

Distinguished Co-Chairmen, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin my statement at this opening session of the Peace Conference by addressing my deep thanks to His Majesty, King Juan Carlos, and to the government and people of Spain for hosting this historic Conference and for all the facilities and care they have offered participating delegations. On behalf of my country, Syria, its President, Government and people I would like to express our deep appreciation to this friendly country, Spain, with which we enjoy deep-rooted historic, human and cultural ties, whose manifestations are still alive and bright to this very day.

I would also like to express my thanks to the co-sponsors of the Conference, the United States of America and the Soviet Union, for the determination they have demonstrated to convene this Conference at the date proposed by Presidents George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev.

In this context, I would like to express my appreciation for the great efforts of President Bush supported by President Gorbachev, which were the pre-eminent factor in imparting to the Peace Process unprecedented momentum and seriousness. Consequently, this Conference cannot be considered a ceremonial event, as one of the participating parties had wanted. Rather, it is an international event which has aroused interest in the entire world.

In addition, I cannot fail to recall the sustained personal efforts of Secretary of State James Baker during his eight visits to our region, particularly the important, lengthy and frank talks he held in Damascus. These talks, by their seriousness and the positive atmosphere which surrounded them, have, indeed, helped to make convening of this Peace Conference possible.

It must be emphasized at this point that the role of Europe in the Peace Process is both important and vital. Europe is geographically close to our region. Security in one region cannot fail to affect that of the other while both share common interests.

The role of the United Nations, regardless of the status allotted it in this Conference, remains important; as long as the objective of the peace process is to reach a comprehensive, just and peaceful settlement within the framework of international legitimacy and on the basis of United Nations resolutions; and as long as the results reached by the parties are to be sanctioned by the Security Council.

The convening of this Peace Conference in this beautiful country, Spain, evokes boundless symbols, meanings and images. The peoples of the entire world, not only the peoples of our region, are buffeted by conflicting feelings towards this Conference, feelings fluctuating between success and failure, between optimism in achieving peace and the pessimism of a regression to conflict and confrontation. It is no exaggeration to state that the continuing intransigent Israeli position, which is bereft of any justification, is the one that places the world on the brink of incalculable dangers and prevents the region from enjoying peace.

The Arabs, throughout their long history, have always advocated peace, justice and tolerance. Their history, both ancient and modern, abounds with evidence of this fact. The Jews, and Oriental Jews in particular, know better than anyone that they have lived among

Muslim Arabs throughout history wherever they coexisted without ever suffering any form of persecution or discrimination, either racial or religious. Rather, they have always lived in grace and dignity, participating in all walks of life. The Jews have never known security, tolerance and equality approximating the security, tolerance and equality they have enjoyed in the lands of Arabs and Muslims. Anyone perusing the pages of history today will realize the blatant contrast between this tolerance and full equality with which the Arabs treated the Jews for hundreds of years, on the one hand, and the persecution, injustice and discrimination inflicted on the Arabs - particularly Palestinian Arabs - languishing under Israeli occupation, on the other.

Suffice it to recall - if only the reminder were heeded - that had Israel's political orientation since 1948 been humane, millions of Arabs: Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese, would not have been uprooted from their homes; nor would they have been denied - until today - their right to return. Had Israel's policies not been settler-colonialist, Palestinians languishing under Israeli occupation since 1967 would not have been denied all their fundamental rights, foremost among which is their right to self-determination. It is that very right that the Palestinians - children, women and the elderly - have steadfastly expressed through their peaceful Intifada during the past four years as seen and heard by the entire world. The continuing denial of the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people will lead this people to believe that resorting to violence alone is the most viable means of achieving that right.

The list of evidence of inhuman Israeli practices is long and documented. These are practices which were condemned by dozens of resolutions adopted by the United Nations. These are practices of which the Israelis are tacitly cognizant. They are known to many a fair-minded historian and journalist in the West, although some do not dare address these practices frankly and unequivocally for reasons which are regrettably not known to wide sections of European and U.S. public opinion. First among these reasons is that Jewish extremists both inside and outside Israel harass those writers and journalists and jeopardize their livelihoods and future. If they happen to be Christian they are accused of being anti-Semitic. But if they are Arabs and Muslim it is easier to accuse them - without any evidence whatsoever - of terrorism and the intention of destroying Israel. Contrary to every law and norm, the burden of proof in the minds of these extremists is incumbent on the accused. Thus the innocent becomes a suspect in the eyes of a large sector of Western public opinion. The aggressors who have usurped the land of others by force thus become the advocates of peace, whereas the victims of aggression who demand the return of their occupied land and their usurped rights become terrorists and destructive war-mongers.

