

Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs David Levy at the Ceremony Marking the Resumption of Permanent Status Negotiations at Erez Checkpoint Sept. 13, 1999

My esteemed colleague, Abu Mazen; members of the Palestinian delegation; dear ambassadors; fellow members of the Israeli delegation:

We are gathered here this evening about eight years after the Madrid Conference, where the Middle East peace process was launched, and on the sixth anniversary to the day of the signing of the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the PLO. In these eight years we - Israelis and Palestinians - have come a long way with regard to mutual recognition, implementation of the interim agreements, and the formulation of frameworks for reconciliation and cooperation. Now we are entering the final stage: the formulation of a permanent status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. With God's help, this agreement will put an end to the century-old conflict between the two nations that has caused so much suffering. In the past eight years we have experienced exciting times, as well as times of anguish and agonizing pain. Together we found the golden mean of compromising in such a way so as to meet the needs of the Israelis and Palestinians alike. At times, however, we were - and are - divided by major disagreements.

The fate of the peace process depends on our joint effort to solve these difficult problems and this will be our test. Nevertheless, despite all the years of negotiations, we have not allowed ourselves to lose the hope of a successful conclusion to the peace process. We have not let ourselves wallow in despair and have not - even for a moment - lost our ability to keep going and to keep sight of the goal. The credit for this ability belongs to the bold leaders of the region, especially the pioneers who paved the way and regrettably are no longer with us: President Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, King Hussein and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The Government of Israel is determined to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion after each side fulfills its obligations; it is motivated by a profound inner conviction that the time has come for all sides in our region to embark on a different pattern of relations. In the few weeks since the formation of the new Government in Israel, we have demonstrated our adherence to a rapid timetable for achieving and implementing understandings and agreements. This is how we acted in connection with the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum, and this is how we intend to act in connection with the permanent status agreement.

We have to reach a framework agreement on the principles of the permanent status agreement by February 2000 and the permanent status agreement itself within a year. None of us is under any illusions. We face a difficult task. The permanent status agreement is the final step in building peace, but it is perhaps the most complicated of all. We and the Palestinians will have to address a long list of extremely thorny issues. It is no secret that each side is coming to the negotiating table with its own set of principles, positions, and opinions.

Israel is guided by four basic principles in negotiating a permanent status agreement: we will not return to the 1967 lines; united Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel; settlement blocs will remain under Israeli sovereignty; there will be no foreign army west of the Jordan River.

We must be prepared for the differences between our perceptions to seem deep and unbridgeable at times. At such times we all - the nations and their leaders - have to continue to focus on the goal of ending the conflict and remember that we have the tool that we need to cope effectively with the challenges and difficulties of the negotiations. We have the ability to resolve the conflict by means of direct dialogue around the negotiating table. This is the only way! We must also remember that both sides will have to make compromises that may involve painful decisions. Some people doubt our ability to reach a framework agreement within a reasonable amount of time, as stipulated in the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement. I want to state and stress honestly and sincerely: if we cannot reach a framework agreement within five months, we certainly will not be able to reach a permanent status agreement by September 2000. Therefore we have to do our best and know that the eyes of multitudes are upon us. It is imperative that we exhaust every option and leave no stone unturned, so that we can look our children in the eye and say that we tried everything we could. Let us not be mistaken: our efforts to instill peace will continue to encounter the vigorous opposition of those destructive forces that oppose the peace process and seek to sabotage it even by the most invalid and terrible means of all. We must wipe this out together. The goal of terrorism is to harm innocent people. Let me make this perfectly clear: The citizens of Israel and their Government expect our Palestinian partners to continue to struggle resolutely against terrorism and its infrastructure. We will fulfill our obligation to fight terrorism everywhere and by every means. This is the elementary duty of the Israeli Government. But we are also counting on the fact that a determined and tenacious fight against terrorism by the Palestinian Authority is an essential component of the peace process.

Furthermore, in order to prevent frequent crises in our relations, we will have to draw up a code of conduct, with the help of our friends in the international community, on the basis of which the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians will be conducted.

We cannot agree to have a diplomatic war waged against us on all international fronts while we are engaged in direct negotiations. This is an unacceptable and unbearable duality. We certainly cannot accept threats of violence. The leaders of the nations must understand that in addition to the negotiating work, it is their job to prepare people psychologically. Peace is education. Peace is the language of peace - the language of leaders to their people, the language of teachers to their students, and the language of religious leaders to their flocks. It is incumbent upon the international community to aid, support, and back the steps taken by the parties to the direct negotiations by creating an atmosphere that will help achieve momentum.

This atmosphere will be created first and foremost by avoidance of unilateral positions and steps that predetermine the outcome of the permanent status negotiations. If such care is not taken, and if one side thinks that it and its positions have unilateral international support, nothing will be accomplished. We all - the regional players and the players from outside the region alike - must continue what we began and help the peace process along by bolstering the Palestinian economy and restoring the momentum of the multilateral process.

I must state here unambiguously that in the multilateral process Israel has nothing to gain other than creating the atmosphere and developing the potential of both sides and all the forces in this region to act to develop their nations and provide a salve for many wounds. I am happy to have been one of the initiators of this process. I remember the impressive conference in Moscow, which really launched a new course that brought the sides closer together, sidestepped hostility and enmity, and resulted in development in many fields for the benefit of the peoples and for the benefit of the countries. We expect, and are now seeing, efforts being made by the international community - by the United States and Russia and by the European Union and Japan, and with the consent of Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinians, and ourselves - to renew the momentum of the multilateral process. Let us not convey the feeling that alongside the negotiations that we conduct in good faith, we can permit ourselves to

evoke doubt in the international arena as to the chances of peace between us. If we do, God forbid, we will be creating despair with our own hands, through our behavior. Who would want to help those who cannot themselves identify constructive realms that are essential to their people? We must remember this and remind others.