

President Bush and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel Participate in Joint Press Availability, 23 May 2006

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you. Mr. Prime Minister, welcome. I'm particularly pleased to welcome Mrs. Olmert to the White House, as well. Thanks for coming.

The Prime Minister and I have known each other since 1998, when he was the mayor of Jerusalem, and I was the governor of Texas. And I remember you greeting me in your office there, and you probably thought you were going to be the Prime Minister -- I wasn't sure if I was going to be the President. (Laughter.)

We've just had a really productive meeting. We reaffirmed the deep and abiding ties between Israel and the United States. And those ties include our commitment to democracy and our strong belief that everybody has the right to worship freely. The ties include growing trade and economic relationships. The ties include important educational exchange programs that allow Israeli students to study in American colleges and universities, and American students to travel and study in Israel.

In our meeting, the Prime Minister and I recalled the great contributions to peace made by Ariel Sharon. I asked the Prime Minister to convey my very best wishes to Ariel Sharon's sons.

Prime Minister Olmert and I discussed peace and security in the Middle East, which the people of Israel seek and the American people support. In 2002, I outlined my vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security. Prime Minister Olmert told me that he and his government share this vision. The international community seeks to realize this goal to the road map, which calls for a comprehensive settlement that resolves all outstanding issues between Israelis and Palestinians. I believe, and Prime Minister Olmert agrees, that a negotiated final status agreement best serves both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and the cause of peace.

Palestinian Authority President Abbas favors and speaks out for peace and negotiations. Yet, the Hamas-led Palestinian government does not. Hamas needs to make a strategic choice for peace. The United States and the international community have made clear that Hamas must recognize Israel's right to exist, must abandon terror, and must accept all previous agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. No country can be expected to make peace with those who deny its right to exist and who use terror to attack its population.

Today, Prime Minister Olmert shared with me some of his ideas -- I would call them bold ideas. These ideas could lead to a two-state solution if a pathway to progress on the road map is not open in the period ahead. His ideas include the removal of most Israeli settlements, except for the major Israeli population centers in the West Bank. This idea would follow Prime Minister Sharon's decision to remove all settlements in Gaza and several in the West Bank.

I look forward to learning more about the Prime Minister's ideas. While any final status agreement will be only achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes, and no party should prejudice the outcome of negotiations on a final status agreement, the Prime Minister's ideas could be an important step toward the peace we both support. I'm encouraged by his constructive efforts to find ways to move the peace process forward.

And finally, the Prime Minister and I shared our concerns about the Iranian regime's nuclear weapons ambitions. The United States and the international community have made our common position clear: We're determined that the Iranian regime must not gain nuclear weapons.

I told the Prime Minister what I've stated publicly before: Israel is a close friend and ally of the United States, and in the event of any attack on Israel, the United States will come to Israel's aid. The United States is strongly committed, and I'm strongly committed, to the security of Israel as a vibrant, Jewish state.

I look forward to our continuing discussions after this press conference. I'm not sure the delegations realize this yet, but we're going to shed ourselves of our delegations and the Prime Minister and I are going to go up to the Residence and sit down and have a continued dialogue. And if we decide to brief our delegations on what we discuss, we will do so. But if not, they're going to have to guess. (Laughter.) And then I'm looking forward to dinner.

Welcome.

PRIME MINISTER OLMERT: Thank you, Mr. President. I thank you for your kind invitation to visit Washington, and for the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the many issues on our common agenda. Our meeting was enlightening, and I look forward to working closely with you in the coming years, to deepen the friendship, understanding and bilateral ties between the United States and Israel.

I also recall our meeting in the city hall when you and I were strolling around the beautiful building, at the terrace on the sixth floor, watching the walls of the city of Jerusalem. At that time you were the governor, I was the mayor, and I think none of us thought that the day would come that I will have the honor and the privilege of being hosted by you as President of the United States and Prime Minister of Israel.

I could sense then your deep connection to the Holy Land, and your friendship and commitment to the state of Israel. I must say, Mr. President, that my instincts did not fail me. I, and the entire people of Israel, appreciate your true friendship and unwavering commitment to Israel's security and its well-being as a vibrant Jewish state.

Your involvement in the Middle East and personal contribution to the efforts towards resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict has been significant. The vision which you outlined in your historic speech of June 2002, of two democratic states living side-by-side in peace and security, is the basis of any progress towards a solution in this region. Your unreserved support of the disengagement plan in your letter of April 14, 2004, to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon -- and I join you in praying for his recovery -- were the basis for the success of its implementation. What you immediately recognized to be an historic state was later adopted by all those who were skeptical in the beginning.