Distinguished Co-Chairmen,

We have never carried the banner of war and destruction. Syria has consistently called for the achievement of comprehensive and just peace on the basis of United Nations resolutions. We have always emphasized our sincere intention and serious desire for peace. At the height of the October war President Hafez al-Assad said:

We do not revel in death and destruction. Instead, we are repulsing death and destruction. We are not aggressors and we have never been, but we have and continue to repel

aggression. We do not wish death on anyone, but we are protecting our people from death. We love freedom and wish it both for ourselves and for others.

Peace and the usurpation of land of others cannot coexist. For peace to be stable and durable it must encompass all parties to the conflict on all fronts. Developments in our region have proved this fact. Israel exploited the signing of its peace with Egypt in 1979 to then proceed to annexing Jerusalem in 1980, the Golan in 1981 and invading Lebanon in 1982. It is clear that Israel perpetrated this series of aggressive acts at a pace that exceeds the pace of its withdrawal from the Egyptian Sinai.

In the aftermath of each act of aggression the Security Council was called upon to convene and resolutions were unanimously adopted; Resolution 476 declaring the annexation of Jerusalem as null and void; Resolution 497 declaring the imposition of Israeli laws in the Golan as being null and void and with no international legal validity, and Resolution 425 calling for unconditional Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

However, as was the case with Resolutions 242 and 338, these resolutions were not implemented at the time due to Israeli rejection and intransigence and due to the atmosphere of the Cold War between East and West. Now, as the Cold War has come to an end, as the spirit of confrontation and competition between the United States and the Soviet Union has given way to a new stage of reconciliation and cooperation, and as the Peace Conference has convened, the peoples of our region and of the world at large await the implementation of these resolutions at the earliest date through serious and productive talks.

It is noteworthy to point out in this context that Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, on the basis of which the Peace Conference is being convened, were adopted as a compromise among the permanent member States of the Security Council. As it is well known, the majority of these States have been sympathetic to Israel since its creation. Hence, the implementation of these two resolutions should not be the subject of new bargaining during bilateral negotiations. Rather, they should be implemented in all their provisions and on all fronts. Resolution 242 emphasizes in its preamble the principle of "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war." This means that every inch of Arab land occupied by the Israelis by war and force: the Golan, the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip must be returned in their entirety to their legitimate owners. International public opinion is aware more than ever before - and especially following the Gulf Crisis - that double standards are no longer acceptable in this age, that the principles of international law, not the law of the jungle, must be respected, and that United Nations resolutions, not brute force, must be applied.

At last, the States of the world have come to realize that Israel alone resists the efforts for peace with all the influence it can muster. It is Israel which perpetuates its occupation of the territories of others by force. All have come to realize that Israel follows a futile and obsolete ideology based on expansion, the building of settlements and the uprooting of Arabs from land in which they had lived for centuries in order to replace them with new immigrants who have never lived in this region.

In this regard, Syria would like to remind the co-sponsors of the Conference, and through them the international community, that Israeli occupation of Syrian and Palestinian territories has resulted in uprooting approximately half a million Syrian citizens from the Golan who have to date not been able to return. The occupation has also resulted in the presence of over a quarter of a million Palestinian refugees in Syria who are denied the right to return to the homeland of their fathers and forebears in Palestine.

The claims invoked by Israel for the migration of world Jewry to it at the expense of the native Arab population are not sanctioned by any legal or humanitarian principle. If the entire world were to adopt such claims it would have to encourage all Christians to emigrate to the Vatican and all Muslims to holy Mecca.

It is a contradiction in terms that Israel refuses to implement United Nations Resolution 194 of 1948 which provides for the return of all Palestinian refugees to their homes and for compensation to those who do not wish to return, under the pretext that there is not enough land. Yet, at the same time, Israel continues to induce hundreds of thousands of new Jewish immigrants to settle in this very land and to abandon their lands of origin such as the Soviet Union, which extends over one sixth of our planet's land mass.

We believe that the time for inconsistencies and empty pretexts whose only aim is to justify the perpetuation of occupation and annexation has now passed. We believe that all parties, both aggressors and victims, now stand at the threshold of a historic opportunity - which may not come about again - an opportunity to end long decades of destructive conflicts and to establish a durable, comprehensive and just peace that would deliver the region from the vicious circle of war and usher in a new era in which the peoples of the region may devote themselves to its prosperity and development.

