The Pursuit of Middle East Peace: A Status Report

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[Introductory remarks about the Washington Institute.]

…. Last July, President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry launched a vigorous effort to reach a final status agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. Now it is early May, we have passed the nine-month marker for these negotiations, and for the time being the talks have been suspended. Some have said this process is over. But that is not correct. Asm y little story testifies. As you all know well— in the Middle East, it's never over.

Think back to the spring of 1975, the year the United States brokered the Sinai II agreement. In March of that year, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger set out to the region to broker a second disengagement agreement between Israel and Egypt. After ten days of shuttling back and forth between the parties, the Secretary of State suspended his efforts and returned to Washington empty handed. The President, President Ford, and the Secretary announced they would step back. Kissinger vented his frustration. Maybe a David Ben-Gurion or a Golda Meir could lead Israel to a peace agreement, he fumed, but never a Yitzhak Rabin! We learned a little later what a peacemaker Yitzhak Rabin could be.

Everybody thought it was over. Of course, as we know now, everybody was wrong. A few months later the talks were restarted, and soon thereafter a deal was reached.

What was true then is possibly true today: this process is always difficult, but it is never impossible.

But in certain ways, things were more difficult in the Kissinger days and in some ways, they were easier. For an audience that loves Middle East history, I think it is interesting to take stock of what has changed and what has stayed the same since Henry's time.

In some ways things are easier in the Israeli-Palestinian context today than in the past.

The international context for peacemaking is better today. The Cold War and fear that a conflict in the Middle East would trigger a nuclear superpower confrontation is no longer there.

The region has not faced an all-out Arab-Israeli war in 40 years. Peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan have held today despite very difficult circumstances—two intifadas, conflicts with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, and of course the Arab Revolutions. Turmoil in the Mideast is bringing Israelis and Arab states closer together. Indeed, there is a virtual realignment taking place between the enemies of moderation on the one side and the proponents of moderation on the other that crossed the Arab Israeli divide. As Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has noted, "many Arab leaders today already realize that Israel is not their enemy, that peace with the Palestinians would turn our relations with them and with many Arab countries into open and thriving relationships."

In the Israeli-Palestinian domestic arena there is, in some ways, greater political realism than before. Back in Kissinger's day, Golda Meir said there was no such thing as a Palestinian people. Now a Likud prime minister says there has to be two states for two people. Back then, Yasser Arafat was committed to Israel's destruction. Today, his successor, Abu Mazen, is committed to living alongside Israel in peace.

The U.S.-Israel relationship has also changed in quite dramatic ways. Only those who know it from the inside – as I have had the privilege to do – can testify to how deep and strong are the ties that now bind our two nations. When President Obama speaks with justifiable pride about those bonds as "unbreakable" he means what he says. And he knows of what he speaks. Unlike the "reassessment" Kissinger did in the Ford Administration, there is one significant difference: President Obama and Secretary Kerry would never suspend U.S.-Israel military relations as their predecessors did back then. Those military relations are too important to both our nations.

However, in many respects, when it comes to peace negotiations, things have proven to be much harder today than in the 1970s.

Henry Kissinger faced Israelis and Egyptians who were coming off the painful 1973 war. I was an Australian student in Israel at the time. I remember well the sense of existential dread in the country brought on by the scope of Israeli casualties, and I remember also a willingness to consider withdrawals from the Sinai that had previously been ruled out. A few of you probably remember how Moshe Dayan, then defense minister, stated proudly before the 1973 Yom Kippur War that he would rather have Sharm el-Sheikh than peace. Egypt also had a sense of urgency, generated by Sadat's belief that only peace with Israel could change Egypt's dire circumstances and only U.S. diplomacy could achieve that peace.

Yet, where is this sense of urgency today? To be absolutely clear, I am not for a moment suggesting that violence is necessary to produce urgency and flexibility. That is abhorrent. We are very fortunate to have two leaders, in President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu, who are committed to achieving a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through peaceful means.