I intend to exhaust every possibility to promote peace with the Palestinians, according to the road map, and I extend my hand in peace to Mahmoud Abbas, the elected President of the Palestinian Authority. I hope he will take the necessary steps which he committed to in order to move forward.

Unfortunately, the rise of Hamas, a terrorist organization which refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist, and regards terrorism as a legitimate tool, severely undermines the possibility of promoting a genuine peace process. As you stated, Mr. President, the Palestinian Authority headed by Hamas government must abandon the path of terrorism, dismantle the terror infrastructure, honor agreements and recognize Israel's right to exist. By doing so they will find us a willing partner in peace. However, we will not enter into any kind of partnership with a party which refuses to recognize our right to live in peace and security.

Despite our sincere desire for negotiations, we cannot wait indefinitely for the Palestinians to change. We cannot be held hostage by a terrorist entity which refuses to change or to promote dialogue. If we come to the conclusion that no progress is possible, we will be compelled to try a different route.

I presented to the President ideas which I believe could help advance his vision and prevent a political stalemate. According to these ideas, we will remove most of the settlements which are not part of the major Israeli population centers in Judea and Samaria. The settlements within the population centers would remain under Israeli control and become part of the state of Israel, as part of the final status agreement. This process of free alignment would reduce friction between Israelis and Palestinians, ensure territorial contiguity for the Palestinians, and guarantee Israel's security as a Jewish state with the borders it desires.

The implementation of these ideas would only be possible with the comprehensive support of the United States and the international community. I anticipate working with you to explore ways to advance this.

We discussed the Iranian issue. The Iranian regime, which calls for Israel's destruction, openly denies the Holocaust, and views the United States as its enemy, makes every effort to implement its fundamentalist religious ideology and blatantly disregards the demands of the international community. The Iranian threat is not only a threat to Israel, it is a threat to the stability of the Middle East and the entire world. And it could mark the beginning of a dangerous and irresponsible arms race in the Middle East.

Mr. President, we appreciate your efforts to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, including through the U.N. Security Council. They are of crucial importance. The international community cannot tolerate a situation where a regime with a radical ideology and a long tradition of irresponsible conduct becomes a nuclear weapons state. This is a moment of truth. It is still not too late to prevent it from happening.

I thank you again for your gracious hospitality and for our discussions. I look forward to continue working with you, Mr. President. Thank you very much.

PRESIDENT BUSH: We'll take two questions a side, starting with Steve Holland.

Q You mentioned that the West Bank plan could be an important step. Doesn't this sweep away the U.S. principle of a negotiated two-state solution? And should the Palestinian side approve any plan that would establish Israel's final borders?

PRESIDENT BUSH: You just heard the Prime Minister say that he's going to exhaust all options to negotiate, that he wants to reach out a hand to President Abbas. And I agree. I said in my opening statement that the best solution is one in which there's a negotiated final status. And we discussed -- we spent ways -- we spent some time discussing about how it's important to get a Palestinian President to the table. And the Prime Minister says he looks forward to discussing the issue.

And so our preferred option, of course, is there to be a negotiated settlement. On the other hand, as the Prime Minister said, that if he's unable to find a partner in peace, if nothing can go forward, he is willing to think about ways to advance the process forward.

And in order to solve this problem, there needs to be willingness to take the lead, and creativity, and the desire to follow through on the vision. The most important aspect about peace is to have a vision for peace. And I appreciate the Prime Minister's vision of two states, side-by-side -- two democratic states side-by-side in peace. That's possible.

And so what I come away from the meeting with is that the Prime Minister, one, has a vision; two, willing to reach out to determine whether or not that vision exists with the Palestinian President, which I think it does; three, is willing to work to see whether or not it is possible for two sides to come together, and if not, is still willing to consider other ways to move the process forward. That's, to me, a very positive statement.

Q You said you wanted to hear more. Is there anything that worries you about this plan?

PRESIDENT BUSH: No, the only thing that worries me about the plan is that Hamas has said they want to destroy Israel. And the reason that worries me is, how can you have two states, side-by-side in peace, if one of the partners does not recognize the other state's right to exist? It's illogical for somebody to say, I'm for a state, side-by-side with another state, and yet I don't want the state to exist. And so we spent time talking about Hamas, and I assured the Prime Minister that our position is steady and strong; that Hamas must change.

Now, we care about the Palestinian people -- and I say, we, both of us -- he can speak for himself on this issue -- but we are trying to set up a mechanism that supports the Palestinian people. Our beef is not with the Palestinian people. Our beef is with the government that -- a group in the government that says they don't recognize Israel. And so the United States, we're working with the Europeans -- Condi's people in the State Department are working with the Europeans to come up with a mechanism to get food and medicine and aid to the Palestinians.

