

Statements by President George Bush and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon following their meeting at the White House 07 May 2002

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Washington, D.C., May 7, 2002

PRESIDENT BUSH: I want to welcome Prime Minister Ariel Sharon back to the Oval Office. We've just had a really good conversation about how to get on the path to peace. I want peace; our government wants peace; the Prime Minister is interested in peace, of course. And we had a good discussion about how to move forward.

One of the things that I think is important -- the Prime Minister has discussed this, as well -- is for us to immediately begin to help rebuild a security force in Palestine that will fight terror, that will bring some stability to the region. I think it's very important that there be a unified security force; that, at the same time, we need to work for other institutions -- a constitution, for example, a framework for development of a state that can help bring security and hope to the Palestinian people and the Israelis.

And one of the things we've got to make sure that we do is anything, any vision understands that there are people in Israel who long for security and peace, people in the Palestinian world who long for security, peace and economic hope.

To this end, I've told the Prime Minister that George Tenet will be going back to the region to help design the construction of a security force, a unified security force, that will be transparent, held accountable.

So I really am pleased with our conversation. As I've said, there are responsibilities to be had by all the parties. We discussed those responsibilities. I told the Prime Minister there's nothing more I want than to be peace in the region, and that I look forward to working with

him and his government to achieve that peace.

Mr. Prime Minister, welcome. I'm glad you're here.

PRIME MINISTER SHARON: Thanks so much. I'm very glad to have this opportunity to come again here to visit you, Mr. President. I would like to thank you for all your efforts. And we need to act against terror worldwide. We appreciated that. And we appreciate your leadership and courageous decisions. And, of course, I would like to thank you for your friendship.

Israel is a peace-seeking country, and we are, after many, many years being involved in many wars, heavy battles, and now after the last operation that we carried out against the infrastructure of terror in Samaria and Judea -- or as you call it, the West Bank -- I believe that there is a chance now to start and move forward.

We discussed these issues, how to move forward. We emphasized the need for reform in the Palestinian Authority, and I think that's very important. And we discussed the original peace conference that I advocated, and I believe it's very important. We hope that it will take place.

Altogether, all of us understand the importance of peace, the need for peace, and I think that we are committed to take every effort and every step to make peace.

I would like to thank you again for everything, and for your friendship.

Q: If you could, first of all, identify what you mean by "unified structure." And secondly, more broadly to both of you, your administration is on record as supporting accelerated peace talks, dealing with Yasser Arafat, and making Saudi Arabia a key partner. Prime Minister Sharon favors incremental steps, taking Arafat out of the process, and he's provided you evidence suggesting that the Saudis encouraged Palestinian attacks. Have you bridged any of those gaps, the two of you?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, "unified" means that as opposed to six, seven, or eight different security forces under six, seven or eight different commands, there's one command structure. That's what that means.

Q: Palestinian?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Yes, Palestinian, exactly.

In terms of the other issues, we discussed a wide range of issues. One of the things that should becoming apparent to people is that we're in consultation with not only the Israelis, but other governments. I talked to Crown Prince Abdallah today, as well as President Mubarak about how best to proceed toward a common vision.

You just heard the Prime Minister talk about the desire for peace. We had the Saudi Crown Prince stand up and talk about peace and the need for a peaceful solution. And it's very important for us to seize this moment, as the Prime Minister mentioned, and lead and get on that path. And that's exactly what we've talked about.

I want to reiterate what I've said and will continue to say -- there are responsibilities. If people truly want there to be peace, people have the assume their responsibilities for peace. The Saudis must do that, and they're willing to do that. I talked with the Crown Prince, and I made it clear to him that we've got to fight terror in the region for there to be peace, and that he and the other leaders must work and must convince the Palestinian Authority that they have got to do everything in their power to lead toward a solution.

At the same time, I emphasized what Ariel has just mentioned, that we must provide a framework for growth of a potential Palestinian state. There's got to be the framework for education and health and economic development, as well as security. And all parties have got responsibilities in the region to do their part.

Q: You've said many times that one should not compromise with terrorism. You said many times that you are disappointed with Yasser Arafat on the issue of terrorism. Do you think that Israel should compromise and negotiate with Chairman Arafat?

PRESIDENT BUSH: I'm never going to tell my friend, the Prime Minister, what to do on how to handle his business. That's his choice to make. He's a democratically elected official. And I'll reiterate; I have been disappointed in Chairman Arafat. I think he's let the Palestinian people down. I think he's had an opportunity to lead to peace and he hasn't done so. And that's why it's important for all of us to work out a way to develop the institutions necessary for there to be a Palestinian Authority that's got the capacity to keep security, but, as well as a Palestinian Authority that's got the ability to help promote hope for the future of her people -- that there's an education system that works, a health system that's vibrant.

And by the way, there's plenty of nations that are willing to participate, so long as the framework for a stable part of the world is in place. And

those are the reforms that the Prime Minister has talked about, and those are the reforms that we must press.

I will give you one example. The Palestinians need to develop a constitution, rule of law, transparency. They've got to have a treasury that is able to battle corruption, so that not only do the Israeli people have confidence in the Authority, but so do the Palestinian people have confidence in the Authority. And those are the reforms we've discussed.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister, the last time you met President Bush, you accepted the idea of a Palestinian state at the end of the peace process. Do you still support the establishment of a state? And, Mr. President, do you believe that a state should be a stated goal of a peace process?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Yes. I haven't changed my position.

PRIME MINISTER SHARON: I think that it's still premature to discuss this issue. I think what we have to concentrate on now is making every effort that real reform will take place. We discussed how really to reach these reforms, what should be there. And we discussed some other developments like the original peace conference and other issues.

Q: What reforms must take place before you would consider a Palestinian state?

PRIME MINISTER SHARON: I think that, as I said, it's premature now. I think, first of all, steps should be taken in order to establish, or to have real reform in the Palestinian Authority.

Q: Mr. President, I wonder if you could tell us -- you've probably been studying these ideas of reforms in the Palestinian society. How long do you think, how long do you estimate it will take the Palestinians to carry out these reforms? And do you have any reason to believe, or any information that Mr. Arafat will agree for such reforms? And will Arafat agree actually to lose his power and give it to somebody else in the Palestinian leadership?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, you know, it's interesting, I think the operative question is, how soon will you start working on reforms. The answer is, as soon as possible. That's what we discussed -- how quickly can we begin the reform process. That's also, is what we'll with the Arab leaders who have got an interest in the area, about how to get reforms going.

And the answer as to whether or not people will accept the reforms -- look, our job is to convince the Saudis, the Jordanians, the Egyptians that these reforms are absolutely necessary. And when I say people have got responsibilities, I'm not just saying the Israelis and the Palestinians have responsibilities. I'm saying these leaders. This is a subject I discussed with Crown Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia. He's the man who laid out the vision for peace. He's also a man who understands that by reforming the Palestinians we have a chance to achieve peace.

So I would hope that all the responsible Palestinian leaders understand that reform is in their interest. It's in the people's interest. Listen, I deeply hurt when there is a lack of hope for moms and dads of anybody -- Palestinian moms and dads -- it bothers me. It bothers me to think there are some whose children are so hopeless they're willing to commit suicide.

And so one of the things we've got to work for and one of the things our nation will work for is reforms coupled with humanitarian help. Reforms with the chance for there to be economic development, so people can realize a normal life.

As to who's going to accept what, we'll find out. But one of the things that's going to be clear is that the world is rallying toward these reforms. And that's what our job is to do, is to lead them to those reforms. It makes a lot of sense. And this is a good first step toward the path to peace.