

## BENJAMIN NETANYAHU, PRIME MINISTER OF ISRAEL

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Prime Minister of Israel

Am: In 1917 the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour wrote a letter announcing his conversion to the idea that the Jewish people should have a national home in Israel. This Balfour Declaration is regarded as one of the founding documents of the modern State of Israel and to celebrate its centenary Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has come to London where he's been talks with Theresa May. To some he is the arch defender of the Jewish people. To others, he's a bellicose hardliner dedicated to expanding the very settlements seen by the Palestinian Arabs as their obstacle to peace, and he joins me now. Welcome, Prime Minister.

BJ: The good part was shorter than the bad part.

AM: Well let me turn to the bad part. The second bit of the Balfour Declaration which does say: "that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." Can you really say that that has been held to by your government?

BN: They talk about the civil and religious rights. In fact Israel's Arab citizens are the only ones in the Middle East, the only Arabs in the Middle East who enjoy genuine civic and religious rights. Religious freedom is protected in Israel as nowhere else, tragically, in the Middle East and civil rights, or course they're - Supreme Court Judge was an Arab, ministers including in my government who are Arabs, Druze and members of parliament who are Arabs and so on. I would like to see more involvement of the Arabs in civil life.

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AM: In Israel and in the occupied territories there are pretty gross human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch, let me read you this. "Whether it's a child imprisoned by a military court or shot unjustifiably or a house demolished for lack of an allusive permit or checkpoints where only settlers are allowed to pass, few Palestinians have escaped rights abuses during the 50 year occupation." And again, Amnesty International say much the same thingt: "Israeli forces unlawfully killed Palestinian civilians, including children in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories and detained thousands of Palestinians who opposed Israel's continuing military occupation, holding hundreds in administrative detention, torture and other ill-treatment of detainees remains rife and punitive." That is not in the spirit of the Balfour Declaration.

BN: I completely dispute the arguments about torture and I completely dispute the whole – the contentious statement here, because no democracy has been threatened like Israel with enemies that seek our destruction and fire thousands of missiles on us. Just imagine thousands and thousands of missiles on London. Actually you don't have to imagine it, you had it. Look at what was done in retribution. We haven't done that. We act, I think, in moral ways. I think our Army which is the – there's no more moral army in the world - is maligned and I think part of the battle of Israel, the battle I'm involved with is to dispel these lies. And I have no compunction in doing so. I think Israel stands out as a beacon of democracy. A beacon of self restraint in a sea of troubles in the attacks, the wonton, violent attacks that are meant to destroy us. And that I think would serve as an example to others around us, because the others in the region do not do this.

AM: All right. If there is one thing that upsets supporters of Israel, including many Jewish community leaders in this country, is the push of settlements. Now your own defence minister has said that the rate of settlements in very sensitive areas like East Jerusalem

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and the West Bank if faster than at any time since 2009. You're pushing ahead and this is the one thing that makes supporters of Israel despair, including in this government.

BN: I think that the settlements are an issue. I don't think they're *the* issue. I think the issue is the one hundred year old persistent refusal of the Palestinian leadership to recognise a Jewish state in any boundary. If that were removed all these issues, including the issue of settlements, would be resolved. I do take issue with one other thing since I can say. Well, see, I think the idea that Jews cannot live in Judea is crazy.

AM: But at the moment this is Palestinian territory and you are putting –

BN: Well it's disputed territory.

AM: The UN says it's a flagrant violation of international law.

BN: The UN also says that - UNESCO, you know, vaunted organisation just said that the Jewish people have no connection to Jerusalem. Tell that to King Solomon and King David, three thousand years of Jewish attachment. So I think the facts are different. But I think the central fact is this. I think settlements is a side issue because the idea –

AM: Not to the Palestinians it's not.

BN: Well I think it is too. Because when we removed all the settlements from Gaza and ostensibly did what they say, Andrew, go back to the '67 lines, take away the settlements, which we did, Gaza didn't become peaceful. Gaza launched thousands of rockets from Gaza that we vacated against Israel. Not against Tel Aviv, against Jerusalem, against every part of Israel. And when I asked them and I said, why are you doing this, rhetorically, is it to liberate the West Bank where the other part of the Palestinian

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people live, they said, yeah that too, but no, we want to liberate Palestine; Tel Aviv, Jaffa, -

AM: You're in a war with Hamas, they have now done a deal with Fatah, do you distinguish between Fatah and Hamas in this regard?