But one problem that revealed itself in these past nine months is that the parties, although both showing flexibility in the negotiations, do not feel the pressing need to make the gut-wrenching compromises necessary to achieve peace. It is easier for the Palestinians to sign conventions and appeal to international bodies in their supposed pursuit of "justice" and their "rights," a process which by definition requires no compromise. It is easier for Israeli politicians to avoid tension in the governing coalition and for the Israeli people to maintain the current comfortable status quo. It is safe to say that if we the US are the only party that has a sense of urgency, these negotiations will not succeed.

Kissinger also had the advantage of being able to pursue peace incrementally – what he labeled the "step-by-step" approach. He told me recently that he introduced that idea because, after the trauma of the Yom Kippur War, he believed Israeli society could not handle the big jump to a total withdrawal from Sinai. It took six years from war to peace on the Israeli-Egyptian front. On the Israeli-Palestinian front, the Oslo Accords provided for an interim process that was supposed to last five years. It has now been twenty years since Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shook hands on the White House south lawn. Since then, thousands of Israelis and Palestinians have died and the interim process is now thoroughly stuck, with further redeployments and road maps turned into road kill along the way.

An interim period that was designed to build trust has in fact exacerbated mistrust: suicide bombings, the second intifada, and continuous settlement growth have led many people on both sides to lose faith. This is why Secretary Kerry, with the full backing of President Obama, decided to try this time around for a conflict-ending agreement.

There are other differences too. Egypt is a state with a five thousand year history, capable of living up to its commitments. The Palestinians are just now in the process of building their state and given the bitter experience of the second intifada and the consequences of the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, Israelis don't trust them to live up to any of their commitments. Even now, after a serious U.S.-led endeavor to build credible Palestinian security services, after seven years of security cooperation that the IDF and the Shin Bet now highly appreciate, and Abu Mazen's efforts to promote non-violence in the face of pressure from extremists, the fundamental mistrust remains.

The geographic context is different too. The Sinai Peninsula is a 200 kilometer buffer zone between Israel and Egypt. Israelis and Palestinians live virtually on top of each other. Moreover, the geographic issues are at the heart of what it means to be a Palestinian or an Israeli. The core issues – land, refugees, Jerusalem – have defined both peoples for a very long time. It is part of their identity in a way that the Sinai desert was not.

Now, as back in 1975, we face a breakdown in talks, with both sides trying to put the blame on the other party. The fact is both the Israelis and Palestinians missed opportunities, and took steps that undermined the process. We have spoken publicly about unhelpful Israeli steps that combined to undermine the negotiations. But it is important to be clear: We view steps the Palestinians took during the negotiations as unhelpful too. Signing accession letters to fifteen international treaties at the very moment when we were attempting to secure the release of the fourth tranche of prisoners was particularly counterproductive. And the final step that led to the suspension of the negotiations at the end of April was the announcement of a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement while we were working intensively on an effort to extend the negotiations.

But it is much more important to focus on where we go from here. And it is critical that both sides now refrain from taking any steps that could lead to an escalation and dangerous spiral that could easily get out of control. Thus far since the negotiations been suspended they have both shown restraint and it is essential that this continue.

We have also spoken about the impact of settlement activity. Just during the past nine months of negotiations, tenders for building 4,800 units were announced and planning was advanced for another 8,000 units. It's true that most of the tendered units are slated to be built in areas that even Palestinian maps in the past have indicated would be part of Israel. Yet the planning units were largely outside that area in the

West Bank. And from the Palestinian experience, there is no distinction between planning and building. Indeed, according to the Israeli Bureau of Census and Statistics, from 2012 to 2013 construction starts in West Bank settlements more than doubled. That's why Secretary Kerry believes it is essential to delineate the borders and establish the security arrangements in parallel with all the other permanent status issues. In that way, once a border is agreed each party would be free to build in its own state.

