



Documentation: Yuval Diskin's Speech to the Conference
"10 Years to the Geneva Initiative– Leading the Way to Peace"
Tel Aviv, 4 December 2013

Good evening and Happy Channuka,

During this important event marking ten years to the Geneva Initiative, I would like to focus on three issues.

The first: Why the "two states for two peoples" option may fade and disappear in the near future.

Second: Why it is vital to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the near future on the basis of the two states for two people option.

Third: What needs to be done to succeed in this difficult mission.

I will open with a few background words:

Almost all of my adult life since I joined the IDF in 1974 was spent at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I was a young soldier when the first of the settlers appeared in the area; a cadet in officers training during the first "Land day" in 1976; I was there during the relatively quiet years of the 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's; during the first Lebanon War in the Beirut sector; and in the terror ridden refugee camps of Sidon during the first Intifada. I was a part of the hopes and fears at the beginning of the implementation of Oslo in 1993, in the war against the wave of suicide bombings which smashed the Oslo process from 1993 to 1997. I was shocked like all of you at the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a terrible Jewish terrorist in November 1995. And after that in the blood soaked war against the suicide terror during the second Intifada, and during the painful transfer of nearly 9,000 settlers from their houses in the Gaza Strip, and in operations against the rocket terror from the Gaza Strip in the years after. I saw with my own eyes countless attacks and casualties, and personally commanded hundreds of operations against terror.

One could say that in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict I have seen almost everything, and done almost everything.

Moreover, if I were to be asked again to defend my nation and country I would do so, principally because I believe that we have a responsibility to defend the home of



the Jewish people – and in this home I want my children to grow up and to raise their children.

But...I would very much like for our home to have clear and agreed borders, to have neighborly relations with our neighbors, and that our homeland reflects values and a consensus that echoes the right priorities: that we put the sanctity of people before the sanctity of land, and I also want a home that does not require the occupation of another people in order to maintain itself.

I presume that you noticed when I reviewed the last four decades, that in each decade we had an ongoing conflict with the Palestinians.

When you add the numbers up, you can see that almost twenty years of the past 35 we were stuck in wars or ongoing operations against waves of terror.

During these years, I learnt from up close that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has many faces. I also learnt that on the other side of the conflict there are human beings who are seeking the fulfillment of their rights and their independence, that suffer daily as a result of the unsolved conflict.

I was not one of the founders of the Geneva Initiative, but I am certain that the Geneva Initiative is a solid foundation for the two states for two peoples option. At the end of the day, the different possibilities for solving the conflict in the basis of two states have been 'worn thin' over the last twenty years. The time has come for a decision to be made!

I am here tonight primarily because I believe with all my heart that the "two states for two peoples" approach is essential for our essence, for our identity, for our soul, for our security and no less important, for our moral standing as a society; otherwise we are a nation who chooses to rule over another!

I am here, because I am totally convinced that the consequences of the unsolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict represent an existential threat which is far graver than the Iranian nuclear project for our future as a people in our country.

And I am here, because I am convinced that we need to reach an agreement now, before we reach the "point of no return" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a point from which we will not be able to return to the option of "two states for two people", and I will briefly explain why:



