
President Discusses American and European Alliance in Belgium

Concert Noble
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Our greatest opportunity and immediate goal is peace in the Middle East. After many false starts, and dashed hopes, and stolen lives, a settlement of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is now within reach. America and Europe have made a moral commitment: We will not stand by as another generation in the Holy Land grows up in an atmosphere of violence and hopelessness. America and Europe also share a strategic interest: By helping to build a lasting peace, we will remove an unsettled grievance that is used to stir hatred and violence across the Middle East.

Our efforts are guided by a clear vision: We're determined to see two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. (Applause.) The Palestinian people deserve a government that is representative, honest and peaceful. The people of Israel need an end to terror and a reliable, steadfast partner for peace. And the world must not rest until there is a just and lasting resolution of this conflict.

All the parties have responsibilities to meet. Arab states must end incitement in their own media, cut off public and private funding for terrorism, stop their support for extremist education, and establish normal relations with Israel. Palestinian leaders must confront and dismantle terrorist groups, fight corruption, encourage free enterprise, and rest true authority with the people. Only a democracy can serve the hopes of Palestinians, and make Israel secure, and raise the flag of a free Palestine. A successful Palestinian democracy should be Israel's top goal as well. So Israel must freeze settlement activity, help Palestinians build a thriving economy, and ensure that a new Palestinian state is truly viable, with contiguous territory on the West Bank. A state of scattered territories will not work. (Applause.) As Palestinian leaders assume responsibility for Gaza and increasingly larger territory, we will help them build the economic and political and security institutions needed to govern effectively.

These vital steps are also difficult steps, because progress requires new trust, and because terrorists will do all they can to destroy that trust. Yet we are moving forward in practical ways. Next month in London, Prime Minister Blair will host a conference to help the Palestinian people build the democratic institutions of their state. President Abbas has the opportunity to put forward a strategy of reform, which can and will gain financial support from the international community – including financial support. I hope he will seize the moment. I have asked Secretary Rice to attend the conference, and to convey America's strong support for the Palestinian people as they build a democratic state. And I appreciate the prominent role that Prime Minister Blair and other European leaders are playing in the cause of peace.

We seek peace between Israel and Palestine for its own sake. We also know that a free and peaceful Palestine can add to the momentum of reform throughout the broader Middle East. In the long run, we cannot live in peace and safety if the Middle East continues to produce ideologies of murder, and terrorists who seek the deadliest weapons. Regimes that terrorize their own people will not hesitate to support terror abroad. A status quo of tyranny and hopelessness in the Middle East – the false stability of dictatorship and stagnation – can only lead to deeper resentment in a troubled region, and further tragedy in free nations. The future of our nations, and the future of the Middle East, are linked – and our peace depends on their hope and development and freedom.

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Lasting, successful reform in the broader Middle East will not be imposed from the outside; it must be chosen from within. Governments must choose to fight corruption, abandon old habits of control, protect the rights of conscience and the rights of minorities. Governments must invest in the health and education of their people, and take responsibility for solving problems instead of simply blaming others. Citizens must choose to hold their governments accountable. The path isn't always easy, as any free people can testify – yet there's reason for confidence. Ultimately, men and women who seek the success of their nation will reject an ideology of oppression, anger, and fear. Ultimately, men and women will embrace participation and progress – and we are seeing the evidence in an arc of reform from Morocco to Bahrain to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our challenge is to encourage this progress by taking up the duties of great democracies. We must be on the side of democratic reformers, we must encourage democratic movements, and support democratic transitions in practical ways.

Europe and America should not expect or demand that reforms come all at once – that didn't happen in our own histories. My country took many years to include minorities and women in the full promise of America – and that struggle hasn't ended. Yet, while our expectations must be realistic, our ideals must be firm and they must be clear. We must expect higher standards from our friends and partners in the Middle East. The government of Saudi Arabia can demonstrate its leadership in the region by expanding the role of its people in determining their future. And the great and proud nation of Egypt, which showed the way toward peace in the Middle East, can now show the way toward democracy in the Middle East.

Our shared commitment to democratic progress is being tested in Lebanon – a once-thriving country that now suffers under the influence of an oppressive neighbor. Just as the Syrian regime must take stronger action to stop those who support violence and subversion in Iraq, and must end its support for terrorist groups seeking to destroy the hope of peace between Israelis and Palestinians, Syria must also end its occupation of Lebanon. (Applause.)

The Lebanese people have the right to be free, and the United States and Europe share an interest in a democratic, independent Lebanon. My nation and France worked to pass Security Council Resolution 1559, which demands that Lebanon's sovereignty be respected, that foreign troops and agents be withdrawn, and that free elections be conducted without foreign interference. In the last several months, the world has seen men and women voting in historic elections, from Kabul to Ramallah to Baghdad – and without Syrian interference, Lebanon's parliamentary elections in the spring can be another milestone of liberty.

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Across the Middle East – from the Palestinian Territories, to Lebanon, to Iraq, to Iran – I believe that the advance of freedom within nations will build the peace among nations. And one reason for this belief is the experience of Europe. In two world wars, Europe saw the aggressive nature of tyranny, and the terrible cost of mistrust and division. In the Cold War, Europe saw the so-called stability of Yalta was a constant source of injustice and fear. And Europe also saw how the rise of democratic movements like Solidarity could part an Iron Curtain drawn by tyrants. The spread of freedom has helped to resolve old disputes, and the enlargement of NATO and the European Union have made partners out of former rivals. America supports Europe's democratic unity for the same reason we support the spread of democracy in the Middle East – because freedom leads to peace. And America supports a strong Europe because we need a strong partner in the hard work of advancing freedom in the world. (Applause.)

