

## ***Ensuring a Jewish Democratic State of Israel***

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The vision of Israel as both a Jewish and a democratic state lies at the core of Israel's existence. These are not contradictory ideals, rather complementary values that enable Israel to exist as a secure state, living in peace with its neighbors to the extent possible in the land of Israel. This is my vision, and it underlies a long line of decisions we must make here at home. What follows are some of the conclusions that emerge from this vision and relate to the relationship between us and our Palestinian neighbors.

In the most immediate sense, the existence of the State of Israel as a democratic Jewish state requires one basic parameter: we need a Jewish majority. The moment there is no Jewish majority within the borders of Israel, no matter its specific territorial contours, a conflict between its values arises. Thus the struggle for the existence of the State of Israel is not only a struggle for its physical existence, one that the IDF wages on a daily basis, but is also a struggle for our existence as the national home of the Jewish people.

The fundamental Zionist idea that obligates us to defend ourselves and struggle for the existence of Israel embodies a single principle: the existence of a secure democratic Jewish state that exists in peace in the land of Israel – but not all of the land of Israel. If we decide that the existence of the Jewish people requires the settlement of Jews in every part of the land of Israel, we will lose the existence of the State of Israel as a democratic Jewish state. This is something we cannot allow to happen. That is not my vision.

Do not underestimate the situation. I presume that some think this is obvious. But it is not obvious in some parts of Israeli society, and it is not

obvious to some of Israel's leadership. It is not enough to muse fondly about the vision or try to work towards its realization. It is also necessary to grapple with a reality that is far from simple.

Today the Middle East is divided into two camps: the pragmatic and the radical. The bad news is that the extremists forging a radical Islamic ideology are growing stronger. Some of them are represented by a state such as Iran, an entity that has absolutely nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Should peace with the Palestinians be established early tomorrow morning, Iran will not change its ideology. It is using the conflict for its own ends in order to gain the support of public opinion in some Arab countries. Israel is not the only nation Iran is targeting; it acts against other regimes in the region as well. The understanding that Iran represents a threat against the whole world, certainly on this region, is one shared by the leaders of the entire world. Usually, Western leaders hear of the Iranian threat in Arabic, perhaps even more than in Hebrew.

Iran is not an isolated entity; it is allied with Hezbollah in Lebanon and supports Hamas. Indeed, if we examine the Palestinian Authority for a moment, the same regional division is reflected geographically and ideologically in the PA. On one side is the Gaza Strip controlled by Hamas, an extremist Islamic terrorist organization that does not represent the Palestinians' national interest but strives both to prevent us – and not only us – from living here, and to impose its ideology on the region. On the other side we have the Palestinian national movement, which still bases its ideology and policy on the two-state solution. The bad news is that the radical elements are gaining the upper hand. We must understand that this is a religious conflict that cannot be resolved, and to the extent that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict becomes more and more a religious one, our capacity for resolving it decreases. Time is working against us. We must understand that refraining from acting, the notion that "let's just wait until things get better and we have a more effective or a stronger partner," will lead us to a situation where the price for our inactivity, for our reluctance to make hard decisions, for our lack of daring to tell the truth to the public in the State of Israel, will be much steeper than the price of a peace settlement. This is a difficult task for any Israeli leader, and especially after nine months of negotiations, I have a reasonable assessment of the cost of the solution to the State of Israel.

The half-full glass is that for the first time we have the capacity to be in the same camp and create coalitions with the more pragmatic Arab states that understand that Israel is not the one threatening regional stability, states that understand that Iran is the real threat against them. Therefore, in the short term, there is also an opportunity here for us.

Examination of the situation in the Palestinian territories shows that because of its inherent weaknesses, the group representing the Palestinian national interest needs the Israeli security services to fight terrorism. Anyone looking for an excuse not to make progress can find it there. Over the years Israel has claimed either that there is no partner willing to arrive at a settlement with us, or that there is a partner but that the partner is weak and lacks the means to implement agreements. Now we have both. We have Hamas in the Gaza Strip that does not want a settlement but is powerful enough to act, and we have Fatah on the West Bank that wants a settlement, so I believe, but lacks the capacity to act.

