A Conversation on the Middle East
Featuring Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL)

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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Moderated by Robert Satloff, Executive Director

Transcript

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ROBERT SATLOFF: Today, we're delighted that the Institute can host Sen. Marco Rubio. Senator Rubio is, of course, the senator from Florida. He has served in the Florida House of Representatives before joining the U.S. Senate. He was speaker of the House of Representatives. He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2010. Now, it's commonplace to say of Senator Rubio that he's a rising figure on the national stage. I think that's incorrect. I think it's much more fair and appropriate to say that Senator Rubio is already a major figure on the national stage and, of course, within the Republican Party.

Today, we focus on one important aspect of the senator's interests and concerns: his service on the Select Committee on Intelligence and on the Foreign Relations Committee, which took him last week to a trip to Jordan, to Israel, and the West Bank, and I'm very pleased that he's here to offer his impressions and to have a conversation with me and with all of you about what he took away from that visit abroad. So, Senator, welcome to The Washington Institute. The floor is yours.

MARCO RUBIO: Thank you, I appreciate it very much. [applause] And I apologize for being ten minutes late, or what in the Senate is considered early. But I apologize for that. But thank you so much. Thank you for arranging this. I'm glad to be here with the Institute. Thank you for making things so friendly. This is a bit much, wat— [Laughter] . . . but why don't we just take care of business right up front here . . . [Laughter] Anyway, thank you for having me. What I thought I'd do maybe is just kind of walk through my visit and then maybe we'll open up for the conversation; just kind of walk you through the schedule of what we went through in the different meetings that we did.

On the outset, let me say, it's not my first visit to the Mideast, and it's not my first visit to Israel. I visited there about three weeks after my election on a personal trip, so I was elected but I wasn't sworn in and I visited on a personal trip; didn't do any governmental meetings. Largely [I] just got to tour the country as a tourist would and got to see a lot of the sights and learn about the country from that perspective. So it's my first *official* trip to the Middle East, to—let me say—to Israel, and I've been to Kuwait and other places earlier. But that was the first official trip to Israel, and to Jordan—the first time I had ever gone. So we arrived in Tel Aviv and we drove—and I wanted to do the drive—so we drove across the border and the border-processing process, just to kind of experience that and to be able to see the geography of the land, I thought, was important.

Then we arrived in Amman and we had a series of meetings the following day with a number of individuals, including the foreign minister and, obviously, the king. The perception you get from Jordan, being there, is a couple of things: number one, they're trying to get out in front of the factors that led to the Arab Spring in other countries in the region. And so what they're undergoing now is a series of

constitutional reforms that are being implemented. And the goal—the sense that you get—is they're trying to do this in a measured way. Obviously, they believe that if they move on reform too quickly, it could spiral out of control and lead to chaos and uncertainty. Obviously, if they move too slowly, that could also create resistance within the society. In that vein, we were able to meet with several folks of the loyal opposition. There was another group, basically the Jordanian version of the Muslim Brotherhood, that had boycotted the constitutional reforms and the election, but there were others that had participated within that process. We had an opportunity to speak to them, and they remained frustrated. In fact, some of the commentary they used with us was that the reforms are window dressing. The reforms aren't real. They shared with us their concerns about the crackdown on free media and the ability to criticize the government. The king, on the other hand, was pretty proud of the reforms they have undertaken and pretty proud of the direction that it's gone. My sense of it, personally, is that it's an important step, as long as it is a first step in a process of multiple steps. I think that's important for Jordan's long-term future—along with their economic development.

And that's the second part that they're extremely concerned about. If I have one concern about my visit to Jordan, it's that I didn't see a clear and concise plan to grow their economy. So they're very donor-dependent, in terms of how they fund government and their society. And I didn't see a concrete plan in place to grow beyond that. They have some things going for them. They have a very well-educated population that, unfortunately, decides to leave the country, and that's why they have such a significant expat community that sends remittances. But they would much rather have them there, working and living in the country. And I just didn't see a—and it may exist and I may be unfair, I was only there a day and a half—but I didn't see a clear plan for how it is they are going to incentivize economic growth and create the environment for a more robust economy that provides more opportunities to young people to move ahead in life.

The second thing I didn't see, unfortunately, was how they were going to increase their tourism industry as well, which has suffered. And the way they explained it to you is that tourism largely was a part of a three-country path that pilgrims and others took. You know, they went to Egypt, Israel, and Jordan, but with the Arab Spring, and kind of the negative news in the West about all those factors, people were skipping Egypt—and they're skipping Jordan, so their tourism sector has been hurt, and they're trying to recover in that regard.

