

AUSTRALIA, ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Address by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to Public Forum sponsored by the Zionist Federation of Australia, Caulfield Town Hall, Melbourne, 12 July 1992

It has been nearly two years since a public meeting of the Jewish community last put me through the wringer on Australia's Middle East policy - although there has not exactly been a shortage of communication, private and public, between me and your representatives since then! When I did speak last to such an audience it was September 1990, the second month of the Gulf Crisis following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. It was a time of agonising uncertainty and tension. And it was a time which led me to say - apocalyptically, if not particularly originally - that "the Middle East tinder-box is closer to ignition point than it has been for decades".

In the event, that crisis was resolved - swiftly and decisively, albeit bloodily. Iraq's invasion was reversed, without the whole region igniting, and this occurred as a result of the mobilisation, under United States leadership, and for the first time since the Korean War, of the United Nations's collective security capability. Moreover, in the aftermath of the War significant steps have been taken - backed by continuing international sanctions - to eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and its capacity to produce them in the future.

Nobody suggests that the problem of Iraq has been resolved once and for all. Saddam Hussein's regime, which the world had hoped would be overthrown, remains intact; it continues to do everything it can to frustrate the efforts of the United Nations disarmament teams; and the plight of the Kurds and Shiites remain only the most obvious of the human rights abuses that continue to be perpetrated. There is no doubt, however, that not just Kuwait, but the region as a whole, is considerably more secure today than it would have been had the international community not responded as it did.

The Peace Legacy of the Gulf Crisis

Moreover, and of crucial importance for the central theme of our discussion tonight, the resolution of the Gulf crisis has proved to be the long-awaited catalyst for a major new effort to resolve that most intractable of all Middle East problems - the conflict between Israel and its Arab and Palestinian neighbours. I spoke to you two years ago of my hope that the resolution of the Gulf Crisis would become a "springboard", as James Baker had put it, for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And I spoke of my hope, shared by so

many, that the resolution of the Crisis would "contains within it the seeds of an earlier, more wide-ranging and more durable Middle East peace than could previously have been imagined".

Those hopes have begun to be realised with the Peace Conference that opened in Madrid on 30 October last year under the joint Chairmanship of the United States and the (then) Soviet Union, and which has continued subsequently with a complex series of bilateral and multilateral negotiating sessions - eleven altogether, in seven different cities. Under the agreed terms of reference the multilateral talks - to which are invited all the regional countries and others like the EC as well - are intended to address region-wide issues, specifically arms control and regional security, regional economic development, water resources, the environment, and refugees.

The bilateral talks are to take place between Israel and, respectively, Syria, Lebanon, and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. In each case they take place expressly on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which refer of course not only to the need for Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories and a "just settlement of the refugee question" but also demand

respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty and territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries free from threats or acts of force.

The terms of reference also set a target timetable. Talks on interim self-government arrangements for the Occupied Territories are to be conducted "with the objective of reaching agreement within one year", i.e. by October 1992. Once agreed, those interim arrangements are to continue for five years, during the third year of which period - and only then - negotiations are to take place on the question of "permanent status".

The immediate credit for the initiation of this process, upon which the hopes of so many are now riding, is due overwhelmingly to Secretary of State James Baker, without whose tirelessly creative diplomacy it would simply not have come about. The magnitude of his achievement should be acknowledged even by those who have concerns about some of the policy positions - not least on the loans issue - taken by him and the US Government along the way. But it also needs to be appreciated that Baker's diplomacy was itself something that could only have borne fruit against the backdrop of the successful resolution of the Gulf conflict. There were four key elements in that backdrop.

First, there was the demonstrated willingness of the Cold War superpowers to put the past behind them and work together to deal with international aggressors - not just rhetorically, but militarily - through the institutional machinery of the United Nations. The constructive

and decisive role played by the then Soviet Union in this respect had a particularly salutary impact on its previous Arab clients, not least Syria, who were forced to come to terms with a wholly new international reality.

