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## **A Conversation with Natan Sharansky and Saad Eddin Ibrahim**

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ROBERT SATLOFF: Friends that I have known for many years, this is such a great pleasure for me. Let me open by asking you about your past before we go into the present and the future.

You, Natan, were in a Soviet jail, you, Saad, were in an Egyptian jail. So tell me what it takes to survive an experience like this. What do you think might be a common experience that each of you had in trying to survive against tyranny? Saad?

SAAD EDDIN IBRAHIM: In my cold cell in Tora prison, I reflected on what made me withstand all the arduous hardships of dealing with and confronting—not just the last regime, for decades. I was a dissident from days of Nasser. I put was under sequestration for prisoners. I was shunned and yelled at by President Sadat, and then ultimately, I was put in prison by President Hosni Mubarak.

So, what made me do all that? It is a feeling I experienced as a child, the teaching and nurturing of my own mother who helped me to stand up and to fight for justice. And that is really the thing that kept me over the years...

SATLOFF: Natan, was it the memory of your mother that kept you going?

NATAN SHARANSKY: There are two important things.

On one hand, you must take everything very seriously. You must feel like you are in the middle of historical, thousand-year struggle, and that every thought of yours will have tremendous influence. You must feel this big responsibility and remind yourself again and again that all of your people—those who came before you and those after you, your family and friends—are in this struggle, and everything depends on you

On the other hand, you must not take anything seriously. You must be able to laugh at all these sort of things. You must make light of your prison guards, of everybody, and to keep everything in proportion. I had a long conversation with Saad about this in Prague, at the conference for democratic dissents. I asked him about his imprisonment, his interrogations, and he—as though he'd read my book and was tying his experience to mine—was joking about the interrogations... I was amazed to see that despite the differences between the reality of the KGB, and the reality of Mubarak's Egypt, you have to stick to the same principles. If you want to win the struggle against these forces of darkness, you have to see it as a very important, principal struggle on the one hand and to be able to laugh about it on the other.

MR. SATLOFF: All right, let's move forward. It has been twelve months since Muhammad Bouazizi lit himself on fire on Tunisia, and the world in the Middle East has never been the same. Like a rollercoaster, it has gone through ups and downs, and perhaps will go up again. Let me open this part of our conversation by getting your assessment.

One year after the start of this great upheaval, where are we? Is this moving in the right direction? Have democracy and freedom come to the Middle East, or, as some have suggested, do we only have chaos and the rule of the mob? Or perhaps is it both at the same time?

IBRAHIM: Well, it is both, and to make an omelet, you have to break a lot of eggs. (Laughter.) That's basically what we are witnessing in every revolution. There will be a lot of ups and downs. There will be victories and defeats, advances and setbacks. I feel that the biggest challenge for the Middle East—and for those who fight for freedom around the world—will be to guard against the hijacking of these imperfect revolutions by counter-revolutionaries, the military, or religious fanatics. That is a challenge for all of us.

As I've written recently, this revolution reminded Egyptians and people in the Middle East of two great revolutions that were hijacked, the Russian Revolution and the Iranian Revolution. In the Russian Revolution, between February and October 1917, a small, cohesive faction of iron-disciplined communists became the dominant faction. In eight months, they were able to hijack that revolution. The same thing happened more than sixty years later in the Iranian Revolution. The young people that withstood the brunt of the shah's oppression staged a glorious revolution, but the ayatollah came from Paris and took over—hijacked—the revolution. And we know the rest. Many of us here are old enough to remember the events of 1979.

The revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—and the ongoing revolution in Syria—were staged by young, eager democrats, yet there is a danger that more disciplined, cohesive Islamists in the region may hijack them. We are not here to strategize, but I am alerting this audience about it, assuming they all have a deep interest and a lasting commitment to seeing a stable, progressive, peaceful Middle East.

We in the region are not going to find that future alone. We need your spirit, your goodwill, your help, and the assistance of your government to help us guard against the hijacking of the democratic revolutions in the Middle East. (Applause.)

SATLOFF: Natan, you have spoken about the freedom agenda and the urgency of democracy in the Middle East. But in the recent elections in Morocco, Tunisia, and especially Egypt, Islamic parties have done fabulously well, and the "Facebook generation"—the young men and women of Tahrir Square—did terribly. Is this the future of democracy in the Middle East?