The other thing that's startling about Jordan in my first visit there is the number of unfinished buildings. I mean, literally, you went down the street and there were these numerous buildings that were in different states of noncompletion. And some told me that it had something to do with taxes—as long as the rebar was exposed, you didn't have to pay the full taxation on it—but others just looked like they were abandoned and no one was there. So, I'm concerned about the pace of the democratic reforms, and I think we have a reason to be concerned about their economics, as well, and their long-term plan to develop the economy and create

employment opportunities, which is largely at the heart of many of these Arab Spring revolts in the region. You have a very young population that sees no economic opportunities in the short or near term and is increasingly frustrated by that. So, in addition to all that, there's a real strain that Syria's facing, with upwards of about 350,000 to 400,000 refugees, and the number's growing. And they're desperate for more aid. And that's placing a strain, not just on their government coffers but on the region, or the country where the refugees are housed.

After that, of course, I went to Israel. And Israel, as you're well aware, has a number of issues they're very concerned about. At the top of the list is Iran. And clearly, they were concerned about Iran, but they're quick to remind us that Iran is not just an Israeli problem, it's a global problem. It's a problem for the world. And I agree with them in that regard. I think the—and I'm not saying anything they're not saying publicly—I think they are convinced that Iran is going to move forward for a weapons program, or the capacity for weapons, and that they're using negotiations as a ploy to buy time, but that ultimately no amount of economic sanctions . . . They don't dispute that the sanctions are having an impact, but they believe that no amount of sanctions is going to stop Iran from moving forward with its weapons program. And they point in particular to the new centrifuges that they've now come up with that are spinning faster and more efficiently as evidence of that move that they continue to make. So they're very concerned about Iran.

Their second major concern in the short term right now, and I think it's tied with their third, but their second major concern is Syria with regard to weapons. And obviously the chemical weapons and the biological agents that are in Syria are very concerning to them, but they are especially concerned by the other advanced-weapons systems and Syrian stockpiles, in particular antiaircraft weaponry—the SA-300, for example, which is an advanced antiaircraft weapon that even Iran does not have. But Syria does, and they are concerned about that reaching Hezbollah, because that would be a game changer in terms of the options that Israel has with regard to how they impact Hezbollah. So they're very concerned about the transfer of weapons in the short term. In the longer picture, I think they're just concerned about Syrian instability and what it means not just in the Golan but what it means in general for the region. Obviously, they're concerned about a security vacuum in the long term in Syria that creates a kind of a Libya-on-steroids type situation, where you have a place awash with radicals, weapons, and obviously vicinity to Israel and other countries in the region. And they're very concerned about that.

The one thing that's very clear about the Syrian conflict is that we are now on the verge of two separate conflicts. You have one conflict to get rid of [Bashar al-] Assad—and there's these different elements that are working together toward that goal. But there's a second conflict that's happening concurrently and will be the central conflict once Assad falls. And that is the fight between the resistance themselves—a fight for influence, a fight for territory. There are clear signs of al-Nusra and others beginning to lay markers as to what their operating space and territory is going to be. There are clear indications that they are stockpiling

weapons in that area to be able to solidify their hold. And you can already see the outlines—of not just sectarian conflicts, but the outlines of these different groups lining up and anticipating that they're going to be going to war with each other already, but especially after Assad leaves. So there's a real concern about that.

Maybe this is a good point to segue to kind of an observation that everyone has in the region—and I'm not sure there's anything to be done about this. But the observation is that one of the reasons the region is having all these problems is because these are artificial lines drawn by Western powers, in the postcolonial era, that basically forced all kinds of people who don't want to live together to live together. That's what they'll tell you: that Syria and Iraq and other countries like that don't really have a national identity. They were largely created by the Brits and others—they drew these artificial lines on the map and [made] these different groups and tribes live together who don't necessarily want to be together or belong together. And that's what's leading to some of these situations in the region. I think that's a bit simplistic, but it's certainly the view that they have as to what's causing all of these problems.