You may want to comment on it yourself, Mr. Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER OLMERT: Thank you, Mr. President. Indeed, the government, Sunday, decided to spend 50 million shekels buying medical equipment -- 50 million shekels, about \$11 million -- for the time being, to buy medical equipment and drugs needed for the hospitals in Gaza. And as I said during the Cabinet meeting, we will spend any amount of money needed in order to save lives of innocent Palestinians suffering from the indifference of their government. We will not hesitate to do it. We will use the revenues that we have collected, and more if necessary. We will make arrangements, together with our friends, so that the supplies will arrive directly to those who need them.

This is a humanitarian commitment. We are absolutely committed to help innocent people that suffer from the brutality and the intransigence of their own government, and we will continue to do it at all times.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Q Mr. Prime Minister, are you satisfied from what you have learned out of your meeting with the President with regard of the Iranian issue? And what's your message to the Israeli public about this issue?

And, Mr. President, with your permission, there is a military option, from your point of view, to solve the threat of the Iranian problem, their work on -- to getting a nuclear weapon?

PRIME MINISTER OLMERT: The Iranian issue was discussed, indeed, between the President and myself. And we'll continue to talk about it later. Obviously, there is a major threat posed, as I've said already, and the President said, by the Iranians and their attempts to have non-conventional capabilities and also to build up delivery systems and the ballistic missiles that can hit major centers all across Europe, not just in the Middle East.

This is something that needs to be stopped. We discussed this issue at length, and there is a total agreement and understanding between the President and myself that there is a need to stop it. And we reviewed the different ways how to do it, and I am very satisfied with what I heard from the President and on what we agreed that we would continue to do in order to achieve this goal.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Our primary objective is to solve this problem diplomatically. I've told the American people that I will, on all issues, we'll try diplomacy first and exhaust diplomacy. And I explained to the Prime Minister that -- about our diplomatic efforts -- the most important thing in diplomacy is that there be a shared goal and -- in other words, you have to have a common objective, a common goal in order to get people to come together around it. And now we have got a common goal throughout most of the world, and that is, Iran should not have a nuclear weapon. And that's important, and we are now working the diplomatic front around that goal.

We have a variety of options, one of which, of course, is the United Nations Security Council, if the Iranians aren't willing to show progress toward that goal. We're working very closely with what's called the EU3. That's Germany, England and France. And I've been pleased, and Secretary of State Rice has been pleased about their willingness to stay tough on the goal, of achieving the goal. Sometimes when you've got a variety of negotiating parties, it's easier for one -- a non-transparent negotiator to pick off a weak link. And yet, they've been firm, and

that's important for Israel to know. It's important for me to praise our partners for that *strength of purpose*.

Obviously, there's other parties we have to work with, including Russia and China. In other words, you can't get anything out of the U.N. Security Council unless there's an agreement that the Iranians are not negotiating in good faith and aren't willing to go forward. And so we're spending a lot of time working with our Russian friends, in particular, to make it clear to them that Iran is showing no good faith.

And one of the interesting issues that the Iranians have tossed out in this debate is that they believe they have the sovereign right for civilian nuclear power. And my position has been, fine, it's just you don't get to enrich the fuel necessary for the plant. And so we provided a -- I thought a very interesting opportunity for them to say, if you want civilian nuclear power, you can have your plant and the international consortium will provide the fuel for the plant. And we'll pick up the spent fuel from the plant. And this was a very realistic and reasonable approach, and it's been rejected by the Iranians.

And so I say to our friends in our consortium, I'm not so sure these people really do want a solution and, therefore, let us make sure that we're willing to be working together in the U.N. Security Council. That's where we are. We're headed -- we're on the cusp of going to the Security Council. And I repeat to your question, obviously, we'd like to solve this issue peacefully and diplomatically. And the more the Iranians refuse to negotiate in good faith, the more countries are beginning to realize that we must continue to work together.

Martha. Yes, yes.

Q If we can switch to Iraq, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Iraq. Okay.

Q I know that this is something you're leaving up to your commanders, but from what you've heard from your commanders, how confident are you that you can start drawing down troops by the end of the year?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, we are making progress in achieving our objective of training the Iraqis to take the fight to the enemy. And the reason I know that is because I talk to our commanders quite frequently. And we're making good political progress, as the world saw in the formation of a unity government. The government has yet to get their full cabinet in place, although we think that will happen relatively quickly. And then this sovereign government is going to assess their security situation and their security forces and their needs, and work with our commanders. We haven't gotten to the point yet where the new government is sitting down with our commanders to come up with a joint way forward.

