

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Address at the 2007 Herzliya Conference, January 24, 2007

Distinguished Guests,

I cannot speak tonight without referring to the events of the past day, and the Attorney General's decision to hold a hearing for the President in light of the possibility that serious charges may be filed against him. In these circumstances, I have no doubt that the President cannot continue to fulfill his role and he should leave the President's Residence. This is a sad day for the State of Israel.

Ladies and Gentlemen, exactly one year ago less one day, I had the privilege to stand at this podium, at the final session of the Herzliya Conference as Acting Prime Minister, in place of Ariel Sharon, who days earlier had fallen into a coma from which he has yet to awaken. In that speech, I expressed my profound prayer, and that of all those present, as well as the entire nation, that Arik Sharon would return to us. I have carried this hope and this prayer since then.

Today, I would like to focus on a subject which I believe is the most important one, and which was one of the main points of discussion during this Conference over the past few days. This subject is one with significant repercussions for the State of Israel and the region in the next decade. I will present you with a report of the state of the Iranian threat.

Today, there is not one among us who does not sense the dangers inherent in this threat, not only to Israel, but also to the future of the region and to the stability of the world order.

Every Israeli government over the past decade acted vigorously to improve our ability to track Iran's intentions, increase international awareness of the threat, mobilize international support to stop external assistance of the Iranian plans and prepare appropriate options in the event that these efforts prove unsuccessful in the end.

We achieved considerable accomplishments in each of these areas; however let us not delude ourselves: the primary goal which must be realized still lies ahead.

For many long years, we have followed Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, in the guise of a civilian nuclear program. They are working through secret channels in a number of sites spread out across Iran. In the past few years, we have been witness to especially intense Iranian activity on two tracks – the overt and the covert.

Iranian support of Palestinian terror – through financial support, provision of weapons and knowledge, both directly and through Syria – Iranian assistance of terror in Iraq, the exposure of the capabilities which reached the Hizbullah from Iran during the fighting in Lebanon and the assistance which they offered just recently to Hamas, have demonstrated to many the seriousness of the Iranian threat.

This activity has created an opposing front, which includes, in varying intensities, all the permanent members of the UN Security Council; Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt and Jordan; and other key countries in the West, such as Germany and Japan. This front is acting to unite forces and prevent this threat from becoming a reality.

Recently, I returned from an important visit to China, and thus ended a round of diplomatic visits. I met with all the leaders of countries which serve as permanent members in the Security Council, and other key countries. The Iranian topic was at the top of our agenda and at the core of the meetings I held, and which various ministers and other professional officials regularly hold.

In all the contacts I have had, there has been clear agreement that Iran cannot be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons or the material to produce them.

The Security Council's discussion of the Iranian situation and its acceptance of Resolution 1737 are important steps, which brought together all the members of the Security Council. The Resolution was achieved following intense and complex diplomatic efforts. Many parties took part in it, including several agencies in the State of Israel, both on a political level and at a professional level. We know that our efforts contributed greatly to the result.

It is clear to everyone that a diplomatic solution to the Iranian issue is the preferred solution. We also prefer such an outcome. The direction which the majority of the international community leans towards is a solution which can bear fruit, as long as it is done with the necessary ingenuity and determination, while meticulously adhering to the minimum requirements on which there can be no compromise.

Assuming that all the steps which will now be taken (and those which are already being taken) by the international community are sharper, more significant, clearer and more vigorous, the need to adopt more demanding and harsher solutions in the future will be reduced. Those who believe, as we do, that a diplomatic solution is preferable, must now muster their strength to exert pressure on Iran and thus stay the course until change is achieved.

To turn a blind eye now, while ignoring reality, dragging one's feet, and attempting to reach dangerous compromises while avoiding taking clear steps, those of us who wish to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power will, down the road, not be left with any choice but to take much more severe steps in the future.

I wish to clarify - Iran is very vulnerable and sensitive to international pressure, despite its defiant, arrogant and provocative stance, and it is already paying the ever increasing price of this behavior, a price which will only increase if it continues in its policy. As serious as the Iranian threat is, the threat of nuclear attack on Israel is by no means imminent.

At this stage, there is still time, while not unlimited, to stop Iran's intention of becoming a nuclear power which threatens its adversaries, first and foremost, Israel. We are not complacent, we cannot be complacent, and we are responding to the Iranian threats with the necessary seriousness.

Israel is not spearheading the struggle against the Iranian threat. This threat must be dealt with seriously and responsibly, first and foremost by the major powers and by other key nations.

We are at the forefront of the fight to place this issue on the top of the agendas of world leaders and international public opinion. It is our duty to point out the dangers and help in finding solutions.

The Jewish people, on whom the scars of the Holocaust are deeply etched, cannot allow itself to again face a threat against its very existence. In the past, the world remained silent and the results are known. Our role is to prevent the world from repeating this mistake.

This is a moral question of the highest degree. There is a moment during which any rule among the routine diplomatic rules becomes irrelevant. When the leader of a country announces, officially and publicly, his country's intention to wipe off the map another country, and creates those tools which will allow them to realize their stated threat, no nation has the right to weigh its position on the matter. This is an obligation of the highest order, to act with all force against this plot.

We have nothing against the Iranian people, we are not the enemy of the Iranian people and we have no interest in conflict with Iran. In the past, before the takeover by the radical factions of the country with its exceptional tradition and impressive abilities, we had close and friendly relations.

The Iran of today, whose leadership is motivated by religious fanaticism and ideological extremism, has chosen a policy of confrontation with us and threatens to wipe Israel off the map of nations. It supports terror and undermines stability in the region. The Iranian regime, in its aspiration to regional hegemony, bears responsibility for the riots perpetrated by the Hizbullah today to bring down the Lebanese government.

Threats, hostility and fighting are not our way. Our aspiration was, and will always be, to live in peace with our neighbors, near and far. We will never reject a hand, offered in all sincerity, towards genuine peace, by any nation. For this we yearn.

At the same time, our desire for peace should not be interpreted as weakness, but rather as a source of strength. Anyone who threatens us, who threatens our existence, must know that we have the determination and capability of defending ourselves, responding with force, discretion and with all the means at our disposal as necessary. We will not place the lives of our people, the life of our country, at risk.

We have the right to full freedom of action to act in defense of our vital interests. We will not hesitate to use it. I do not suggest that anyone mistakes our restraint and responsibility, or presume that it will harm our determination and capability to act when necessary.

The Iranian issue preoccupies me and my thoughts constantly. I am coordinating the handling of this matter and follow up on it on a daily basis, of one mind with the ministers involved in the matter and in coordination with the relevant agencies and ministries.

Faced with the Iranian threat there is not, never was and will never be any difference between opposition and coalition, between right, center and left. We are all united in this regard and the people stand behind us, united and ready to face the dangers lurking at Israel's doorstep.

There is no human experience we have not undergone. There is no affliction, threat, hatred, jealousy, envy, persecution, violence and bloodshed which have not been seared into our flesh. With unparalleled strength, we built our lives and established a glorious country.

No force in the world can destroy us – and there will never be. We refuse to be dragged into an atmosphere of collective, self-induced fear. We will not allow the people to sink into depression and insecurity. We have immense strength. We have nothing to fear and we will not be afraid.

All of us understand the weight of responsibility and the importance of the hour related to this sensitive subject. Together, through joint internal effort, by joining forces with the world and by speaking in one, responsible voice at home – not overly excited, but rather clear and determined – we will stand up to nuclear threats and prevail.