

Address by Prime Minister Shamir at the Madrid Peace Conference- 31 October 1991

In a historic speech, the prime minister of Israel evoked the history of the Arab-Israel conflict, mentioned the Arab refusal to come to terms with the existence of Israel, and spoke of the new realities in the Middle East after the Gulf War. He reiterated the Israeli Perception of the talks and expressed Israel's readiness to negotiate without stop, preferably in the Middle East, until agreements are reached. He hoped that the Arabs would not focus their attention on the territorial issue as this could lead to an impasse. He praised the role of the United States and called for a spirit of reconciliation and peace. Text:

Distinguished co-chairmen, ministers, members of delegations to the conference, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to represent the people of Israel at this historic moment, and a privilege to address this opening of peace talks between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

I would like to express our profound appreciation to our Spanish hosts for their hospitality, and for making this gathering for peace possible. In its two thousand years of wandering, the Jewish people paused here for several hundred years, until they were expelled 500 years ago, it was in Spain that the great Jewish poet and philosopher, Yehuda Halevi, expressed the yearning for Zion of all Jews, in the words:

"My heart is in the East, while I am in the uttermost West."

I would also like to extend our appreciation to the co-sponsors of this conference: to the U.S., which has maintained a strong friendship with Israel in an alliance that has overcome occasional differences; and to the Soviet Union, which saved the lives of many Jews during the Second World War, and has now opened its gates for the repatriation of Jews to their ancient homeland. The people of Israel look to this palace with great anticipation and expectation. We pray that this meeting will mark the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the Middle East; that it will signal the end of hostility, violence, terror and war; that it will bring dialogue, accommodation, coexistence and - above all - peace.

Distinguished co-chairmen, ladies and gentlemen:

To appreciate the meaning of peace for the people of Israel, one has to view today's Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel against the background of our history.

Jews have been persecuted throughout the ages in almost every continent. Some countries barely tolerated us, others oppressed, tortured, slaughtered and exiled us.

This century saw the Nazi regime set out to exterminate us. The Shoah, the Holocaust, the catastrophic genocide of unprecedented proportions which destroyed a third of our people, became possible because no one defended us. Being homeless, we were also defenceless. But it was not the Holocaust which made the world community recognize our rightful claim to the land of Israel. In fact, the rebirth of the State of Israel so soon after the Holocaust has made the world forget that our claim is immemorial. We are the only people who have lived in the Land of Israel without interruption for nearly 4,000 years; we are the only people, except for a short crusader kingdom, who have had an independent sovereignty in this land; we are the only people for whom Jerusalem has been a capital; we are the only people whose sacred places are only in the Land of Israel.

No nation has expressed its bond with its land with as much intensity and consistency as we have. For millennia our people repeated at every occasion the cry of the psalmist: "If I forget thee, Jerusalem, may my right hand lose its cunning." For millennia we have encouraged each other with the greeting. "Next year in Jerusalem." For millennia, our prayers, literature and folklore have expressed powerful longing to return to our land. Only Eretz-Yisrael, the Land of Israel, is our true homeland. Any other country, no matter how hospitable, is still a diaspora, a temporary station on the way home.

To others, it was not an attractive land. No one wanted it. Mark Twain described it only a hundred years ago as "a desolate country, which sits in sackcloth and ashes, a silent mournful expanse, which not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life."

The Zionist movement gave political expression to our claim to the Land of Israel. And in 1922, the League of Nations recognized the justice of this claim. It understood the compelling historic imperative of establishing a Jewish homeland in the Land of Israel. The United Nations reaffirmed this recognition after the Second World War.

Regrettably, the Arab leaders, whose friendship we wanted most, opposed a Jewish state in the region; and, with a few distinguished exceptions, they claimed that the Land of Israel is part of the Arab domain that stretches from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf.

In defiance of international will and legality, the Arab regimes attempted to overrun and destroy the Jewish State even before it was born. The Arab spokesman at the UN declared that the establishment of a Jewish state would cause a bloodbath which would make the slaughters of Ghengis Khan pale into insignificance.

In its declaration of independence on May 14, 1948, Israel stretched out its hand in peace to its Arab neighbours, calling for end to war and bloodshed. In response, seven Arab states invaded Israel. The UN resolution that partitioned the country was thus violated and effectively annulled.

The UN did not create Israel. The Jewish State came into being because the tiny Jewish community in what was Mandatory Palestine, rebelled against foreign imperialist rule. We did not conquer a foreign land. We repulsed the Arab onslaught, prevented Israel's annihilation, declared its independence and established a viable state and government institutions within a very short time.

After their attack on Israel failed, the Arab regimes continued their fight against Israel with boycott, blockade, terrorism and outright war. Soon after the establishment of Israel, they turned against the Jewish communities in Arab countries. A wave of oppression, expropriation and expulsion caused a mass exodus of some 800,000 Jews from lands they had inhabited from before the rise of Islam. Most of these Jewish refugees, stripped

of their considerable possessions, came to Israel. They were welcomed by the Jewish State. They were given shelter and support, and they were integrated into Israeli society together with half a million survivors of the European holocaust.

