

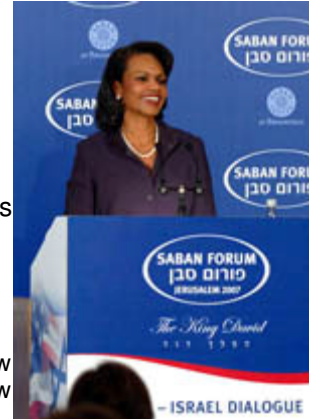
Remarks at the Saban Forum Dinner

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Jerusalem

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SECRETARY RICE: I recognize that I am the only thing standing between you and dinner and therefore, I will try not to be an academic and talk on and on. But I just want to say what a great pleasure it is to be back here in Israel. It seems like yesterday -- actually, maybe it was just yesterday that I was here. But seriously, I love visiting this great country and I remember coming here for the first time a number of years ago and I said at that time and I still believe that it was like coming home to a place that I had never been.



Of the many wonderful times that I have been in Israel, one that stays in my mind is the last visit that I had with Ariel Sharon. I went to his farm. You all know what he was like on his farm. He was relaxed, he was happy, and he said, "How do you like my farm?" I said, "Well, Prime Minister, actually, I'm kind of a city girl," and he said, "Oh, we can fix that," and he took me around, he introduced me to his sheep. And I called him about something a while later. It was actually, I think, the last time we spoke and I said, "How are your sheep?" He said, "Well, actually, they miss you." I think I have succeeded in becoming something of a farm girl, at least for the time being, but that story is only to say that we do, indeed, miss him and our prayers are with him and with the Sharon family.

Every time I come to Israel, when I look upon the land that you've made bloom here in the desert and I see the ancient Jerusalem-stone buildings and they're beside modern steel and glass structures, I drive past the aging hulks of Israeli tanks and recall the dear cost to your nation. I see all of these things and it reminds me that a confident Israel can do things that people considered impossible.

From your first days of independence, you were called by tragic necessity to fight and defend the Jewish state. And you did so then and you've done so since, overcoming insurmountable odds. But Israel has done not just that; this nation has a proud tradition of leaders who have never wavered in Israel's defense, but who used their position of strength to extend their hand confidently to historic enemies and to seek peace, knowing that ultimately, peace is the most lasting guarantor of security and prosperity.

We think of Meachem Begin and we think, of course, of Yitzhak Rabin, who was taken from us by an act of terror 12 years ago today, but whose dream of an Israel at peace lives on in the heart and soul of this nation. As we think of Ariel Sharon and of course, I think now of my good friend and your great leader, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, confidence is a defining part of Israel's pioneer spirit. But I understand that that confidence has been tested when it comes to security.

Many times, as I fly into this country, I'm reminded of a story that President Bush tells and this was before he became President and on a visit to Israel, he was taken up in a helicopter to see this country from up above. And he talks about how he decided then that America's enduring commitment to Israel's security would be unshakable on his watch and he has kept that promise.

When Israel was besieged by terror, the United States insisted that Israel had a right to defend itself. When people used to say, and we forget now that they used to say it, "One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter," it was President Bush who said no, the intentional murder of innocent people is wrong, period. And when violent extremists proclaim their desire to "wipe Israel off the map," it was the United States that has responded with a security package to help Israel defend its homeland against any and all threats.

Peace between Israelis and Palestinians is in the strategic interest of the United States, yet we will defend against any action, as we always have, that would compromise Israel's security. That is my commitment to

you. The commitment of America has given Israel the confidence to work with us and to work with responsible Palestinians and with our friends in the region to begin creating real conditions for peace, conditions that were not there just a few years ago when President Bush took office.

Just think back to 2001. Despite the extraordinary efforts of the Clinton Administration, and I see some of the people here who were involved in those efforts, peace negotiations had collapsed. The violence between Palestinians and Israelis was almost daily. People in this country feared the bus ride; any night out was another possibility of a Passover massacre waiting to happen. The underlying factors that had made peace elusive were there in 2001, as they were in 1967. Israel occupied the future Palestine and Palestinian leadership was complicit in terror.

This led the President and the Administration to try a different approach. The traditional idea had focused largely -- not exclusively, but largely on negotiating the contours of a Palestinian state, its borders, its -- the refugee solution, Jerusalem, all essential, but I submit to you, not sufficient for peace. Because what was also needed was to address the character of the Palestinian state: would it fight terrorism, would it govern justly, would it create opportunity for its people?

In our view, the security of the democratic Jewish state ultimately requires the creation of a responsible Palestinian state. And so the President laid out a vision: two states living side by side in peace and security. And we said that the fulfillment of this vision would require hard work on the ground to build the effective institutions of a democratic Palestinian state and that Israel would have to play its part.

Now I know that many people, perhaps many of you, think that our focus on democracy might have been a bit naïve and I've heard, "Well, it backfired with Hamas' election." Well, let me say, categorically, I disagree with that conclusion. The leaders of Hamas always had the power to affect decisions of war and peace. What they never had was the responsibility for exercising that power and that is what democracy gave them.

The Palestinians then held Hamas accountable for the first time and so did the international community. We confronted Hamas with the very choice it had always refused to make: you can be a political party or you can be a terrorist group, but you cannot be both. The leaders of Hamas have unfortunately made their choice and they've chosen the path of violence. And the international community has remained united around the only responsible policy: isolating Hamas until it is ready to choose peace.

That violent extremism of Hamas stands in stark contrast to the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, the legitimately elected president of all Palestinians, who won a clear mandate to seek peace with Israel. President Abbas and his government are demonstrating that they are real partners for peace. Ahmed Qurei and Foreign Minister Livni are negotiating seriously and in good faith. And President Abbas is showing that he and his government have the will to fight terrorism and govern effectively even if they do not always have the capacity. This is a clarifying choice for the Palestinian people between the path of peace and the path of violence. Responsible Palestinians still face great challenges. They need our support. They deserve our support.