- We all understand that the relentless settlement enterprise and the number of “settlers” or “pioneers” in the territory of the West Bank outside the large settlement blocks continues to grow and will reach a point where no Israeli government will succeed in removing them in the context of an agreement, and it does not seem that the current government has the will or ability to change this trend.
- The last intifada which continued for 5-7 years not only exacted a huge number of victims on both sides – it also destroyed the trust of the peoples on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides that it is possible to achieve peace.
- To this we must add another problem, which is no less serious – the leaders on both sides – those who are supposed to lead, to create hope and to sweep the people along with them are weak and most of the time are stuck in the mutual “blame game”.
- Also, many of our friends around the world, those whose support for the peace process with the Palestinians is critical, see the continuation of the settlement enterprise, and understand the weakness of Netanyahu and Abu Mazen, and they are giving up on the notion that we can implement a “two states for two peoples” solution.
- In addition to all this – in the West Bank, the tension and frustration of the Palestinians continue to grow as they fear that their lands are being stolen from them, as they internalize the notion that the state that they are awaiting is only becoming more distant, and even the Palestinian economy which has improved somewhat since 2007 – now provides no consolation.
- All these bring us to the gravest and most dangerous problem: The growing feeling amongst the Palestinian masses – the feeling that “We have no future, only the past”, there is nothing good in the past, and the future no longer exists!
- Profound social changes generally occur slowly, but we cannot ignore the consequences of the “new” generation, a generation which has watched the “Arab Spring” raging through the Middle East and fear that they are trapped at a dead end. Hundreds of thousands of young Palestinians who grew up under the Israeli occupation are embittered, enraged, frustrated and in particular, feel a sense of hopelessness, and they are seeking a target for the coming eruption – and it is easy to guess who will be their target.
- And let’s not forget that amongst us – amongst Israeli society – there exist difficult tensions between the Jewish majority and the Arab-Muslim-Christian minority, and they can be easily affected by what happens between us and the Palestinians. The experience of the past shows that during the large clashes, the Arab citizens of the state of Israel have demonstrated solidarity with their Palestinian brothers, and we must therefore take into account also



the bond between the Palestinians and their brothers, the Arab citizens of Israel.

Therefore, I am convinced that the level of “petrol fumes” in the air has reached the level where a small spark will create a huge explosion. While the growing trickle of terror attacks in recent months, the tension amongst Palestinians and even the demonstrations against the Praver plan, can be seen as individual random events, they actually reflect a very tense environment which could explode easily.

Palestinian masses or Arab citizens of Israel taking to the streets is a very realistic scenario and is not an extreme scenario. This is the scenario which took place in the last three years in Iran, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Turkey, Russia, Brazil and in recent days even in Ukraine... therefore it would be a grave mistake to think that it could not happen here.

From my experience I can tell you that the nature of this type of events is that they spin out of control. Even Marwan Barghouti, who was the primary initiator of the events which led to the Second Intifada, didn't plan that by taking to the streets in September 2000, he would lead to a seven year Intifada with suicide attacks and with many hundreds of dead and tens of thousands of injured on the Palestinian and Israeli sides. He planned a few days, a maximum of a few weeks of protest. However, the flow of events, the responses and the responses to the responses, led events to spin out of control and to a severe deterioration and to waves of terror which continued for seven years.

And now that I have explained why the two-state solution is in great danger, this is the time to say a few words about the other options which are now on the table:

One option, which is popular amongst certain political groups within Israel, maintains that Jordan is the Palestinian state. From my perspective, Jordan cannot be the Palestinian state for the same reason that Uganda and Birobidzhan couldn't be the homelands for the Jewish people. In any case, even the creation of a Palestinian state in Jordan will not solve the conflict, but would only destroy the Hashemite monarchy, continue the conflict and even create an eastern border which will be very problematic to Israel.

Another option that some government officials evaluate from time to time is a unilateral Israeli withdrawal in certain scenarios where the negotiations fail... I am certain that such a withdrawal would not solve the core issues, would worsen our security access to the West Bank, would not reduce our responsibility for the Palestinian territories in the eyes of the international

community, would not reduce international pressure and would perpetuate the occupation in the areas where we would remain.

And the option to which I will grant a little more time, because in the future this will become the only possible option on the table is “One state for two peoples”.

This option brings with it important questions which we must relate to today including:

- What will be the civil status of Palestinians in the state between the “sea and the river” which will be created by our own hands?
- Will they receive complete equality including the right to vote like the Arab citizens of Israel?
- Will they only be residents with some rights, but not the right to vote?
- What are the expected implications for the Arab citizens of the State of Israel?
- Will the Palestinians that we annex give up their historic demands when the new “sea to river” state is created?
- How will we deal with our identity as a Jewish and democratic state when we become a minority?
- Will our standing amongst the family of nations improve?