The second crucial element in the Gulf crisis was that so many Arab nations joined the international consensus against Saddam. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon - with only Jordan, in the immediate region, standing aside - all made clear their distaste for what Iraq had done, in defiance of emotional appeals to Pan Arabism and in an unprecedentedly striking breach of Arab solidarity.

The third element helping to create the right environment for the Madrid peace process was, by contrast, the unsavoury and profoundly ill-judged role played by the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in supporting Saddam Hussein throughout the Gulf Crisis. This role helped confirm the trend - although this should not be exaggerated - towards greater relative stature being enjoyed within the Palestinian movement by its leadership within the Occupied Territories. This trend, in turn, made it a little easier for Israel to find a formula for Palestinian representation of a kind enabling it to come to the bargaining table (a little ironically, one might think, given the role local Palestinians played in initiating the *intifada*, but such ironies are the stuff of Middle East politics).

A fourth important contribution to the Arab-Israeli peace process made by the Gulf conflict was the highly creditable role played by Israel itself. Notwithstanding the fearful provocation of the SCUD attacks (and the intense emotional provocation of Palestinians being seen cheering the missiles on), and the domestic political pressure all this generated, Israel held its hand. In doing so, it not only avoided the risk of breaking apart the always vulnerable Arab coalition against Iraq, but won the respect of the region and the wider international community for the intelligence and moderation of its stance.

These, then, are the factors which came together to make possible the Madrid peace process - the best chance that Israelis and their Arab and Palestinian neighbours have ever had to reconcile their differences. Nobody came to that process believing that it would necessarily and inevitably bring lasting peace. Nobody believed that the process was going to be self-executing - automatically producing positive results within the agreed time frames. Nobody underestimated the difficulties that would be involved in the negotiating process after forty-three years of bitter enmity, and four bloody and destructive wars. But, equally, there could be nobody of good faith who could possibly argue with the proposition that it would be truly tragic if this unique historic opportunity to resolve the Middle East conflict were to be lost.

The Peace Process in May 1992

This, then, was the background to my visit to the Middle East two months ago, a visit which took me over the course of twelve days to Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iran, interspersed with side trips to Paris and Lisbon for multilateral meetings with Western foreign minister colleagues. I found in the Middle East a political landscape very different to that which confronted Bill Hayden in 1988, and indeed very different to that which had prevailed at any time since the foundation of Israel. It was an environment in which Israel and its neighbours had taken the first tentative steps toward achieving full mutual recognition, and developing ground rules that would in future ensure not only their mutual survival but their mutual prosperity.

But if hopes were high at the time of my visit, so too were anxieties. To understand why I reacted as I did during the course of my visit it is important that you appreciate the extent to which I found a tangible, acute sense of anxiety about the future of the peace process almost everywhere I went - certainly among the Palestinians to whom I spoke in Jerusalem, the West Bank, Amman and Cairo; certainly among all the Arab Government leaders whom I met; but also very strongly among my Western foreign minister counterparts, including those from countries most steadfastly and conspicuously supportive of Israel; and also, strikingly, among just about every prominent Israeli I met apart from those in the Likud Government leadership (and I had discussions in Tel Aviv with more than a dozen such Israeli editors, commentators, think-tank experts, political activists and retired generals occupying political positions across a broad centre-left to centre-right spectrum).

The language and emphasis varied from place to place, and from person to person, but there was a remarkable consistency about the nature of the anxiety that was expressed. That anxiety was simply this: that while the peace process had got off to a good enough start, and while nobody expected really major breakthroughs to occur in the self-government negotiations before the Israeli elections, six months of the initial twelve months negotiating period had expired with very little discernible progress of any kind having been made in the negotiations - and this was placing at fundamental risk the inherently fragile peace constituency of moderate Palestinians and moderates within the Arab Governments.

The slow progress of the formal bilateral negotiations was not by itself such a major cause for concern: what made it so was that it was accompanied by two other factors making it harder every day for moderate Palestinians and other Arabs to hold the line against their extremist brethren. Those factors were the continuation unabated of the massive program of settlement building in the Occupied Territories, and the continuation unabated in those territories of occupation policies perceived as highly oppressive in human rights terms.

