hezbollah or will Lebanon become again an independent country? There were two non-Muslim countries in the Middle East: Lebanon – Christian, Israel – Jewish. Lebanon as a Christian state lost its character. Israel is fighting and will fight to keep its nature. It is not the first time that a foreign body in Lebanon is serving a foreign interest in Lebanon itself. The war is on Lebanese soil, but not for Lebanese destinies or Lebanese interests.

There is nothing that Lebanon should ask from Israel. We gave back to Lebanon all the land. We gave back to Lebanon all the water. We don't play any role in Lebanese politics. We wish Lebanon well. As people to people, we are not hostile. We live

together, have commerce together. It is our interest to see Lebanon successful economically and independent politically. Hezbollah is a Lebanese body, but serves no Lebanese purpose. Nobody understands why they started this war. Nobody understands their aims in this war, short of one thing. They want to “de-Lebanize” Lebanon and make Lebanon part of the sphere of influence of Iran. They fight in Lebanon to serve Iran. The fate of Lebanon is important. It is a multicultural country that can be a peaceful one or a belligerent one. A sustainable peace means to have a peaceful Lebanon, at peace with itself and at peace with her neighbors.

The second struggle is even more meaningful and of a long-range consequence. There are countries that feel that there is an Iranian ambition to take over the Middle East. It has a national taste of the Persians against the Arabs, a religious definition of Shiites against Sunnis, and countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf countries feel all of a sudden a threat of being expelled from their traditional way of life and submitting to a group of fanatical leaders who today are using Hezbollah and Hamas as their arms to change. This is the first time in my recollection that Saudi Arabia has stood up openly and condemned Hezbollah, and the same goes for Egypt and Jordan and others.

The real decision is will the Middle East be under the spell and control of a Persian group of highly ambitious ayatollahs, or will the Middle East keep its traditional character? The Iranians are not only attempting to change the face of the Middle East, but at the same time they want to acquire a nuclear capacity. That becomes a real problem for the rest of the world, because if the Iranians will have the bomb, there is a list of seven or eight countries that will follow suit. And each of them, whether they have an ambition or a conflict, will try to match it with a nuclear bomb, and some of the weapons of mass destruction may reach the hands of terrorists. And then the problem is how can the world be run with so many nuclear countries and nuclear terrorists? It was difficult to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and it will be even more difficult to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. I believe that the G8 leaders understand this, and that makes a new coalition.

In my judgment, Iran is not a great country nor strong country. They run wild, because they think the world is divided. There is no unified policy vis-à-vis Iran. Iran grew in the last 15 years from 30 million people to 70 million people, without creating 40 million new jobs. They introduced more poverty, more unemployment, more crime. Iran is not a homogenous country. The Persians are not more than 55% of it. Forty five percent are minorities, 30% Azeris, 10% Arabs, and so on. The only strength of Iran is the weakness of the international community. I just spoke with Kofi Annan and today they are going to take a decision to contain ambitious Iran. George Kennan, who introduced the idea of containment, meant it against a country, Russia, but now it's against a fanatic religion that has a different way of expressing itself. It is in many ways the future of the world, and in clear ways the future of the Middle East, that is at stake and must be decided.

We shall fight, because we were attacked. We didn't initiate the fight, but we cannot ignore it. We shall try to shorten it, but we shall not stop it until the attacks are stopped and a new situation is created. These are trying times, but I don't have the slightest doubt

that Israel will win. Not just in the military sense, but the real victory will be when we shall return to peace, to stop the shooting and firing, to stop the great ambition to destroy everything that is free, open, and hopeful. That in my judgment is the real meaning of the present confrontation. Thank you.

Question: The U.S. has indicated that it may be pushing for a ceasefire quicker than Israel may want – do you see foresee any tension in these negotiations between Israel and the U.S.?

No. The difficulties will be with Hezbollah. Israel does not doubt the position of the United States, but Hezbollah's actions. If the United States together with Lebanon and maybe other Arab countries will be able to contain and stop the fire, Israel will immediately accept it. If Hezbollah today stopped shooting, Israel would cease firing.

Question: Please comment on David Remnick's New Yorker article where he writes that "the most immediate result of this war will likely be to undermine Israeli consensus for territorial compromise with the Palestinians, shatter the fragile Lebanese polity, and radicalize more Muslims in the region and beyond."

David Remnick used very strong language. I don't see how you can radicalize the radicals anyway. The need for a compromise is not only an Israeli one, but an Arab one. Israel was told to give land for peace. It was hard for us. We gave all the land and we didn't get all the peace. Despite it, Israel didn't lose heart. After four wars with Egypt, we have peace with Egypt which we highly respect. After two wars with Jordan, we have peace with Jordan that we highly respect as well. We offered the Palestinians a Palestinian state in accordance with the Quartet and the Road Map that President Bush introduced. We said that we are ready to move out of most the territories, as we did move out completely from Gaza. I don't think that just because you are a radical, you are either right or you going to win. That is not my experience. I think radicals are radicals making mistakes.