I also worry about a more subtle threat to the character of the Jewish state. Prime Minister Netanyahu himself has made clear, the fundamental purpose of these negotiations is to ensure that Israel remains a Jewish and democratic state – not a de facto bi-national state. The settlement movement on the other hand may well drive Israel into an irreversible binational reality. If you care about Israel's future, as I know so many of you do and as I do, you should understand that rampant settlement activity – especially in the midst of negotiations – doesn't just undermine Palestinian trust in the purpose of the negotiations; it can undermine Israel's Jewish future. If this continues, it could mortally wound the idea of Israel as a Jewish state – and that would be a tragedy of historic proportions.

Public opinion was another element that we found very challenging over the past 9 months. Kissinger focused very little on this element, because while the Israelis and Egyptians fought wars with each other, their societies were not physically intertwined. The peace between two states mediated by Dr. Kissinger was not psychologically difficult. Israelis and Palestinians by contrast are both physically intertwined and psychologically separated and terrorism and occupation have added to the trauma between the peoples, making everything harder.

Consistently over the last decade polling on both sides reveals majority support for the two state solution. But as many of you know neither side believes the other side wants it and neither seems to understand the concerns of the other. For example, Palestinians don't comprehend the negative impact of their incitement on the attitudes of Israelis. When Palestinians who murdered Israeli women and children are greeted as "heroes" in celebration of their release, who can blame the Israeli public – parents who lost children, and children who lost parents – for feeling despair. On the other side, Palestinians feel that Israelis don't even see their suffering any more, thanks to the success of the security barrier and the security cooperation. One Palestinian negotiator told his Israeli counterparts in one of our sessions: "You just don't see us; we are like ghosts to you."

Israelis don't seem to appreciate the highly negative impact on the Palestinian public of the IDF's demolition of Palestinian homes, or military operations in populated Palestinians towns that are supposed to be

the sole security responsibility of the Palestinian Authority, or the perceived double standard applied to settlers involved in "price tag" attacks. Palestinians cannot imagine how offended and suspicious Israelis become when they call Jews only a religion and not a people. Israelis cannot understand why it took a Palestinian leader 65 years to acknowledge the enormity of the Holocaust; Palestinians cannot understand why their leader should have been denigrated rather than applauded for now doing so. And the list goes on and on.

The upshot of these competing narratives, grievances and insensitivities is that they badly affected the environment for negotiations. While serious efforts were under way behind closed doors, we tried to get the leaders and their spokesmen to engage in synchronized positive messaging to their publics. Instead, Prime Minister Netanyahu was understandably infuriated by the outrageous claims of Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator no less, that the Prime Minister was plotting the assassination of the Palestinian president. And Abu Mazen was humiliated by false Israeli claims that he had agreed to increased settlement activity in return for the release of prisoners.

So, why then in the face of all of this, do I believe that direct negotiations can still deliver peace? Because over the last nine months, behind the closed doors of the negotiating rooms, I've witnessed Israelis and Palestinians engaging in serious and intensive negotiations. I've seen Prime Minister Netanyahu straining against his deeply-held beliefs to find ways to meet Palestinian requirements. I've seen Abu Mazen ready to put his state's security in American hands to overcome Israeli distrust of Palestinian intentions. I have seen moments where both sides have been unwilling to walk in each other's shoes. But I have also witnessed moments of recognition by both sides of what is necessary. I have seen moments when both sides talked past each other without being able to recognize it. But I have also seen moments of genuine camaraderie and engagement in the negotiating room to find a settlement to these vexing challenges.

The reality is that aside from Camp David and Annapolis, serious permanent status talks have been a rarity since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. For all of its flaws, this makes the past nine months important. In twenty rounds over the first six months, we managed to define clearly the gaps that separate the parties on all the core issues. And since then we have conducted intensive negotiations with the leaders and their teams to try to bridge those gaps. Under the leadership of General Allen, we have done unprecedented work to determine how best to meet Israel's security requirements in the context of a two state solution -- which Secretary Kerry has emphasized from Day One is absolutely essential to any meaningful resolution to this conflict. As a result we are all now better informed about what it will take to achieve a permanent status agreement.