I am not suggesting for a moment now, nor was I in the Middle East, that this combination of factors was, then or now, the only set of obstacles to the peace process. We must never be naive about how many constituencies, apart from the moderate ones, there are in the

Middle East. We must never forget the destructive role that so many of these constituencies have played in the past, and would again in the future if they had a chance. We must never forget or ignore the reality of the security threat, both external and internal, to which Israel's geography and history exposes it. We must never forget that it is the obligation of every responsible member of the international community to help ensure that those threats to Israel's security are once and for all removed. I made those points over and over again in my private talks with Arab Government and Palestinian representatives, and I will come back in a moment to spell out in a little more detail just what I did say. I accept, in retrospect, that it would certainly have led to a more balanced perception of my and the Australian Government's position had I made more use of such limited opportunities as I had to spell these things out publicly as well.

The point that I think needs to be made by me now, however, even if it is not an easy one for me to make to this audience, is that in the Middle East as I saw it in May 1992 the most immediate and serious current obstacles to the peace process were those being posed by the attitudes and policies of the then Israeli Government - and that this perception was very widely held, not just by Palestinians and other Arabs, but by a very large number of Israelis and by just about the whole Western foreign policy community.

In every complex negotiation involving parties with strongly held views the immediate onus of responsibility for moving the process forward, or avoiding a break-down, tends to shift back and forth. Every party to such a negotiation of course has an obligation to contribute equally to the final outcome, but it is the case that the spotlight of responsibility shifts from time to time along the way. And it just happened to be the case that, in the particular circumstances of May 1992, the spotlight was squarely on Israel.

My perceptions - reinforced not only by what I saw for myself on the ground, but by what I heard from those on both sides of the argument in Israel - were not idiosyncratic or ill-founded. You can (any many of you already have) contest my judgment in making some of those perceptions public, particularly in ways that did under-emphasise other sides to the argument. But I would not wish you to doubt the genuineness with which I formed and expressed the view that, quite apart from all the other difficulties and uncertainties it faced, the whole peace process was in danger of early collapse unless there was some urgent and fundamental changes to the policy approach adopted by the Israeli Government. Nor would I wish you to doubt the genuineness with which I held the view that maybe - just maybe - some strong words of warning from a long-standing and unequivocal friend of Israel might have a better chance of being heard and understood than such words coming from somewhere else.

I do not want to unduly labour tonight the particular concerns I had. I have expressed them elsewhere, and hopefully now there is every sign that, following the Israeli election, those concerns will be dramatically alleviated. But to make my position clear I have to sketch them at least in outline.

In relation to settlements, the problem was simply that the pace and scale of new building, and the creation of new demographic realities to go with it, had been almost universally perceived as incompatible with the ultimate achievement of a negotiated "land for peace" outcome. The permanent status of the territories is not, under the agreed terms of reference of the peace process, a matter for negotiation now. But if the peace process is to be kept alive, so must be the 'land for peace' option. At the time of my visit there had already been established in the occupied territories at least 140 different Jewish settlements involving 260,000 settlers: even if one omits from this equation the wall of settlements around East Jerusalem, where there are some 145,000 Jewish residents (now outnumbering the 120,000 Arabs of East Jerusalem), there are still around 115,000 others living in the Occupied Territories, and not just in the strategic areas of the Jordan Valley and elsewhere but near Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron and other areas right in the Palestinian heartland.

Moreover, as a recent US State Department "Report on Settlements" indicates, although this has not been widely publicised, while the actual land area occupied by settlement buildings is not yet very large in percentage terms, fully half the land in the West Bank and one-third of the land in Gaza has in fact been set aside for Israeli use - through declaring areas closed on security grounds, requisitioning land for military needs, confiscating absentee property, expropriating land for public use, or declaring areas to be State land.