The emergence of responsible Palestinian leaders has given Israel the confidence to reach out in partnership. As Prime Minister Olmert told the Knesset last month, the Palestinian leadership today is not a leadership of terror. The Prime Minister has spoken eloquently about Israel's concern for, in his words, the feelings of indignity and hardship that Palestinians feel and about the need for Israeli leaders, as Yitzhak Rabin did, to take chances, great chances for the sake of peace. This is the path that Ariel Sharon laid out at Aqaba when he said that it is in Israel's interest not to govern the Palestinians, but for the Palestinians to govern themselves in their own state.

So consider the opportunity that now exists. Most Israelis now believe that a peaceful Palestinian state is in the national interest of Israel and that true security requires finding a way to end the conflict and with it, the occupation that began in 1967. Most Palestinians believe that Israel will always be their neighbor and most believe that no Palestinian state will ever be born through violence. And among the Arab states, as they recently made clear in reaffirming the Arab League Peace Initiative, the question now is not whether Israel should exist, but on what terms to make peace with Israel.

Indeed, the rise of violent extremism has created a fundamentally new strategic alignment in the Middle East: responsible states that were once rivals now see that they may share a common interest in combating

a common threat and that a moderate Palestinian state can be a bulwark against that threat. The time has now come for all Arab states to demonstrate to their people and to the world that they are ready to be active partners for peace, peace with Israel, that they believe Israel has a permanent home in the Middle East and the peace that they seek is greater than just the absence of war.

At the same time, the international community is now more deeply and constructively engaged than before. One example of that engagement is Tony Blair's decision to accept the role of Quartet Special Envoy. He is strengthening President Abbas' efforts to build the institutions of a responsible, capable Palestinian state. I want to thank you for that honorable work.

(Applause.)

SECRETARY RICE: Now we hear, and I've heard it many, many times, now is not a propitious time for peace. I do not deny that the present moment is complicated and challenging. I do not deny that the situation in Gaza is deeply troubled. But when has the Middle East ever been uncomplicated or unchallenging? I believe we have a real opportunity now to advance the establishment of a peaceful Palestinian state.

That is why we intend to hold a serious and substantive meeting in Annapolis. Our current course is not meant to replace the roadmap nor to supplant direct negotiations between the parties, but to take this new opportunity and to pursue peace and to protect ourselves against those with far darker designs. We can succeed; failure is simply not an option.

In Hamas' coup in Gaza, in Hezbollah's war in Lebanon, and in the rise of an aggressive Iranian regime, we see that violent extremism is evolving in new and much more threatening ways. Violent extremism is not a threat only to the people of one nation or one race or one religion, but to everyone in the Middle East who seeks peace and a life of modernity with dignity. Responsible leaders and citizens are under attack all across this region. They are being assassinated in Lebanon. They are being murdered in Iraq. And they are being pressured in the Palestinian territories by the violent actions of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and their abhorrent sponsors.

Because of the threat of violent extremism, the two-state solution is, frankly, more urgent now than ever. Responsible Palestinian leaders are genuinely committed to fighting terrorism and building a democratic state, but they are overcoming a crippling legacy of misrule. These are tall orders and the Palestinians need partners. They need a realistic prospect of statehood and we need to help Palestinian reformers show that they can deliver on this hope; for as we read in Proverbs, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is my fear, that if we do not act now to show the Palestinians a way forward, others will show them a way forward. If the Palestinians are losing hope, especially among the young, we have a great danger before us. The prolonged experience of deprivation and humiliation can radicalize even normal people. We've all heard the stories and we've read the reports.

But what is different now and far more dangerous is the context. There are other stories, after all, being told and being written out there today: the stories of violent extremists, of Iranian-backed radicals, and of al-Qaida. They prey for these violent -- the prey for these violent extremists is the Palestinian youth, those who have known little else than intifada, occupation, and daily lives of trial. My fear is that if Palestinian reformers cannot deliver on the hope of an independent state, then the moderate center could collapse forever and the next generation of Palestinians could become lost souls of unbridled extremism.

This is, indeed, a trying and a challenging time, but it is no time to despair. This is a time for us all to make difficult decisions for the sake of peace and all Israelis should be confident that America is fully behind you, that we are fully committed to your security and that you can thus be bold in your pursuit of peace.

Ariel Sharon once told me a story. It was before the disengagement from Gaza. He told me that he went out to talk with Israeli settlers because he, of course, had been the father of the settler movement. He went to one family and explained to them why it was important to share the land and this man, the head of the family, said, "Let me show you something," and he showed Sharon the mezuzah above their house and he said, "You personally put that above our house. You personally told us that this was good for Israel, for us to settle here, and now you tell us that we have to leave for the good of Israel." Sharon was deeply pained by

that. I could see it when he told me the story. But that is what great leaders do. They make hard decisions confidently for the sake of peace.

Israelis have waited too long for the security that will come living side by side with a peaceful and democratic neighbor. Palestinians have waited too long for the dignity that will come with an independent state. We have all waited too long for peace and we should wait no longer. I believe that most Israelis want to end the occupation and that most Arab states and most Palestinians want to end the conflict. And I believe that we have two democratic leaders in Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas who know that the best way to serve their citizens is to build a basis for peace.

This is a moment to advance the historic, long-held aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians, but also to recognize that peace will require difficult, even painful sacrifices by both sides.

So let us summon our strength. Let us move forward confidently. And let us secure for all times what David Ben-Gurion called the legacy of a small nation which has endured great suffering and tribulations, but which is nevertheless great and eternal in spirit, vision, faith, and virtue.

Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

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