The third concern that they have in Israel, of course, is Egypt—and, in particular, the long term of Egypt. They look at the antidemocratic positions that are being taken in Egypt and they view, in the long term, that the Muslim Brotherhood—they view them as a very patient group of people, who in the short term are willing to be pragmatic but have a long-term strategy of fundamentally redefining every entity in Egypt and redefining Egypt as a more Islamist-type place, at every institution, from the judiciary to the legislative branch and certainly the executive and even the military. And they are concerned about what that means in the long term. In the short term, what they're really concerned about is the Sinai—and them keeping the their word and keeping their commitments in the Sinai. They feel like Egypt should be doing more; they feel like the U.S. should be pressuring Egypt to do more in the Sinai. If I'm not mistaken, I thought I read this morning of a court ruling in Egypt that required the—basically told the military it had to do certain things in the Sinai. It'll be interesting to see how that plays out, if that report is accurate. But, ultimately, they're really concerned about that.

I would say the fourth issue that comes up—and, remember, we were in Israel at the time of forming a government, so this was part of that endeavor—is the Palestinian question, with regard to the West Bank in particular. We had a chance to go to Ramallah. We had a chance to meet with the prime minister. We had a chance to talk—very impressive individual—and the sense you get from the Israeli side of that is that it is not the number-one issue on their minds at this moment. But there is a clear understanding that something is going to have to happen on that issue in the long term. And the belief that—and I think this is probably a majority position, although I think there's probably disputes about this—is that in the short term, right now, today, tomorrow, next month, next year, the idea of a complete process where the issue is solved in its totality is not realistic. But what is realistic is creating the conditions toward that reality at some point; in essence, beginning to create the

conditions that improve the lives of people in the West Bank, increase the governance ability of the Palestinian Authority to exercise both economic policies and, in particular, security policies. And the fact is that the Palestinian Authority wants more responsibility—as you know, the West Bank is divided into three different security sectors, an A, B, and C—they want more responsibility in the B and C sectors. They complain that Israeli incursions on security matters undermine their credibility among the population—that people don't take them seriously. They complain about being unable to meet payroll obligations when funds are withheld and things of that nature. But they look for more authority in that regard so they can prove . . . They're also looking for some economic concessions. The one they raised in particular was the ability of their nascent pharmaceutical industry to be able to sell to the global marketplace and even to the Israeli marketplace. So they're looking for economic development opportunities. And, I think, where there's potentially a bridge there is to begin to create individual conditions that lead—make the environment more conducive for this issue to be solved in its totality. And that's the sense that we got from that.

Of course, they were very preoccupied with the formation of a government, which kind of constrains what they're saying and what they're going to say and I'm not—I haven't followed up in the last forty-eight hours about how much progress has been made in that regard, but they are eagerly anticipating the president's visit and were curious about whether the president was coming with a specific plan on the Palestinian peace process or whether he was just going to go and listen. I told them I probably wasn't the best source for the president's thinking [Laughter], but my sense of it was the president was probably coming more to listen than to dictate. And, in fact, I think that was confirmed today in some reporting that I saw. So, I'm glad I was right. So, beyond that—those are the general impressions of what I gathered in the region. I did visit an Iron Dome battery in the north, right outside of Haifa—very impressed with all the technology.

Apart from all the security stuff, and this is probably where I'll end on the Israeli situation, I think we underestimate the economic links between our countries—between Israel and the United States. They're very significant, particularly in the innovation side of things, the technological innovation. What you really see happen a lot is, for multiple different reasons, Israel is a great place to start up a company or an idea. But, ultimately, to take that idea to mass-marketing opportunities, you need to partner up with a bigger company—a Johnson & Johnson or an IBM—and that's really where our partnership has met up, is with the startup ideas that come from Israel finding bigger, larger American corporations that can mass-market it and apply that idea to a broader economic need.

And we certainly see that on the defense front. The Iron Dome is an Israeli innovation—short-term [sic] missile defense. It's manufactured by an Israeli company named Rafael. Obviously, I think that has benefits to us. But that's on the defense side. On the economic-industrial side, and technological side, I was very

impressed by some of that that's there, and some of the opportunities that that's created.

The last point I would make, and this is something we really just need to work on, for those of us who care about foreign policy—is we have to increasingly do a better job of speaking to the American people about why they should care about any of this. In essence, at a time when unemployment is high, and we have all this bickering going on in our political process, and the economic news is not always good, why should we care what's happening fifteen hours away? Why should we care what's happening halfway around the world? There's no easy, single-line answer to that, but the one I'm increasingly finding is effective is to explain to people that we no longer really live in a national economy. We live in a global economy, in the sense that so much of what affects our daily lives is determined by factors far from here. I mean, whether it's the number of drivers in India and China consuming oil or oil products to disturbances in the supply of energy to all sorts of other things, we truly do live increasingly in a global economy, whether we know it or not. Virtually no industry in America, no job, no middle-class job in America, for sure, is completely immune from global factors. So we should care about global issues around the world.