So far as human rights problems in the Occupied Territories were concerned, my starting point was the standards set in the Fourth Geneva Protocol on the Protection of Civilian Persons in the Time of War, which Israel itself has acknowledged as an appropriate touchstone. Settlement building can itself be regarded as a violation of Article 49 of that Convention, involving as it does a transfer of civilian population into the occupied territory. But apart from that, serious problems arise with anything in the nature of collective penalties (prohibited by Article 33), including curfews and travel restrictions imposed for essentially punitive purposes, and the demolition of family houses of those believed guilty of wrong-doing; detentions without trial (addressed by Articles 42 and 64); deportations (prohibited by Article 49); and any unjustified application of fatal force or excessive violence (prohibited by Article 3). There are, unhappily, ample grounds for believing that every one of these prohibitions has been significantly violated.

Of course it is the case that such repressive measures as have been applied in the Occupied Territories have occurred very much in response to the violence and lawlessness which the Israelis themselves - soldiers and civilians alike - have had to confront, both in the form of deliberate tactics of the *intifada* and unrestricted excesses by particular individuals and groups. The tragedy of the situation as I found it is, of course, the way in which the pattern of violence had become a closed, vicious, circle. Action begets reaction;

violence begets retaliatory repression which begets a new round of violence. The task is not to lock oneself ever more deeply into the circle, but to find ways of breaking out of it. The trouble was that I found, in May, no ground for believing that anyone then in authority was seriously trying to do so.

On the question of the Israeli Government's tactics at the bargaining table, I accept that the evidence of the time was perhaps more equivocal than my public statements in Israel acknowledged. No more than very preliminary, and manifestly incomplete, self-government proposals had been held out until then, but maybe more would have been forthcoming from a re-elected Likud Government. My own instinct led me to have serious doubts about the ultimate seriousness of Mr Shamir's commitment even to the first stage of the negotiations, and I let those doubts show. I simply hope it will be acknowledged now that perhaps those doubts were not entirely without foundation, given Mr Shamir's reported post-election remarks to Maariv that such moderation as he had shown in the talks to date had been merely tactical (remarks which he does not appear to have subsequently personally disavowed, although his private office has sought to explain them).

Taking Sides?

I have been widely criticised - with a number of people here tonight leading the charge! - for saying publicly as much as I did about Israel's human rights record, and as little as I did about the human rights record of others in the region and their contribution in setting obstacles to the peace process. I have already explained the general context in which that occurred. A further contributing factor was that the opportunities I had for press contact in Israel were not repeated in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan - either journalists did not turn up when and where expected, or they did not pursue the kind of questions I received in Israel - but I have already acknowledged, and do so again, that, with the benefit of hindsight I could have made more of the limited opportunities I had. Yet another factor was the way in which some sections of the media treated what I did have to say: Mark Leibler could well have said of my visit, as he was kind enough to write in the Australian Jewish Times of Bill Hayden's in 1988, that "the media treated his visit in the same way as they treat the issues - superficially and dramatically".

Let me at least take advantage of the opportunity you have kindly given me now to set the records straight about the issues I did in fact raise.

In Iran, where I met President Rafsanjani, Foreign Minister Velayati and a number of other senior Ministers and advisers, I pulled no punches. I talked about human rights - specifically the use of the death penalty on Bahais and others, political detentions and (in considerable detail) the Rushdie affair. Of course I told the Iranian Government that its refusal to recognise Israel did it no credit, and I also raised Iran's links with Hezbollah in

Lebanon.

In Egypt, where I met President Mubarak, Foreign Minister Moussa the Supply Minister Abul-Dahab, I raised human rights with regard to the treatment, torture and detention without trial, of Islamic dissidents. With Government Ministers and the Arab League Secretary-General, I raised, with great specificity, Australia's objections to the continuing Arab economic boycott of Israel - an issue that I pursued, as I promised the ZFA I would, in every Arab country.

In Syria, where I met President Assad and Foreign Minister El-Sharaa, I discussed at length our great continuing concern about the situation of the Jewish community there - making clear that Australia, while welcoming the April announcement of lifting of restrictions on leaving the country, wanted to see them fully implemented. I also raised political detentions and executions, especially public hangings, as human rights issues of concern to Australia and the whole international community.