The Arab regimes' rejection of Israel's existence in the Middle East, and the continuous war they have waged against it, are part of history. There have been attempts to rewrite this history, which depict the Arabs as victims and Israel as the aggressor. Like attempts to deny the Holocaust, they will fail. With the demise of totalitarian regimes in most of the world, this perversion of history will disappear.

In their war against Israel's existence, the Arab governments took advantage of the Cold War. They enlisted the military, economic and political support of the Communist world against Israel, and they turned a local, regional conflict into an international powder-keg. This caused the Middle East to be flooded with arms, which fueled wars and turned the area into a dangerous battleground and a testing arena for sophisticated weapons. At the UN, the Arab states mustered the support of other Muslim countries and the Soviet bloc. Together they had an automatic majority for countless resolutions that perverted history, paraded fiction as fact, and made a travesty of the UN and its charter.

Arab hostility to Israel has also brought tragic human suffering to the Arab people. Tens of thousands have been killed and wounded. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs who lived in Mandatory Palestine were encouraged by their own leaders to flee from their homes. Their suffering is a blot on humanity. No decent person, least of all a Jew of this era, can be oblivious to this suffering.

Several hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs live in slums known as refugee camps in Gaza, Judea and Samaria. Attempts by Israel to rehabilitate and house them have been defeated by Arab objections. Nor has their fate been any better in Arab states. Unlike the Jewish refugees who came to Israel from Arab countries, most Arab refugees were neither welcomed nor integrated by their hosts. Only the Kingdom of Jordan accorded them citizenship. Their plight has been used as a political weapon against Israel.

The Arabs who have chosen to remain in Israel - Christian, Muslim and Druze - have become full-fledged citizens enjoying equal rights and representation in the legislature, in the judiciary and in all walks of life.

We, who over the centuries were denied access to our holy places, respect the religion of all faiths in our country. Our law guarantees freedom of worship and protects the holy places of every religion.

Distinguished co-chairmen, ladies and gentlemen,

I stand before you today in yet another quest for peace, not only on behalf of the State of Israel, but in the name of the entire Jewish people, that has maintained an unbreakable bond with the Land of Israel for almost 4,000 years.

Our pursuit of accommodation and peace has been relentless. For us, the ingathering of Jews into their ancient homeland, their integration in our society and the creation of the necessary infrastructure are at the very top of our national agenda. A nation that faces such a gigantic challenge would most naturally desire peace with all its neighbours. Since the beginning of Zionism, we have formulated innumerable peace proposals and plans. All of them were rejected. The first crack in the wall of hostility occurred in 1977 when the late president Anwar Sadat of Egypt decided to break the taboo and come to

Jerusalem. His gesture was reciprocated with enthusiasm by the people and the government of Israel, headed by Menachem Begin. This development led to the Camp David Accords and the Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel. Four years later, in May 1983, an agreement was signed with the lawful government of Lebanon. Unfortunately, this agreement was not fulfilled, because of outside intervention. But the precedent was set and we looked forward to courageous steps, similar to those of Anwar Sadat. Regrettably, not one Arab leader has seen fit to come forward and respond to our call for peace.

Today's gathering is a result of a sustained American effort, based on our own peace plan of May 1989 which, in turn, was founded on the Camp David Accords.

According to the American initiative, the purpose of this meeting is to launch direct peace negotiations between Israel and each of its neighbours, and multilateral negotiations on regional issues among all the countries of the region.

We have always believed that only direct, bilateral talks can bring peace. We have agreed to precede such talks with this ceremonial conference, but we hope that Arab consent to direct, bilateral talks indicates an understanding that there is no other way to peace. In the Middle East, this has special meaning, because such talks imply mutual acceptance; and the root cause of the conflict is the Arab refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the State of Israel.

The multilateral talks that would accompany the bilateral negotiations are a vital component in the process. In these talks, the essential ingredients of coexistence and regional cooperation will be discussed. There cannot be genuine peace in our region unless these regional issues are addressed and resolved.

We believe the goal of the bilateral negotiations is to sign peace treaties between Israel and its neighbours, and to reach an agreement on interim self-government arrangements with the Palestinian Arabs.

But nothing can be achieved without good will. I appeal to the Arab leaders, those who are here and those who have not yet joined the process: show us and the world that you accept Israel's existence. Demonstrate your readiness to accept Israel as a permanent entity in the region. Let the people in our region hear you speak in the language of reconciliation, coexistence and peace with Israel.

In Israel, there is an almost total consensus for the need for peace. We only differ on the best ways to achieve it. In most Arab countries the opposite seems to be true: the only differences are over the ways to push Israel into a defenceless position, and ultimately to destruction. We would like to see in your countries an end to poisonous preaching against Israel. We would like to see an indication of the kind of hunger for peace which characterizes Israeli society.