One thing that will never change and is as true today as it was during Kissinger's time is that peace is always worth pursuing, no matter how difficult the path. Indeed, until the very last minute it may seem impossible, as it did in Kissinger's day. The cynics and critics will sit on the sidelines and jeer. They will say I told you so. They are doing it already. They will even claim that the United States is disengaging from the world, even as we have been deeply engaged in this issue that matters so much to so many of our partners around the globe. But we will make no apologies for pursuing the goal of peace. Secretary Kerry certainly won't. And President Obama won't. To quote Secretary Kerry "the United States has a responsibility to lead, not to find the pessimism and negativity that's so easily prevalent in the world today."

And the benefits are just too important to let go. For Palestinians: A sovereign state of their own. A dignified future. A just solution for the refugees. For Israelis: A more secure Jewish and democratic homeland. An opportunity to tap into the potential for a strategic alliance and deep economic relations with its Arab neighbors. For all of us. For all of the children of Abraham. An opportunity for a more prosperous, peaceful, and secure future.

Whether we get there or not, however, ultimately comes down to leadership. After a five months pause, Kissinger was able to resume the negotiations with Rabin and Sadat and bring them to a successful Sinai II Disengagement Agreement because Rabin was eventually capable of overcoming his political constraints and Sadat was prepared to make positive gestures that made it possible for Rabin to do so. As Dr. Kissinger has noted, "The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been before."

Let's hope it won't take a five month pause this time. Let's hope that President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu are able to overcome the hurdles that now lie on that path back to the negotiating table. When they are ready, they will certainly find in Secretary Kerry and President Obama willing partners in the effort to try again – if they are prepared to do so in a serious way. The obvious truth is that neither Israelis nor Palestinians are going away. They must find a way to live together in peace, respecting each other, side-by-side, in two independent states. There is no other solution. The United States stands ready to assist in this task, to help the leaders take their peoples to where they have never been, but where they still dream of going.

Thank you very much.

Question and Answer Period

ROBERT SATLOFF: [I thank you for that] extraordinary speech. I look forward to going over it in microscopic detail. But really, in all seriousness, I thank you so much for everything that went into that speech and, if I can just add—if I can thank you for the many months, and really it's years and decades, of your commitment to this amazing goal—a goal I think every person in this room shares, but you have worked so hard to take from a goal into reality, a goal of a truly secure and lasting peace. So thank you. [applause]

Martin and I had a chat the other day about what I get to do right now—and I get to ask Martin three questions. So I should say at the outset what I'm not going to waste my questions on. I'm not going to waste my questions on how soon Martin goes back to Brookings, as has been reported by the Israeli press. I'm not going to ask my question on—

MARTIN INDYK: They knew before I did.

SATLOFF: There you go. I'm not going to ask some of the fascinating historical questions which emerge from this account, such as how we should look at the difference in the strategic environment between 1975, when the pursuit of Egypt-Israel peace was a key player in the global confrontation, whereas what role, if any, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict plays on global politics today. I'm going to focus on a couple of items [laughter]

INDYK: I gotta answer that one—

SATLOFF: Ok, but that doesn't count as one. I do want to begin with the following: Martin, you mentioned competing narratives, and you also went into some great detail about the question of settlements. Now recently, in the Israeli media, there was a detailed op-ed by a certain journalist which quoted an unnamed American diplomat as going into great detail about how the settlement activity was the principal reason on which the impasse in negotiations ended. And then there are others who offer a different narrative, which goes something like this: that, in fact, the real complaint that one should have about Prime Minister Netanyahu and settlement activity is not so much that it was rampant, but that he didn't take public credit for how little there was, and that he was essentially not feeding his hard right by having settlement activity in Jerusalem and its environs—but that he wasn't feeding the hard right but never publicly took credit for it and, therefore, didn't isolate the hard right. So these are two very different narratives

at looking at settlement activity: one, that it was rampant and that it fed all the worst fears among Palestinians and therefore undermined the credibility of the negotiations and, on the other hand, that it was actually quite limited, but Netanyahu didn't take public credit for limiting it, and therefore there wasn't that psychological shift that was so important to peacemaking. Which is it?