So how do we face this situation? In reality, the solution is complex, but at the conceptual level it is fairly simple, requiring that we adopt a dual strategy with regard to the two prongs of the Palestinian society and leadership. On the one hand there is Hamas, a radical Islamic terrorist organization, an organization fighting not for the establishment of a Palestinian state but for the eradication of the Jewish state. This is an organization unwilling to acknowledge, as demanded by the international community, that Israel has the right to exist, and is unwilling to abandon terrorism and recognize previous agreements signed by the Palestinian national movement.

Hamas is not a partner for dialogue – though not because it should be punished for the years of terrorism it has inflicted on the citizens of Israel. If I thought that there was even the slightest chance of arriving at a settlement with it, my position would be different. But given that Hamas represents an ideology that does not allow for compromise, there is only one way to operate against it and that is by force.

At the same time, on the other side of the equation, we must arrive at agreements to end the conflict with the Palestinian national movement. We must remember that this is a zero sum game. A weak Hamas means a strong Fatah, whereas a Hamas gaining strength means that the forthcoming among the Palestinian leadership have no ability to arrive at a settlement.

Therefore, any idea that it is possible to deal with only one side of the equation and thereby resolve our situation in the region is mistaken. It is impossible to conduct a peace process with Fatah and simply hope that the situation will improve in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, it is impossible only to fight Hamas terrorism and not conduct a process over a settlement with Fatah and attain a resolution.

Without a doubt, Operation Cast Lead was a necessary move that achieved its goals. Its primary objective was to restore the power of deterrence to Israel. This was achieved. The fact is that Israel embarked on the operation – after many years of restraint, repeated fire on its citizens, the dismantling of settlements, and the withdrawal of every last soldier from the Gaza Strip – while having the legal right to respond to the aggression against it. The moment we left the Gaza Strip it came under the control of a terrorist organization. That is why the operation was necessary.

The operation was necessary not in order to reach a settlement with Hamas, rather to do what any civilized nation must do in order to protect its citizens – just as the free world fights terrorism globally, and rightly so. I do not and will not accept the comparison between terrorists and IDF soldiers. I have no problem with the fact that the world wants to judge Israel; we are part of the free world. The problem begins when the world starts to judge us unequally and impose blanket standards on the region, and not just compare us with the soldiers fighting against international terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Not a single democratic nation legally, socially, or morally draws a comparison between a premeditated murderer and someone who kills another by accident. It is true that the pain of a Palestinian mother and that of an Israeli mother is the same, but that is not a basis for comparison.

The basis for the comparison is between the terrorist, the murderer who seeks out teenagers standing in line in front of a discotheque or children on the bus on their way to school, and the IDF soldier who must fight terrorism under almost impossible circumstances, where terrorists live among the Palestinian population and during operations hide out in arms-filled mosques and hospitals. This is the situation in which we have to operate. When operating in such circumstances there are, unfortunately, civilian casualties, but this is never intentional. I know that during and after fighting, the IDF monitors its conduct with extreme care. Hence, for

example, the steps – unprecedented anywhere in the world – of phoning Palestinian civilians living in the Gaza Strip in order to inform them well ahead of time to evacuate the areas in which terrorists are hiding because they will be attacked.

A state's deterrence is not only a function of the number of tanks and airplanes at its disposal, but also a function of the decisions made by its leaders. Israel must do what is right to defend its citizens. I would make the same decisions, one by one, all over again. To the same extent it was important in 2006 to embark on the Second Lebanon War, it was right to embark on Operation Cast Lead in 2008.

The decisions I mentioned before must be made not in order to win the approval of anyone abroad, but for ourselves, because our very existence is at stake. To be an Israeli patriot means to make decisions in order to enable the existence of the State of Israel as part of the two-state solution. This is not a favor we are doing the Palestinians, the Arab world, or even the United States. This is a favor we are doing ourselves, because this is the only way to preserve the Jewish identity of a sovereign state in the land of Israel.

The greatest danger to us is the establishment of a bi-national state. A bi-national state requires internal arrangements, and that means that in the future it could become an Arab state in every respect. This is the real danger for anyone unwilling to make a decision, one who is hedging and responding only because there is external pressure and thinks there is no need to reach a decisive resolution. Imagine, if you will, that tomorrow morning the world were to announce: "Leave us alone. Work things out for yourselves. We don't want to be involved. Spill one another's blood to your hearts' content," and the Palestinians were to say: "You know what? Why two states? That reduces our territory, and we would have to cope alone; let's live together." The next thing you know, everyone has the right to vote. I admit it: I am not humane enough to want to grant the right to vote to everyone between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, because the principle of the State of Israel as the national home of the Jewish people is important to me. But because democratic values are no less important to me, I cannot allow us to reach this clash of values.