I also think, by the way, that the U.S. standing in the world is largely built on our commitment to fundamental principles like human rights and democracy and freedom—freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and things of this nature—and I think we have an obligation to always be on the side of that. That doesn't always mean we're going to invade a country. That doesn't always mean we're going to give weapons. That doesn't always mean we're going to be involved militarily or with aid, but we clearly should be pronounced on the side of those factors, in particular the human rights one, which I think, unfortunately, we've slipped on. And, I would say, I wish we were a little louder in that regard, as you look at some of the human rights issues that are emerging around the world with regard to religious liberties and things of that nature. So, I think that's important as well, because that's our currency on the international stage—in addition to our military power and our economic importance is our values. That sets us apart for the world and still makes us an indispensable nation because of it, so I hope we'll be more forceful in that regard. So, I'll be more than happy to answer questions or enter into this dialogue, but those are my impressions of the situation. And maybe we can at some point talk more in depth about the Syrian opposition—the direction that's going—and the U.S. engagement in that regard.

SATLOFF: Very good. Thank you, senator. It sounds like you had quite a busy few days. [Applause]

RUBIO: Yeah.

SATLOFF: Let's begin with where you just ended, if we can, and talk about Syria. The news emerging—at least the suggestions are that the administration is considering

a shift in policy to provide nonlethal support to the Syrian opposition, including to the armed opposition. Is this a good idea? Will it turn the tide? Is it enough?

RUBIO: Yes, and it's not enough—and I'll explain what I think we potentially could do, which I haven't heard anyone discuss yet. The first thing I would say to you is that we do have a problem, and the problem is that there is real resentment. There is real resentment building among the Syrian opposition at their idea that the U.S.—the West in general and the U.S. in particular—has abandoned them; that we speak out against—that we're in favor of democracy, in favor of freedom, so they rise up to exercise that and get rid of a really bad person in Assad and basically fight for the principles that we say our nation is founded upon, and we do nothing. We've abandoned them. That's the sense that they have. And the abandonment isn't just disappointment anymore, it's anger—real anger. And, so, I think that's an issue we need to understand. The second point is that arms are already flooding into Syria. Syria is awash in arms, both weapons from the Syrian regime that are being captured and weapons that are coming in from third parties and other countries. And the problem we have is that the best-organized, the best-armed, and the best-equipped elements in Syria are the most radical ones, the most antidemocratic ones, the most anti-American ones. And that's a problem in the context of what I just outlined to you. And that is that secondary conflict that's emerging. And, so, there's the real risk that when Assad falls, and he will fall, the largest, most well-equipped, best-organized groups in that conflict will be the people who, quite frankly, are against our national interests.

So what I would say is that there is—the U.S. should, in an intelligent way, become engaged. In addition, I read the *Washington Post* story this morning, and I think those things are good—body armor, et cetera. I think we should consider the following: There are plenty of weapons in Syria. They're coming from other countries, they're being confiscated. . . . What the opposition really needs is access to ammunition. And, I think, one of the things we can consider, if we can identify a couple or more responsible groups that we feel have built capacity: ammunition is something we can provide, which is not weaponry per se but is essential, obviously, to the weaponry. And I think that's a step that I'm prepared to advocate for—is the provision of ammunition to resistance groups within Syria that we think we can build a long-term dialogue with. In addition, at the right time—and we have to continue to build this capacity—is increased intelligence-sharing with these groups, in essence allowing them to understand what battlefield conditions look like. . . . In essence, the goal is this: we should want the best-organized, the best-equipped, and the most-dominant groups in the opposition to be groups that are friendlier to our national interests than some of the other elements that are involved.

Now, it's still going to be a mess, post-Assad. It's already a mess now. But I think it behooves us to do everything we can to ensure that the strongest elements in Syria post-Assad are those who are listening to us, can be influenced by us, and have a desire not just to keep the Syrian nation together but to respect the rights of a diverse country, which Syria is, the rights of ethnic minorities—not to strike out on

ethnic cleansing or those sorts of things that we've seen in other nations that have fallen apart in this regard—and also elements that are going to try to bring stability in a way that's friendly to our national interests in the region.