In order for a just peace to be established no Arab land must remain under Israeli occupation, nor can the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination remain denied.

If the objective is truly for the peoples and the States of the region to coexist; to enjoy security, peace, and prosperity; to place their plentiful energies and resources at the service of their economies and development . . . how can such a desirable objective logically be realized without eliminating occupation and restoring legitimate rights?

The Arabs have given much for peace. They have openly declared that they desire peace. They merely demand the enjoyment of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Charter of the United Nations to all peoples and which have been recognized by the international community and the world at large for every people.

Alone among all States of the world Israel insists on maintaining its hold on the Arab territories which it occupied by force under the pretext of security; as if geographic expansion can guarantee security in this age of scientific and technological advancement. Were the world to emulate this Israeli logic how many wars and conflicts will arise between neighboring states under that pretext?

The Arabs have responded to the call of the co-sponsors of the Conference in appreciation of their efforts and serious endeavor to work towards a just and comprehensive peace in the region.

However, Israel would be gravely mistaken were it to interpret this Arab response as a license for it to perpetuate its intransigent stands within the Conference or any of its committees. Israel would also be doing itself an injustice more so than to others if it were to take lightly the peace process or the unanimous international wish to reach a just and comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict in accordance with the criteria of international legitimacy as well as the spirit and letter of the Charter of the United Nations and its resolutions.

Despite Syria's numerous reservations concerning the format and terms of reference of this Conference, the Syrian Arab delegation has come here to attempt to reach a comprehensive, honorable and just peace to all aspects and fronts of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Our delegation has come carrying inexhaustible reserves of good will, a genuine serious desire for a just peace and determination to help enable this peace process succeed and reach its noble objective. That determination is only equalled by a no lesser determination to reject any attempt to exploit the current peace process to legitimize that which is illegitimate and unacceptable according to the United Nations, its Charter and resolutions; or to obtain any gains - however small - which would mirror the abhorrent injustice of aggression or which would reward the aggressor.

This firm Syrian position whose every element is anchored in the principles of international legitimacy and resolutions of the United Nations deems it imperative for Israel to withdraw from every inch of the occupied Syrian Golan, West Bank, Jerusalem, the Gaza District and the South of Lebanon. This position also deems it imperative to safeguard the legitimate political and national rights of the Palestinian people, foremost among which is their right to self-determination. The building of settlements in the occupied Arab territories is an illegal action; it is considered null and void and it stands as a major obstacle in the way of peace. Thus, it is imperative that the settlements be removed. The continuation of settlement activity in the Arab occupied territories, particularly since the peace process has commenced, is tangible evidence that Israel does not want to reach genuine peace.

Distinguished Co-Chairmen,

Syria's acceptance of President Bush's initiative which is based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of "land for peace" has opened the way to the peace process - as has been acknowledged by all. Our presence as participants in this Conference embodies our desire to achieve comprehensive and just peace. Our agreement to undertake bilateral talks is clear indication of our serious contribution to building a genuine and comprehensive peace in the region.

However, concern for the success of the peace process requires that multilateral talks which do not fall within the framework of Resolution 242 not be initiated until substantive and concrete achievement has been made in bilateral negotiations which would confirm the elimination of the major obstacles on the road to peace. That is because Israel - as everyone

knows - is not interested in implementing Resolutions 242 and 338 on the basis of the principle of "land for peace." Israel is interested only in entering into negotiations on economic co operation with the States of the region while perpetuating its occupation of Arab territories. This is in contradiction with the objective on which the convening of this Conference was based.

Distinguished Co-Chairmen,

We have come for an honorable and just peace based on international law and legitimacy. We have not come for a false peace which reflects the conditions imposed by the aggressor and the yoke of occupation. We have come for a genuine peace encompassing all the fronts of the Arab-Israeli conflict and not for a peace which would address one aspect of the conflict to then merely cause new conflicts and tensions in the region.

Proceeding from our belief in such a peace we confidently and resolutely declare our determination to work towards a comprehensive, just and peaceful settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict which would liberate the land, and guarantee the national rights of the Palestinian people as well as security for all.

Were the Peace Conference to succeed in achieving these objectives, which are the focus of world expectations, it would herald a new dawn in our turbulent region and the beginning of a new era of peace, prosperity and stability.