INDYK: Well, I'd never agree with a senior unnamed American official. [laughter] Did I say agree or disagree?

SATLOFF: You said agree.

INDYK: No, I'd never disagree, I meant. Ah, Freudian slip. I've not heard of this second account—it doesn't make any sense to me—and I honestly don't understand what it means. Maybe someone else can explain it to me. What I do know is that, in the midst of negotiations, the settlement announcements—not so much of the tenders, but the combination of tenders and planning—as I said, eight thousand planning units were announced—and coming as each tranche of prisoners was released, had a dramatically damaging impact on the negotiations.

You see, Abu Mazen, I think, came into these negotiations skeptical after twenty years since Oslo. And the impact that settlement activity had since then—I think some additional 200,000 settlers in the West Bank since 1993, since the signing of the Oslo Accords—that settlement activity became a kind of litmus test. Now, he had wanted a construction freeze before negotiations started, but Prime Minister Netanyahu, given the makeup of his government, with the right-wing parties in it, could not deliver on that. And the prime minister chose instead to release these prisoners. But Abu Mazen did not expect that it would be accompanied in this way by these announcements of thousands of settlements. And as I said in my speech, the argument that was made publicly repeatedly by Israeli leaders that he had agreed to the settlement activity in exchange for the prisoner releases—in other words, he had purchased the prisoner releases by agreeing to more settlement activity in the territory that he considered was supposed to be for the Palestinian state that he was negotiating for—that was a humiliation for him. And I witnessed it. I witnessed the way that he shut down. It wasn't the only reason he shut down, but it was the major reason that he shut down toward the end of last year.

So, I don't know what this other narrative is, but I can tell you firsthand that that had a very damaging effect. And, by the way, it was intended to have that damaging effect. The promoters of the settlement activity were the ones who were adamantly opposed to the negotiations, even though they were in a gov-

ernment that was committed to the negotiations. And it was that determination to use settlement activity as a way of sabotaging the negotiations that succeeded. And that is a real problem.

Now Abu Mazen says, If we're going to resume the negotiations, there has to be a construction freeze—not just in the West Bank but also in Jerusalem, he says, for three months, so that during that time the negotiators can draw the map. And then Israel can build wherever it wants on its side of the border.

Of course, Prime Minister Netanyahu can no more do a three-month construction freeze in the West Bank and east Jerusalem than he could before we started the negotiations, in the run-up to that, because that would collapse his government. And there's no prime minister that I know anywhere who is willing to sacrifice his government. So, it's not just that it sabotaged the negotiations, but it's also a roadblock—one of the roadblocks, now—to the resumption of the negotiations. So, you know, we can rationalize it, we can explain it away, we can argue that they're all going to be evacuated, or 80 percent of the settlers are going to be accommodated, as part of the deal, which is probably true. But, in the meantime, the building of settlements, expansion of settlements, on land that the Palestinians believe is supposed to be part of their state—and the prevention of their ability to build in the same land—is a very problematic situation in terms of trying to resolve this conflict.

SATLOFF: Let me ask you, Martin, about one item on the agenda, which wasn't on the agenda back in 1975 but which was a major item on the agenda between Israelis and Palestinians today—and it didn't come up in your remarks at all. And that's the Israeli request that Palestinians recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Now this is terminology that American officials from presidents on down have endorsed and used. Is it legitimate for Israel—was it legitimate, is it legitimate—to put this on the agenda and to view it as a key item, a key desiderata, a key item that it wants from the Palestinians within the package of items that get traded in the give-and-take of negotiations?

INDYK: In the view of the Obama administration, it is totally legitimate. By the way, it's legitimate for either side to bring issues to the table that are important to them. And from our point of view, from the American point of view, it's kind of self-evident that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people. It's never been an issue in our own policy, and President Obama has made it absolutely clear that from the American point of view, from his point of view, there needs to be that kind of mutual recognition.