So, I'm prepared to say that that's something that we should really consider doing—is, in addition to these nonlethal elements that are being . . . You don't have to give them weapons. I think they have plenty of weapons, quite frankly. I think what they need is ammunition. They run low on that very quickly. Look, I'm uncomfortable with the idea that we're doing anything to escalate violence. On the other hand, that's what's happening right now. That's a fact. And the sooner this conflict ends, the better off we're going to be. Unfortunately, it's already gone on way too long. I think the death toll's up to 70,000 people. That's only going to continue to grow; God forbid, if the regime decides to use biological agents or chemical agents. And the longer this thing goes on, the harder it's going to be to close that security vacuum in the aftermath as well.

SATLOFF: Senator, what is your argument to Americans who hear this and will say, "Oh, no. Another Middle East entanglement is on the horizon." What is the strategic argument that you want to make to Americans to convince them that this is something with which we should get more deeply engaged.

RUBIO: Well, there's a number of fronts. First of all, the entanglement—we're not talking about American troops on the ground, we're not talking about U.S. airpower, we're not talking about sending American soldiers or even American trainers into Syria. We're talking about providing ammunition. That's all we're talking about doing—and opening a dialogue in assistance to a group of folks that hopefully will be the dominant party there once Assad has left.

The second thing I would say—and our national interest is as follows, and I would view it in this order: number one is that Damascus in particular and Syria in general was a way point for global terrorism. It was a place that was basically a friendly operating environment for terrorists from all over the world. That's where they would transit through, that's where they would get their fake passports to be able to carry out attacks against the West and our interests around the world. So that alone is reason to do everything we can do to get rid of Assad and that environment. The second point is that I think the loss of Assad is the ultimate sanction against Iran, in terms of Iran's influence in the region. Again, Iran used Assad and used Syria to give weapons and aid to Hezbollah and also to stage other operations. I mean, that's why they're so heavily involved in what's happening there now.

So, that's also in our national interests, and obviously that forces us to pivot on the Iran question, and why is Iran . . . And I've heard arguments from some—Why should we care about this country that has a military that's nothing close to ours, that's so far away. Here's why: the reason why we should care is that if Iran gets nuclear capability, that gives them immunity to continue to do what they're doing now, times ten. This is a country that has, basically, adopted asymmetrical and

terrorist activity as a weapon of . . . statecraft. They use that to further their foreign policy goals. And so they organize and try to carry out the assassination of a foreign ambassador in this city. And so they are behind bomb plots in Argentina, and they aid groups that carry out bomb attacks in Europe. And it's part of their strategy to strike out against our interests all over the world—indirectly through these terrorist groups but, quite frankly, directly.

And, so, we're going to have—if they acquire a nuclear capability, they will be able to do all of that, but our options in terms of limiting them will be even more limited, because they're a nuclear power. And they're sitting there right now and they're looking at North Korea and they're looking at Libya and they're saying, who do we want to end up being, Muammar Qadhafi or North Korea. And they believe that the weapon, as much as anything else, is insurance that gives them the flexibility and the immunity to act out against us and the world in any way that they like.

And so we should be concerned about that. That's a reason why we should care about what happens in Syria. Because if they lose Assad and they lose Syria, it is a major, major sanction, for lack of a better term, against their ambitions, a major limiting factor against them. But, again, I go back to the point that Syria has been the organizing point for many terrorist plots and many terrorist activities against our interests and the interests of the West and of the world, and that's why we should care about Syria.

We have to be smart in how we get engaged, so we're not talking about airpower, we're not talking about U.S. troops, we're not—we're talking about ammunition, body armor, and to the extent that it can responsibly be done, the sharing of intelligence, so that we increase the capabilities and the long-term influence that we have over these resistance elements within Syria.

SATLOFF: You made the connection, I think quite appropriately so, between Syria and Iran. So let me pivot and ask you about one of the other headlines of today's news, which is the early reports of the Almaty negotiations between the international community and the Iranians, in which the Iranians seem to be relatively pleased with what was put on the table. Do you think that there is a diplomatic answer to the Iranian nuclear program? And, if not, at what point, in your view, do you think a military option should be less of an abstraction and more of a reality?

RUBIO: Well, let me just say, I don't want to sound like some war hawk or, you know, a tough-talking Cold Warrior–type deal, this is not what this is about. This is trying to deal with reality. The only thing that Iran has ever responded to—in the entire history of the Islamic Republic—is the threat or the fear of losing control of the country and of their grip on power. It's the only thing they've responded to. The end of the Iraqi conflict, the Iran-Iraq War, because they were afraid it was gonna—they were going to lose their grip on power, they suspended their nuclear weapons

program in the early 2000s because they were afraid the U—they were next after Saddam Hussein. This is the only thing they've ever responded to.