BN: Yes, I do. Because Hamas takes its goal of destroying Israel and translate it into active terror. That is not the case with the Palestinian authority and one would hope that Hamas would love to that position and not have the Palestinian authority move to Hamas. So I would say this. Unity for peace is good. Unity for the destruction of Israel is bad. And that's what we're looking at frankly.

AM: Now what is also clear however is that your policy for Gaza is not working. The policy of having a kind of cordon around Gaza restricting what can come in and out, a kind of blockade of Gaza has actually increased the power of Hamas in Gaza and mobilised the population behind Gaza because of the appalling human rights situation inside Gaza. This policy is simply not working.

BN: Gaza is occupied by Hamas. Hamas has 30 thousand armed thugs. It's a thugocracy, armed thugocracy in which they periodically execute Gazans, Palestinians. They don't cut off their heads but they pretty do the same, you know masked executioners who put an AK47 bullet right in the back of the neck of anyone who tries to relieve the people of Gaza from this. Here's what we've done – here's what I've done.

AM: You shot a lot of people there too.

BM: I've opened up the border crossings to enable one thousand trucks a day of goods, food, medicine, anything you want. Unlimited supplies coming into Gaza as long as they're not

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weapons. And in fact it's Israel right now in fact who say there is one country, Israel, more than any other that is actually taking care of the population of Gaza because we have no quarrel with the population. We do have a quarrel with those who have hijacked them and used the territory of Gaza to launch a war against Israel. One day I hope we'll be rid of Hamas, Hamas will disarm, then we can have a glorious future.

AM: Well let's look at the future because you described the issue of the Palestinian state very vividly recently. You've said, actually what we can't have is an armed hostile anti-Israeli state sitting on our borders forever. We just cannot have that and therefore you've used the word 'an entity,' a Palestinian 'entity.' Are you suggesting that what the Palestinians might get is as it were the status of a kind of self-governing territory inside a greater Israel?

BN: I think they should have all the powers to government themselves and none of the powers to threaten us. Which means that it has to be –

AM: Falls short of a full state, in other words?

BN: Well, I'd say the reality in the middle east which is peppered with failed states and pre-failed states and collapsing states means that if we withdraw our security control from an area what happens invariably is that militant Islam comes in, whether Daesh, ISIS, or Hamas backed by Iran. Either one is horrible. Horrible not only for us, horrible also for the Palestinians or the Lebanese. You just heard Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon –

AM: Resigning

BM: Resigning. He said basically it's because Hezbollah took over, which means Iran took over. And I think this is a wakeup call for everyone. It says what the Middle East is really experiencing. It's

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experiencing the attempt of Iran to conquer the Middle East, to dominate it and subjugate it. And I think when Israelis and Arabs and it's all the Arabs and the Israelis, agree on one thing people should pay attention. We should stop this Iranian takeover. For your interest too.

AM: I want to come to Iran directly in a moment, but just before I do it sounds – if you talk to almost any British MP they say, two state solution, two state solution, two state solution. The way you are talking it sounds as if the two state solution is more or less over and moving to a different solution, a one state solution.

BM: No, I don't want a one state solution, I'll be clear about that. But I'll say and I'm unabashed about saying that, but I want to make sure that what we have next to us is something that will not threaten our lives. It really makes a difference what the other state is. Is it Costa Rica or is it North Korea? Is it another mini Iran or is it Luxemburg? So nobody says that when you say two states. The other state, if it's not demilitarised, if it doesn't recognise the State of Israel, which the Palestinians still refuse to do, then it merely becomes a platform for continuing the war against the one Jewish state. And therefore I think you have to be more specific and say no, what we want is the recognition, finally, after a hundred years, after the Balfour Declaration, finally recognise the Jewish state. I want it expletive deleted. It's about time. Recognise the Jewish state and let's make sure that it's the Palestinians do not have the weapons to destroy it.

AM: And you've been talking about all of this with Donald Trump. A man who's got a slightly dodgy rep in this country but you've seen him up close and personal, what do you make of him?

BN: I think he has – first of all I think he has leadership qualities and I think he wants to - he sees in the Middle East something

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different. There are some people who saw Iran as the solution to the problems of the Middle East.

AM: Some people like Barrack Obama, you mean?

BN: Some people. I have, by the way a very good relationship with Barrack Obama when we did agree on things. So we signed an MOU, Memorandum of Understanding to give Israel a ten year security package, I welcomed that and I respect that. But I disagreed with him on Iran because I think, yes, I think he saw Iran as a solution in many ways and Donald Trump sees Iran as the problem. But it's not Donald Trump who sees Iran as the problem. We do. The Arab states do. Hariri who just resigned does as well. And he's right.