Unfortunately, there are people who do not understand the cost of not reaching a settlement, if the cost of reaching one is so high. It is not a

simple decision to move people out of their homes. But even after the suffering caused to the people who were evacuated, I still think it was the right decision. I know that there are people who would like to conduct negotiations in order to buy time. And there are those who would like to conduct negotiations in order to prove that there is no partner on the other side. There won't be a settlement, but at least we'll have an alibi with regard to the world. But the idea is to arrive at a settlement, not to prove there is no partner. Nine months of negotiations is the easiest part. The idea is not to present conditions that will make a settlement impossible or prove that we are the good guys and they the bad guys, but to attempt to reach a settlement. So that I am not misunderstood: I do not think that a settlement is around the corner. I do not think that the decisions that Israel must make are easy. Likewise, I hope there is someone on the other side who can make decisions.

The Palestinians will not be able to make decisions without the total support of the Arab world. Any compromise they decide on will require that support, and the Arab world cannot continue to straddle the fence. This support is important from the beginning of the process till its end. The Arab states must understand that any end to the conflict, any compromise on the part of the Palestinians, represents the Arab interest. This process is crucial and must be started now.

We conducted negotiations for nine months. They did not come to fruition in the form of an agreement, but they also did not hit a dead end. Today, it is possible and necessary to continue from the same point at which they stopped. The principles underlying the negotiations were presented in Sharm el-Sheikh, and the world as a whole adopted them. They contain nothing that an Israeli leader who wants to reach a settlement cannot live with. They do not contain any concession on any basic Israeli interest that any leader who has conceptually adopted the "two states for two nations" solution cannot endorse. Whoever wishes not to arrive at a settlement may have a problem. Whoever still believes in a Jewish presence in every part of the land of Israel should not pursue this course, and certainly should not pursue this course only to prove there is no partner.

Moreover, I do not believe in partial agreements and agreements in principle. We have had enough of those. The principle is: a detailed agreement providing a response to all the issues, led by the core issues that

require clearly articulated answers. In order to reach a settlement we have to provide a response to the reality that has been created on the ground in the last forty years, including what we call the settlement blocs, which themselves still need to be clearly defined but represent no more than single-digit percentages of Judea and Samaria. In the permanent settlement, it is in the national interest of the State of Israel to maintain the Jewish population centers because they are there. That is the reality. Whoever is incapable of making the distinction between them and isolated settlements has yet to come to terms with reality. And this coming to terms is critical. What about security arrangements? Appropriate security measures are not a favor to be bestowed on Israel. The world cannot allow itself the establishment of another terrorist state or another failed state in this region. Therefore, it is a common interest to create the security measures that are critical to reach the end of the conflict.

The principle dictates that Israel is a national home for the Jewish people, and a Palestinian state is a solution for Palestinians everywhere – whether in Gaza, in Judea and Samaria, or those kept in refugee camps for many long years for no good reason. This is also the national solution for Israel's Arab citizens who are citizens with equal rights in the democratic State of Israel, but within the framework of a two-state solution have no future national obligations to Israel. This is the formula, and the world can be enlisted to advance this formula.

What about Gaza? A permanent settlement does not in and of itself provide a solution for the Gaza Strip. Therefore the idea was to arrive at such a settlement and implement it only after a change in reality. That change in reality must start happening now. Some aspects are underway, certainly in Judea and Samaria. But it is impossible to hand over the key to a future Palestinian state to Hamas, and we therefore came to an agreement with the Palestinians that the establishment of a Palestinian state would occur only after a change in reality so that there is a responsible government in charge to accept the conditions of the Quartet and to fight terrorism.

Even if the establishment of a Palestinian state is postponed, we will have a period of time to clarify the status of the settlement blocs, the borders of the State of Israel, and the conditions for establishing a Palestinian state. It is possible to embark on the process: to leave the army in place but evacuate some of the settlements. We can begin unilaterally and start

moving towards the direction defined in the agreement. The price is not low and reality will make it difficult to implement. I hope that leaders on the Palestinian side will be found who will face the Palestinian people and say: “Perhaps this is not one hundred percent of what we hoped for, but this is the only way to provide a response to our national vision.” If the leaderships on both sides make the statement and mean it, we can do it.