

The White House
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

July 08, 2014

Remarks as Prepared by White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region Philip Gordon at the Ha'aretz Israel Conference for Peace

Tel Aviv, Israel

Thank you for that kind introduction. I also want to especially thank Ha'aretz publisher Amos Schocken, Ha'aretz Editor in Chief Aluf Ben, Ha'aretz CEO Ramri Guez and the Ha'aretz Peace Conference CEO Akiva Eldar. This is a remarkable event and I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to address it.

It is heartening to see such a robust turnout and so many important voices convened here today to discuss such an important issue at such a challenging moment. Cynics would say this conference is badly timed. Peace talks have been suspended, and the tragic kidnappings, killings, and demonstrations over the past several weeks mean that peace between Israelis and Palestinians is the wrong agenda.

I would argue just the opposite. Indeed, I applaud *Ha'aretz* for responding to the suspension of negotiations not by moving on to other issues but by assembling this distinguished group of experts and political leaders to ask how we can all do better. Because the lesson of the past several weeks is not that we would be better off focusing on other challenges but that the inability to resolve the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians inevitably means more tension, more resentment, more injustice, more insecurity, more tragedy, and more grief. And the sight of grieving families, Israeli and Palestinian, reminds us that the cost of this conflict remains unbearably high.

This conference is also taking place at a time of growing threats to Israel's security. Over the past several days, Hamas and other terrorist groups have launched dozens of rockets at Israeli towns and cities, forcing local populations into their shelters. The United States strongly condemns these attacks. No country should have to live under the constant threat of indiscriminate violence against innocent civilians. We support Israel's right to defend itself against these attacks. At the same time, we appreciate Prime Minister Netanyahu's call for acting responsibly. We, in turn, call on all sides to do all they can to restore calm and to take steps to protect civilians.

Before I talk about politics and diplomacy, I would like to convey President Obama's and Secretary Kerry's deep condolences to the families who lost loved ones over the past weeks. The pain felt in Israel for the kidnap and murder of Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Fraenkel resonated across America and throughout the world. The abduction and killing of Muhammad Abu Khdeir and several other innocent Palestinians was equally tragic.

The families of Naftali, a dual Israeli-American citizen, and of Muhammad have responded with noble resolve and humanity. Yishai Fraenkel, Naftali's uncle, responded to Muhammad's death by saying: "The life of an Arab is equally precious to that of a Jew. Murder is murder, whatever the nationality or age may be." And Muhammad's father, Hussein, asked: "Whether Jew or Arab, who can accept the kidnapping and killing of his son or daughter? I call on both sides to stop the bloodshed." That these two men spoke by phone on Sunday and comforted each other for the tragic losses they've suffered is an inspirational reminder of the common humanity that exists on both sides in the face of this senseless violence. We have strongly condemned these killings and we have offered our full support to Israel and the Palestinian Authority to find and bring the perpetrators to justice. While there has clearly been far too much recrimination and some reprehensible examples of racism on both sides, we appreciate that Prime Minister Netanyahu has unambiguously condemned Muhammad's killing and appealed to Israelis not to take justice in their own hands, and that President Abbas has condemned the kidnapping of the Israeli teens and maintained extensive security coordination with Israel throughout the crisis. This is a moment for leaders on both sides to demonstrate reason and calm, and ensure that extremists are marginalized and calls for retribution and revenge have no place on either side.

Regional Context

This conference is about efforts to make peace between Israelis and Palestinians. But I want to start by acknowledging that in a Middle East in turmoil, Israel faces threats on a wide variety of fronts. That is why President Obama has done so much to ensure that U.S.-Israel security cooperation is more extensive than ever. Whether it's the long-term provision of defense assistance; the unprecedented intelligence cooperation; the U.S. investments in missile-defense systems such as Iron Dome and Arrow; the joint work on new defense technologies; the recent agreement to supply advanced military capabilities including the V-22 Osprey and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter; or the high-level consultations we maintain through mechanisms like the U.S.-Israel Consultative Group; no one can question America's unshakable commitment to Israel's security. And I would like to reiterate here and now – on a day when air defense sirens are going off – that this commitment will not waver.

Our commitment to Israeli security means not just working closely with Israel to ensure its military edge, but doing all we can to deal with developments in the region that threaten Israel's security as well as our own.

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Israeli-Palestinian Peace

These are of course only some of the regional challenges that affect Israeli and American security interests alike. But how do they affect the quest for Middle East peace? Do the threats emanating from growing regional turmoil mean that the Palestinian issue should be set aside as a distraction, not worth the investment of time and political capital when there are so many other challenges for Israelis to meet? And in any case, hasn't the past year – or indeed the past 20 years – demonstrated the futility of such an effort?

