

Remarks of the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
Karel Schwarzenberg
at AJC Global Forum in Washington, DC on June 2, 2013

(Check against delivery)

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege and pleasure to address the Global Forum of the American Jewish Committee today.

Various distinguished personalities of Israel's public life have, in times past and recent, spoken of the Czech Republic as a true friend of Israel; and on behalf of my country, I am glad and honoured to accept that title.

The ties of social and cultural history between our countries run deep. We celebrate them on happy occasions such as those related to our rich mutual economic, cultural and academic exchange with Israel, and we remember and draw on them on less happy ones such as the difficult and often frustrating roles which the international community shoulders with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and in which we participate as a member state of the European Union and the United Nations. In both fora, the Czech Republic has consistently, sometimes against the current of majority opinion, promoted an unbiased and nuanced understanding of issues and challenges related to the peace process.

The Czech Republic's political partnership with Israel is not simply a deliberate choice by its political elites. It builds on a long-standing public recognition and respect in our country for Israel as a state which, throughout the many wars and other violent challenges of its dramatic history, has tenaciously preserved not only a stable democratic political system, but also a vibrant and colourful artistic scene and many areas of world-class academic and scientific achievement.

As Czech diplomats, we have always deeply valued the insight of our Israeli colleagues, as well as academics, into contemporary international issues, most recently and prominently the current wave of political upheaval sweeping the Middle East. In which context I should add that on a political level, we appreciate and admire the restraint and sensitivity with which Israeli diplomacy is navigating the challenge of responding to these events, which in many cases touch on Israel's vital security interests.

While much international public attention is focused elsewhere in the region, no substantial political progress is being made in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. This in itself has little to do with the "Arab Spring". The core factors behind the stalemate are the same as ever: inability of the two sides to reach a mutually satisfactory compromise on a set of key issues including the division of land and the rights of Palestinian refugees, compounded by the chronic inability of the Palestinians to overcome their internal political disunity. Hopes on both sides for a breakthrough in negotiations are growing increasingly distant and weak.

It is not my part or intention to use this short speech to offer political judgments on this long-term stalemate, which has deep, complicated and structural reasons. As intermittent violence by Palestinian militants against Israel continues, chiefly through rocket attacks from Gaza, the Czech Republic will continue to firmly stand behind the government of Israel in its responsibility to provide basic security for its citizens – no matter how high or low the hopes for a political solution to provide a lasting peace.

However, the crisis of the peace process and a deepening sense of a "long-term provisionality" of the status quo create specific new political dangers for Israel. As an engaged, consistent and concerned friend of Israel for more than 50 years, I feel it as my duty to speak openly and offer a friend's warning and criticism when necessary, as I do to my personal friends and family.

Many in Israel – though not on an official level – now talk of the chronic crisis of the peace process as a crisis of the two-state solution. Such statements are often made in a strangely

resigned, even complacent way. It is as if the authors merely wanted to express their exasperation or disillusionment with the peace process, without reflecting the logical implications: without an independent Palestinian state, there is no way for Israel itself in the long-term outlook to remain a state that is both Jewish and democratic.

This impression is compounded by what appears to be persistent indifference among Israelis toward the territorial preconditions of a future viable Palestinian statehood. Alarm among Israel's foreign partners about the continued expansion of Jewish residential areas beyond the Green Line, steadily eroding the size and contiguity of the residual non-Jewish territories, often seems to be felt in Israel as a political nuisance to be overcome, rather than a serious questioning of Israel's political credibility.

This perceived attitude gravely tests the political goodwill that Israel enjoys in the Western world and specifically in Europe. It is easily interpreted as Israel's psychological acceptance of a long-term situation where there is a single independent political entity between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, with different civic rights for two different groups of inhabitants. As a result, not only left-wing radicals but also more and more members of the political mainstream in Europe are now beginning to speak of an Israeli "apartheid" system.

That such use of this term is historically misleading and unfair is not the issue here. I am saying that this is what is happening to popular perception among Europeans, not because I am happy about it but because it is what is happening. Israel is losing a significant part of European public opinion, and I am not sure if most of the Israeli public appreciates this trend and its potential consequences.

The request I would like to make of the American Jewish Committee, as our fellow friends of Israel, is to join us in helping to contain and reverse the serious damage that is being done to Israel's image in Europe. This must involve not only advocacy in Europe itself, but also an effort to help Israeli leaders appreciate the challenge and recognize its roots in current psychological attitudes in Israel towards the peace process and future Palestinian statehood.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me assure you that my words to you today reflect my experience gained during five years in the chair of Foreign Minister and as a life-long observer of European politics. They change nothing about the fact that I will remain a staunch friend and ally of Israel in the future as I have been in the past.