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PM Netanyahu's speech at the Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly 9 November 2009

*View webcast of November 9 plenary - http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/ujcfiles/ga09/program/video.html
PM Netanyahu begins his address at 01:12:00*

My dear friends, leaders of the Jewish communities of North America,

The history of the Jewish people has been marked by a paradox. We are at once both small and great. We are few in number but luminous in achievement. In the ancient world, the Jews were a small people on the foothills of Asia touching the Mediterranean. But in Alexandria some 2200 years ago, the Bible was translated into Greek, and the world has never been the same since.

The Jews brought to civilization at least three big ideas: the idea of monotheism, the belief that all people have innate rights that transcend the power of kings, and a prophetic vision of universal peace. It is impossible to fully describe the revolutionary impact of these ideas throughout history, nor the poetic power of the Biblical stories that overshadowed much of the literature of the ancient world.

As in antiquity so in modernity.

Israel is one of the world's smallest countries. But our success in science and technology, agriculture, medicine, and the arts belies our size. And on this continent, the Jewish community accounts for less than 2% of the population, yet its creative accomplishments in every field are legend and legendary. In modern times, Jews everywhere have made extraordinary contributions to humanity.

So, smallness and greatness have thus accompanied our people throughout nearly 4,000 years of our history. But our conspicuous achievements often masked our small size and the vulnerability that comes with being small.

Being prominent but small, we often could not defend ourselves against larger foes who envied our achievements, despised the ideas we championed, and periodically sought to expel or even annihilate us outright. The rebirth of Israel

did not eliminate such attacks. But it fundamentally changed our ability to repel them.

In 1948, some 600,000 Jews, their backs against the sea, fended off the assault of much larger enemies sworn to our destruction. We were aided by many of our fellow American Jews. You gave money, arms, and most important, tremendous moral support.

You helped Israel absorb waves of immigrants, you spearheaded the historic struggle to free Soviet Jewry and you have tirelessly worked to strengthen the American-Israeli alliance which is a cornerstone of Israel's security. Today, you support Birthright, Masa and Nefesh B'Nefesh - these are programs that promote Aliyah and strengthen Jewish identity, thereby ensuring that our numbers are not further diminished and dwindled by the forces of assimilation.

Strengthening Jewish identity can no longer be a task exclusively for the Diaspora.

It is increasingly the responsibility of the Jewish State. Over a decade ago, I was proud to be the first Prime Minister to allocate state funds to bolster Jewish identity outside of Israel. And I assure you that in my second term, I intend to do even more.

The result of our joint efforts has been a stronger Israel. And only a strong Israel can achieve peace. But even a strong Israel is still a small Israel. And a small Israel demands a secure peace. Peace in our land, the peace of Jerusalem, our eternal capital, is one of our oldest longings, expressed in our Psalms and our prayers.

Peace between Israel and our Arab neighbors: the first and immediate result would spare our children the horrors of war. It would spare our children the horrors of war. It would spare our grandchildren the horrors of war. What a great gift. Peace could usher in a new age of economic progress for the benefit of all. We have already signed peace agreements, two of them, with Egypt and Jordan. And we are eager to achieve peace with all our other neighbors, especially with the Palestinians.

I believe there is no time to waste. We need to move towards peace with a sense of urgency and a sense of purpose. I want to be clear. My goal is not to have endless negotiations. My goal is not negotiations for negotiations sake. My goal is to reach a peace treaty, and soon.

But to get a peace agreement, we must start negotiating. Let's stop talking about negotiations. Let's start moving.

This past June at Bar-Ilan University, I put forward a vision of peace that has united the vast majority of Israelis. In this vision of two states for two peoples, a demilitarized Palestinian state would recognize the Jewish state.

Now, what do I mean by a Jewish state? It is a state in which all individuals and all minorities have equal individual rights. Yet our national symbols, language and culture spring from the heritage of the Jewish people. And most important, any Jew from anywhere in the world has a right to immigrate to Israel and become a citizen.

I want to make it clear: Any Jew, of any denomination, will always have the right to come home to the Jewish state. Religious pluralism and tolerance will always guide my policy.

What does a Jewish state mean for the Palestinians? They must abandon the fantasy of flooding Israel with refugees, give up irredentist claims to the Negev and Galilee, and declare unequivocally that the conflict is finally over.