In both Syria and Lebanon I raised at some length, and with a persistence to which my interlocutors will testify, the obstacles to the peace process posed by their non-participation in its multilateral sessions, making the point that the process was intended to be a seamless mutually-reinforcing whole. In Beirut, in association with meetings with the President, Foreign Minister and Speaker of the Parliament, I raised very specifically (and in fact publicly) not only the situation in South Lebanon, but the destructive role being played there and world-wide by the Hezbollah - which led to me being subsequently attacked in a published statement by that organisation for having given "insult to the resistance movement".

Similarly with the Palestinians, of whom I met senior PLO Adviser Dr Nabil Shaath in Cairo, a group of senior PLO Officials led by Bishop Elia Khoury in Amman, and a group led by Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi in Jerusalem: in all those conversations I went out of my way to talk about Australia's long standing problems with the PLO - not least the continuing language of its Covenant, the PLO's performance during the Gulf Crisis, and the erratic quality over the years of the commitment to moderation of so many of its leaders. I spoke constantly of our abhorrence of terrorism and violence in any shape or form - including both attacks on Jewish civilians and the continuing ugly scale of collaborator killings - and of the contribution the Palestinians could make to the peace process by doing everything within their power to curtail absolutely, and once and for all, the actions of extremists within their ranks.

Make no mistake about it: while I have criticised Israel's human rights excesses in the Occupied Territories, I am well aware of the authoritarian and undemocratic nature of most of the other governments in the region - and have criticised their excesses. I know too that democracy's roots are much deeper in Israel than elsewhere in the region and that

the democratic process in Israel itself is admirably robust and vigorous. My criticisms of Israel's human rights performance in the territories should be seen in that total context.

Let me also take this opportunity once and for all to set the record straight on just what I said, and why I said it, on the subject of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 - which deals of course with both the status of Jerusalem and the question of the "right of return" of displaced Palestinians. I have to say that the headlines and press stories generated on this subject were nothing short of extraordinary, in particular those suggesting that I had somehow initiated discussion of the whole subject and was engaged in nothing less than promoting the swamping of modern day Israel by a mass of Arab returnees. The truth is quite otherwise, but unhappily the highly coloured reporting on this issue, not least in the Jewish press, certainly cast a negative pall over the much of the rest of my visit, and seems to have made a major contribution to the strong emotions generated by it within the Australian Jewish community.

What happened was simply this. The US State Department spokesperson, Margaret Tutwiler, had answered a question on Resolution 194 a day or so before I arrived in Israel. The issue was all over the Israeli press as a result, and it was, naturally, the subject of virtually the first question I was asked after I arrived. I said that Australia, like the United States, had supported 194 at the time it was passed, and in principle subsequently, but that it was a complex and sensitive issue which would have to be looked at in the full context of the peace process. I also made the point that 194 specified compensation as an alternative to repatriation. Return or compensation is the choice, and presumably this same choice should apply in principle to the hundreds of thousands of Jews displaced at the same time from Arab countries, meaning that Israel might well come out ahead if competing claims were to be properly balanced. The irony is that I had made essentially all these same points before on the public record, in answers given in the Senate in May 1990 and September 1991: on both those occasions they disappeared without trace (even, I think, in the pages of my indefatigable friend Michael Danby's Australia Israel Review). But in May 1992 they caused an explosion!

Of course, like the status of Jerusalem itself, the question of the Palestinian right of return is an extremely difficult and delicate issue. Resolutions 242 and 338 are the primary issues in the peace process and, as I have said, the basis for the current negotiating agenda. Resolution 194 is not directly on that agenda, and the unreality of wholesale return must be acknowledged, as I believe it is by many Palestinian leaders. But it seems inevitable that the issues raised by 194 will at least have to be addressed by the negotiating parties, if only in the multilateral working group on refugees, before the peace negotiations are finally completed.

While dealing with the accumulated brickbats of the last couple of months, this is perhaps also the place to say a little more about the Australian Government's policy towards the PLO. Life would be easier for a good many of us if we no longer had to regard the PLO

and its current leadership as a relevant player in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. From the Palestinians' own perspective, other spokespersons have emerged who are less weighed down by the baggage of the past, more consistently moderate in the way they express themselves and certainly more attractive to the international community. It is difficult to contest the proposition that Hanan Ashrawi has done more in twelve months to generate sympathetic understanding for the Palestinian cause than Yassar Arafat has done in twenty-four years.