Question: Please comment on the Qana incident and on the notion that Israel has squandered its military window of opportunity, and world opinion is turning against Israel.

You mean world opinion is to see Hezbollah winning the war? What is the alternative? Is anyone really interested to see Hezbollah and Hamas and the Iranians and the Syrians winning the war? If you want to stop it, you have to fight and go to war. In war you have a lot of mistakes. The greatest mistake is the war itself. Whoever wants to prevent mistakes must stop the war. I remember that there was in Kosovo an attack and over 10,000 civilians lost their lives. No one was talking about proportions. Frankly, when you have every night 100 rockets and missiles falling on your heads, you don't feel this is exactly proportionate. If somebody would suggest to us another method how to stop it, we should be happy. In Kfar Qana, the Israeli Air Force, which uses precision bombs, bombed the place which is 300 meters from the shelter where the children were located. We can't understand. In our experience 300 meters is safe enough distance not to hit

civilians. They are still investigating what happened. This does not prevent us from feeling deeply sorry about children losing their lives. When I was Minister of Foreign Affairs and we built the first hospital for children, we informed the Arab countries that when it comes to children, we shall consider their passports as international. Children belong to all of us and are the hope of humanity, and when they lose their lives it is a tragedy. But when you use civilian life as a shield for rockets and missiles, according to international law you have a right to defend yourself. It was totally unnecessary, if they wouldn't have near that place a base for launching rockets and missiles. We are terribly sorry, but it wasn't our choice.

Question: Do you see China and Russia as backing away from pressuring Iran to give up their nuclear program?

I don't think so. Neither the leaders of China nor Russia want to see a nuclearized world, including the terrorists. I don't think so. I think now the present tack of the American administration to create a coalition against Iran is the right thing to do.

Question: Is the Realignment Plan still on the agenda?

That's your worry right now? The world is wide enough to contain many agendas, but our first choice is to have a bilateral agreement, not a unilateral one. We want peace by agreement, and we are ready to pay the cost of peace, but if not, we shall do what is necessary. Right now I don't think this is the most burning issue on the Israeli agenda.

Question: What would have to change in Iran in order to ensure the security of Israel?

Iran is not Israel's problem alone. Iran is a problem for the rest of the world. The first priority is the nuclear problem. The second priority is the use of Hezbollah to divert attention from it. It's very difficult for Israel to be modest, but we admit that when it comes to Iran, we feel modest and we think that the world should handle this situation, not us. We are satisfied with the problems we have already, and don't want any further examples. If there is nobody in the world who can stop it, what can we do? The ones who can and should stop it is the world community. Iran is a danger to the world, not just to Israel.

Question: How will peace be achieved with Syria and Iran if the U.S. won't talk with them? Can you please update us on the Sheba Farms situation?

On the first issue, I do not believe that there will be any talks with Iran until there is a resolution of the United Nations. In a matter of hours, such a resolution will take place and that may change completely the position of Iran. If there is a unified position of the world on Iran, then Iran will return to her real dimension. And then we shall see. About the Sheba story, it is funny that Hezbollah only remembered, or they reminded themselves, about Sheba after they were out of explanations for the Lebanese people why they were fighting. They didn't say that they are going to fight in order to win Sheba. That was a late-coming explanation or excuse. The problem with Sheba is the following.

Sheba does not belong to Lebanon. It belongs to Syria. The United Nations resolution did not call upon Israel to leave Sheba. The United Nations resolution called on Israel to withdraw all forces to the international line, which we did, to have no intervention in Lebanon, which we did. We were complimented by the United Nations Secretary-General. Now today Sheba is the same problem. Let them decide to whom Sheba belongs, to Syria or Lebanon. Anyway, Israel did not annex Sheba and we don't consider Sheba as part of our motherland.

Question: Please comment on the coordination between Hamas, Hezbollah and the role of Iran, and please update us on the well-being of the three kidnapped soldiers.

On the first issue, I think the Palestinians are very anxious to separate between Hezbollah and Hamas vis-à-vis public opinion. They think that the Hamas fight was overshadowed by the Hezbollah craziness. They are more crazy than them. And they feel suddenly in the shadows, which they don't like. Nobody is mentioning them, and all this shooting of rockets and missiles is for public relations. Why they are shooting at Sderot? Nobody can understand. About the three soldiers that were taken hostage, to the best of our knowledge they are alive and healthy. And since the Foreign Minister of Lebanon announced that they are alive and healthy, he became in a way responsible for their future. Lebanon cannot behave like they are responsible for nothing and the whole world owes them everything. They have an army of 80,000 soldiers to fight, but they don't. Why? Because it's not pleasant to fight. So why do they want other people to fight for them? They are a government that doesn't govern. So why should anyone relate to it? They are occupied by the Hezbollah. The time has come for Lebanon to become serious. And we look upon Lebanon as the responsible party for the safety and well-being of the two soldiers that were taken hostage by the Hezbollah that resides and acts in Lebanon.