Yet, even after we achieve peace it may take years for the spirit of peace to permeate most levels of Palestinian society. Therefore, any peace agreement we sign today must include ironclad security measures that will protect the State of Israel.

Here comes that paradox again.

Israel is powerful but small. No matter where our final borders are drawn, Israel will remain exceedingly small. I am not sure you know how small Israel is. The United States and Canada are each roughly 400 times the size of Israel and the Arab world is 500 times the size of Israel. Egypt alone is roughly 40 times larger and even a small country like Jordan, our neighbor to the east, is almost four times as big. Israel is bigger than Rhode Island, but that's about it.

Small countries are not necessarily insecure. Belgium and Luxemburg are small but they today are not insecure. Yet if their neighbors included radical regimes bent on their conquest and destruction with terror proxies firing thousands of missiles on their people, believe me, they would feel insecure. Anyone would. Because of our small size and the radical and violent neighborhood in which we live, Israel faces security threats like that of no other nation.

A few facts to drive the point home.

A few days ago, the Israeli navy interdicted a ship carrying hundreds of tons of rockets and explosives from Iran bound for Hizbullah via Syria. Last week, Hamas tested a rocket with a range of nearly 40 miles. Now, for a large country, that might not be too consequential. But in tiny Israel, Hamas and Hizbullah now

have the power to reach Tel Aviv. Israel's security therefore requires that any territory vacated in a future peace agreement must be effectively demilitarized.

An effective demilitarization of Palestinian areas is an essential component of peace recognized by successive American presidents. I want to assure you Israel is willing to make great concessions for peace. But there can be no concessions on Israel's security. We have to ensure that weapons do not flow into the Palestinian areas in the West Bank, which overlooks Tel Aviv and surrounds Jerusalem.

We cannot permit another Gaza or South Lebanon in the heart of the country. What we want is a durable peace, a peace that can be defended. We fervently hope that such a peace will hold, but we must be prepared to defend ourselves in case it doesn't.

The UN report on Gaza, which falsely accuses Israel of war crimes for legitimately defending itself against real war criminals, in effect seeks to deprive us of the right of self-defense. This report must be firmly rejected.

We are proud of the Israeli Defense Forces. We are proud of our sons and daughters who are defending our country every day. We know that our army, Israel's army, is as moral as any army on earth. In supporting the IDF and rejecting this report you're sending a message to terrorists that they cannot get away with firing on civilians while hiding behind civilians. And you do something else. You support peace. For only an Israel that can defend itself is an Israel that can take further risks for peace.

I thank President Obama for resolutely opposing this twisted UN resolution. I applaud the overwhelming vote last week in the American Congress condemning this biased report. I know there are many Canadian friends with us here today. I wish to extend my thanks to Prime Minister Harper for his staunch support for Israel's right of self-defense.

Last week, I watched a joint exercise of the IDF and some 1400 American soldiers to improve Israel's defense against incoming missiles. I salute these American soldiers, and I thank their President, their Commander in Chief, President Obama for his commitment to Israel's security. On behalf of the people of Israel, I send my condolences to the American servicemen and women who were killed at Fort Hood last week.

My friends,

My government is working to advance peace and we are not just talking. We have removed hundreds of security checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank. I personally extended the hours of operation on the Allenby Bridge and I've removed bureaucratic hurdles to Palestinian economic development.

These efforts, along with measures taken by the Palestinian Authority to improve security, have spurred an unmatched boom in the West Bank and has made life better for ordinary Palestinians. For the first time in years, businesses, banks and industry are sprouting. Restaurants, theaters, and shopping malls are overflowing. Thousands and thousands of Palestinian jobs are being created.

I think we can do a lot more to improve the reality on the ground, and we will. I intend to do a lot more.

Prosperity can help advance peace - but only so far. To truly resolve the outstanding issues between us, we must begin and complete peace negotiations.

We should not place preconditions for holding talks. Such obstacles to talks were never set in the 16 years of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. From the day my government was sworn in seven months ago, I have been calling for peace negotiations to start.

I said I would go anywhere, anytime to advance peace. And no Israeli government has been so willing to restrain settlement activity as part of an effort to re-launch peace talks. So I say today to the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas: let us seize the moment to reach an historic agreement. Let us begin talks immediately.