But the truth of the matter is that the PLO does still seem to represent the aspirations of most Palestinians, both in the Occupied Territories and in the Palestinian diaspora, and it is playing a significant role in the peace negotiations, albeit indirectly and behind the scenes. There is regular contact between the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks and the PLO, as the whole world now knows after the much publicised recent meeting in Amman. It does make sense, accordingly, for those countries who are trying not only to make sense of that process but also to help it generate constructive outcomes, to keep some lines of communication open with the PLO and to use them so far as possible to influence the Organisation in a moderate direction.

Australia's policy is now, as it was before the Gulf Crisis, to be prepared to engage in dialogue with the PLO at both ministerial and official levels if that dialogue seems likely to be productive. We regard the PLO as a non-monolithic body in which, for the moment at least, the moderates are ascendant. We will deal with the PLO to the extent that by doing so we can encourage those genuinely committed to the peace process. Our policy in all these respects is right in the mainstream of Western practice. While we do recognise the Palestinians' right to self-determination and, if they so choose, to an independent state, we do not recognise any existing "State of Palestine" and we certainly do not recognise the PLO as the government of such a state. We have no plans to give the PLO any more formal recognition, and no plans to change the current level or intensity of contacts with it.

The Future

What, then, of the future? I continue to believe - as I said to the public meeting two years ago, and as I put it to all my Jewish interlocutors in Israel - that the wisest utterance about Israel's Palestinian dilemma was that of David Ben Gurion 45 years ago. He said in effect that Israel could be a Jewish state; it could be a democratic state; it could be a state occupying the whole of the historical Israel; but it could not be all three. He persuaded his fledgling nation in 1947 to accept two-and-a-half of the objectives: a Jewish and democratic state occupying part of Eretz Israel. And it is the task of the present generation of leaders to persuade Israelis to make the same choice now. By 2015, or maybe 2025 if Russian and other immigration resumes and maintains its peak, the Arab population of Israel and the Occupied Territories will outnumber the Jewish. The situation in the territories has shown how hard it is now to maintain just and democratic standards when confronted by a largely hostile population. Without territorial compromise, unless Israel is

prepared to relinquish its Jewish identity its claims to be a democracy will be sorely eroded.

This is a perception which is now, happily, returning to the mainstream of Israeli thinking. You will no doubt be as fascinated as I was to have read that a recent poll of all retired IDF generals, plus those of equivalent rank in Shin Bet and Mossad, indicated that a significant majority - almost 75 per cent - would be prepared to return to Jordan or to the Palestinians most of the West Bank provided agreement could be reached on appropriate security arrangements. Further, around 70 per cent of them believed that a land for peace deal could also be struck with Syria on the Golan, and more than half said they would be prepared to accept a Palestinian state if security and economic guarantees were provided. These are not the judgments of a Foreign Minister from a long way away, or of an academic in an ivory tower, but of those who have had the responsibility to physically defend the nation's very existence.

The most overwhelming evidence that Israelis are coming to terms with the real choices confronting them, and the historic opportunity for lasting peace that the ending of the Cold War and the resolution of the Gulf War have created, is of course the outcome of last month's elections. It is in no partisan spirit that I welcome the victory of a fraternal Labour Party. It is because I believe - as most Israelis apparently believe - that this change was the only way that Israel could haul itself back from the edge of the abyss.

Yitzhak Rabin was right when he wrote before the election that:

What will be decided is the fate of Israel and the road it will follow in the coming years.... We are facing a cross-roads in the history of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. For the first time, after more than 100 years of bloodshed and terror... there is a chance for conciliation between ourselves and the Arab world.

He went on to say that

we must seize this hour of grace with both hands. We must embark on serious negotiations towards decisions and agreements: first leading to the establishment of an autonomy in the territories, then to a permanent peace settlement.

He acknowledged that territorial compromise involves painful concessions, and emphasised that it does not mean giving up security. He said clearly that

the bargaining will be bitter, difficult and merciless. There will be harsh arguments, and we shall insist that our vital security interests are not

compromised. But finally, we shall come home with the peace for which we are all yearning.