When it was first introduced—and you probably remember this, Rob—actually, by Tzipi Livni, who is very dedicated to trying to achieve a two-state solution—when she was negotiating in the Olmert gov-

ernment with Abu Ala, and when she first put it on the table, Abu Ala, you know, said, This is a new requirement. We reject it. But he was a very canny negotiator, and I think he saw it as, suddenly, a new card that Israel was giving him in his pocket. If it's so important to Israel that they need recognition of their nature as a Jewish state, as opposed to recognition of Israel's right to exist, which the PLO had already done back in 1993, he thought, Well, ok, if they care about this so much, I'll get something for it. I believe that this was his attitude.

And we proceeded on the assumption that the resistance to this on the Palestinian side was tactical. There were objections, strong objections, that Abu Mazen voiced to it. Number one, he said, This is a new requirement. It was never a core issue in the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, in the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, or in the Oslo Accords. We were required to recognize Israel's right to exist, not Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. So that was his first objection. Second objection was that to call it a Jewish state is to deny the rights of Israel's non-Jewish citizens. The third objection was that it would somehow undermine the argument of Palestinian refugees for a "right of return." And the fourth argument was that it would require the Palestinians to accept the Zionist narrative.

So, in the negotiations we tried to address all of those concerns. But the more we tried to address them, the more he seemed to dig in. And the more that the Israeli government made it an issue, and raised it to a more and more supreme issue, I think the more that the Palestinians began to think, There's something going on here. It's part of the pathology of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that what one side wants, the other side naturally denies. So it ended up becoming a major roadblock. And I think there is a way of resolving it. I believe that once the Palestinians come to understand what their state will look like, and when they will get it, this issue will become much less important—and solvable. But I do not believe—and, by the way, I do not think that Prime Minister Netanyahu insists that it be a precondition, or that it has to be resolved first. The concept of all of these issues being dealt with in parallel is accepted by both sides.

So hopefully there's a way of reconciling the demands and concerns of the two sides on this issue. But I have to tell you—at the moment, the gap on this issue is very wide. Prime Minister Netanyahu says it's foundational, and Abu Mazen says I won't even discuss it.

SATLOFF: Martin, let me ask a question about the American role. There was an evolution over the last nine months in terms of what the American side hoped to achieve: agreements, understandings, and eventually it became an effort by Israelis and Palestinians to win over America in the blame game, as you

said—as you implied. At what point, if any, do you say in your parting memo to the secretary, Next time we do it differently. Next time it's not about us. Next time we're less of a partner—less of a fixture in negotiations, rather—we have to find a way to make it more about them. And then how would you go about doing it to make the negotiations more about Israelis and Palestinians negotiating with each other than each side negotiating with you?

INDYK: Well, first of all, as I said in my remarks, the first six months were of the two sides negotiating with each other. I was in the room for much of those negotiations, but I was a silent observer, and we did not interfere in that negotiation at all except occasionally to clarify things, or to get them to set the next date for the negotiations, which always seemed to be a negotiation in itself. And, as I said, those six months, all of the core issues were discussed. And it was possible to essentially delineate where the gaps were on all of those core issues. At that point, it became natural for the United States to step in and start to work with both sides to try to develop bridging ideas that would close the gaps. And that's when we moved from direct negotiation to two months of negotiations between the U.S. and Israel and then the U.S. and the Palestinians.

The first part of that was negotiating with the Israelis. And that was a very intensive negotiation. It wasn't visible. There were tens of hours, maybe even hundreds of hours—I didn't count them up—of telephone calls between the secretary and the prime minister. There were secure video conferences. And that was a very intensive negotiation, in which the prime minister—and I described how difficult, visibly difficult, it was for him. But he moved. He showed flexibility. We had him, I think, by the end of that process, in the zone of a possible agreement.