SHARANSKY: Don't say that...Recently, a journalist covering the elections wrote that it's clear the Egyptian Revolution is not French Revolution. I say, "I hope it's not French Revolution."

The day after the French Revolution, with its great slogans, every other leader was killed by the opposition, who declared them to be the enemy of the people. This red terror started—not with the Bolshevik revolution, but the French Revolution. They had ten years of corruption, of different governments, then came Napoleon, and then Louis XVIII. Finally, two generations after the French Revolution, they started the process of building civil society.

Did these two generations pass in vain? Would it have been better for Louis XVI to stay in power? Of course not. There is a big distance between revolting against a fear-based society and crossing out of it, and finally building the civil society where neither you nor your enemy lives in fear. A big social change has to take place.

As for the Middle East... people lived under the constant fear that they could be punished for their views, and at some moment, it became unbearable. They felt that the regime was weak, and they could try to cross the line. That's exactly how it happened before, in Eastern Europe and Latin America.

A few days after Mubarak fell, I meet the official responsible for Israeli intelligence. I asked him, "Do you think that revolution will happen in Syria?" He replied, "Absolutely not." I asked why, and he explained what's happening in the army, Sunni-Shia dynamics, the dominance of the Alawite sect, the economy. I said, "But do you know that in Syria today, people are telling jokes in the streets that for years, they were afraid to tell. That's what happened in Egypt in the past year; they publicly told jokes about Mubarak—the sort of jokes that landed Saad in prison less than a decade ago. Now, they tell them freely. That's what happens when people are not afraid any more.

But the United States doesn't get credit for this change. What happened is not something the West missed or could have shaped differently. It was inevitable. Again, I quote Saad in Prague, where he spoke to President Bush, who also attended the conference with the dissidents. Saad thanked President Bush for helping secure his release, but he challenged him: "Why do you support Mubarak? He's such a corrupt dictator." President Bush gave the answer that every leader gives: "We have no choice, because if not Mubarak, it will be the Muslim Brotherhood, and we prefer Mubarak." Saad replied with exactly what all of us democratic dissidents felt: "If the only choice which you will leave to these people is Mubarak or the Muslim Brotherhood, then, it will be the Muslim Brotherhood. It was the same way with the choice for Palestinians—it was only Arafat or Hamas, so it was Hamas...

Now the important question is whether the democratic forces will be capable of building a civil society. The answer depends upon, again, the will of the people...

SATLOFF: So if America wants Egypt to be the sort of democracy both of you want it to become, and if we don't want it to be hijacked by the Islamists, then who do we help? And how do we do it? We just saw the Facebook generation get 16 percent of the vote.

IBRAHIM: Help the process. Be consistently principled.

SATLOFF: Consistently principled? We're talking about Washington here. (Laughter.) (Applause.)

IBRAHIM: I'm hoping that even Washington could be principled. Is that too much to hope for?

SATLOFF: Go ahead.

IBRAHIM: If you support principles and process, I think that even if the Islamists win the next round of elections, they will not win the round that follows it. I am of the conviction that democracy is safeguarded, and I'd rather live with whatever outcome, so long as the process is free, fair, and transparent.

Young Egyptians, those who toppled the Mubarak regime, have become like a fourth branch of government. The people in Tahrir Square are a new authority; public legitimacy is a new controller of the political process in Egypt...and in Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria. These people will be the best guardians of their own revolutions, of their own universal yearning for freedom and democracy. I have no doubt about this.

SATLOFF: There are two schools of thought about Israel's interests: either Israel has to be wary of what's happening in the Middle East, or Israel has to take steps to try to shape what's happening. Natan, which school do you belong to, and if the latter, what should Israel do?

SHARANSKY: Well, first of all, I'm a little bit afraid of the words "Should Israel try to shape the situation in the Middle East?" Of course, Israel and America should try to influence events in the region, but only—as Saad said—by sticking to their principles. They should not, God forbid, start giving advice or instructions on what "you guys" have to do.

