

## **Reuven Rivlin, President of the State of Israel**

Mr President, Madam Vice-President of the Commission/ High Representative of the Union, honourable Members, my wife Nechama, ladies and gentlemen, with your permission I will speak my words in Hebrew.

A mere four hours: that is the flight time from Tel-Aviv to Brussels. I could say that four hours, and light years, separate Brussels and Tel-Aviv, but in truth there is not much difference between them, be it in awareness or in essence: two cosmopolitan cities, practically neighbours, not far from each other, both recently struck by a wave of terrorism.

Seated here are many delegates from numerous European countries. Some share the Mediterranean Sea with us, all share a rich and painful history with the Jewish People. About a month ago, the leaders of Europe marked 100 years since the Battle of Verdun, the longest battle of World War I, with 900 000 casualties, including 300 000 fatalities. Some half a million Jewish soldiers served in the armies of the countries at war, often poised against each other, firing upon each other.

But this 'patriotic bloodletting' did not bestow any privilege on the Jewish People. Quite the contrary: Jews in every country were accused of spying and treason. Germany started a 'head-count' of Jewish soldiers. In Eastern Europe, Jews were accused of Bolshevism and of Anti-Bolshevism. It is estimated that more than 170 000 Jewish soldiers were killed in World War I, and around 100 000 more were murdered in post-war pogroms.

That horrible war, World War I, was the herald of the 'Exodus' of the Jewish People from Europe. Many Jews saw in the United States of America their new home. Others, Zionist leaders, shaken and shocked from having had to face their own Jewish brothers as foes on the battlefield, took action to fulfil the dream of a national home for the Jewish People, in its ancient and eternal homeland, the Land of Israel.

From where we stand today, the Great War was but a promo to a much more horrendous war that followed suit: World War II. In World War II, the annihilation of the Jewish People was a defined target of the Axis powers headed by Nazi Germany. The second 'European Exodus' of the Jewish People occurred upon the defeat of the Third Reich. This was a traumatic emigration: one of refugees and agony, of a culture destroyed, of a people which lost one third of its sons and daughters.

Distinguished audience, even the wildest of imaginations could not have foreseen a course of events in which an ancient people returned from years of exile and rebuilt its historic homeland. A wild imagination could neither have foreseen such a convoluted historic course of events in which an utterly torn and bleeding continent, awash with the blood of war and strife, would have paved the way to a joint European parliament.

And yes, no less important are the solid, steadfast ties created between us: ties embodied today in a wide array of joint ventures and cooperation, in research and innovation, in health and the environment, education and culture and many more areas. Regardless of the perspective from which we look at this – our past, our present or the future we are awaiting – we intrinsically linked, Israel and Europe, in an unbreakable bond.

Just as humanity could not be what it is without Europe, so Europe could not be what it is without the Jewish People. It would be difficult to imagine what humanity would have been like without Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Galileo Galilei, Martin Luther or Marie Curie, just as it would be difficult to imagine what Europe would be without Maimonides, Spinoza, Freud or Einstein. Our common interests – and, moreover, our common values – dictate our present and shape our future.

Liberty, equality, justice, pluralism and religious tolerance, democracy: these are the basic tenets inscribed in Israel's Declaration of Independence. These are the constitutive values of the European Union.

The European Union, and within it this distinguished Parliament, is an audacious endeavour of politics and statehood. Tomorrow this endeavour will be put to a complex test in the United Kingdom, while, day in day out, it stands the test of refugees and migration on a historic scale. The State of Israel too is an audacious endeavour of statehood, of a people returning to its land after two thousand years of exile. And, just like you, Israel faces difficult and complex challenges. But unlike Europe, which embarked upon a process of removing partitions between nations and states, Israel wishes, and indeed must, remain first and foremost a national homeland, a safe haven for the Jewish People.

The State of Israel is by no means a compensation for the Holocaust, but the Holocaust has posited as a basic tenet the necessity and vitality of the return of the Jewish People to history, as a nation taking its fate in its own hands. I feel that the massive criticism aimed at Israel in Europe stems from, inter alia, a misunderstanding and an impatience toward this existential need of the Jewish nation and the State of Israel.

On the other hand, and much to my regret, Israel has a growing sense of impatience when it comes to Europe. There are those who feel anger and frustration toward certain European actions, vis-à-vis what they perceive as sometimes unfair criticism, sometimes even contaminated by elements of condescension and, some would say, double standards.

My European friends, we cannot agree on everything, but, as friends and as true allies, I call upon you and ask you: let us be patient. Please respect the Israeli considerations, even when different from your own. Respect Israel's sovereignty and the democratic process of its decision-making. Respect Israel's staunch commitment, indeed its very duty, to protect its citizens. For us it is the most sacred commandment of all.

A few years ago, a French friend turned to me and said: 'If we and the Germans have made peace and put an end to conflict once and for all – and, believe me, what happened between us and them overshadows any other conflict I can think of – then there is no reason for you not to succeed.' He continued: 'How long have you and the Arabs been fighting, all in all? One hundred years? Fifty years? We have been fighting for a thousand years, and now it is over, forever.' This is what he said to me.