I pers—this is my personal view—I personally believe that the ayatollah, the Supreme Leader, has concluded that he wants a weapon. That's my personal view, that's not built on any intelligence or—that's just my personal view that they believe it is the ultimate insurance policy. They are convinced that the U.S. and the West want to overthrow them and get rid of them, and this is the ultimate way to ensure their grip on power is to have a nuclear weapon. They—and I don't think this is an exaggeration to say, I don't know this for a fact, but I'm pretty confident of it—they saw what happened to Muammar Qadhafi and they said, "We don't want to be Qadhafi, we want to be North Korea, and look at what North Korea has been able to do. This small country with virtually no economy, where people are basically starving, unfortunately, tragically, and yet no one can do anything to them, because they're a nuclear power. And that's what we want to be. We want to have that level of security"—and by the way, that also gives them influence in the region, over their neighbors.

So this is what I'm convinced that they want, and I believe that the only thing that will keep them from assuming that direction is if they think that they can lose control. So, it's my personal opinion, and I hope I am wrong, I really do, I hope that there is a breakthrough in negotiation that convinces Iran to suspend its weapons program, allow inspectors free reign to come in the country and ensure that the weapons program is not there. I really hope that that's what happens, but I don't believe that's what will happen. I believe that negotiations are nothing but a ploy to buy time, I believe that ultimately what they want is a nuclear program, and I believe ultimately what they're looking for is an excuse to trigger that. If not, they'll just do it. That's what I believe.

So, here's what I think the options need to be for Iran. And I think the president has said that. And so, to the extent that he's already said that, I'm supportive of what he's said. And that is this: we will not allow—Iran will not get a nuclear weapon. It will not happen. It will not have a nuclear weapons program; we will not allow that to happen. And the only choice that Iran has—it's not whether they want a weapon or not, because that's not going to happen—the only choice they have is, are they going to destroy their economy in pursuit of a weapon, or are they going to abandon this lunacy and come back to reality. I think that's the only choice that needs to be before them.

The other thing I would say is—even though we may not have a lot of influence in the short term—we should be very clear on speaking out on behalf of those that have the desire for freedom and change in the upcoming elections in Iran. That the right to peop—that these should be free and fair elections, that we should be on the side of democracy in Iran, that we should speak out against human rights violations in Iran, to be very clear of who we're dealing with and the nature of this government. There are people in Iran, they may be scared to speak out after what

happened in 2009, but there are people in Iran, I would say the majority of people in Iran, that do not want to be ostracized from the world. They don't want Iran to be a pariah state, and they don't, they want, they basically want to live normal lives in a normal country with a normal economy, where if they work hard they can get a job that pays them a decent wage, and they can raise their kids to have better opportunities—this is what they want. We need to be publicly on their side. Because these words, in the long term, they matter. We know from the Cold War experience that people took inspiration from us taking that position. And if this administration has made any mistake with regard to Iran, it's not be—is that they were not more forceful and more clear in support of the Green Movement in 2009, when they took to the streets and protested over what was happening. And I hope we don't repeat that mistake again in 2013, as these elections are coming up in June, I think June or July, right? June's right.

SATLOFF: June. Thank you. Let me switch, because I want to cover the waterfront before I can turn some questions over to the audience. You were in the area at a moment of heightened tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, some violence in the West Bank, et cetera. What should be the goal of U.S. policy right now on this front? You alluded to this earlier in your remarks, but if you could—if you could clarify because there are some reports that the administration has perhaps more ambitious objectives. What do you think should be the right approach?

