

Briefing by FM Netanyahu to the Diplomatic Corps - 17 Nov 2002

Opening Remarks

Thank you very much, all of you, for coming in on a Sunday, and I apologize for breaking your weekend. Unfortunately, the terrorists don't care much for Sunday, or Saturday, or Friday night, as you saw.

It is good to see all of you. We are rekindling a tradition I kept as prime minister and foreign minister. We would meet on regular occasions, and I intend to do the same now. I met with many of you during the last three years when I was not in office; in fact, one of the most memorable meetings I had was with Charge d'Affaires Ihab al-Sherif of Egypt. The last time we met was on a particular date, it was September 11; and, in the course of our discussion, we received news of the horrific tragedy, the horrific attacks in America. And I remember that I said to Charge d'Affaires Sherif that this is an event that would change history.

It has, but history takes time to unfold, and the full consequences of this change are being visited upon us as we speak. Of course, we are all experiencing in Israel, and in other countries as well, the savage attacks of terrorists. In the last 48 hours, Israel has received messages of condolences from many of your governments, and they're deeply appreciated. They are heartfelt, they express utter condemnation for what happened, and our appreciation is equally heartfelt.

But, at the outset, I'd like to make something clear. Israel expects the world not only to support us when we bury our dead; Israel expects the world to support us when we fight to defend our lives against the forces of terror, as is the right of every nation, under the right of self-defense. I think you can imagine what would happen if, in your own countries, worshipers would be killed or wounded, holy sites would be attacked - either churches, or mosques, or synagogues - and if this would be an unrelenting attack that attacks your people day in and day out. So we have to address this in the way any civilized country would do. The first obligation of any civilized government is to protect the lives of its citizens.

In this particular attack in Hebron, the terrorists were en route to Kiryat Arba; this is the best information we have. That is, 12 Israelis were killed and some 15 were wounded near the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the Tomb of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But we have clear information that the terrorists were en route to a mass killing of civilians in Kiryat Arba. The attack in the Hebron area follows the October 25th decision on the part of the Israeli government to vacate positions that were, in fact, taken up, or rather withdrawn by Israel. Israel withdrew from these areas in order to alleviate the pressure on the civilian population. And, in response, what we got was, of course, the massive attack that we have now.

Unfortunately, this is a pattern that is repetitive. We make gestures, we make accommodations, and what we get in return is an escalation of terror, an abuse of Israel's willingness to act in a humanitarian fashion. And this, of course, makes it very difficult to lessen the hardship to the population.

These attacks that we have witnessed in previous months come from all the organizations. Yesterday, or rather two days ago, it was from Islamic Jihad; before that, it was from Fatah-Tanzim, which is headed, of course, by Arafat. Before that, we had attacks from Hamas and other organizations. In other words, everyone is part of this; all of the terrorist organizations are engaged in what they call "the armed struggle." And the chosen sites are everywhere: they could be in the historic city of Hebron, they could be in a kibbutz within the Green Line like Kibbutz Metzger, in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, or anywhere in the country. The objective of these organizations is to kill Israelis, as many as possible. And, if they had the ability - the political and military ability - they would kill Israel altogether.

It is important for me to say that we have unambiguous information that Mr. Arafat is not merely passive; it is not merely that he is not lifting a finger to stop this terrorism. He is actually engaged in lifting a finger, and more often a hand, in fact, two hands, to torpedo any effort to stop the terrorism. Arafat is actively torpedoing efforts to stop the terrorism, and Arafat himself is often engaged in the financing and the launching of terrorism. He has financed, for example, in July the funding of the person who actually launched the terrorist into Kibbutz Metzger. So, I think this leads to one obvious conclusion: if any of us still clings to the illusion that we can deliver the task of protecting Israeli lives to the Palestinian Authority, this is an illusion. It's not going to work. It cannot work.

The only force that can protect Israeli lives is Israel and its army. And therefore, the conclusion that we come to is that we must exercise the

right of self-defense against the forces of terror and against the regimes that stand behind them. I use the word "regimes," because what is involved is not only Arafat's regime. Take the case, for example, of the attack in Hebron, of the Islamic Jihad. That organization is based in Damascus. Ramadan Shallah, its leader, in fact enjoys the patronage and the protection of the Syrian government. And therefore, I urge all of you to include in your policies the clear-cut demand that Syria be told to stop this action, be told to close down the offices of the Islamic Jihad and the other terrorist organizations; the clear-cut demand that Hizbullah be declared a terrorist organization. And, indeed, to put pressure not only on Syria but also on Iran, that has been actively supporting these terrorist organizations and others.

I think that only a clear-cut and coherent position by the international community can contribute to putting the pressure on those regimes - Palestinian, Syrian, Iranian, and others - that are supporting this wave of terror. If we are to win the war against terrorism, we have to address this problem indivisibly. Terrorism is a unified problem, it is indivisible. There are not good terrorists and bad terrorists, as President Bush has said, there are only bad terrorists. And those leaders and regimes that are compromised by terror are illegitimate. They cannot be partners for anything.

And the important thing is to use this clarity in your own policies, which is what you would do in your own predicament and what you are doing, those of you who have been unfortunately attacked by terror. It is important to understand that terrorism is indivisible, and therefore the battle against terrorism has to be indivisible. Those who practice terrorism, those who condone, support and encourage terrorism should be attacked diplomatically and, in the case of direct attacks, military attacks, should also be defended against militarily.

Thank you very much.