

***Ambassador Ophir Kariv – Opening Statement to the  
Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence  
December 10<sup>th</sup> 2020***

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the chairman and the committee members for inviting me here and giving me the opportunity to discuss with you the Israeli perspective on some of the core issues facing the Middle East today, both the threats as well as opportunities.

Before we turn to contemporary geopolitics, I would like to refer today's date, which happens to mark the commencement of the Jewish festival of Chanukah. This evening, Jews all around the world are celebrating the lighting of the first candle, of eight, of Hanukkah. This holiday commemorates the successful rebellion of the Jews in the land of Israel against the Seleucid Empire. That Jewish struggle, from 167 to 160 B.C, resulted in the re-dedication of the Temple on Temple Mount, marking the opening of yet another chapter of Jewish sovereignty in what is now Israel, with Jerusalem as a capital.

As ambassador of the modern State of Israel, this holiday bears special significance as it highlights the historical continuity of the Jewish people in our land, the age-old bond with Jerusalem and indeed the direct line that connects today's Jewish state, which I represent, to that Jewish state of 2170 years ago. This history is well documented in biblical, archeological and historical sources. On a more personal level – my family-home is in the city of Modiin – which is

built near and named after ancient Modiin – the very place where that rebellion started.

Throughout history, the Middle East has witnessed the rise and fall of local powers, as well as of foreign occupiers. Jewish sovereignty flourished, and then declined. Our independence was followed by occupation, destruction and exile, foreign rule and again by a national revival with the rise of Zionism and the establishment of the modern state of Israel.

If we move from the wider historical perspective to the concrete issues facing us currently, in order to give a concise overview of the various subjects that are currently on the agenda of Israeli decision makers, I chose to focus today on the following: The Abraham Accords, the Iranian threat, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinians, and Covid-19 and its impact on Israel's international development cooperation.

**The Abraham Accords, which refer to the historic peace agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain,** represent a strategic paradigm shift in the Middle East. A growing number of Arab states recognize that Israel is not an enemy, but rather a valuable partner for prosperity, and a strategic ally in dealing with common challenges. The agreements signed between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, and hopefully soon with other countries, are aimed at tackling the real core issues in the Middle East – both the threats and opportunities. The agreements consolidate the cooperation of moderate countries confronting the extremists' axis of Iran and its proxies. The alignment of goodwill, knowledge and resources in areas like trade, food security, renewable energy, Hi-Tech, innovation, R&D, transportation, water treatment, public health, fighting Covid-19 among many more, carry huge long-term benefits to our peoples and to the entire region. I believe one issue of tremendous importance to all states in the Middle East is climate change, which

also has direct geopolitical impact on the Middle East. If we can find ways to cooperate together to combat the effects of climate change, it could mitigate some of the negative impact on our entire region.

It is important to note that these agreements do not come at the expense of the Palestinian issue. Rather, they provide an opportunity for a renewal of the peace process in a more supportive environment. We call upon all countries to support those agreements and the new atmosphere they have created, and to encourage other parties, including the Palestinians, to join and take an active part in this new momentum for peace and cooperation.

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**The Iranian regime** continues to constitute the biggest threat to the region and through its nuclear program, combined with the ongoing development of ballistic capabilities, as well as the arming of its terrorist proxies, also far beyond the Middle East. The Ayatollah's regime continues to pursue its goal of becoming a nuclear military power while at the same time it continues its efforts to destabilize the region both directly and through its proxies.

Recently, the Secretary General of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) confirmed once again that Iran continues to enrich and store Uranium in enrichment levels and quantities far exceeding its international obligations. The Secretary General also confirmed that Iran has failed to provide reliable answers to the IAEA concerns relating to its nuclear activities.

The Iranian regime continues with its policy of deceit while pushing forward its efforts to become a nuclear threat. In the past, firm sanctions proved the only efficient means to force a change in Iranian policy – including bringing it to the

negotiation table. A strong sanctions regime, led by the US, is required in order to thwart that nuclear threat.

At the same time, Iran continues its efforts to destabilize the region in order to establish its influence through a northern “Shiite arch” from Iran through Iraq to Syria and to Lebanon and the eastern Mediterranean, and a southern arm in Yemen and to the Gaza strip.

At all times, even during its economic crisis, Iran has continued to spend huge sums of money to arm and support militias and terrorist groups in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen and elsewhere. An effective ban on selling arms to Iran should be applied to limit its destructive policy.

The Iranian regime that calls openly for the destruction of the state of Israel is using Syria as another front against Israel. Israel will not accept this and will continue to do whatever is necessary to thwart this strategic threat. A total roll back of Iranian forces and militias, including Hezbollah, from Syria is essential.

**In Lebanon**, the Hezbollah terror organization, financed and backed by Iran, continues its project of upgrading its arsenal of rockets, making them much more accurate. This precision project is considered a major threat by Israel. Hezbollah continues to place its military facilities in the heart of civilian areas in Beirut and store rockets and weapons in villages and private houses in south Lebanon. These are lethal ticking bombs in the midst of the Lebanese civilian population, who are being cynically exploited as human shields by Hezbollah. In addition, Hezbollah attack tunnels, crossing into Israel, have been discovered by the IDF in recent months. This act of aggression was initiated from within South Lebanon, sometimes close to UNIFIL positions.

