

Amos Oz full transcript [English] at INSS' Annual International Conference, 2015

Amos Oz: Thank you, Anat, for those lovely opening words.

Good morning everyone. This morning I would like to speak about dreams in which Israel would be better off in letting go of soon.

We will start with the most important issue, an issue which in my eyes, is an issue of life and death for the State of Israel. If there won't be a two-state solution, and soon, then there will a single state here. If there is to be a single state here it will be an *Arab* state, from the sea to Jordan. If there is to be an Arab state here, I do not envy our children and grandchildren.

I said: "an Arab state from the sea to Jordan." I did not say a bi-national state. With the expectation of Switzerland, all bi-national and multinational states are finding it difficult: Belgium, Spain... Or otherwise, have already collapsed into a bloodbath: Lebanon, Cyprus, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine.

If there isn't a two-state solution soon, it is very possible that in order to delay the establishment of an Arab state from the sea to Jordan, there will temporarily rise a dictatorship of fanatical Jews, a dictatorship with religious and racists traits, a dictatorship that will oppress with an iron fist both the Arabs and its Jewish objectors. Such a dictatorship will not last long. Nearly no dictatorship of minority oppressing those

of the majority has lasted long in this new era. Even at the end of this road, a dictatorship of a Jewish minority over an Arab majority, even at the end of this road, lies an Arab state, from the sea to Jordan, and perhaps even an international boycott, or a bloodbath, or both these punishments together.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have all sorts of wise guys here, perhaps even in his very hall who tell us over and over again that there is no solution to the conflict, and therefore they preach the concept of “managing the conflict”. Perhaps it is worthwhile to turn their attention the fact that “managing the conflict” will look exactly like last summer. “Managing the conflict,” means, in fact, a continuum of the Second Lebanon War and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth. A continuum of the Operation Cast Lead, and Pillar of Defense. and Protective Edge; and crossbows at the ready and iron boots and beatings. And perhaps also an intifada or two in Jerusalem and in the territories until the collapse of the Palestinian Authority and the rise of Hamas, or an even more extreme and more fanatical faction than Hamas. This, in my eyes, is the meaning of “managing the conflict.”

I should note here, in parentheses: I do not represent anyone. I was elected by no one. Sometimes, when I give a good lecture, I manage to represent myself, but not always...

Not, let us talk for a moment or two about a *solution* to the conflict rather than “managing the conflict.” Let me tell you that for the past one hundred years, which you can call “our one hundred years of isolation”, for the past one hundred years and more, we have not

had a better window of opportunity than *now* to end this conflict. It is not because the Arabs have suddenly become Zionist. It is not because they are suddenly willing to recognize our historical right to Israel. But rather because Egypt and Jordan, and Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and the Maghreb countries, and even Assad's Syria, have, at present, and in the foreseeable future, a much more immediate enemy, more destructive, and more dangerous than the Jewish State.

Twelve years ago, a Saudi Arabia peace proposal was placed on our table, which is in fact the proposal of the Arab League. You are probably familiar with it. I certainly don't propose that Israel rushes to sign on the dotted line at the bottom of the current proposal. However, this proposal certainly justifies negotiations and it's bargaining. We should have done this 12 years ago; we might have been at a completely different place today. Such a proposal, if it had been submitted to use during Ben Gurion's time, during Levi Eshkol's time, during the negative days of the Arab Summit Conference in Khartoum - we would all have been dancing in the streets.

I will now tell you something controversial, which will probably be disputed in this hall too. Since at least the Six Day War in 1967, we have never been victorious in any war. Even the Yom Kippur War. A war is not a basketball game where the one who scores the most points wins the trophy, with a shake of hands and applause from the fans. In war, contrary to a basketball game, even if we have burnt more tanks than the enemy, and we have brought down more planes, and killed more enemies, and conquered enemy's lands,

it does not mean that we have won. The winner in a war, ladies and gentleman, is the one who achieves its objectives, and the loser, is the one who does not achieve its objectives.