I am standing here today and saying in no uncertain manner: from 1993, the year in which the Oslo Accords were signed, the elected Israeli leadership has been – as it still is – in support of the solution of 'two-states for two peoples'. Furthermore, being well versed in the Israeli Parliament, I know that any political agreement brought before the Israeli Knesset by an elected government will be approved. Nevertheless, and with all the difficulty and pain involved, we must look reality straight in the eye and tell the truth. Currently the practical conditions, the political and regional circumstances, which would enable us to reach a permanent agreement between us – the Israelis and the Palestinians – are failing to materialise.

First, in order to achieve a comprehensive permanent agreement, an effective leadership is required. However, the Palestinian leadership today is divided in (at least) two: the Palestinian Authority ruling over Judea and Samaria and, on the other hand, Hamas, which rules Gaza and is ideologically committed – in both its political and its military leadership – to the annihilation of Israel.

Second, in order to achieve a stable and viable agreement, a reasonable regional and economic infrastructure is required. But we are living in a reality where the plague of murderous Jihadi fundamentalism, religious fanaticism and incitement – embodied in the Islamic State and Hezbollah – are at our very borders and have not missed out Gaza and the West Bank either. We live in a reality of a chaos-stricken Middle East in which uncertainty is the only certainty.

To this worrisome picture, add the dire economic straits, poverty and lack of infrastructure in Gaza and Judea and Samaria, which in turn will continue the destabilisation and nurture violence. In this respect, Israel is making, and will continue to make, vast efforts: more than any other actor in the region, and even at the price of complex security risk-taking. But Israeli intervention alone will not suffice.

Finally, one should bear in mind the most fundamental trait of Israeli-Palestinian relations today, which is, to my deep regret, a total lack of trust between the parties on all levels; between the leaderships and the peoples.

I am afraid that, for years, the international community has been acting as a mediator between the parties based on one inflexible paradigm, that of striving to renew negotiations toward a permanent agreement. This paradigm leads to a dichotomy: 'Two states or a bi-national state', 'All or nothing', 'Here and now or nevermore'. It is, by the way, by virtue of that same paradigm that various European states opposed the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, claiming that it does not provide a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Had that concept been accepted then, imagine where we would be today. This paradigm relies on the assumption that the problem which is the crux of the matter in this bloody and painful conflict is simply the lack of good faith on both sides, and that, if only pressure is exerted on 'them' and on 'us', they will adhere to a permanent agreement and to a state of peace.

However, as years go by and rounds of negotiations fail one by one, bringing in their wake waves of murderous violence and terror, it seems that this assumption of a 'lack of good will' is proving not only to be fundamentally erroneous but also to ignore the circumstances, the capabilities, and the present situation on the ground. And that, by definition, would lead to the failure of any attempt to negotiate a permanent agreement.

Ladies and gentlemen, I speak before you today in the name of the citizens of Israel, grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers and mothers, sick and tired of this bloody vicious cycle which soaks up the blood of our loved ones, the blood of our sons and daughters. I speak before you in the name of these young men and women who wish to live in their country, and not die in their homeland. I speak to you today in the name of a nation that abhors war and desires life and peace. And, I must say, one cannot hope to achieve better results while resorting to the same outlooks and tools that have previously failed time after time.

The French initiative, adopted by the EU institutions only a few days ago, suffers from those very fundamental faults. The attempt to return to negotiations for negotiations' sake not only does not bring us near the long-awaited solution, but rather drags us further away from it. This striving for a permanent agreement 'now', is the chronicle of a predictable failure, which will only push the two peoples deeper into despair. This despair is the hottest bed for extremism, and undermines the endeavours of moderates.

And this despair, ladies and gentlemen, today seizes not just members of my generation but also boys and girls growing up in this part of the world, whose worldview and awareness are shaped by the violent present. This despair is the gravest danger looming over us, Israelis and Palestinians alike.

If the international community really wishes and truly aspires to be a constructive player, it must divert its efforts away from the renewal of negotiations for negotiations' sake, and toward building trust between the parties and creating the necessary terms for the success of negotiations in the future.

In the current circumstances, we must all ask ourselves 'What can be done today?' rather than 'What cannot be done?' And things can be done. This mission of creating the terms for a future agreement, creating an infrastructure for trust, and for a life of dignity for both peoples, demands of us today – the international community and Israel alike – that we invest tremendous efforts in four main avenues.

The first is harnessing the moderate powers in the region. The cooperation with Jordan and Egypt is a supreme common interest of Israel and the international community as well, with the aim of preventing military build-ups beyond our borders, and in order to eradicate extremism and preserve the stability of the region. Similarly, the involvement and effective guarantees of friendly states in the region may also reduce the violent friction and serve as a warranty for future action.