Question: If a ceasefire is arranged with Hezbollah, would that include Hamas as well? What is the Israeli strategy for stopping the Qassam rocket attacks?

I think that Hamas and Hezbollah are two different issues. They are not the same, in the eyes of the Americans too. They are differently organized. We have to fight them both politically and militarily. The military is going from one place to another place in Gaza to try and destroy the bases of the missiles. It goes on all the time, day after day, and we are trying also to hit the leaders of it. Because whoever is preparing a missile or bomb, is not going to feel that he is going to become an honorable citizen of the world. So we are really going after them. By the way to change a little bit the perception about the war, it's a new experience to fight this sort of a war. It's my feeling that our army is improving day to day, because we learn with experience, and the other side is getting more tired from day to day. It didn't yet reach the point of decision, but it won't take long for our army to develop more and more countermeasures.

Question: CNN has reported that there has been no mass exodus of Lebanese civilians from southern Lebanon – do you think Israel should maintain a longer ceasefire to allow people more time to leave?

Our target is not the civilian population in southern Lebanon, but only those houses that host either terrorists or their missiles. We are telling the people in southern Lebanon publicly, either get rid of the missiles in your homes – you cannot collect missiles like you are collecting cats or dogs, it's not a pet missile – or leave your home. It's your choice. We are again trying to deter terror not inflict tears and pain. They are not our targets. We would like to see them safe and living in peace. But we will go from one place to another place if the information will show that they hide missiles or rockets there.

Question: Are missiles still coming into Lebanon from Syria?

The missiles were supplied to the Hezbollah by Syria and Iran, and I think they tried to re-supply them. That is the reason why we bombed the bridges and passages, so they won't be able to carry missiles from Syria to Lebanon. And that's why we bombed the runways of the Beirut airport, because the Iranians tried to bring in missiles by plane to Hezbollah and we need to keep an eye on it and prevent the re-supply of those arms.

Questions: How have the recent attacks against Jewish targets in the Diaspora, including the one in Seattle, affected the decisions of the Israeli government?

They are our brothers and sisters, and citizens of the United States, and it so happens that both the United States and Israel cannot remain indifferent to it. The United States authorities should do what they can. We should do on our part what we can. The United States has to deal with whatever is taking place in America. And we shall do what we can about these murderers and killers. Terror became global. They don't have a front; they don't have a land; they don't have a uniform; they don't have a passport; they don't have a law. The world at large must coordinate to stop them from killing innocent people.

Question: What does the Israeli government know about Hezbollah underground infrastructure?

You want a full map? It is a good question from an operational point of view. I don't have a good answer, but we are trying to do our best. They shift from place to place, but I do believe our intelligence is doing a good job.

Question: Is the Israeli government doing enough to explain the human suffering of the Israelis?

It is painful and it is difficult. A mother that has, say, a baby and a soldier, can hardly sleep at night, because a missile can hit the baby and the soldier will go to the front. I won't deny it, to sit in a shelter for three weeks is also very difficult. But in my own experience I have never seen our people so united and so determined to face it. I visited a hospital in Haifa and there was a woman who immigrated to Israel three years ago, a single woman. She lost her leg. I asked her if she would like to go back to Russia. Her answer was, "I shall remain with my two legs in this place." This story really expresses the spirit of the people. Even if you lose a leg, you remain with your two legs. I

wouldn't like to sound bombastic, but I have an advantage on all you. I am 83 years old and have been through all the wars and all the peace, and I know there were terrible times. People thought they were going to lose, that they would destroy us. But through all those times I remained an optimist and a man of peace. I didn't change my mind. It is a difficult time, but we shall make it.

I want to express my profound thanks to the United States of America. We never ask the United States to send soldiers to defend us. We don't want any American mother to be worried because of us. Our boys will do it. But the moral support and political support is not less meaningful. It touches our hearts. We are very proud and very thankful for this attitude, by the Administration, by the Congress, by the press, by the people. It must be said that we are lucky to have such a Jewish community on our side. Who in the Arab world would help the Palestinians like the Jewish community helps Israel? The Palestinians would already have a state. Instead, they offer them declarations and rhetoric. But here we have your heart, and your feelings, and your identity. And at this time, I don't see the slightest distinction between the American people, the Jewish community, and the State of Israel. It's great to be together on the right side, not to lose hope, and to understand the nature and the cost and the difficulty of maintaining this struggle. But finally, it will serve the Arabs and serve the Muslims as well once they will get rid of their fanatic leaders.

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