



**DEFENDING ISRAEL TO DEFEND OURSELVES**

**WORLD JEWISH CONGRESS**

**Governors conference**

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First of all, I would like to thank the World Jewish Congress for your kind invitation. It is always a pleasure to be with all of you here in the city of Jerusalem. And even more today.

I want to start straight out condemning the ruthless terrorist attack that killed yesterday four Israelis, one of them pregnant, outside a Jewish settlement near Hebron.

I do want to bolster, once again, my clear conviction that nobody should talk, neither deal, nor yield to terrorists.

The only fate for terrorism is to be fought and defeated.

Today, understandably, all our eyes are on Washington DC, where hosted by President Obama, Primer Minister Netanyahu and the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahamud Abbas, are going to enter in direct talks after so many months of impasse.

Though I'm not sure about the possibility to achieve a "historic agreement" given the circumstances on the Palestinian side, we must be optimistic. At least the world will see that is not the Israeli government the one that is not willing to talk and is not ready to deliver.

We should be optimistic but also prudent. Expectations are too high, and as a politician I know that big expectations tend to produce bigger frustrations. Last time the leaders from Israel and the Palestinian Authority met in order to produce a peaceful and lasting agreement, the outcome of the meeting was precisely the opposite: a second Intifada far more lethal than the first one.

But let us dream for a while and believe that a final status between Israel and a Palestinian State was to be reached soon. It will not only change the dynamics here, it will show to the entire world how wrong they have been blaming Israel for all the wrongdoings in the region, or the lack of a Israeli-Palestinian agreement as the source of all violence stretching from Morocco to the Hindu Kush.

The world would see that a Palestinian State would neither tame the Islamic radicals and jihadists whose goal is to establish a fundamentalist theocracy, nor would diminish the nuclear and revolutionary ambitions of the Iranian regime, the real two main drivers of the future of the region and the world.

In any case we should be looking to Washington DC not only for the talks going on there today, but for deeper reasons. The US have been the cornerstone of the Western world, expanding our core values of freedom, prosperity and human dignity, and protecting our security vis a vis our enemies. The United States have played a vital role

and our way of life depends on her playing that central role in the future. Something that is not guaranteed, up to what I know.

Revealing his Arab mind, Bin Laden said when he and some of his fellows were celebrating the destructions of the Twin Towers, that if someone has to choose between a strong horse and a weak horse, he will invariably choose the strong one.

For decades if not centuries, the strong horse has been the West clearly. Today, nonetheless, we are facing some contestant.

There are some that would like to see a new world order where the western powers have a diminished role and influence, like Russia and China, each one for different reasons.

There are some others who would like to have more influence for themselves, like Brazil or, lately, Turkey.

And, of course, there are those who would like to destroy our system to impose their vision, like the revolutionary ayatollahs in Iran, or the jihadists led or inspired by Al Qaeda.

To add more confusion, we in the West are going through one of the most, if not the most, severe economic crisis in our recent history. And while the crisis is global affecting the whole planet, some are better prepared to deal with its consequences than others. If the crisis last too long, a new distribution of power will be inevitable. There will be winners and losers. No doubt about that.

Furthermore, major parts of the West are suffering a kind of crisis of identity. Europe is a good example. With a declining population, increasing numbers of Muslim immigrants, many of them exposed to radical ideas, multiculturalism has imposed

itself as the political correct way to deal with the challenges of different cultures living together even if some of them do not want to be integrated or do not respect the other. I mean, when judeo-christian values are aggressively challenged every day and the 68-generation that dominates our current leadership does nothing to defend them.

Peacenik Europe has been fighting the West for too long, and because of that has been so hypercritical of Israel.

US were a different story. At least until very recently. President Obama has put in motion forces that, if unchecked, may redefine the nation and its place in the world in ways that, to me, may cause major problems to all of us.

From his inauguration he has sought a new relation with the Muslim world even at the cost of undermining America's best ally in the region, as he has done with Europe pursuing a reset relation with Moscow.

He seems to have devoted more time and energy in organizing today's meeting and advancing a new peace plan than trying to prevent the Iranian regime to build its bomb.

He has projected an image of somebody who wants to escape from the problems of the world, from Iraq to Afghanistan, embracing many enemies of America while punishing its traditional allies.