The Palestinians were, for that time period, quite content to sit back and enjoy the show; it was a kind of spectator sport. The defense minister of Israel was insulting the secretary of state and our ideas on security—yeah, it actually wasn't a laughing matter from our point of view. But it was clear that there was a good deal of tension between the U.S. and Israel, and they were content for that time. But during that time—and I can't say that I fully comprehend all of the factors involved—during that time Abu Mazen shut down. As I said, settlement activity was a big factor in it.

I think the rivalry over the succession was also a big factor. He's seventy-nine now, he's weary, he wants to leave office, and he's more focused on succession now than on making peace. I think he came to the conclusion that he didn't have a reliable partner for the kind of two-state solution that he was looking for. And he kind of shifted to his legacy and the succession.

And that reminded me—you'll appreciate this for a little bit of a history excursion, if you'll allow me, since this was your last question, right? [laughter]

SATLOFF: But you haven't answered it yet.

INDYK: That's what U.S. government officials do, Rob—not answer questions. You'll recall—and has Ehud Barak left, he'll recall, he's not here—phew. But he'll recall that Hafiz al-Assad, the father of Bashar al-Assad, was coming to the end of his time in office—basically, the end of his life—and he was looking to make peace with Israel. At that moment, at the end of 1999, he decided he wanted to move after playing around with us for eight years. And suddenly he said, I want to do it, I want to make peace and I want to do it quickly. And he sent his foreign minister to negotiate with then prime minister Ehud Barak in Blair House and in Shepherdstown. And the details of the text that we were negotiating were then leaked to Haaretz [which] embarrassed and humiliated Assad, especially because it didn't have anything about the one demand that he had made, which was the '67 lines. And he shut down, so that when we came with Prime Minister Barak's map of the line of withdrawal, which essentially was the '67 lines, except for a little narrow strip around the northeast quadrant of the Sea of Galilee, he shut down. And he did not answer us, other than saying, no, he's not interested. And, you know, we puzzled for a long time about what happened there, as we puzzle today about what happened with Abu Mazen.

But the fact is, when he came to Washington in mid-March and we put ideas on the table, by that point he wasn't willing to respond. And, you know, the response we got was essentially in the Arab League summit in Kuwait, in which he said he would never discuss the Jewish state but didn't relate to any of the other issues.

So it's like, you know, there were ships passing in the night. Abu Mazen was flexible and was engaged in the first six months, when the secretary was involved with him, looking for ways to meet Israel's security requirements, which was the key thing we were working on at that time. But by the time we got back to him, other things had intervened and he'd moved on to the succession, which is what he's focused on today. The Hamas-Fatah reconciliation is not about making a deal with Hamas, it's about elections—because he wants presidential elections. He can't resign now because the head of the PLC [Palestinian Legislative Council] would become the president. And the head of the PLC is a Hamas representative. So he wants elections so that he can hand over to an elected president who presumably will not be Hamas. Or that's his assumption. And that's where he's now focused.

He will come back to negotiations if his test of seriousness is met, as I explained it to you: construction freeze in the West Bank and east Jerusalem for three months while the border is drawn—because if an Israeli government is prepared to do that, then from his point of view, that's a serious negotiation. Other than that, he's not interested. He's focused on succession instead, and his legacy, and he would rather go out as a leader who did not compromise on Palestinian rights than a leader who made a deal that didn't meet Palestinian requirements.

So I know what I didn't answer is your question, will there be more-direct negotiations than we had? Yeah, but it was, kind of, not an issue. We had direct negotiations, then we had bilateral U.S.-Israel and U.S.-Palestinian negotiations, then we came back at the end to direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. And there are times in which it's appropriate and times when it's better for the United States to be engaged with each side. And I think that both sides, in the end, were not unhappy with the way in which that was handled. There were occasions when they said it's better if we deal directly—and we said go ahead. And we'd be quite happy for them to deal directly with each other now. And we'll play a facilitating role. So I just think it depends on the dynamic of the negotiation.

SATLOFF: Friends, we could go on with this seminar on Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, because there really are very few people who could do this seminar with any more experience or insight than Martin. But we've exhausted my three questions. So please join me in thanking Ambassador Martin Indyk. [applause]