We appeal to you to renounce the Jihad against Israel. We appeal to you to denounce the PLO covenant which calls for Israel's destruction. We appeal to you to condemn declarations that call for Israel's annihilation, like the one issued by the rejectionist conference in Teheran last week. We appeal to you to let Jews who wish to leave your countries, go. And we address a call to the Palestinian Arabs: renounce violence and terrorism; use the universities in the administered territories - whose existence was made possible only by Israel - for learning and development, not agitation and violence; stop exposing your children to danger by sending them to throw bombs and stones at soldiers and civilian.

Just two days ago, we were reminded that Palestinian terrorism is still rampant, when a mother of seven children and a father of four were slaughtered in cold blood. We cannot remain indifferent and be expected to talk with people involved in such repulsive activities.

We appeal to you to shun dictators like Saddam Hussein who aim to destroy Israel; stop the brutal torture and murder of those who do not agree with you; allow us, and the world community, to build decent housing for the people who now live in refugee camps. Above all, we hope you finally realize that you could have been at this table long ago, soon after the Camp David Accords were first concluded, had you chosen dialogue instead of violence, coexistence instead of terrorism.

Ladies and gentlemen, we come to this process with an open heart, sincere intentions and great expectations. We are committed to negotiating without interruption until an agreement is reached. There will be problems, obstacles, crises and conflicting claims. But it is better to talk than to shed blood. Wars have not solved anything in our region. They have only caused misery, suffering, bereavement and hatred.

We know our partners to the negotiations will make territorial demands on Israel. But, as an examination of the conflict's long history makes clear, its nature is not territorial. It raged well before Israel acquired Judea, Samaria, Gaza and the Golan in a defensive war. There was no hint of recognition of Israel before that war in 1967, when the territories in question were not under Israeli control.

We are a nation of 4 million. The Arab nations from the Atlantic to the Gulf number 170 million. We control only 28,000 square kilometers. The Arabs possess a land mass of 14 million square kilometers. The issue is not territory, but our existence.

It will be regrettable if the talks focus primarily and exclusively on territory. It is the quickest way to an impasse. What we need, first and foremost, is the building of confidence, the removal of the danger of confrontation, and the development of relations in as many spheres as possible.

The issues are complex, and the negotiations will be lengthy and difficult. We submit that the best venue for the talks is in our region, in close proximity to the decision-makers, not in a foreign land. We invite our partners in this process to come to Israel for the first round of talks. On our part, we are ready to go to Jordan, to Lebanon and to Syria for the same purpose. There is no better way to make peace than to talk in each other's home. Avoiding such talks is a denial of the purpose of the negotiations. I would welcome a positive answer from the representatives of these states here and now. We must learn to live together. We must learn to live without war, without bloodshed. Judaism has given the world not only the belief in one God, but the idea that all men and women are created in God's image. There is no greater sin than to ravage this image by shedding blood. I am sure that there is no Arab mother who wants her son to die in battle - just as there is no Jewish mother who wants her son to die in war. I believe every mother wants her children to learn the art of living, not the science of war.

For many hundreds of years, wars, deep antagonisms and terrible suffering cursed this continent on which we meet. The nations of Europe saw the rise of dictators and their defeat after lengthy and painful struggles. Now, they are together - former bitter enemies - in a united community. They are discussing the good of the community, co-operating in all matters, acting almost as one unit. I envy them. I would like to see such a community rise in the Middle East. And I believe that, despite all differences between us, we should be able, gradually, to build a united regional, community. Today it is a dream - but we

have seen, in our own lifetime, some of the most fantastic dreams become reality. Today, the gulf separating the two sides is still too wide; the Arab hostility to Israel too deep; the lack of trust too immense, to permit a dramatic, quick solution. But we must start on the long road to reconciliation with this first step in the peace process.

We are convinced that human nature prefers peace to war and belligerence. We, who have had to fight seven wars and sacrifice many thousands of lives, glorify neither death nor war. The Jewish faith exalts peace even to the extent that it considers it a synonym for the Creator Himself. We yearn for peace. We pray for peace.

We believe the blessing of peace can turn the Middle East into a paradise; a center of cultural, scientific, medical and technological creativity. We can foresee a period of great economic progress that would put an end to misery, hunger and illiteracy. It could put the Middle East - the cradle of civilization - on the road to a new era.

Such a goal merits our devotion and dedication for as long as it is necessary until, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, we shall be able to turn "swords into plowshares" and bring the blessings of peace to our region.

Let me conclude with the words of the same prophet: "Peace, peace, both for far and near, says the Lord".

Distinguished co-chairmen, ladies and gentlemen,

Let us resolve to leave this hall with a united determination that from now on, any differences we may have will be solved only by negotiations, goodwill and mutual tolerance. Let us declare, here and now, an end to war, to belligerency and to hostility. Let us march forward together, to reconciliation and peace.