AM: There is a new and unexpected alliance if I could say that, between Israel and many of the Sunni states in the region against Iran. Listening to you talk about Iran it's almost as if you see them as one of those great empires moving in, the Assyrians or whoever, moving from Asia right the way to the Mediterranean. And you have said very clearly, putting aside even the nuclear issue, we will stop them doing that. We will not let them get to the Mediterranean. We will not let them have an Iranian Shi'ite empire spreading from Teheran right to the shores of the Mediterranean. How are you going to stop them doing that?

BN: Iran openly calls for our destruction. Something even in your experience, you may have been under the threat of conquest, but not destruction. But Iran openly says we're out to destroy what they call us the 'small Satan, en route to the big Satan, the great Satan the United States and in the middle is –

AM: Middle sized Satan.

BN: No offence. You're a middle sized.

AM: No offence taken.

BM: But this is what Iran wants to do and it is seeking to colonise Syria for that purpose. That is to Lebanonise Syria. What they did in Lebanon that Hariri, Prime Minister Hariri resigned over is basically they took over the country. Probably killed his father, threatened to kill him. So the same thing is being done –

AM: Collapse of so called ISIS or the Islam state from moving in.

BN: Well as ISIS collapses - as ISIS moves out, Iran moves in. But they want to bring their air force there, right next to Israel, they want to bring Shi'ite and Iranian divisions right next to Israel. They want to bring submarines and military vessels right into the Mediterranean, right next to Israel, so we will not let that happen, we will resist it.

AM: And you would go to war to stop that happening?

BM: You know the more we're prepared to stop it the less likely we will have to resort to much greater things. There's a principle I very much adhere to and that is nip bad things at the bud.

AM: But if you can't, we've had rocket attacks on Riyadh in the last few days, we've had what's happened in Lebanon, things are moving all over the place. Things are moving in the Horn of Africa. You can see there's a big, big situation. Are we drifting or moving at this stage towards a major war in the region between Iran and her allies and proxies on the one hand, and Israel and the Sunni state on the other?

BN: You're definitely in such a conflict and you're quite right there is a realignment in the region, but I think it's a larger battle. It's the battle between medievalism and modernity. The forces who stand for modernity Israel squarely does. Have to fight these –



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have to resist the onslaught of this militant Islamism that uses rockets, terrorism, suicide bombers and so on, and the sparks of that firmament you see on the streets of London. If medievalism wins there, you lose here. So we're really on the front line of this great battle for the future of the world. Not merely the future of the Middle East, but the future of the world.

AM: And you think Donald Trump gets it and is at your back?

BN: I think he definitely understands that Iran is the primary problem. It probably accounts for 95% of the problems we experience now in the Middle East and I think he gets it and it's a good thing that he gets it.

AM: Can I ask about the condition of Jews in this country because I have a lot of Jewish friends and there are a lot of Jewish community leaders who are very worried about your government and they say that particularly the settlements issue has made it much, much harder to defend Israel in this country. We've always had anti-Semitism in Britain but it's been quite quiet for a long time as it is back on the rise.

BN: Well, you know I wouldn't blame Jews for anti-Semitism any more than I would blame blacks for racial hatred or anti-gay hatred because of what they are. Not what they do.

AM: But there's a distinction between Jews and policies.

BN: Well you know what happened. Theresa May gave his extraordinary speech, extraordinary on the Balfour centennial and she said, you cannot go on the attack and say that Britain has no right to exist because you oppose some of the British government's policies, so Britain has a right to exist, Israel has a right to exist. You may disagree with this or that policy but you would never question any other country's right to exist based on

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this or that disagreement with a policy. Yet this is what is levelled against Israel and against Israel alone.

AM: One of the big supporters of Palestinian rights in this country is the new Leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, who has said in the past for instance that we shouldn't allow free access for who he calls 'Israel's criminal politicians' to come into this country. He might very well be Britain's Prime Minister before long, what would that do to relationships and should you not pick up the phone and talk to him directly?

BN: Well, first of all the British people decide who they want to govern them, but I hope that there will be a continuity of British policy with Israel because here's something people don't know. That cooperation has saved many lives. Many Israeli lives, many, many British lives. Because we have an intense cooperation between our security intelligence agencies and it is protecting Britain and it is protecting Israel and it's something I hope will continue in the future.

AM: Mr Netanyahu, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.