In the Yom Kippur War, Sadat's objective was to shatter the status quo created in the Six Day War of 1967, and he succeeded in this. We were defeated, because we did not achieve our objective. We did not achieve our objective because we did not *have* any goals and *we could not have had* any goals that were possible to be achieved by military force.

Am I saying that military force is superfluous? Heaven forbid. In any given moment in the past 70 years, including this morning, when we're sitting and holding discussion in Ramat Aviv, our military force stands tirelessly between us and between destruction and annihilation. On condition the we remember: when talking about Israel and its neighbors, our military power can only prevent. Prevent tragedy, prevent annihilation, prevent mass injury to our population... But we shall never be able to *win*, because we have no goals achievable by military power.

That is why, as I said, I see the concept of "managing the conflict" as a formula for continuous trouble, not to mention defeat after defeat.

Many Israelis, too many Israelis, believe, or are brainwashed to believe, that if only we take a very large stick and beat the Arabs just one more time, very hard, they will panic and leave us alone once and for all, and everything will be alright. It has been almost 100

years that we have been picking up that big stick, and an even bigger one, and even bigger one, and it hasn't helped.

The right wing and the settlers tell us over and over again that we have a right to the whole of Western Israel, at the very least. That we have a right to the Temple Mount. But what do they actually mean when they use the word "right". A right is not what I really, really want. A right is not even something that I also feel really, really strongly that I deserve and that it should be mine. A right is something that others recognize as my right. If others do not recognize it as my right, or if only a portion recognize it as my right, then what I have is not a right but rather a claim. And this is the difference between Ramla and Ramallah. Between Haifa and Nablus. Between Beer Sheva and Hebron. The entire world, including the majority of the Arab and Muslim world, recognizes today, happily or unhappily, that Haifa or Beer Sheva is ours. Apart from Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, the whole world acknowledges that. However, no one in the world, apart from the settlers and perhaps their supporters on the far right in the United States, recognizes that Nablus and Ramallah belong to us. And this is the difference between a right and a claim.

The settlers and their supporters say: "we have a right to the whole of Israel and of course also the Temple Mount." However, in fact, they mean to say something completely different. Not that we have a right but rather we have a religious duty to hold every acreage.

When I pass by an ATM, I have, if I am not mistaken, a right to withdraw NIS 2,000. But this does not mean that I am obligated to withdraw NIS 2,000 each time that I pass by an ATM. When I stand next to a lawfully marked street crossing, of course I have a right to cross the road. And if there is also a green traffic light opposite the street and even a police officer signaling me by hand to cross the road, certainly, certainly, certainly I have a right to cross the road. But if I see a truck coming at me at a speed of 100km per hour, I also have the full right not to realize my right, and not to cross the road. I'm referring, for example, to the Temple Mount, why should the Jews not have the right to pray on the Temple Mount? However, we also have a right to realize that right during this lifetime.

I want to tell you, there are people among us, for whom this 70-year-old conflict, which involves 150 million Arabs, is insignificant. They are tired of it, they are bored, they want action. They want to lead us to war with all of the Islam. With Indonesia, with Malaysia, with Turkey, with nuclear Pakistan. They are in fact ready to go to war with the entire world. And I am asking you and myself: should we die for the sake of prayers on the Temple Mount? That is not written anywhere in the caves of Israel. This is not "be killed and do not misbehave." I'll tell you something harsh: if you seek a world war for the Temple Mount – please, without me. Without my children, without my grandchildren.

Even a war against the whole of Islam is not enough for them. We have, it would seem, those who are attempting to lead us to a war against the whole world.

You know, approximately 40 years ago, the day after the revolution of 1977 and the Likud's rise to power, the editor for one of the largest newspaper's in Israel was so thrilled by the revolution, so euphoric that he opened his personal article on the opening page with the unforgettable words, and I quote: "The triumph of the Likud party in the Israeli elections returns America to its real dimensions." Also today, I identify a certain Israeli attempt to "return America to its real dimensions." To destroy the alliance between America and Israel in favor of the alliance between our extreme right and the very extreme right in America. We must never forget that at least twice in our history, we have found ourselves in a war against, almost, the entire world. And in these two cases, it ended very badly.