We cannot relate to these questions as if they were “Shrapnel in our behind”, as one of our new ministers has suggested, because as will rapidly become clear in the reality of “one state between the sea and the river”, one of the difficult questions will be – who is really the shrapnel and who the behind!?

In the case of a “sea to river” state, as is planned by certain politicians within Israel – the vision of the founding generation of a Jewish-democratic state upon which we were raised and educated – is likely to fade away and disappear!

Let’s return to the present and try and understand the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

- According to statements made by the Prime Minister, the State of Israel is following a two state strategy.
- Most of the core problems focus on the West Bank and Jerusalem.
- The most complex issues are: An agreement on land, right of return, agreement on Jerusalem and in particular the Temple Mount and the holy basin and the eastern border in the Jordan Valley.
- The rift in the Palestinian Authority between Fatah, which controls the West Bank and Hamas which controls Gaza, prevents, for the immediate future, a complete and final agreement.



- The current political coalition map and the problems of control in the ruling party, in my opinion prevent the implementation of an agreement with the Palestinians.
- The lack of trust between the two leaders will make it very difficult to reach an agreement.
- The public atmosphere on both sides prevents the building of an agreement, and all the more so its implementation.
- There is a legitimate fear as to whether an agreement can be reached which will be effective for the long term.

What do I recommend to do in this situation?

I am certain that the ability of each of the sides to “deliver the goods” is very limited for the reasons that I have outlined.

Therefore, I believe that the chances to reach and implement an agreement in a bilateral framework alone are very small. Furthermore, an agreement with the Palestinians has only a small chance of surviving in the long term without a regional agreement which will include at least: Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Jordan. This is due to the fact that the Palestinian state will be dependent on each one of these states.

However, in my opinion there are additional interested stakeholders – these are the states that due to the geo-strategic changes in the region, such as the “Arab Spring”, the Iranian threat, and possible changes in US policy to the Middle East, share many mutual strategic interests. These changes necessitate that the State of Israel develop a new regional strategy, which relates to the new challenges which include both threats and interesting opportunities.

A solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can make a decisive contribution to bringing the State of Israel and these states closer, including, in addition to Jordan and Egypt: Saudi Arabia, some of the Gulf States and in certain situations even Turkey.

However, there is no doubt that the immediate circle must include those actors that have the greatest interest as they have the most to gain: Israel, the Palestinians, Jordan and Egypt. Therefore, I maintain that deeply involving Egypt and Jordan at a relatively early stage of the negotiations is critical to their success and to the future of the agreement which will be reached at the end.

To this end, there is great importance to the warming of relations between the USA and its allies and the new regime in Egypt, as well as the relations between the Palestinian Authority and Egypt.



It will be impossible to turn these countries into genuine partners with a real interest in maintaining an agreement without creating a web of agreements between them, which will deal with the common fundamental interests between these countries including: Security, energy, water, transport, economy and agriculture.

The State of Israel, which has strategic access to gas, desalination technology, and advanced agricultural technologies, could be a central and influential player in each of these fields.

The second circle needs to include Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf States, who can provide financial and political support for an agreement and help to maintain its stability.

To the two circles there is an additional significance – they will provide Abu Mazen with the “Arab” legitimacy he will very much need to reach fateful decisions in the framework of an agreement.

The third circle must include the USA, Russia, Europe and other countries that have a clear interest in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These need to create political and economic incentives for all the sides in order to reach an agreement.

I believe that the commitment which will emerge from deep partnership of Jordan and Egypt in the agreement, with the clear gains for each, can guarantee that Egypt and Jordan will leverage their interests with the future Palestinian State when it is created, and will therefore guarantee its commitment to the agreement for the long term.