Beginning with British policy in the Middle East and the time of Lawrence of Arabia, the free world has made a kind of silent agreement with the Arabs: your dictators will deliver stability and we will support these dictators. Now, this agreement is broken. It's nonexistent. And it broke not because the leaders of the free world decided to stop it but because the people in the streets didn't want it to continue.

Now, there are two options. The first one, which I fear will come to pass, is that we—the free world and Israel—will start looking for greater influence in the region and will try to identify which forces will be acceptable to the people and take our interests into account. So, there will be some kind of moderation of nondemocratic forces in order to take power, creating a new set of dictators, supported with some preconditions by the free world. And then history will repeat.

The other option is to stick to the principle, to recognize that we don't have an opportunity to influence directly, but we can exert help simply by saying that all our preparation, assistance, and recognition of real legitimacy, will be connected to the pace of development of civil society. The deeper the civil society the forms, the deeper will be our contribution.

Israel can benefit a lot from not being the only democracy of the Middle East. A lot. But how would that happen?

I continually say that our so-called peace process has not been a peace process because it was connected to supporting dictatorships undermining democracy. Palestinians could have become a

democratic entity twenty years ago, because they were very close to the democratic way of life in the Middle East. Instead, they agreed to make Arafat a strong dictator so he could deliver peace.

Again, there was hope of peace after Arafat died. By chance, that very day, I was visiting with President Bush, who had invited me to come and discuss my book, *The Case for Democracy*. He asked me, "Is Abu Mazen a good guy or a bad guy?" I told him, "I can prove that he's good guy. I can prove that he's a bad guy." (Laughter.) It doesn't matter.

The question is now whether American policy will stick to the principles of civil society or not... We have some opportunities because of the desire all over the Middle East to have governments that defend all their people. This desire will also be translated among the Palestinians.

Peace can be built from the bottom up, not through imposing deadlines, such as "we must sign an agreement in the next two months. There are no conditions; there is no will to sign an agreement in the next two months. But there will be reforms, they will build from the bottom up, there will be more preparation for peace. So yes, I think we can influence the course of events but only by sticking to the principles and not trying to impose peace.

SATLOFF: Let me close by asking Saad one last important question. We have just celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of Egypt-Israel peace. Will there be another 30 years of peace between Israel and Egypt? Will we celebrate on the sixtieth anniversary?

IBRAHIM: The short answer is yes. The longer answer is that I wish we celebrated peace not only between Egypt and Israel but for the entire Middle East.

I asked my wife, who happened to be in Tahrir Square for the first hour of the revolution, two questions. First, what is the gender makeup of the crowd? Are there boys and girls? And the answer was yes. Second, is there the usual bashing of Israel and America that has been a part of past demonstrations? And the answer was no; for at least the first two weeks, there was no bashing of Israel, there was no mention of America. To me, that was a healthy sign. If the people leading the revolution are not obsessed with ugly anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment, then that is at least a good beginning.

I was hopeful that the Israelis would take advantage of that early neutrality and make some progressive moves toward the Palestinians, to take the poisonous element out of the discourse in the Middle East that has for many years distracted from the issues that concern the average man and woman in the region. Autocrats have always abused this issue. There is of course a legitimate dispute between the Jewish people and Palestinians. In seventy years, the Arab regimes have not liberated one inch of the so-called lost Palestine, yet they have used this issue day and night to distract their people, to divert their attention from their own abuses.

So I was very keen to know how seriously that issue was taken in Tahrir Square in the early days. I think during the sixth week after the revolution, some Nasserites thought to use that issue again, when they staged a march to the Israeli embassy. That was old-style politics, and it is up to progressive Israelis to really make some very bold moves in the tradition of President Sa-

dat...From a position of strength, they should make some very courageous and humane move toward the Palestinians. If they do, I think there will be a truly genuine and promising resumption of the march for peace and democracy.

These are two sides of the same coin. I am a firm believer that peace and democracy are integral in the Middle East, and I am hopeful that our Israeli friends and colleagues will help to expand the small constituency for peace on the Arab side, so that it will become a major constituency, by making some bold moves toward peace.

SATLOFF: Friends—(applause). Friends, please join me in thanking and congratulating these two champions of human rights. Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Natan Sharansky, our 2011 Scholar-Statesman Award honorees.