

Rice Optimistic About Path to Peace in Middle East

But secretary warns there remains "much work to do" to achieve goal

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has expressed optimism about the chances for peace in the Middle East and of achieving President Bush's vision of Israel living side-by-side with a democratic Palestinian state.

Speaking February 6 in Jerusalem with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, Rice said that "this is a time of optimism" in the Middle East because the new leadership in the Palestinian territories has expressed its desire for a peaceful future with Israel, and because the Israeli government has decided to participate in a disengagement plan from Gaza and four settlements in the West Bank.

Rice said, however, that there remains "much work to do" to achieve a peaceful outcome in the region, such as making certain of an "effective fight against terrorism, because security and terrorism are at the core of peaceful existence."

"[W]e will ask of our partners and our friends here in Israel that Israel continue to take the hard decisions that must be taken in order to promote peace and to help the emergence of a democratic Palestinian state, and we will ask the parties in the region to be supportive of these elements," she said.

Following is the State Department transcript of remarks by Rice and Shalom:

(begin transcript)

Remarks With Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom After Meeting

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Jerusalem

February 6, 2005

FOREIGN MINISTER SHALOM: It is my great pleasure to welcome Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Israel in her first visit as Secretary of State. The Secretary comes in a time of great optimism. We are having a new opportunity that we are determined to seize. Tuesday's summit in Sharm el-Sheikh is a very important event, but the real test is of actions and not declarations. The real test is of, let's say, moving toward peace and not only of ceremonies. I believe the United States has a crucial role to play in our region in order to bring peace and quiet after so many years, and the Secretary's visit to Israel can help us to ensure that the infrastructure of terrorism is removed and in order to enable us to build an infrastructure of peace.

This is a new time. We are having a new era, and we believe that the United States will be very helpful for both parties to narrow the gaps and to move together toward peace.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much, Minister. We have met many times before. This is indeed my first trip to Israel as Secretary of State. I want to underscore what the Minister has said, that this is a time of optimism. It is a time of optimism because fundamental changes are underway in the Middle East as a whole. Fundamental changes are underway in the Palestinian territories and the new leadership in the Palestinian territories has expressed its desire for a peaceful future with Israel, and of course we are supportive of the Israeli government's decision to engage in a disengagement plan from the Gaza and four settlements in the West Bank.

I think all of these elements give us the possibility to get back onto the Road Map and to move toward the President, President Bush's vision, which he articulated in June of 2002, of two states, two democratic states living side by side in peace. There is much work to do in between, of course. We will have to, all of us, make certain that there is an effective fight against terrorism, because security and terrorism are at the core of peaceful existence. We will ask of our partners and our friends here in Israel that Israel continue to take the hard decisions that must be taken in order to promote peace and to help the emergence of a democratic Palestinian state, and we will ask the parties in the region to be supportive of these elements. And in this regard, we want to thank very much the Egyptian government for the decision to hold on Tuesday the summit between Prime Minister Sharon and President Abbas in [Sharm el-Sheikh] and for the attendance there of the Jordanian government, because the regional support for peace must be strong. Incitement must be stopped by all parties. There is a need to help the Palestinians with the development of the democratic institutions that will form the foundation of statehood and to make certain that we are all doing what we can for peace.

I have just been in London and in Berlin. I will be in Europe after this, and I can assure you, Minister, that our European colleagues -- I also talked with Foreign Minister Lavrov of Russia -- that our European colleagues, the members of the Quartet, stand ready to do everything that we can. And I most especially want to bring the personal commitment of President Bush and my own personal commitment to this process because this is a time of opportunity, and it is a time that we must seize. Thank you very much.

FOREIGN MINISTER SHALOM: I would like to join my colleague, the Secretary, by thanking the Egyptian government for hosting this summit in Sharm el-Sheikh on Tuesday. I raised the idea only about a month ago to have a new summit like we had in Aqaba, and I am very happy that we have the opportunity to have this kind of summit in Sharm el-Sheikh on Tuesday. It is very important that this summit will be fruitful and will be a turning point in order to enable us and the Palestinians to move together toward peace. And, of course, we will need, once again, your assistance, Madam Secretary, and I am sure that we will get it.

Thank you.

(end transcript)

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