All of the countries need to work together to ensure that the future Palestinian state will have a viable economy, infrastructure, and be secure, as any undermining of its stability will affect the other states.

Given that the rift between Gaza and the West Bank is not solvable in the near future, and given that most of the critical problems are located in the West Bank and Jerusalem – an agreement needs to begin first in the West Bank with a series of significant confidence-building steps in the near term, which will help create an atmosphere which will aid a solution.

However, these will not help if we do not deal with the “soul” of the agreement:

Most important: We need to recreate hope!!



We need to ensure that the Israeli and Palestinian publics no longer feel that there is only the past, and that they believe that there is also a future.

Like an economy in crisis, the existence of hope can “oil the machine” and help the process of creating growth and ending the crisis.

How do we do that?

First, we need to believe in our path and mean it with all our heart – especially those who we chose to lead us and who profess to support “two states for two peoples”.

Second, to send a clear message that our leaders really do seek peace – by making a dramatic change in the Israeli political map – which means creating a new coalition made up of parties that support a peace agreement.

Third, building personal trust between the leaders, given that historically all of the political processes between Israel and the Arabs were based on the trust that was created between the leaders and between their emissaries.

Fourth, changing the public atmosphere through an appeal from the leaders of both sides to the Israeli and Palestinian publics.

Fifth, to engage in generous gestures in order to strengthen hope and trust amongst the masses that something can change. Two gestures which could make a significant contribution to strengthening hope are:

- The first, most immediate and important – an immediate freeze on settlements in any area that is not within the large settlement blocks. This is by far the most important gesture which could create the sense that something really has changed, and no less important – will block the settlement enterprise from spinning out of control.
- The second is the release of prisoners, and given the sensitivity to this issue amongst the Israeli public, I'll explain my position. In principle I oppose releasing prisoners under blackmail or threat and I have not changed my mind on this. However, I am certain, even though it pains me greatly, that a peace agreement justifies even the release of prisoners – however this should be done only in the final stages!
- Sadly, the cynical and sickening political deal which was stitched together to prevent a settlements freeze, involved the release of prisoners – at an immature and early stage of the negotiations – and in a manner which rightly outraged wide sections of the Israeli public.



Sixth, – at the appropriate time – Israeli leadership taking daring steps such as appearing in Ramallah before a forum of senior PLO leaders, senior Fatah leaders and senior members of the PA or an invitation to Abu Mazen to appear in the Knesset to speak about peace.

In summary:

I do not belong to any political party. In my mind, this is no matter of right or left or the political center.

This is a matter which requires a long-term historic perspective and national responsibility of the first order to take advantage of this opportunity, perhaps the last, to escape the “death grip” with the Palestinians and to solve the conflict with two states for two peoples.

I know that the dangers are great and the changes of success not guaranteed, given that the conflict is deep, religious, national, about land, and much blood has been spilled which as you know, does not turn to water in the Middle East, that there are economic, cultural and deep mental gaps between the sides and there also have been deep sediments built up over dozens of years.

We should expect moments of crisis, disappointment and failure, and we will need to adjust expectations along the way both with ourselves and with our partners in dialogue; the Palestinians and regional partners.

However, I still believe that a genuine goal-oriented leadership can propel a process forward which, if begun genuinely, without pettiness, with mutual respect and with generous Israeli confidence-building gestures, has a chance to instill hope and to create a momentum and a more positive atmosphere on the Palestinian and Israeli streets; to build a solid majority of Israelis and Palestinians to support the process and gradually build trust between the leaders.

All this can constitute a platform for negotiations with reasonable results during the first phase and even reach successful results later on.

To end, I will quote from Yaakov Rotblit's song “Shir Lashalom – Song of peace”. Pay close attention to the words and I will leave the interpretation to each of you sitting in the hall:



“So just sing a song for peace
don't whisper a prayer
Just sing a song for peace
in a loud shout”

Thank you all.

Translated by Benjamin Rutland