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Transcript

Sixty Years of British- Israeli Diplomatic Relations

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Rt Hon William Hague MP:

It is a pleasure to join you to mark sixty years of diplomatic relations between Britain and Israel. This is a milestone in our shared history, coming at a time of great change and optimism across the Middle East, as well danger, as people aspire to greater political and economic freedom and their full human rights.

I congratulate Chatham House and the Israeli Embassy for giving us the opportunity to celebrate the anniversary and to reflect on its significance, not only for our relations but in the context of the sixty year search for peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Ron Prosor, the Israeli Ambassador, is leaving us soon to go to the United Nations. He has been such a strong Ambassador for Israel in Britain that his Foreign Ministry has clearly decided that his talents are wasted representing Israel in just one country, so they have decided to make him their representative to the entire world gathered at the UN.

Our relationship with Israel goes far beyond the realm of diplomatic relations, as important as those are. It is based on bonds between families and communities as well as shared values and common interests. Israel is a friend and a strategic partner of this country in the Middle East, and we are very grateful for that.

The Prime Minister gave a speech earlier this month about our government's absolute commitment to security for the Jewish community in Britain. He said that our Government will never rest while the Jewish community, which makes such a contribution to our national life, feels under threat from anti-Semitism and extremism.

I want to pick up that theme today, and to talk about Israel's security at a time of profound change in the Middle East, and why we believe this change has made urgent process on the Peace Process an objective that is even more pressing than before.

But before I do, I would like to say a few things about our relations with Israel.

First, Britain, this British Government and this Foreign Secretary will stand for a secure future for Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people, alongside of course a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. Britain's support for Israel was there at the very start. We are steadfast in our support for it today. Our belief in Israel's right to exist is not an issue of discussion or compromise.

Second, we oppose efforts to undermine Israel's legitimacy. Israel has the right to defend itself and we will continue to stand up for that. This does not mean that we will agree on every expression of that right or on every one of Israel's actions. I do believe that it is vital that in exercising the right to self defence Israel takes every possible step to avoid loss of innocent life. But it does mean that this Government is firmly opposed to those who seek to deligitimise Israel, and that we are firmly opposed to boycotts.

And third, it is my personal hope that the ties between Britain and Israel will thrive and grow even stronger in the future than they are today. When I sent our excellent new Ambassador to Israel I gave him very clear instructions to work to advance the peace process and to build the best possible relationship with Israel. In the last six months we have launched a UK/Israel Life Sciences Council, a UK/Israel Regenerative Medicine fund, a major push to promote links between our high tech economies and a new Film Treaty to expand our cultural cooperation. In 2010 trade between the two countries went up 30% compared to the year before.

These three things are the fundamentals of our relationship. But while they remain constant, the Middle East itself is in the throes of major upheaval.

It is a moment of unprecedented change in the Arab world, one which combines the immense potential for greater democracy and human development with the risk of violence and threat to human life that we see so represented to an extreme degree in Libya.

Across the region, young people are demanding their human rights and a say in their government – universal aspirations that our country strongly supports.

As our Prime Minister has said, 'for those of us who – like Israel – believe in and practise democracy this is a precious moment of opportunity for political and economic reform in the Arab world that could deliver greater stability and security for all.'

Britain is at the forefront of those countries calling for extraordinary efforts by the international community to seize this moment. We must support countries like Egypt and Tunisia which are in transition, so that they are encouraged and assisted to move irrevocably in the direction of democracy and freedom. The Prime Minister and I are working to galvanise a transformation of the European Union's neighbourhood policy so that it can act as a magnet for positive change, providing clearer incentives for the creation of free, democratic and just societies that respect human rights. This is an immense long-term prize – potentially the greatest gain for human rights and freedom since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.

Israel finds itself very close to these dramatic developments, and concerned about the implications for its security.

I know that change in Egypt has created fears for some Israelis who recall the dark days when the country was at war with every one of their neighbours. For the past thirty years Israel has built its stability on the peace with Egypt so I understand Israel's concern.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah continues to re-arm itself in a way that directly threatens Israel and undermines peace. And further afield the President of Iran has indulged in unacceptable and abhorrent rhetoric about the state of Israel, while his government continues its nuclear programme in defiance of UN Security Council Resolutions.

As I saw when I visited Israel's northern borders, security is at the very heart of the daily life of Israelis - we need only think about people in places like Sderot, the recent barrage of rocket attacks from Gaza the cruel murder of the Fogel family or the appalling bus bomb just last week, for Israel's sense of insecurity to be brought home very forcibly. Last week, we in Britain felt the cost of Israel's insecurity painfully, when a British woman was killed in a terrorist attack in Jerusalem. At the same time Palestinian civilians have been killed over the last week in the Gaza Strip too. Loss of innocent life on all sides deepens wounds and only bolsters those who argue for violence and revenge.

Security is also at the very heart of the search for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and Israel and the wider region. I am always struck by the fact that there are still 57 countries in the Muslim and Arab world that do not yet recognise Israel – something that I want to see reversed as part of a comprehensive peace, starting with acceptance and implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative.

