

Presentation to the Subcommittee on Near East and South Asian Affairs
of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Member of Knesset Rabbi Michael Melchior

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by congratulating you for conducting this hearing, and thanking you for inviting me to participate. In the part of the world where I live, there have been all too few reasons for optimism of late. The continued concern and commitment of the government of the United States to help the sides reach an agreement, is one of those few. We pray that as a result of careful research and study conducted by committees such as this, your government's concern and involvement will increase and be even more effective, so that we can together arrive at a plan to end the violence which plagues us in the Middle East.

The last decade has, indeed, seen numerous attempts to solve the Middle East conflict. From the outset I personally was a strong supporter of the Oslo Accords, and as a minister in Ehud Barak's cabinet I was closely involved in the Camp David negotiations and their aftermath. In spite of all the hope generated by Oslo, in spite of all the international support it and later efforts received, none brought the desired result. It seems that every time a peace effort is to bring us a step forward towards resolving the conflict, we would be driven two steps back by yet another terrorist attack. All the peace efforts – some of the most serious of which, of course, were sponsored by your government – were well intentioned and the products of fine minds. Yet I think that before we embark on yet another new peace initiative, we would be wise to examine the previous efforts to see if perhaps there was an important element missing in them all.

In the tradition of solutions that ended many of the conflicts of the twentieth century, recent peace initiatives aimed at an overall political solution to the Middle East conflict. I would like to suggest, however, that there is a difference between ours (as well as some of the other troubling conflicts of the twenty-first century) and those of the last one hundred years. In an interesting way, I submit, post-Cold War conflicts contain an element more similar to pre-World War conflicts, than to those of the 1900's.

The most dangerous wars of the twentieth century – the wars you and I grew up with – were wars of conflicting territorial, economic, or nationalistic interests. Today's conflicts may have territorial aspects as well, but –

like those of more than one hundred years ago – they are seen as mostly cultural, ethnic, and religious. They are not wars fought between countries; they are wars between civilizations.

Recent peace-making efforts have been unsuccessful, I submit, because they offer only twentieth-century style political / economic / territorial solutions to what are no longer just political, economic, or territorial conflicts. The Europeans thought they could hold Yugoslavia together by pouring in economic aid and by suggesting clever political solutions. What they got was ethnic cleansing. Today's efforts to solve our conflict must be different. Though we think otherwise, extremist elements in the Middle East wish to turn the Arab-Israel conflict of today into one aspect of the new century's overall clash between the Western Judeo-Christian civilization, and Islam. It is not hard to realize why they do so. Jews and Moslems see their religions as a major element in determining their identity. If fundamentalists persist in portraying an American-sponsored peace as an invasion of cheap Western, secular values, then peace initiatives become threats to the traditional lifestyles and religious values that zealots would die to preserve.

Totalitarian Moslems see Israel as an outpost and vanguard of Western, secular society. Making peace with Israel, recognizing its legitimacy, is a threat to the integrity of Moslem civilization in its heartland, the Middle East. No territorial compromise with "the small Satan" [the U.S.A. is "the big Satan"] is possible, and no suggestions for political or economic resolution to the conflict can be sufficient.

Extremists among the Palestinians have demonstrated this repeatedly. We must remember that the present "Intifada" began in the immediate wake of the Camp David negotiations where the Palestinians were offered a much more than just "generous" offer of territory and economic benefits. The violence today is not – as the Palestinians would have the West believe – about Israel's "occupation" of Palestinian territory. Mr. Arafat was offered an end to "occupation", and he turned it down! Rather than embracing political, territorial, and economic solutions offered, the Palestinians began the current wave of violence, calling it "Intifadat el Aksa". [El Aksa is a mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.] They have denied historical fact, and replaced it with a myth. They now claim that there never was a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Our sincere concern for what is in fact Judaism's holiest site, is depicted as a fabrication to hide Israel's secret aim of attacking the mosques now there. Palestinian terrorists seek – and receive – support from Moslems all over the world, glorifying the blood they shed as part of this century's historic and holy fight to defend Moslem civilization from an attack by Western civilization's puppet in the Middle East, Israel.

The Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and el Aksa Martyrs who terrorize Israel as part of "Intifadat el Aksa" are not out to end Israel's occupation of parts of the Gaza strip or the West Bank. They are out to defend Islam from the threat of the West. Offering to satisfy the territorial or national

aspirations of the Palestinians will not satisfy them. They are not Palestinian nationalists fighting a twentieth-century kind of war. They represent maximalist, totalitarian elements in Islam that cannot tolerate any foreign impingement on Moslem territory. They see themselves as Moslems defending the faith, more than Palestinians fighting for their rights.