In our view, the answer to both these questions is: no. What President Obama said in Jerusalem last March remains as true now as it was then: peace is just, necessary, and possible.

It is true that the last round of negotiations did not succeed and we find ourselves in an uneasy pause. We have not hidden our disappointment that the parties could not bridge the gaps that divide them. At the same time, we have no interest in a blame game. The unfortunate reality is that neither side prepared their publics or proved ready to make the difficult decisions required for an agreement. Trust has been eroded on both sides. Until it is restored, neither side will likely be ready to take risks for peace – even as they live with the dire consequences that result from its absence.

We understand that. But the United States did not invest so much effort into brokering peace talks because we believed it would be easy, or even that the gaps between the parties are narrow. It isn't, and they're not. The reason we have pursued this relentlessly – the reason Secretary Kerry devoted so much of his precious time and unparalleled energy to the pursuit of peace – is because of our firm belief that as hard as it is, peace is the only path to security for Israel and self-determination and dignity for the Palestinians. We have pursued it because all the alternatives, for Israel and the Palestinians, are worse. We have pursued it because time is on nobody's side.

Peace is necessary because given the demographics west of the Jordan River it's the only way to ensure a secure and democratic future for the Jewish state of Israel. While walls and missile defense systems can help protect against some threats, true safety for both sides will only come with a comprehensive negotiated settlement, and the real commitment and mutual trust required to make it last.

We know that many Israelis fear withdrawal from the West Bank due to the experience in Gaza, from which rockets continue to strike Israel, notwithstanding the full withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlements.

But it is precisely this outcome that we are determined to ensure is never repeated. That is why President Obama, supported by Secretary of State Kerry and Secretary of Defense Hagel, asked General John Allen to lead a security dialogue with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) regarding Israel's security in a two-state context. General Allen, a recently retired four-star Marine Corps General, is one of the sharpest military minds in the United States. He has worked closely with Israeli counterparts for years. There is no American better suited for this job.

For over a year now, General Allen has coordinated closely with his Israeli counterparts in the IDF to fully understand Israel's security challenges from Israel's perspective in a two-state context. He and his team have developed a broad series of approaches to security that address, but are certainly not limited to, the Jordan River Valley. We believe these approaches can make Israel more secure than it is today, and are consistent with the sovereignty of a future Palestinian state.

Sadly, much of the public debate about this work has been misinformed and misleading, which has created distracting and politically charged criticism. And while the details of this work remain classified, I want to make clear that General Allen and his IDF counterparts are taking into account a range of contingencies, including the rising threats we see around the Middle East today. The approaches that are being discussed would create one of the most secure borders in the world along both sides of the Jordan River.

By developing a layered defense that includes significantly strengthening the fences on both sides of the border, ensuring the right level of boots on the ground, by deploying state-of-the-art technology, and with a comprehensive program of rigorous testing, we can make the border safe against any type of conventional or unconventional threat – from individual

terrorists to a conventional armed force. We are well aware that technology alone cannot be the answer in making peace any more than it can be in protecting Israel without peace. But we also know that it can play a key role in making Israel's border with Jordan secure.

Despite the difficult political climate, recent actions by the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah demonstrate its courage and reliability as a security partner with Israel in order to further the cause of peace. This includes President Abbas' recent speech in Saudi Arabia – in Arabic – emphasizing the importance of security cooperation with Israel, as well as Palestinian Authority Security Force efforts in seeking to locate the three kidnapped teenagers and maintain calm in a highly charged environment.

The bottomline is that, based on this Security Dialogue, we are confident that, together with Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians we can create a comprehensive approach to security, proven through operational testing, to meet the highest standards anywhere in the world.

Security is a priority in working toward peace because we understand that Israel has to be strong to make peace. We also believe that peace will make Israel stronger. We are convinced that real security will come from a two-state solution that brings Israelis the lasting peace and secure borders they deserve, and brings Palestinians the sovereignty, freedom, and dignity they deserve.

Peace will also mean finally having Israel be broadly and universally accepted among the community of nations, reversing the growing international frustration about this conflict and undercutting the risk of Israel's isolation.

Israel confronts an undeniable reality: it cannot maintain military control of another people indefinitely. Doing so is not only wrong but a recipe for resentment and recurring instability. It will embolden extremists on both sides, tear at Israel's democratic fabric, and feed mutual dehumanization.

As the President has said, neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a sovereign, free, and secure people in their own land. Or to quote one of your own leaders, Ariel Sharon: "It is impossible to have a Jewish democratic state, at the same time to control all of Eretz Israel. If we insist on fulfilling the dream in its entirety, we are liable to lose it all."

Reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians would help turn the tide of international sentiment and sideline violent extremists, further bolstering Israel's security. We know all too well the troubles that can arise for Israel internationally when there is no movement on the political track, especially when settlement activity continues to make the potential peace map more difficult and to undermine international support for Israel. On this, I should also be clear of the United States' longstanding position: we consider settlements illegitimate and an impediment to progress on peace negotiations. Settlement announcements would be a counter-productive reaction to the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli teenagers.

Ehud Barak once warned of a 'tsunami' in New York, and as we speak here today, we're seeing signs already that pressure may be building. Progress on peace holds international challenges at bay. But it also opens up new possibilities for Israeli participation across the international system, particularly with Israel's Arab neighbors, who face common threats. In contrast, if we fail to come back to peace talks, renewed efforts to isolate Israel internationally and legitimize Palestinian statehood unilaterally are all but certain. The United States will do all it can to fight boycotts and other delegitimization efforts. But in many of these realms, particularly outside the Security Council, our ability to contain the damage is limited, and becoming more and more challenging. This is what American friends of Israel mean when they express concerns about the potential for Israeli isolation if peace talks do not succeed. Let me be absolutely clear that these are not threats. The United States will always have Israel's back. That's why we fight for it every day at the United Nations, where we have worked diligently to ensure Israel is treated fairly and on par with all other states.

But as Israel's greatest defender and closest friend we owe it to you to ask fundamental questions—which in fact many Israelis are asking themselves: how will Israel remain democratic and Jewish if it attempts to govern the millions of Palestinian Arabs who live in the West Bank? How will it have peace if it is unwilling to delineate a border, end the occupations and allow for Palestinian sovereignty, security, and dignity? How will we prevent other states from isolating Israel or supporting Palestinian efforts in international bodies if Israel is not seen as committed to peace?

We also believe that the growing turbulence in the wider Middle East is not a reason to downgrade the priority of peace with the Palestinians, but quite the opposite. Not only would a viable peace agreement boost Israel's standing internationally, it would provide the platform for Israel to be an integral and active part of a regional strategy and solution. It would boost trade and expand business and investment opportunities with Arab states.

Israel shares core interests and concerns with important regional partners, from Iran's nuclear program to the threat of violent extremism, and brings unparalleled resources, know-how, and expertise to the table. But harnessing this fully requires a resolution to Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. This is one reason why Secretary Kerry devoted so much time engaging the Arab League during the recent final status negotiations.

He repeatedly convened Arab Foreign Ministers from the Arab League Peace Initiative Follow-Up Committee and encouraged them to revitalize the API, including by supporting the concept of land swaps.

Given where we find ourselves, it is understandable that some on both sides are looking at other options, some of which were presented at this conference today. But most of these are stop-gaps at best. At worst, they are a recipe for continued or increased conflict or isolation. A "one-state solution" is implausible, and would effectively mean an end to the Jewish and democratic nature of your state. Unilateral annexation of West Bank territories populated by Israelis is wrong, illegal, and a recipe for Israel's isolation. The United States could never support it, and I doubt any of Israel's other friends would. Other unilateral or interim measures may appear tempting alternatives, but they do not solve Israel's and the Palestinians' long-term problems. In fact, they could deepen them. The fact remains, only a negotiated solution – two states for two peoples – can give Israelis and Palestinians the futures they need and deserve.

Israel should not take for granted the opportunity to negotiate that peace with President Abbas, who has shown time and again that he is committed to nonviolence and coexistence with Israel.

President Obama has articulated his vision for what peace looks like on several occasions. It hasn't changed. But it bears repeating today, and at this forum.

A lasting peace will involve two states for two peoples: Israel as a Jewish state and the homeland for the Jewish people, and the state of Palestine as the homeland for the Palestinian people, each state enjoying self-determination, mutual recognition, and peace. While the core issues of the conflict must be negotiated, the basis of those negotiations is clear: a viable Palestine, a secure Israel.

Negotiations should therefore result in two states, with permanent Palestinian borders with Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, and permanent Israeli borders with Palestine. The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states. Any peace agreement will require robust security provisions that safeguard Israel's security. And the Palestinian people must have the right to govern themselves, and reach their full potential, in an independent, sovereign and contiguous state.

The United States remains prepared to assist the parties in bridging the substantive gaps that remain. Our deep commitment has not waned, but it's not our commitment by which peace will live or die. It's yours, and your Palestinian neighbors'.

It will ultimately require courageous political decisions by Israeli and Palestinian leaders to find the common ground that enables them to resume direct negotiations. And when they demonstrate they are prepared to do so, the United States will be there, right by their side, to help them achieve the lasting peace their people so deserve.