The second avenue is developing Palestinian economy and infrastructures for quality of life. One cannot speak about a future agreement when people live with a basic existential feeling of having no future, no opportunities, no hope and no horizon. With the backdrop of economic difficulties in Judea and Samaria, and the situation in Gaza, a broad economic course of action is called for. Infrastructures must be developed – gas, electricity, water, sewerage and housing – in Gaza and Judea and Samaria. At the same time, a solution must be found to the human tragedy in Gaza – whereby around 1.5 million Palestinians are held hostage by a Jihadist terrorist organisation, Hamas – just as solutions must be found to the movement of residents, the transfer of trade and the enabling the appropriate security. On this issue, the State of Israel has repeatedly stated its willingness to join hands with the international community in a joint endeavour.

Israel considers the rehabilitation of Gaza and the economic development and equalising of standards of life on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides to be both an ethical and a security interest. Sources of livelihood and employment must be developed too, as Israeli and international companies that identify the potential of investing in the human capital between the Jordan and the sea, have already begun to do. The development of a stable Palestinian economy must be carried out, laying the emphasis on developing a real, independent and vital private sector as a stabilising factor free of political interests.

Furthermore, developing the economy must take into account the need for developing infrastructures for quality of life, for a life of dignity and wellbeing. Rawabi, the first planned Palestinian city ever built in the Palestinian Authority, is a model of the power and significance of basic wellbeing in creating a breathing space and a feeling of movement and progress.

The third avenue is investing in joint ventures aimed at creating joint interests. Whether we wish it or not, we – Israelis and Palestinians – share a small and common area, with common regional resources and assets, and common regional challenges. Together, we live on what is equal to one third of Austria. In such small and crowded space, creating common interests is a crucial factor in strengthening stability, and in creating the terms needed to replace the next war with programmes benefiting both parties.

We should foster and promote joint Israeli-Palestinian development ventures in the fields of renewable energy, infrastructure and the environment, joint industrial and tourism ventures and cultural and social ventures: between Israeli and Palestinian local authorities, and between private corporations and business people on both

sides. For instance, the ecological park being developed through cooperation between the regional council of Gilboa and the Palestinian city of Jenin, with the support of the international community, in which the shared Kishon River is undergoing cleaning and purification processes, with the aim of providing a solution to one of the most complex issues of the conflict – the water problem. You, ladies and gentlemen, know better than I do how joint ventures create a horizon for another reality.

Fourthly and ultimately there is the avenue of education. Increasing stability, developing infrastructures and strategic terms are essential conditions, but are not enough. Creating the conditions for any future agreement requires conditioning hearts on both sides for the possibility of living with mutual respect. Peace is made between leaders but peace is also made between peoples. Changing present trends requires addressing deep-rooted hatred and fear. Otherwise fear will have the upper hand, if only because it is, to our regret, much more tangible than hope. Building trust demands an investment in the creation of wide channels of communication, not only in security contexts but also in academic, cultural, and governance contexts – and, at the same time, educating future generations to become acquainted with our neighbours, their culture and language.

Distinguished audience, the State of Israel values the efforts invested by the international community in general, and by the European Union in particular, in seeking a peaceful future between the parties. The responsibility for building trust between us and our neighbours rests, first and foremost, on the shoulders of the two parties. But if Europe is interested in serving as a constructive factor in striving for a future agreement it will be incumbent upon you, its leaders, to focus efforts at this time in a patient and methodical building of trust: not through divestments, but through investment; not by boycotts, but by cooperation.

It is no easy task for me to stand here before you today and say that, at this time, a permanent agreement for peace between us and the Palestinians cannot be achieved – because, first and foremost, I stand before the Israeli people, before my children and grandchildren, before the Israeli and Palestinian children wherever they are. It is to them that I and we, and all of us, are to be held accountable: to ask ourselves what we have actually done to promise them, someday, another future?

I believe in the capability of both these peoples to live with each other, for the simple reason that we have no other choice. If we desire life, we must, today, invest our utmost efforts in what can be achieved, not in that which cannot – for the sake of our future, and that of our children.

I would like to thank my friend, the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, for the invitation to come here, in the same week as the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. There can be no substitute for direct and joint conversation. In this act you have taken a step, albeit small, to bolster trust between the parties.

Distinguished audience, 100 years ago the thought of a joint European Parliament was inconceivable. Cooperation in the fields of electricity, gas and coal started this miracle of a Europe living in peace with itself. Small steps created a great reality. Help us step forward, step together with us, for the sake of the possibility that one day, an Israeli President will tell another world leader: 'If we and the Palestinians have made peace and put an end to conflict once and for all, there is really no reason whatsoever that you cannot succeed. We fought for many dozens of years and now it is over, forever.'

On behalf of the people in Israel, I wish all Europe's Muslims, and the Muslim believers throughout the entire world, Ramadan Karim, Kul Am Wa Antum Bikhair.

Ladies and gentlemen, 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, may all who love her prosper. Peace be within thy walls and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions' sake, I will now say, Peace be within thee.' (Psalm 122, 6-8).

God bless you all.

(Applause)