I can see days, not far off – and I hope I'm mistaken – but I can see days not to far off in which the airport workers in Amsterdam or Dublin or Madrid will refuse to handle El Al planes. Shoppers will boycott Israeli produce and leave it on the shelves. Investors and tourists will keep away from this ostracized country. Ladies and gentlemen, this is not futurology, we are already half way there.

David Ben Gurion taught us the State of Israel will not be able to stand without the support of at least one powerful country. Which powerful country? It changes. Once it was England, once even Stalin's Russia. Once England and France together, and in recent decades the United States. However, the alliance with the US is definitely not part of the natural order.

Now if you allow me talk for a minute and a half about one of the most important distinctions one has to make both in the life of an individual and in the life of a country: the distinction between things that are constant and those that are variables. Those who are unable to make this differentiation – it is very dangerous to let them navigate the world. You know, Kishon had these direction to his home: left at the post box, right at the traffic light, then left again next to the man who is hitting his child. This is not a joke.

There are certainly some amongst you who remember that for decades they have scared us – that if we give back the territories the Soviet army will appear next to Kfar Saba. I cannot tell you with certainty that if we vacate the territories all will be wonderful. But it can be determined with certainty that the Soviet army next to Kfar Saba will not happen. This was a non-differentiation between variables to constants.

Now, let's move on to the present. Those very same scaremongers who have scared us for decades with “the Soviet army will approach the gates of Kfar Saba” are scaring us now that if we retreat from the territories rockets will fly over Tel Aviv, and over Ben Gurion Airport, and over Kfar Saba. I cannot say with certainty if they will or they wont. But please allow me to tell you with all authority of a first sergeant in the IDF: it's already possible to attack us with rockets over Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv, in Kfar Saba. Not only from Kalfilya but also from Iraq, from Pakistan, maybe also from Indonesia. Again, as with the matter of the Soviet army in Kfar Saba, we have in front of us a lack of distinction between variables and constants. If not today, then tomorrow or

the day after tomorrow, it will be possible to have direct, fatal and accurate rocket attacks from any point in the world to any location in the world.

Will we send the IDF to conquer the whole of planet Earth?

Ladies and gentlemen, the fact that the United States is a powerful country and our ally is a variable and it could change, if we try hard enough it will change faster than expected...

However, the Palestinians are our neighbors, and the fact that we live in the center of the Arab and Muslim world – that is a constant. Even the Iranian nuclear danger is a variable, not a constant one. Because even if we, or others in our name, decide to blow up Iran's nuclear facilities, we will not be able to blow up the knowledge. Because nuclear Pakistan could tomorrow, if not tonight, become an even more radical Islamic state than Iran – and it already has a nuclear weapon. And also, because no one is preventing our rich enemies from buying off-the-shelf nuclear weapons and directing them pointed towards us. And mainly, because in several years time, anyone who wants a weapon of mass destruction will be able to acquire it. Here, too, this constant parameter must be Israel's deterrent force. Meanwhile, the capabilities of our enemies, nuclear or otherwise, are variable matters, which are not dependent on us at the end of the day.

I've already told you that contrary to many of my left, pacifist friends, I cannot guarantee that if we sign a peace agreement and leave the territories everything will be great.

However, I believe that if we remain in the territories the situation will be worse. If we remain in the territories, there will eventually rise an Arab state from the sea to Jordan.

At this point, I want to level criticism at some of my left wing, pacifists friends and myself. There are millions of Israeli citizens who would perhaps relinquish the territories in return for peace, but they have no faith in the Arabs. They do not want to be seen as “suckers”. They are scared. We must never discount the fear or ridicule it, and we have done that occasionally. We can try to break down the fear. Perhaps try to calm it. Maybe it wouldn't hurt for the pacifist left to also share some of this fear. Because there is a reason to be afraid. A man who is afraid, rightly or wrongly, never deserves to be scorned or ridiculed nor should they be discounted. The issue of “peace in return for the territories” needs to be argued, not with exuberance, not with contempt, not with anti-Semitic caricatures. We need to argue as people who weigh one danger against another danger.