RUBIO: I think that the right approach for the U.S., particularly right now, is to view all these issues through the lens of Israeli security, and the belief that the more secure Israel feels, the likelier it's going to be that this issue will move forward to resolution. And obviously they have multiple concerns right now. If you're Israel and you're looking around the region, it does not look good. You're worried about Jordan's long-term stability, you're seeing what's happening in Syria—the weapons there—you're seeing Hezbollah, and perhaps getting access to those weapons, you're seeing Egypt heading the direction that it's headed, you see Iran moving forward, and—you're very—these issues are existential. You're worried about what they mean to your long-term existence as a nation. And it's not that the Palestinian question is not important to the Israelis, I feel it's just that in the ranking right now, it's kind of lost its place, because of all these other things. And they have a fundamental difference of opinion, between what they believe the ranking of these issues are and what I think our own administration has decided to link these two issues together. And they—I'll tell you in my meeting with the king, the first issue he brought—raised—was the Palestinian question, and the belief that if that issue were resolved, all these other issues in the region would be resolved. And I understand why that's important in the Arab world, that that issue be made number one, particularly as it applies to their own domestic policies. But I, for one, do not believe that if the Palestinian issue is resolved, Iran will abandon its nuclear ambitions. If the Palestinian issue were resolved, I don't believe Iran would stop sponsoring terrorism. I don't think Hezbollah would go into another line of business. I don't believe Hamas would close shop. In essence, I think these—and I don't believe it would change the direction Egypt is headed, either.

So ultimately, that—it is an important issue, and I think what the U.S. should be involved in is, number one, helping Israel to be as secure as possible in that regard. Number two is encouraging the sorts of things that will improve the quality of life for Palestinians, and particularly in the West Bank, improving their governance structure, improving their economy. And I think if they're more secure and more prosperous in the West Bank and security on the Israeli side of the eq—I think that begins to create the conditions where a breakthrough becomes more possible. Probably not next month or next year, but certainly, and hopefully, within the foreseeable future.

Where I think we make our mistake is in trying to impose a plan. I think that's impossible. We cannot impose—the U.S. cannot come in and impose a plan or impose concessions on either party, quite frankly, but especially not on the Israelis. I think these issues have to be negotiated through. Quite frankly, I think that in my personal opinion, the Israelis understand that there are some issues that will have to be negotiated through in order to arrive at a settlement of these issues in the long term. But right now the environment is not conducive to that. And so the fact that we can't do everything should not keep us from doing something. The fact that you can't do everything doesn't mean that you can't do anything. There are things that we can help with, whether it's continuing to increase the security capacity of the Palestinian Authority, whether it's helping bridge the gap to help economic development and growth in the region and particularly in the West Bank—I think these are things that help create the conditions, so that there can be a breakthrough at some point, especially as Israel becomes more confident with its security posture, vis-à-vis all the other issues that are happening in the region.

SATLOFF: One last question, this one about a country you didn't [visit], but a country in which you have been very public in a view recently: Egypt. You referred to it earlier in your comments. Earlier this year you supported an effort to halt the transfer of certain weapons systems to Egypt. President Obama once described Egypt under Morsi as "neither an ally nor an enemy." I'd be interested in how you would describe Egypt, and what sort of changes—beyond the individual weapons systems—what sort of changes you would like to see in our relationship with the new Egypt.

RUBIO: Well first of all, Egypt's relationship to the United States is totally up to them, and the direction that the Morsi government tries to take the country or wants to take the country. And they'll have to make that decision. Here's my view on foreign aid in general and Egypt in particular. And that is that our foreign aid exists to further our interests in the world. And our interests in the world, to give you Egypt as an example, are, number one, we want Egypt to live up to its commitments, its security commitments to its neighbors. Number two, we want Egypt not to be a place that foments violence and makes their neighbors more insecure. Number three, we want Egypt to be a place that respects religious liberties, democracy, the rights of women, the rights of ethnic minorities, et cetera, and our aid, not just to

Egypt, our aid in the world should be conditioned upon these things. We don't have to give foreign aid. We do so because it furthers our national interest. That's why we give foreign aid.

Now obviously there's a component of foreign aid that's humanitarian in scope, and that's important too. I'm a big supporter of the PEPFAR [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] program that provides HIV/AIDS medicines in Africa. But from a governmental perspective, the reason why we do that is because economic development and long-term stability in Africa is in our national interest. And so, again, foreign aid and military aid should be conditioned on our national interest, and not just with Egypt, but with the world, and everyone we give foreign aid to. I think it's particularly important when it comes to Egypt. And so if you look at the things that I've just outlined that we're expecting from Egypt, for example, securing the Sinai, they don't need jet airplanes to—I mean, who are—they don't need advanced weapons systems to do that. They just need to do it. And they have the existing weapons systems to live up to their commitments in the Sinai. And I do think that our foreign aid needs to be conditioned on performance metrics, not vis-à-vis Egypt, that applies to everybody. And so I hope that we'll reexamine that. We may have more to say with particular and specific legislation soon that, in fact, ensures that our foreign aid is designed in such a way to encourage and incentivize our recipients to behave in a way that not only furthers their goals but ours as well.