However, having said that, this is a new chapter in our relationship. In other words, we're now able to take a new assessment about the needs necessary for the Iraqis. And when I get that report from our commanders, I'll share it with others and you.

Q Sir, can I just add --

THE PRESIDENT: Please --

Q The U.S. has the most powerful military in the world, and they have been unable to bring down the violence in any substantial way in several of the provinces. So how can you expect the Iraqis to do that?

PRESIDENT BUSH: If one were to measure progress on the number of suiciders, if that's your definition of success, I think it gives -- I think it will -- I think it obscures the steady, incremental march toward democracy we're seeing. In other words, it's very difficult -- you can have the most powerful army of the world -- ask the Israelis what it's like to try to stop

suicides -- it is a difficult task to stop suicide bombers. That's the -- but that's one of the main -- that's the main weapon of the enemy, the capacity to destroy innocent life with a suicider.

And so I view progress as, is there a political process going forward that's convincing disaffected Sunnis, for example, to participate? Is there a unity government that says it's best for all of us to work together to achieve a common objective which is democracy? Are we able to meet the needs of the 12 million people that defied the car bombers? To me, that's success. Trying to stop suicides -- which we're doing a pretty good job of on occasion -- is difficult to do. And what the Iraqis are going to have to eventually do is convince those who are conducting suicides who are not inspired by al Qaeda, for example, to realize there's a peaceful tomorrow. And those who are being inspired by al Qaeda, we're just going to have to stay on the hunt and bring al Qaeda to justice. And our Army can do that, and is doing that right now.

Q Mr. President, the Prime Minister just said that the settlement blocks in the major population centers will be part of Israel, annexed to Israel in the future. Do you support that? Would the United States sanction that?

And, Mr. Prime Minister, can you give us some assessment of the time that you are willing to wait for the emergence of a Palestinian partner?

PRESIDENT BUSH: My answer to your question is, refer to my April 14th, 2004 letter. I believed it when I wrote it, and I still believe it. (Laughter.)

Q -- (inaudible) --

PRESIDENT BUSH: -- rare that I wrote the letter, or rare that I believed what I wrote? (Laughter.)

PRIME MINISTER OLMERT: First of all, I want to emphasize again what I said before and what I said before the elections and immediately after the elections in Israel, and when my government was inaugurated in the Knesset just a couple of weeks ago. I said that we will make a genuine effort to negotiate with the Palestinian side on the basis of the road map, which is the framework for future negotiations towards, hopefully, a peace agreement between us and the Palestinians.

I meant precisely what I said. I'll make every possible effort. And in order to examine it carefully and seriously, I will certainly meet with the elected President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. We haven't yet decided about the timing. It will be in the near future. And I will do everything that I can in order to help create the necessary circumstances for such negotiations to take place, providing, of course, that the Palestinian partner will have to not just to make a public commitment, but to be able to deliver on the basic requirements of the road map and the Quartet decisions, namely to recognize the state of Israel and its right to exist as a Jewish state, to unarm the terrorist organizations, and to implement all the obligations of the agreement signed between the state of Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

So we will make an effort. And I say time and again that we accept the sincerity of Mahmoud Abbas as the elected President of the Palestinian Authority. He is genuine, he is sincere, and we hope that he will have the power to be able to meet the requirements necessary for negotiations between us and the Palestinians. How soon it will be? The sooner the better. I don't want to prejudge it at this point. I think it's too early. And I didn't come with a timetable to meet with the President of the United States.

We shared our observations. I entirely agree with the vision of the President as it was outlined so brilliantly in the famous speech in June of 2002, which really set the course for all the developments that took place in the Middle East since then and created the possibility for ultimately the disengagement, which was a turning point in the history of the Middle East. And we are grateful to the President for the courage that he manifested then in presenting this outline and in being the first to support the disengagement, and carry on in spite of the

difficulties and the skepticism and the question marks posed by different countries at the beginning. Most of them joined in later.

So we are anxious to have negotiations. And we will look and find every possible avenue to help establish a process of negotiations on the basis of these conditions. However, as I said, we will not wait indefinitely. If we will reach the conclusion that in spite of all these efforts, it is impossible to implement the principles of the road map through a negotiating process, we'll look for other ways to implement these principles, and to ultimately create a situation where there are secured borders for the state of Israel, with the population centers in the territories as part of a state of Israel, and with a contiguous territory that will allow the Palestinians to establish their own Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. And hopefully, this is something that will happen within the next three to four years.

Again, I am grateful to the President for the efforts that he was making and for his willingness to examine together with me these new ideas, -- as he called them, bold ideas -- in the event that all other options will not be possible.

Thank you.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Good job.

END 5:36 P.M. EDT