And, another error that several of my left, pacifists' friends make, I am not part of this but several friends are. Sometimes, it looks to them as if peace is placed on a very high shelf in the toyshop. Reach your hand and touch it. Our father, Rabin, nearly touched it with the Oslo Accords but he was too greedy at last minute to pay the full price and did not bring us this toy. Father Ehud Barak almost touched that toy of peace at Camp David but he was too greedy to pay the price and returned without peace. Also Father Olmert. We have a greedy father, we have a father who doesn't love us enough because otherwise our father would have already brought us the desired peace.

I reject all these notions.

I believe that peace needs more than one partner. A juicy Arab proverb goes: “It is impossible to clap hands with one hand.” After my lecture you are invited to try and find out...

Ladies and gentlemen, my key Zionist assumption for several decades is very simple. We are not alone in this country. We are not alone in Jerusalem. I tell my Palestinian friends the same thing: you are not alone in this country. There is no choice but to divide this small house into two even smaller apartments. Yes, a two family house. And “a good fence makes a good neighbor,” the poet Robert Frost said.

Now we are hearing here and there this idea of a bi-national state, and it’s coming from both the extreme left and actually from the extreme right. Moshe Arens, for instance. In my eyes, the idea of a bi-national state is a sad joke. Not only because of what I said at the start of my lecture as to what is happening in all the bi-national and multinational states in the world but rather for a much simpler reason. It is impossible to expect from both Israelis and Palestinians after 100 years of blood, sweat and tragedy to jump together into a double bed and start their honeymoon. If, in 1945, immediately after World War II someone were to suggest at merging Poland and Germany into one bi-national state – they would have to be admitted to a mental institution.

I was probably the first, at age 28, that wrote, a short time after the great victory in the Six Day War, that the occupation would corrupt us. In the very same article, I also wrote that the occupation would corrupt those occupied.

No. The Palestinians and we cannot suddenly turn into one big happy family because “us and them” are not a family, or united or happy. We are two unhappy families. We need a fair divorce rather than a honeymoon. After time – certainly! Perhaps a common market will emerge, a federation, a collaboration. But at the first stage, this country must become a two-family home because we are not going anywhere; we have nowhere else to go. And the Palestinians also are not going anywhere, they also have nowhere else.

The long quarrel between the Palestinians and us is not a Hollywood western of good versus bad but rather a Greek tragedy of justice versus justice. Very often, unfortunately, injustice versus injustice. Because of these views, more than few call me a traitor. But I am tell you, an ER surgeon treating a patient with multiple injuries - and if he’s a good doctor - he will ask himself: “What first? What is most urgent? Which of the injuries is most likely to kill the patient?” In the case of the State of Israel, it is not the religious coercion, it is not achievable housing, it is not even the price of a Milki (a type of packaged pudding). The continued quarrel with the Arabs is quickly becoming a war between Israel and the world. This kind of war endangers our very existence.

This may be the place to reveal to you, out loud, before hundred of people, our most guarded security secret, the most censored. And the secret is this: We are actually

weaker, *and have always been weaker* than all our enemies combined. Our enemies have been brainwashed for tens of years with wild rhetoric dealing with the destruction of Israel and the throwing of the Jews into the sea. They could have easily sent against us a million well-equipped fighters, or two million or three million, and we would not be here. But they have never sent us more than tens of thousands. Because, despite the wild rhetoric, the existence of Israel or its destruction was never a life and death issue: not for Syria, nor for Gaddafi's Libya, nor for Egypt, not even for the Ayatollah's of Iran. It if were a question of life and death for them, we would not be here by now.

We are, perhaps, a question of life and death for the Palestinians but we are lucky in that they are too small to prevail over us in any situation. With this, please remember, the total of all our enemies together could prevail over us if, heaven forbid, they have genuine motivation and not only a rhetorical and propaganda-based motivation. Our adventure on the Temple Mount, could, heaven forbid, could give them this motivation.

