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Ambassador Edward P. Djerejian

It is an honor to be here to celebrate the centennial of Prime Minister Yitzak Shamir and to accept this award for humanitarian diplomacy. I share this award with my wife, Francoise, who is with us today. Francoise served as my private emissary to the Rabbi of Damascus Avraham Hamra when the American ambassador could not be seen frequenting the Jewish Quarter of Damascus, lest the Syrian security force crack down further on the Jewish community.

My time as US Ambassador to Syria had a number of challenges, including the Gulf War and the Madrid Peace Conference, which I will address in a moment. But helping Syria's Jewish community to realize its deserved rights to travel and property was an important part of our assignment to Damascus.

Jews had lived in Syria since the time of David and had always been a valuable part of the country's cultural landscape. But when I arrived in Damascus, the Syrian Jewish community had been persecuted for decades and a series of recent events had flared tensions.

Since 1947, when anti-Jewish violence led to thousands of Syrian Jews fleeing to Israel, travel and property rights for Syria's Jews had been severely restricted. Around the time of my arrival in 1988, there had been ten recent cases of Syrian Jews attempting to immigrate to Israel, being captured, imprisoned and in some cases

tortured. International travel was only rarely allowed, and only on the condition of family members and a \$1000 bond being left behind as collateral. Syrian Jews were not allowed to own or sell certain property. Damascus's Jewish Quarter was under constant surveillance. This was a very difficult problem that had been building for decades.

The US government, including Congressmen, President George Herbert Walker Bush and Secretary of State Baker, had on a number of occasions raised our concern about these issues to the Syrian government, but the effort had gone nowhere. I was relegated by the Syrian regime to the Mukhabarat, the Syrian intelligence service, to deal with these matters.

Toward the end of one of my meetings with President Hafez al-Assad in 1989, on our way to the door, I asked if I might raise a sensitive issue. I restated the importance to my government of addressing this problem and my frustration about the lack of momentum. I asked if there was another channel I might pursue, as the ways we had tried were clearly not working. This was not a political or security issue, I pointed out, but a humanitarian one. It was not linked to other issues involving Israel – *these were Syrians after all* – and should not be perceived as a concession to Israel. We were only asking that he treat one segment of his population the same as the others. He thought about it and said I should work with Nasser Qaddur, his Minister of State and trusted confidante. This was an encouraging step – Qaddur could get things done.

Over the next few months, we met with Qaddur and Syrian Jewish leaders, especially Rabbi Avraham Hamra. Often, as I mentioned, this involved sending Françoise to carry messages to the Rabbi on my behalf. The goal was to convince the government to grant exit visas to unmarried Jewish women, who couldn't find Jewish husbands in Syria, and to reunite divided families. We also hoped to convince Assad to lift

restrictions on the sale and purchase of property and to release the Soued brothers, who had been arrested for attempting to immigrate to Israel.

Hafez joked to me that he didn't want Syrian Jewish women to leave – there were more than enough eligible Syrian bachelors, so they wouldn't need to find Israeli husbands. He told me that he had no problem with Syrian Jews going to “this place you call Brooklyn,” but he would reverse his decision if he saw that Syrian Jews were leaving for Israel.

In 1989, Assad agreed to grant 500 exit visas to Syrian Jews on the condition they not go to Israel. While I was there, I do know that at least a few ended up in that “place called Brooklyn,” and some finally ended up here in Israel, including Rabbi Hamra.

While I did what was necessary for the Jewish community, I must confess I did it with some remorse because I was contributing to the multi-confessional breakup of Syria and the Middle East. For hundreds of years, the people of Syria and across the region lived together mostly in peace – sharing neighborhoods, cultures, backgrounds and languages. The Syrian Jewish community was renowned for its rich culture and craftsmen, especially the coppersmiths who furnished Arab residences and palaces throughout the Middle East.

Today that seems like a fading dream. Across the world, and not just in the Middle East, people are becoming more polarized, more entrenched in their beliefs – less willing to live together with mutual respect. Leaders, as well, seem to be becoming more entrenched in their beliefs, less practical and pragmatic, less willing to negotiate or recognize other views as valid.

This is why it is fitting tonight that we are here to discuss Yitzhak Shamir. During my time in the Bush 41 administration, Secretary of State Baker and I had what you might call a somewhat complicated relationship with Prime Minister Shamir. I'll never forget that during a visit to Israel some years ago, I was leaving the Dan Hotel in Tel Aviv and Yitzhak Shamir and his wife Shulamit were walking up the steps. Shamir looked at me and said, "Oh my God, you're not back again?!"