I don't think the growing delegitimation attacks against Israel are unrelated to the crisis of the West, and more particularly, the crisis of confidence that emanates from the White House today. When the strong horse is not perceived to be strong anymore, people tend to act in ways unbelievable days before.

Our weakness perceived or real, is the strength of our enemies. We can complain but accept our decline doing nothing, as many seem to prefer, or we can counteract, defend ourselves and strengthen our values.

I have chosen the second option. Because I believe in the West, what we have been, what we are and what we can be.

And here is where Israel enters the equation. If the major strategic challengers are a potential nuclear Iran on the one hand and jihadism on the other hand, Israel is vital for us, for our nations and societies.

Israel is not only an integral part of the West, for all kind of reasons I don't need to elaborate here, Israel is today essential for us. Even more now than before, not only because you are in the region where the strategic tectonic plates collide, but because you are one of the few nations willing to pay a price for your survival, a nation that will do whatever it takes to defend itself, a nation where our core democratic values are so ingrained that defending the State of Israel is the same as defending our liberal system.

Particularly in a moment when the historic leader of the West, the United States of America, are going through a time of introspection, exhaustion, and why not confusion.

If US keep fading away as a force for good in the World Israel will be forced to play a growing role in the region, and possibly beyond the region.

Defending Israel is ultimately defending the western roots, the western values that many in Europe, and some in America, seem to have forgotten. They are not obsolete. And the best proof is precisely Israel and its people.

Letting the delegitimation of Israel grow, seems to me the best path to weaken not only the freedom of maneuver of Israel, but to undermine ourselves in front of our enemies, which are the same.

That's why a few months ago I embarked some personal friends in a new project called Friends of Israel Initiative. Even when we first heard that the Israeli soldiers were intercepting the Flotilla heading to Gaza, and we were caught by the public uproar against Israel, we all believed that it was necessary that somebody should stand up and say, enough is enough, that over emotive and often irrational modes of discourse about Israel are simply not acceptable, that they should be replaced with reason and decency.

We come from different continents, and from a variety of personal experiences. And the key element, I believe, is that, we are non-Israelis and mainly non-Jews. We are, simply put, concerned citizens, concerned democrats.

Why would we feel inclined to defend Israel knowing that we will automatically be stigmatized?

The answer is very simple: because we live in a world where is indispensable to defend our moral values, our identity and the faith in our democratic societies, to build a better and safer world.

We are used to seeing on TV, and sometimes at close quarters, the imperatives and consequences of, let me call it, hard-battles. But besides, below or above conflicts like the one being waged in Afghanistan, there is something else going on, let me call it a soft-battles. By which I mean an attack on our core values, on our very way of life.

For all the founder members of the Friends of Israel Initiative, Israel is a western democratic country, Furthermore, it is a land of future, a country of great opportunities.

We decided to start moving with our Initiative because we all shared a sense of urgency. We, as a global group, believed that our best contribution would be to reinforce the international standing of Israel. Because many had come to the conclusion that Israel may be the weakest link. That a criticized Israel may evolve in time into an isolated Israel; and an isolated Israel may become a pariah state. At that point, anything could be possible.

That's why we believe halting this process of eroding the rights of Israel is not only important, but vital: To Israel, of course, but to all western countries. As I put it in an op-ed in the Times a couple of months ago, "if Israel goes down, we all go down".

Let me conclude by saying one more thing.

Our goal is to be proactive and constructive. We aspire to make the case for Israel as a normal country, with all the virtues and, yes, all of the defects of a normal democratic society. We want to make our case sustainable over time. Israel is usually portrayed in a very negative way. We want, and we need, to open a space to discuss Israel and the wider region in a more rational way.

It will take a lot of effort, and time, as well as money. But we believe we will see results. You don't win battles by adopting a purely defensive posture. Neither do you win battles by simply focusing on the particular crisis of the moment.

Because the world is currently undergoing profound and rapid changes that will have enduring consequences for all of us we cannot wait to act.

We have been in Paris and London, and in ten days we will organize a launch of the Initiative in Washington DC, the heart of the matter. It is important that European voices, essentially non-Jewish try to bring some reason into the debate here as well.

If we want to prevail over our adversaries we must start reinforcing ourselves, starting with the ideological front and the battle of ideas. There is where we should and we can make our best contribution. And with your help, we will.