I know there are many skeptics. I am not one of them. I believe that peace is possible. I know how committed the Israeli people are to peace and how committed I am to make peace. But I need and we need a determined Palestinian partner as well. A partner willing to shoulder the risk and burdens as we are.

I believe that with good will and with courageous leadership on both sides, and no less important, with the continued support of the United States, peace can become a reality. We can surprise a skeptical world.

Achieving peace is a great challenge facing Israel. At the United Nations in September, I spoke of another great challenge: preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability. The Iranian regime tyrannizes its own people, sponsors and supplies terrorism, and openly pledges to wipe Israel off the map. Imagine how much more dangerous this regime would be if it had atomic bombs.

The responsible members of the international community must unite to prevent this grave threat to the peace of the entire world. I support President Obama's continued efforts toward these ends, and I appreciate the firm position taken by the leading European countries. We must not succumb to the Iranian regime's deceit and cunning. We must stand together to stop Tehran from realizing its nuclear ambitions.

In addition to achieving peace and preventing a nuclear Iran, there is a third momentous challenge before us - reducing the world's dependence on oil. This would help cleanse our world after more than a century of industrial pollution. It would help our economies by decreasing our dependence on depleting resources. And it would end the massive transfer of wealth to some of the world's most odious exporters of terrorism and fanaticism.

Here's the question: can we dramatically reduce our dependence on oil?

Remember, sometimes, one or two inventions can change centuries of habit. For many centuries, salt was highly valued for preserving food. Caravans of camels carried it across the deserts, and it was nearly worth its weight in gold. The salt trade helped build economic empires, and the world's dependence on salt showed no signs of slackening. But then came two inventions: canning and refrigeration. Virtually overnight, salt lost its immense value. The same thing may happen to oil. Scientific and technological breakthroughs could dramatically reduce the world's dependence on petroleum. And Israel could play an important role in making that happen.

You know, of course, about our high-tech companies and venture capital funds, our engineers and scientists, our patents and our Nobel laureates. In biotech and agro-tech, in solar energy and desalination, and in many other fields, Israeli innovation is transforming the way we live.

Two perceptive writers recently wrote a book called, "The Start-Up Nation". We are the start-up nation. Now we must use our minds to help achieve breakthroughs in the field of clean energy. For example, Israel could apply its unique expertise to the juncture of water and energy. The global need for water is rapidly increasing. Yet, a third of the cost of producing clean water is energy. Sea-water in abundance can be readily desalinated with solar power and channeled inland. Having mastered both of these technologies, Israel can make a decisive contribution to alleviating water shortages around the world, especially in the growing economies of Asia and the parched expanses of the Middle East.

I am in the process of establishing a national commission that will bring together Israel's finest scientists, businessmen and engineers. We hope to work with other governments and experts to dramatically reduce our dependence on oil in the next decade, providing an example to be emulated by the rest of the world. If we could cross the oceans, fly the skies, and reach the moon, we should be able to harness water, wind and sun to power our world.

My friends,

I know that these three enormous challenges - achieving peace, preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and developing alternative energies - seem daunting.

But I want you to remember another mission whose success seemed completely implausible when Theodore Herzl embarked on it over a century ago.

The challenges confronting Herzl's vision of a Jewish state were not less than overwhelming. Most of the world's Jews lived in Europe and had no intention of moving to the barren land of their forefathers. Few saw the clouds gathering on the horizon. Fewer still saw the need for action. But with a clear plan and a prophetic sense of urgency, Herzl helped the Jewish people overcome their tragic condition of powerlessness. His implausible idea gathered so much force that within a few decades our people emerged from the worst massacre in history to establish an independent state in our ancestral homeland. And then our small people then dedicated itself to the great task of building a modern Jewish state.

In an understandable moment of frustration, Herzl lamented, "The tragedy of the Jewish people is that we do not believe in ourselves." But Herzl did not lose faith. He said, "We are strong enough to form a state." "We possess all the human and material resources for this purpose."

"If we will it," he famously said, "it is no dream."

My friends,

We have learned from history that if the Jewish people are united and determined, if we harness our hopes and our dreams, the hardest tasks are within our reach.

We are a small people but a great people; a people generous enough to pave a path toward a lasting peace; a people brave enough to thwart the dangers that confront us; and a people creative enough to once again help steer humanity towards a better future for all.

עד כאן.

מח' מידע ואינטרנט – אגף תקשורת
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