He had a reputation as a hardliner, as strictly principled. He was called steadfast, or stubborn, depending on who you asked.

Secretary Baker tells the story that at his first meeting with Shamir, he told him that he knew that Shamir is described as a man of principle, who was unable to be practical. Baker, on the other hand, had the reputation of a practical man who lacked defined principles. Baker told him that he did have firm principles, but viewed practicality as the means of achieving them, and that he suspected Shamir was more practical than his reputation let on. He was right.

Despite our differences, when I talk about Shamir I commend him for his political courage. He did a number of things that he, personally, did not want to do, but did so because it was in Israel's longer-term interest. Today, that kind of approach seems an increasingly rare trait.

That's certainly not to paint him as a saint – he did a lot of things as Prime Minister we strongly objected to (which we made very clear to him), and he was a difficult, exasperating negotiator. But still, we were able to work with him. He was committed to Israel and its long-term interests and was practical in pursuing those interests. In diplomacy, that's all you can ask for in an interlocutor.

The prime example of Shamir's leadership and strength was during Desert Storm, while Saddam Hussein was firing SCUD missiles into Israel. This was one of the tenser periods in Israel's history and anyone could understand the desire to fire back – which was what the Israeli military and public, as well as Saddam, wanted. We had to make a major diplomatic effort to convince him not to retaliate, which would undermine the international effort against Saddam, undermining Arab commitment to the coalition. And to his credit, he agreed. That wasn't easy for him to do – here is Israel under fire, and strong retaliation has always been at the center of Israeli deterrence policy, but he had enough faith in US leadership and friendship to act with restraint and let the US-led coalition handle it. Restraint was in Israel's long-term interests and, as hard as it was for him, he recognized and followed through on it.

He also knew that Israel's entrance into the conflict could undermine other longer-term goals, most notably a peace agreement (which he had secretly been working on) with Jordan. Again, here was this man who was a fierce defender of Israel acting pragmatically and strategically against what had to have been his first instincts.

One of the most important periods of our relationship with Shamir was in the time before and during the Madrid Peace Conference. Again, Shamir didn't want to go to Madrid, and neither did most Israelis, because of the Iraqi missiles and Palestinian and Jordanian support for Iraq. But he went.

Coming out of Desert Storm, we saw an opportunity. Regional radicals were marginalized, US approval was high, and relationships across the region were strong. Baker approached Shamir and explained the landscape – the Saudis would come to the table and King Fahd seemed responsive, even privately recognizing Israel and the need for a peace settlement. Shamir was positive, but characteristically, he argued on

a number of points. But he undoubtedly had an open-mindedness we felt we could work with.

My role came from the Syrian side. I was then Ambassador to Damascus, and we knew that the initiation of peace negotiations would depend highly on Syrian participation. It was an enormous, exhausting effort to get Assad to come to the negotiating table under conditions Shamir would agree to – Baker coined this “bladder diplomacy” because we sat at the table for hours and hours at a time without so much as a bathroom break. But eventually, we got Assad to agree. I remember receiving President Assad’s positive response to President Bush’s proposal after six and a half grueling weeks of negotiations in Damascus, where I had to answer a myriad of questions on the US proposal and our intentions. I called Secretary Baker on the secure line from the embassy and gave him the positive news. He asked me if I was sure and I said I was. There was no Syrian loophole.

In formulating the conference, we took a two-track approach – getting the Israelis and Palestinians to meet face-to-face, but also to get the Arab states and Israelis to meet face to face – something the Israelis had sought but which the Arab states refused. Both sides were getting something they had long-wanted. When we were able to get the Arabs (the Syrians and especially the Saudis) to agree to face-to-face, direct negotiations without a UN buffer, the Israelis couldn’t say no. The Israelis had been requesting this for years. Shamir knew that Israel’s and his own credibility would be seriously undermined by a refusal to go to the conference.

Many say that we exerted hard pressure on either side to get them to come to the table, but it wasn’t so much pressure as it was assertive diplomacy with a coherent strategy behind it. We crafted the peace conference by creating a diplomatic and political landscape where it was difficult for both the Arabs and Israelis to say no.

That is something I feel is largely missing from the US approach to the complex issues of the Middle East today.

As a new administration takes over in Washington in January 2017, we need an effective strategy that focuses on how to marginalize the forces of extremism and terrorism, pursues conflict resolution – especially concerning the Palestinian issue – and addresses the fundamental causes of instability in the region as a whole. But that is a subject for another conference!

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you again for inviting me and my wife to Netanya and for this award.