

*Remarks by the Czech Defense Minister Alexandr Vondra at the 2011 Herzliya Conference, February 6, 2011.*

Good evening, ladies and gentleman,

It is always a special moment to be in Herzliya, and I am delighted to see so many friends among us. I remember the beginnings of the Herzliya Conference, and I am impressed to see how it has grown over the past eleven years.

The title of our debate tonight goes to shared strategic challenges. I want to say a few words on the risk that current developments in Egypt pose to the stability in the region, and I also want to discuss how we might enhance our defense cooperation to further strengthen our security and partnership with Israel.

These days we are monitoring the news on the fast-moving events in Egypt (and Tunisia, Yemen or even Jordan) with what I would say is a great concern.

It is true that Israel is not in the very center of the attention right now, but let us not be mistaken: the first question that came to our minds when the protests in Egypt started was whether or not the stability and security of Israel is endangered.

I hope it is not the case. But I also consider myself a realist. I know very well that the path from popular movements to a truly liberal democracy is long, thorny and differs from country to country, and from culture to culture.

Some are tempted to draw analogies with the revolutions in Central Europe twenty years ago. For sure, the current popular dissent, the universal aspiration for freedom and better social and economic conditions is somehow similar to what happened in the region I come from in 1989.

However, a regime change does not happen overnight just because of the voice of the street, or now the voice of the web. What some label as revolutions in the Arab world, we see rather as a mix of justified popular movements with a potential for liberal democracy that are certainly worth supporting on one hand, but also as a mix of ideological radicalization, military instability and danger of further WMD proliferation on the other hand. This may have a devastating impact on Israel's security and the Middle East Peace Process as a whole.

We also see street violence, flight of prisoners, looting museums and shops and other phenomena that have nothing to do with what happened in my country twenty years ago, but rather trends signifying the possibility of a wider failing of the state. And this prospect is truly worrisome.

I am not saying this to undermine the legitimate aspirations raised in the streets of Tunis, Algiers, Sana'a, Cairo and the other cities. But too often we have seen fair elections and would-be democratic reforms exploited by enemies of freedom and liberty.

And that is why I think it is sometimes better to have an orderly evolution between a status quo and a revolution with an uncertain result. We cannot afford more uncertainty in the Middle East that would jeopardize Israel, the only true democracy in this region.

We must not allow the Middle East peace process to be torpedoed. And we should act with respect to those who have helped make the peace process a reality. The leaders in Cairo belong among such people.

This is especially in time when the European Union, the immediate neighbor, is somehow weakened and unable to act decisively with one voice.

The causes of EU's weakness are internal, and NATO Secretary General outlined them in Munich two days ago: Europe is divided over fundamental questions of defense and security policy, weak because of austerity measures and drifting away from the United States in terms of defense spending.

NATO Secretary General Rasmussen spoke primarily on security related issues related to security, but the above is pretty much true in broader political context.

In this situation, it is critical for the EU member states not to succumb to this weakness and step up their support to Israel.

For the past ten years, the Czechs have been active advocates of a strong partnership of Europe with Israel. Let me make clear that this attitude will not change.

As you know, the Czech Republic and Israel have a good portion of shared history. The Czechoslovak President Tomas Garrigue Masaryk was the first head of state to visit the Mandatory Palestine in 1927. Czechoslovakia provided military assistance and training in 1948 when Israel was defending her existence. Unfortunately, our relations were soon interrupted for several decades.

After the fall of communism, Czechoslovakia renewed her diplomatic relations as one the first foreign policy steps made. In the spring of 1990, following on the tradition of President Masaryk, Václav Havel was the first president of free Central and Eastern Europe to visit Israel. I was privileged enough to be a part of his delegation then.

Today, my country is not in the same position like it was in 1948. Israel does not need our military assistance now. However, Israel can rely on our firm moral and diplomatic support in defense of the values we share and in our joint struggle against the threats we face together, even if the level of threat perception in our countries is sometimes different in time and distance, sometimes giving us, the Czechs, a false impression that we are safe and secure. However, we should not be forgetting that these threats are fundamentally the same.

The Czech Republic and Israel both struggle against terrorists and Islamist extremists who challenge democracy and freedom and try to replace our values with oppression, fundamentalism and totalitarianism. The proliferation of WMDs is equally concerning to us. The prospect of nuclear race with Iran is a real nightmare.

That is why I hope that despite recently failed talks with Iran, diplomacy, deterrence as well as sanctions will nevertheless succeed. On the other hand, I believe that the military option should not be ruled out. By ruling out the military option, we are in fact weakening diplomacy. And I want diplomacy to succeed.

This brings me to my final point. Diplomacy is only one tool that builds a truly strategic partnership. When I became the defense minister last summer, I began to think how to enhance the Czech Republic's cooperation with Israel in the defense area.

I quickly figured out this would not be an easy task. I have had to deal with severe budgetary cuts like all of my colleagues present here tonight. Over the past two years, our military

budget was reduced by 20 percent. This reflects the popular trend in my society arguing that because of the absence of immediate danger, we in fact do not need to spend on defense much.

Furthermore, I also discovered during talks with my counterparts that we often share the same goals and values, talk about pooling and sharing our capabilities, but we lack concrete and tangible projects.

Quite often, instead of a "strategic partnership" we find ourselves in a "strategic frustration." And I do not want this to be the case in the Czech Republic's strategic partnership with Israel.

Israel serves as a role model for the Czech Republic in integrating research and development into military planning and procurement.

Therefore, during my short visit, I will be hosting an event in cooperation with the newly established Israeli-Czech Chamber of Commerce, which will welcome the representatives of the Israeli defense industry.

I hope this event will generate new opportunities fostering a new level of partnership, equally ambitious, albeit smaller in nature, such as the one concluded between Britain and France.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I outlined a number of risks stemming from the contemporary developments in your neighborhood and how they link to the strategic partnership with Israel. I want to conclude by saying that we must demonstrate our readiness to defend the values we share with Israel, and that we denounce any attempts that try to undermine her legitimacy. Furthermore, we must be looking for concrete projects that will make our partnership with Israel even stronger.

Unity in values should not be and cannot be just a psychological placebo to make us feel good about each other.

If it means anything at all it must mean unity in policy and unity in action. This is something we cannot repeat too often these days, within Europe, in the Atlantic area and in our relationship toward the Middle East as well.

Thank you and thanks again to the organizers for inviting me here, and I wish you a successful conference.