Israel sees the Lebanese government as responsible for any hostilities initiated from within its territory. Israel's position is also that UNIFIL must boost its operations to fulfill its mandate in full.

The whole of Hezbollah should be declared a terrorist organization without erroneously differentiating a political wing from a military one. The list of countries that have declared all of Hezbollah a terrorist organization now includes 19 countries including Israel, the US, UK, Germany and also the Arab League.

Recently, Israel and Lebanon started negotiations, with American involvement, with the aim to reach an agreement on their maritime border. Such agreement will contribute to stability in the region and will support an economic recovery of Lebanon.

## **Palestinians**

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The strong Jewish connection to the Land of Israel, with Jerusalem at its heart, is deeply rooted in over 3000 thousand years of documented history. This includes periods of independence, occupation by foreign powers, exiles and national revivals. At all times, Jerusalem has been the national, spiritual, cultural and religious center of the Jewish people and always served as its capital during periods of full or partial sovereignty.

**The Israeli-Palestinian conflict** is more than 100 years old.

Historically, Palestinian leaders have followed a policy of repeatedly rejecting opportunities to achieve peace, some are demonstrated in these maps, and brought upon their people tragedy and suffering.

Israelis and Palestinians are destined to live side by side. We hope the Palestinian leadership learns from its historic mistakes first, but not only, for the sake of its own people. We call on the Palestinians to join the new positive momentum of peace and cooperation created by the Abraham accords. We call upon them to come to the negotiation table and start a direct, bilateral serious negotiation without any pre conditions. We call upon friends of the Palestinians to encourage them to do so.

### **Covid-19 and Israel's International Development Cooperation**

Like the vast majority of countries around the world, Covid-19 has posed many challenges in Israel. The very best of Israel's start up nation has come to the forefront with medics, scientists, innovators and entrepreneurs dedicating their efforts towards developing vaccines, tests and treatments for Covid-19, as well as other measures to deal with the societal impact of the virus.

This pandemic knows no borders. It has also emphasized the importance of Israeli – Palestinian cooperation and the UN Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace, Nikolay Mladenov, has hailed this cooperation as “exemplary”. Since March, Israel has done its utmost to assist the Palestinians in measures to deal with Covid-19 by facilitating the supply of thousands of donated test kits,

large volumes of Personal Protective Equipment, by guiding Palestinian healthcare staff in coping with Covid-19 and facilitating other aid activities. Israel also carried out a public health campaign in Arabic, to also advise Palestinians in coping with the pandemic. Israeli hospitals have been and continue to be a model for co-existence as Jewish, Muslim and Christian healthcare staff work together to achieve the best outcomes for their patients.

On a broader level, MASHAV – Israel’s Agency for International Development Cooperation – has continued to share its expertise in development technologies and techniques with partners around the world, but with a specific emphasis on Covid-19. The agency was founded in 1958 when the State of Israel had just achieved its tenth anniversary of independence. Since the beginning, its focus has been on the sharing of expertise, which helped Israel rapidly develop since 1948. This is achieved through training people from the developing world in areas such as agriculture, healthcare, food security, women’s empowerment and other such topics. This training is done in person in Israel and abroad, and MASHAV also work on international partnerships and consultancies. In recent years, MASHAV has flown approximately 2500 trainees from developing countries to Israel for training on an annual basis, as well as conducting some 300 short term consultancies and on the spot courses in developing host countries each year. Since the onset of the pandemic, MASHAV has adapted its activities to providing training for thousands of participants from developing countries through webinars. among other activities, MASHAV also hosted an online conference for Women Leaders, which Amina Mohamed, the Deputy Secretary-General of the UN participated in, alongside senior participants from the WHO and Israel. Practical on the ground humanitarian assistance has been provided in more than 120 cases mainly in the Least Developed Countries as well as in Low-Middle and Upper-Middle Income Countries. Israel has been assisting with public health, supplying PPE, providing computers for the elderly and young people to access remote learning, assisting micro-enterprises and

also through food programmes. In certain cases, ventilators were provided and assistance was given to local projects to manufacture PPE. Local development projects, initiated and given grants by MASHAV were carried out by its local alumni and Israeli expats living in developing countries. MASHAV is evidence of one of the founding principles of the Israeli state that is our duty to empower individuals and communities in need by sharing our knowledge and expertise.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Middle East is a complex region as is each and every issue I have given an overview of in this presentation. In order to understand it, and certainly in order to have a constructive contribution, one must be aware of the complexities, the challenges and the opportunities that our changing reality holds. Israel sees peace with its neighbours, including the Palestinians, as a vital interest and we hope the new momentum for peace will soon include the Palestinians as well as the rest of the moderate Arab world.

Thank you.

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