

Distinguished Co-Chairmen, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first apologize, as I have to leave this hall immediately after my statement, together with some of my colleagues, in order to return to Israel before sunset, in time for the advent of our holy day of rest. I trust no one will see in this a sign of disrespect.

Let me also express again our thanks and appreciation to our Spanish hosts and to the co-sponsors for putting so much effort in making this conference possible.

For two days, we have sat in this hall, armed with a lot of patience, to listen to what our Arab neighbors have to say.

We have heard much criticism and many charges. We can respond to each and every charge, to every misrepresentation of history and fact - and there were quite a few - and we can refute every contention. We, too, can cite morality, justice, and international legality in our favor. But is this what we have come here for? Such futile exchanges and rebuttals have been taking place during the last forty-three years at the U.N. and in countless international gatherings. They have not brought us one inch closer to mutual understanding and peace. This is precisely why we have persistently called for direct, face-to-face talks. Nevertheless, we came here out of goodwill, hoping there might be a change, a turn for the better in tone and content, that would lead us to a new and more promising chapter. And we have not given up this hope.

Let me therefore make just a few remarks, not for the sake of polemics, but to shed light on a few facts.

Syria's representative wants us and the world to believe that his country is a model of freedom and protection of human rights, including those of the Jews. Such a statement stretches incredulity to infinite proportions. The ancient Jewish community in Syria has been exposed to cruel oppression, torture, and discrimination of the worst kind. Most of the Jews fled the country over the years and the few thousand left are living in perpetual terror. Anyone who tries to cross the border is incarcerated in prison, beaten and tortured, and his family exposed to punishment and constant fear. But not only are the Jews the victims of the Syrian regime. To this day, Syria is the home of a host of terrorist organizations that spread violence and death to all kinds of innocent targets, including civil aviation, and women and children of many nations. I could go on and recite a litany of facts that demonstrate the extent to which Syria merits the dubious honor of being one of the most oppressive, tyrannical regimes in the world. But this is not what we have come here for.

To the Lebanese people, our neighbors to the north, we send a message of sympathy and understanding. They are suffering under the yoke of Syrian occupation and oppression and are denied even the capacity to cry out in protest. We bear no ill-will to the courageous and suffering Lebanese, and we join them in the hope that they will soon regain their independence and freedom. We have no designs on Lebanese territory, and in the context of a peace treaty and the removal of the Syrian presence, we can restore stability and security on the borders between our two countries.

In many respects, we have a situation of de facto non-belligerency with the Kingdom of Jordan. We sincerely believe that a peace treaty with Jordan is achievable. In the context of such a treaty, we will determine together the secure and recognized boundaries, and lay the foundation for a relationship of mutual cooperation and neighborly relations. Both countries stand to gain from a relationship of peace and we hope to achieve it through direct, bilateral negotiations.

I listened attentively to the statement of the Palestinian Arab spokesman in the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. The Palestinian Arabs are our closest neighbors and in many respects, their lives are intertwined with ours. This is one more reason for the importance we attach to an accommodation with this community.

The Palestinian Arab spokesman made a valiant effort at recounting the sufferings of his people. But let me say, that twisting history and perversion of fact will not earn them the sympathy which they strive to acquire. Was it not Palestinians who slaughtered a major part of the Jewish community of Hebron, without any provocation? Was it not Palestinians who rejected every peace proposal since the beginning of the century and responded by violence? Was it not Palestinians who produced a leader who collaborated with the Nazis in the extermination of Jews in the Holocaust? Was it not the Palestinians who called their Arab brethren in 1948 to come and help them destroy the Jewish State? Was it not the Palestinians who rejoiced and danced on the roofs when Iraqi Scud missiles were falling on Tel Aviv? Have they forgotten that more Palestinians were killed by their own brethren in a few recent years, than in clashes with Israeli security forces? Even to this very day, under conditions which you describe as occupation, is it not a fact that any Jew who strays into an Arab village risks his life, but tens of thousands of Palestinian Arabs walk freely in every town and village in Israel and no one molests them?

We have presented the Palestinians a fair proposal, one that offers them a chance to improve their lot immensely. I appeal to them to accept our proposal and join us in negotiations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have come here to seek together the road that would lead us to peace and accommodation, rather than to engage in a match of charges and counter-charges. Peace is not just words or a signature on a piece of paper. Peace is a frame of mind and a set of actions that are the opposite of hostility, and create a climate of mutual trust, tolerance and respect.

With an open heart, we call on the Arab leaders to take the courageous step and respond to our out stretched hand in peace. Yesterday, I extended an invitation to come to Israel for the first round of peace negotiations and begin a sincere exchange that would lead to agreement. We hope you will accept our invitation. We will readily reciprocate. I am sure I speak for every man, woman and child in Israel, who join me in the hope that, after all, this gathering will be registered in history as a turning point, away from hostility and forward to coexistence and peace.

Thank you.