If we accept their paradigm, that the Arab-Israel conflict is in fact a clash of civilizations (modern Western society versus traditional Islam) rather than a conflict of national interests (Palestinians versus Israelis), we will be guilty of empowering the most extreme, totalitarian religious factions involved in the conflict, and condemn ourselves to ever-escalating violence led by zealots. I would like to suggest an alternative. I would suggest that world leaders instead empower a coalition of civilizations of moderate forces from within opposing cultures. I hope that the world's political leadership will seek out Moslem and Jewish religious leaders, who – while not compromising their faith – still recognize the need to suspend implementation of fundamental beliefs, in favor of achieving peaceful co-existence with a neighboring civilization. Once found, these moderate religious leaders must be joined in a cross-cultural coalition to counter the extremists in each camp. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the only way to avoid a violent clash of West versus East, of Christians and Jews versus Moslems. And – unlikely as it may sometimes seem – it is viable. Though the totalitarian radical elements of Islam gain headlines today, I can assure you from the work I have done in recent years, that there are religious leaders in the Arab world who teach that the sanctity of human life is a supreme value of Islam. Extremists in my own religious camp pervert Jewish teachings to justify dastardly acts like that of Baruch Goldstein and the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, and manipulate holy texts to prevent progress towards peace. But rabbis in Israel know that our true Torah is a Torah of peace, and our holy texts in fact teach us the need to live in peace with our neighbors.

An imam and a rabbi may disagree over many things. One's God and His Messengers may not be like the other's. But if both agree that neither of their gods and prophets wants us to kill each other, then a partnership can begin. I have met many prominent Moslem, Jewish, and Christian leaders in the Middle East who are ready to join such a coalition. In January of 2002, in Alexandria, Egypt, religious leaders of the highest stature (including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the dean of the el Azhar seminary in Cairo, and the Chief Rabbi of Israel) met and laid the foundation for a coalition of rational, moderate religious leaders. Subsequent contacts and meetings, with top religious leaders of Sunni Islam in the Palestinian Authority and all over the Moslem world, demonstrate that the coalition is not only needed, but practically feasible.

The true “culture clash” will actually be an intra-civilizational fight to change public opinion in the two societies, a clash between the totalitarian extremists (both Moslem and Jewish) on the one side, and the rational moderates (both Moslem and Jewish) on the other. The political leaders of today must do much more than pay lip-service in support of the religious moderates. It must be a top priority for the enlightened world to empower

them. We should all applaud the Nobel Peace Prize committee for taking a first step in this direction. The governments of the world must summon all the creativity and resources at their disposal to enable a coalition of moderate religious leaders to change the way their constituents perceive adherents of competing civilizations. The voice of this coalition must be heard overpoweringly in local media, in schools, synagogues and mosques. The media prefer to broadcast fiery radicals, and extremists have a built-in advantage in the competition for public exposure. Moderate religious leaders must be given whatever tools they need to redress this imbalance, and educate their peoples towards realistic moderation, rather than romantic martyrdom. Otherwise, the extremist religious elements will continue to dominate public opinion and fan the flames of violence.

My call to empower a moderate religious coalition, I know, runs counter to conventional wisdom. But the peacemakers of today must not repeat the mistake of their predecessors, and ignore religious issues. It was a mistake to believe that if political issues could first be solved, religious issues would somehow work themselves out later. Religion is the core of the cultural identity of both Arabs and Jews. It must be given a top priority in any agreement between them. Religious and cultural leaders, therefore, are needed at the outset and in the forefront to address our problems in the twenty-first century. Political leaders alone cannot stop the bloodshed.

What are the realistic goals of those who would end the violence in today's world? Let me begin by stating clearly: an immediate resolution of the differences between civilizations is not a realistic goal. The differences among civilizations – especially when religion is an important element – are so profound that we cannot expect them to be resolved in the near future.

That does not mean, however, that the situation is hopeless. Though we cannot resolve our differences, we may still learn to live with them. We may not be able to end the tension between us, but we can keep it from running out of control. Previous attempts to bring an overall peace to the Middle East were admirable and honorable. They offered solutions to what were perceived as the basic problems dividing Israel and its neighbors. But they failed. The differences between us and the Arabs are deeper and of a different nature than yesterday's peacemakers realized. In addition, the rash of terrorist attacks on our population centers has changed public opinion in Israel. Sadly I report to you, that many even of our moderate citizens doubt the intentions of the Palestinians, and consider an overall peace agreement unrealistic. Controlling the violence is the most Israelis think can be achieved in the foreseeable future.

The Biblical vision of world peace, when the wolf dwells happily with the lamb, remains a dream for the End of Days. We can, however – sadly perhaps – lower our sights and aim not for a full resolution of the conflict, but for control and stabilization of the situation. An end to violence, a partial peace, a “piece of peace” if you will, is achievable, and our best alternative until, some day, the dream of an overall peace will become real.