The effect of Rabin's election, and the real commitment he will immediately inject at least into the self-government negotiations, will be to immediately swing the spotlight back to the other side of the table. It will be the turn of the Palestinian and the Arab states to take yes for an answer. Their bona fides will be under as close scrutiny as Israel's ever were.

I happen to believe that they will rise to the occasion - that there are so many ordinary Palestinians and so many ordinary Arabs in neighbouring countries who do want peace and prosperity for themselves and their children that they will not let the extremists in their midst snatch it from them once again. I believe that if solid progress is quickly made on the self-government issues this will inject new momentum to the other current negotiations, both bilateral and multilateral, and this in turn will feed back momentum and dynamism into the next round of bilateral negotiations when they fall due with the Palestinians - creating an atmosphere in which there will be a very real prospect of ultimately bridging the gap, that still now seems so wide, between the two sides on the permanent status question. The trouble with the previous Government's policy on settlements was that it was so confidence-destroying. What I think we can look forward to under the new Government is the gradual evolution of a series of genuine confidence-building steps, leading gradually but ultimately to lasting peace.

I don't think it is naive to grasp at this chance for peace in the way that Yitzhak Rabin seems now determined to, with the kind of objectives and the kind of strategy I have just described. But it would be naive to do so in a way that ignored the risks along the way, against which risks no-one should relax guard. In particular:

- . the past behaviour of Palestinian extremists both within and outside the PLO, and indeed the erratic behaviour of the PLO leadership itself over many years, suggests ample danger yet ahead. Post election killings by Palestinian rejectionists clearly demonstrate that the election in itself, even if it is followed by rapid progress in negotiations, cannot and will not solve all the problems. The continued support for extremism within the Occupied Territories, most notably by Hamas, will continue to be a series obstacle to the peace process;

- . Syria continues to have a substantial military force including SCUD missiles, and its past attitude toward the peace process over many years understandably does not inspire total confidence that is now completely committed to the current negotiations; and

- . Iran's publicly restated determination to stand outside and beyond any

peace process, to continue to challenge the very existence of Israel, and to continue to support organisations like Hezbollah, again does nothing to contribute to regional confidence-building.

It is the case that throughout the region, even nowadays in Iran, there are forces of moderation and pragmatism at work, forces genuinely committed to lasting peace, and it is up to the international community to engage and encourage them as I sought to do in my own visit to the region. But where any country or community in the region falls short of the behavioural standards and the commitment necessary to move the peace process forward, it must expect to be criticised by the international community. That is what Australia has done in the past, both robustly and even-handedly, and is what we must and will continue to do in the future.

There is a special bond between Australia and Israel, and especially between those Israelis and Australians who share the social democratic ideals that so governed the life and intellect of the new nation at the time of its founding and beyond. It has been a bond forged with an acutely keen consciousness on our part of what the founding of Israel meant, and continues to mean, to the Jewish people all over the world.

It has been a bond much reinforced for me personally and my generation by our knowing, as we do so well and so closely from our school and university days, so many of the first post-Holocaust generation of Australian Jews. They were kids, now men and women, whose grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins and family friends were slaughtered in Hitler's gas chambers and killing fields; who felt the awful emotional weight of this history constantly upon them; who were determined - as Jews are everywhere - to ensure that it never happens again; and who are committed above all else to Israel as the embodiment of that consciousness, that pride, and that determination.

No-one who has had, as I have had, this kind of bonding experience, and no-one who has been moved, as I have been moved, by seeing the images of the Kristallnacht or Warsaw at Yad Vashem, or by standing, as I did last year, outside Kiev by the ravine at Babi Yar, could possibly be indifferent to the fate of this land, this state, created to right centuries of grievous wrong done to the Jewish people.

It is not because of my indifference, let alone my hostility, that I responded as I did in May. It was because of my distress, and my despair, at what seemed then likely to be the imminent collapse of all that mattered about the Jewish dream. Mercifully, I think that time has now passed, and that we can, together, dream again.