Look, I am not confident that it is possible to end quarrel with the Arabs overnight. But it is possible to try. I, for one, believe that it was already possible a long time ago to reduce the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an Israeli-Gaza conflict. I didn't say resolve it. To reduce it from an Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an Israeli-Gaza conflict. If only we hadn't been foolish enough to say, for years, that Arafat was too much of a blood-soaked assassin to do business with, and that Abu Mazen is so weak and harmless so why should we do business with him? It was possible, long ago, to reduce the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an Israeli-Gaza conflict. *And it is also possible to do it now.*

It is difficult, being a prophet in the land of prophets – there is too much competition. But let me tell you, from my long life's experience, that in the Middle East the words "forever", "never", or "at no price" usually mean something between six months and thirty years. If someone had told me, when I was called for reserve duty in the Sinai Desert in the Six Day War, and to the Golan Heights in the Yom Kippur War that one day I would go to visit Egypt and Jordan with an Egyptian visa or a Jordanian visa in my Israeli passport – I, the pacifist; I, the optimist; I, the peace instigator – would have said to whoever told me that: don't exaggerate, maybe my children, maybe my grandchildren but never me. I did travel to Egypt, to Jordan, I have an Egyptian and Jordanian visa in my passport.

Now, to conclude, I want to tell you, in case you haven't heard, that for dozens of years, this small country was undergoing a wonderful and fascinating cultural golden age. In literature, in cinema, in the arts, in Hi-Tech, in science, in technology, even in philosophy. Typically, people only talk about a golden age in nostalgic terms after its already passed. But Israel has been undergoing for decades a wonderful, creative golden age. And when it comes to spiritual creativity, Israel holds the status of a supreme power.

I want to tell you, if you have never thought of this before, perhaps now you will think of it: the city of Tel Aviv, where we are sitting now, the first Hebrew town, is at least in my eyes, a collective creation by the Jewish Israeli people and she is not any less important, and maybe even more important, say, then the rabbinical literature that was written in the

Diaspora. The city of Tel Aviv, in my eyes, is even more important, than the poetry from Spain. Maybe Tel Aviv is even no less wonderful than the Babylonian Talmud. And she is only one of the many collective creations that has been created in Israel in our hundred years of isolation.

Now I have a little confession. I love Israel also in times when I cannot tolerate it. You know why? Here's a short story. Stanley Fischer, who was the head of the Bank of Israel, told me that he went with his wife for a weekend to Cyprus to rest, Friday-Saturday. The flights from Ben Gurion Airport to Cyprus leave, for some reason, at one in the morning and land in Cyprus after two in the morning. At 2:30am, the head of the Bank of Israel and his wife are standing very tired by the conveyor belt waiting for their luggage. An Israeli traveler approaches him politely: "Excuse me, sir, are you the head of the Bank of Israel?" / "Yes" / "Tell me, where should I change money: here at the airport or tomorrow in town?" This is what I love. This would never happen to the head of the Bank of Germany nor to the head of the Bank of England nor to the head of the Bank of France.

That is Israel.

I love it even when I can't tolerate it. I love her because of its directness, because its rudeness. I love her because she is like this. If it is my fate to one-day fall down in the street, I want to fall in the street of Israel, not in London, not in Paris, not in Berlin, not in New York. If I fall here they will pick me up. I know – that as soon as I'm back on my

feet their will be many who will want to see my fall but if I fall again, their will be those who will pick me up.

I'll conclude. I am very fearful for the future. I am scared of the government's policy and also embarrassed by it. I am frightened by the fanaticism and by the increasing violence here and I am also embarrassed by it. But it's good for me to be an Israeli. It's good to be a citizen in a country that has 8 million prime ministers, 8 million prophets, 8 million messiahs. Each of them, every taxi driver with his or her personal formula for immediate redemption. Everyone shouts all the time and only a few listen. I listen, that is how I make a living. It's also not boring here. Sometimes, it's even fascinating spiritually and emotionally.

Ladies and gentleman, what I have seen her in my lifetime is a lot less, and also a lot more, than my parents and their grandparents could ever dream of.

Thank you for your patience and your tolerance. Thank you.