Ours, of course, is not the only conflict of this century where ethnic, cultural, and religious differences exacerbate the tension. There are those who see the tensions in Kosovo, Cyprus and Kashmir as clashes of civilizations, no less. There, world leadership has – wisely, I think – proposed practical methods to control violence and stabilize the situation, rather than trying to reach an overall resolution to the vast differences between the cultures in conflict. Though those practical proposals have not yet proven uniformly successful, the world recognizes they are the best means to address the situation. I find it curious that only in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, does the world repeatedly press for an overall resolution of the problem. The “piece of peace” approach has not failed elsewhere. I suggest we give it a try in our part of the world as well.

What are the elements necessary for us to have our “piece of peace”? I would like to share with you four observations that I think will help us bring violence under control and learn to live with our differences.

Firstly, if the Palestinian leadership wants a state of its own, it must realize that no state can exist with uncontrolled armed militias in its midst. It must take immediate steps to centralize authority and control the terrorist organizations many of which, by the way, threaten its own legitimacy as well. (Totalitarian extremists have no tolerance for less-extreme elements in their own society, either.) It will not be easy to disarm Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, but the Palestinian leadership has no choice but to face up to the challenge.

Secondly, we cannot insist on Palestine becoming a Western-style democracy as a pre-condition for ending the violence. Demanding that the Palestinians become a democracy makes good sense, for we know that democracies don’t make war on each other. But, if we were to insist on making agreements with democracies only, we would not have peace today with any of our neighbors. We’ll be happy when the Palestinians show more of an inclination towards forming a true democracy, but we don’t have to suspend our efforts to stabilize the current situation, while we wait for them to do so.

Thirdly, though we must do all in our power to combat terror, we must realize that stopping today’s terrorists is not our only goal. It is in Israel’s best interest that the Palestinians have a viable, prosperous state. The humanitarian catastrophe visited on the Palestinian people by the current conflict pains us as moral human beings, as well as – on a practical level – provides a breeding-ground for future suicide bombers.

And finally, we must physically separate ourselves from the Palestinians. We shall have to divide into two states: one Jewish and one Palestinian. As Zionists, we know that Israel must be a Jewish democracy where human rights are safeguarded. Given the demography of the region, if there will be only one state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, it will not be Jewish, and/or it will not be a democracy. We would like to negotiate

with the Palestinians to bring about this separation, but given the problems with the present Palestinian leadership, imminent success for such negotiations seems unlikely. Until we can negotiate agreed borders, we may be forced to pull out of the Gaza Strip and much of the West Bank unilaterally, and establish a secure division between us and the Palestinians. I wish to emphasize that we consider an agreed-upon border to be preferable (and would likely be better geographically for the Palestinians), but Israel has the right to secure borders, and will in the meantime assert that right unilaterally, if necessary. This will be no easy matter for us in Israel. Many well-intentioned idealistic settlers will have to be uprooted from the homes they built and have lived in for thirty years. In addition, a unilateral withdrawal risks being seen as rewarding the terrorists, who will undoubtedly claim that it was their violence that drove the Jews out of occupied territory. I submit, however, that true victory for terrorism is the continuation of the uncontrollable violence of today. If we take these admittedly painful steps to bring the situation under control and to manage it on our terms rather than theirs – we will have sent a message to the terrorists that their days have become numbered, that their cause eventually will be lost.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is today despair among Palestinians and Israelis. After every terrorist act, with every funeral, even those who once thought there was a chance for peace find it harder to believe that there are partners left on the other side. Unsuccessful peace initiatives by powerful and well-meaning friends, only deepen the despair.

Totalitarian factions would turn our national differences into an insoluble clash of civilizations. We ask our friends to help us empower a rational, moderate coalition of religious and cultural leaders from both sides, who will provide an alternative to those totalitarian extremists who now dominate public opinion and make real peace impossible.

Our friends who would help us achieve peace must appreciate that full peace may not be as immediately attainable as we had all hoped. Rather, we ask that they help us develop a workable, realistic plan that would allow us and the Palestinians to live with our differences, control the violence, and stabilize our situation.

Ladies and gentlemen, we Jews end all our prayers with a blessing and wish for peace for our people. When we depart, as it were, from our sanctuary of prayer, we bow and take three steps backwards. The late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Rabbi Emmanuel Jacobovits, pointed out how proper it is that before asking the Almighty to make peace for us, we step back and thus make room for others. If we are so full of ourselves that we cannot make room for others, there can never be peace among us. And there is no greater blessing for Israel than peace. Let us pray that the leaders of the world have the wisdom to encourage all of today's combatants in all of today's conflicts, to allow room for broad cultural, religious, and ethnic spaces, wide enough to accommodate others and their hopes for peace, as well. And if the Peace of our Biblical prophets must remain a dream for tomorrow, let

us have the wisdom to end the bloodshed today, that would deny us even that,
our cherished dream.