I know that the threats for Israel are not just historical, they are real, clear and present, and that Israel sees itself as a country that lives on a knife-edge. As Ehud Olmert put it, Israeli Prime ministers have to go to sleep with one eye open. To lead any country under any circumstances is a heavy responsibility, but I know that those who lead Israel feel the responsibility to ensure its continuing survival.

Those, like me, who want Israel to have a secure future forever, know that this cannot be achieved easily in the face of such dangers. But the alternative, of decades of insecurity and reduced opportunities, is not one we can contemplate without grave concern. Each day without peace exacts a

terrible human toll on both Israelis and Palestinians and makes a two state solution harder to achieve.

So I want to spend the remainder of my speech talking about how we can overcome the difficulties and achieve long term peace, reconciling the legitimate aspiration of the Palestinian people for a state of their own with Israel's natural and justifiable yearning for long term security. Both of these are goals which the British Government supports. We do not believe that they are contradictory, and recognise that reaching them will take huge effort, bold leadership and difficult compromises on all sides.

For like the vast majority of Israelis, and the vast majority of Palestinians, I believe Israel's long-term future and security can only be guaranteed by a two state solution, and that the search for peace enhances Israel's security.

There are several reasons for this.

It is partly a question of simple demographics – an argument repeated so often and for so long that its force has diminished, but which still holds true.

But even more compelling is the fact that time is working against the interests of all those who want peace. The British Government has made very clear our concern about ongoing settlement expansion. We believe it is illegal, an obstacle to peace and a threat to a two state solution. We should not pretend that settlement expansion can continue indefinitely since over time it will make the creation of a Palestinian state more and more difficult to achieve, if not impossible. That is why we voted last month at the UN Security Council for the Palestinian resolution on settlements. .

The change in the wider region makes the peace process even more important. For one of the most important lessons from the 'Arab Spring' is that legitimate aspirations cannot be ignored and must be addressed.

It cannot be in anyone's interests if the new order of the region is determined at a time of minimum hope in the peace process. This creates a risk that in each country, the politics sets with maximum hostility to Israel, rather than giving the new leaders of these countries strong grounds to support the pursuit of peace.

Furthermore, the risk of conflict is significantly heightened in the absence of a meaningful peace process. Israel has experienced this many times before. If we cannot create a path for legitimate aspirations to be secured through negotiations, then clearly there is a risk of violence and generations of young people seeing little hope for the future and being left vulnerable to radicalisation. We cannot let that happen. That is why I was concerned by the

risk of a spiral of violence following recent attacks in Israel and Israeli strikes in Gaza. We understand that Israel needs to defend its people but have underlined the need to avoid further loss of innocent life.

In short, the Peace Process must not become a casualty of uncertainty in the region. We are calling for Israelis and Palestinians to recommit themselves urgently to negotiations on the basis of clear principles supported by the international community.

The UK, France and Germany have set out our views on what those principles should be two states for two peoples based on: 1967 borders with equivalent land swaps, security arrangements that protect Israel whilst respecting Palestinian sovereignty by ending the Occupation; a fair realistic and agreed solution for refugees and Jerusalem as the capital of both states.

We are calling on the United States and the Quartet to set out clear principles on this basis as soon as possible and on both sides to resume negotiations to address final status issues. There has been talk about whether interim solutions will suffice. Let me be clear that I do not believe they will. Final status issues have to be resolved.

We want to see progress by September. This is the deadline set by President Obama and the international community. And it is also the moment when we review the programme to build the institutions of a Palestinian State that the British Government has strongly supported.

Both Israelis and Palestinians must be determined to make peace and must enter into negotiations in good faith too. However, simple the answer looks on paper, peace will not be easy or straightforward to negotiate. If both sides are absolutely committed, it will still be hard. If either side is less than fully committed, then peace will be completely impossible. The Quartet are due to discuss the Peace Process again in April. We will continue to work with Israelis, Palestinians and the US and EU partners to secure urgent progress.

At the same time, we shall not be distracted from addressing the threat Iran presents to the region. In recent weeks, Iran has tried to suggest events are running in its favour and that popular protests in the region have been inspired by Iranian ideals. I doubt people in the region see Iran as a model of freedom, not least because Iran has brutally suppressed its own protesters. Iran's treatment of its own people, as well as its attitude to Israel and posturing in the region show that it would be a disaster to let Iran acquire nuclear weapons. Iran should therefore not doubt the resolve of the international community to address the concerns about its nuclear

programme. We and our partners will be working hard over the coming months to increase the pressure on Iran to negotiate seriously.

To conclude, I never forget that Israel is a country that has been repeatedly attacked through its brief history, that has been at war with all its neighbours for some of its history and with some of its neighbours for all of its history. I remember that Israel has been shelled repeatedly from Gaza and from Lebanon and that it has suffered grievously from terrorism. And I am deeply conscious why the Jewish people – of all peoples – have cause to believe that they must look after themselves, and never rely on others to keep them safe.

But it is because of such things that we are such ardent advocates of the two-state solution and of negotiations now – because security will become harder, not easier, to achieve over time.

In the words of Shimon Peres, we want ‘to dream about a Middle East in which its countries will depart from the conflicts of their parents on behalf of peace for their children’, so that in 60 years time those who come after us can look back on years of peace for Israel, rather than years of conflict and uncertainty. Britain will be a friend of both Israelis and Palestinians as they strive towards this historic prize.