SATLOFF: Okay, very good. Thank you, Senator. We're going to open the floor for your questions—if you'd be kind enough to wait for the microphone to come to you, identify yourself, keep your questions brief, and then we'll try to get as many in the time that we have. I'll start on the right here with Bill Schneider. Not the CNN Bill Schneider.

RUBIO: Oh, too bad.

SATLOFF: But a more—a way more distinguished Schneider. [Laughter]

SCHNEIDER (chairman of the Defense Science Board): Thank you, Senator. I want to particularly follow up on the matter with respect to Iran. There seems to be some convergence between Iran's progress in acquiring a nuclear weapon and concern in the Gulf region in particular about the administration's aspirations to "nuclear zero," where they're wondering, "Is the U.S. going to be able to provide a nuclear umbrella to the threatened states or are they going to be at risk from nuclear blackmail from Iran"? I wonder if you have an observation—

RUBIO: Well, I think that one of the real threats that exists with a nuclear Iran is a nuclear arms race in the region. I mean, that other countries will decide that if there's going to be a Shia bomb, there needs to be a Sunni bomb, and that, for example, is troubling, to say the least. The other, of course, is that you have a country in Iran that openly and actively uses terrorism as a weapon of statecraft. And the concern, of course, is that you could in the long term take nuclear

technology and use it to create weaponry that could be delivered into the hands of terrorists to further Iran's aims in the region and the world. So I think these are real concerns. I mean, my concern of course is with regard to U.S. national interests, on the homeland around the country, but ultimately we have alliances in this region that are important to us as well. And that's the other point in all of this—is, one of the things that countries look at when determining how closely they want to ally with the United States is how good we are to our friends when they get in trouble. And so countries are looking at that. How do we behave toward Israel and its security requireme—how do we behave toward these other Gulf countries that, quite frankly, are cooperative with us both militarily on an intelligence front and economically and in our foreign policy aims? Because if ultimately we cut these folks loose to fend for themselves, we become an unreliable partner and an unreliable ally. Other countries will govern themselves accordingly. So that's important as well. But the overriding fear that I think the world shares about Iran—including apparently the Russians, whose recent comments, as I've read between the lines, I hope, mean that they're growing increasingly frustrated and impatient with the direction Iran is taking their weapons program and their nuclear program—I think the fear people have is that a country that actively engages in the use of terrorism to further their goals all over the world, who's tried and organized and carried out and funded terrorist operations as far away as Argentina, that there's real concern that if they acquire a nuclear weapon, they become immune to international sanctions, they become immune to military action, they become immune to any sort of limits on their willingness to exercise that sort of activity.

SATLOFF: Ambassador Bouran from Jordan up in front, please. Here you go, Alia.

AMBASSADOR BOURAN: Thank you, Robert. Hello, Senator. How are you?

RUBIO: I'm good.

BOURAN: It was a great pleasure to see you and to meet you just before you went to Jordan. And I cannot thank you enough for the wonderful visit that you had and the feedback that I got from Amman that it was extremely important. But as you have said, it was very much short, so at the outset I would say that there's an open invitation for you . . .

RUBIO: . . . to come back.

BOURAN: To come back, and—

RUBIO: Good, and I will.

BOURAN: For you to be able to see and to meet with Jordanians and meet with the youth and see our industries and entrepreneurship, and look at the engine of growth, if I may, be it in the areas of pharmaceuticals or IT. You know, Jordan looks at something like 75 percent of the software Arabization in the whole Arab world, so

the know-how and the technical know-how in terms of all these matters are extremely important. Probably because we don't have the national resources, we have invested so much in ourselves and in our education, and the knowledge economy as you have rightfully said, is part and parcel of daily life of Jordan. And just to highlight the fact that definitely this is one step in terms of the political reform. You have heard it from His Majesty; you have heard it from the foreign minister. When it comes to political reform, this is one step of many, and we are very much committed to that. And the road map, the political road map that Jordan has put—has been recommitted to each and every step that we have put. We have no intention—none whatsoever—just to run, just to throw ourselves from point A to point B. We have to be measured. We have to look. We have to assess. And we benched our marks, on each and every step that led us to this.

On the Syrian issue, I would like to share with you what's happening on the other side of the fence. Just today, just before I came to this gathering, I saw the figures. In one go, in one night, just the last twenty-four hours, Jordan hosted more than 4,600 refugees, in one go—

RUBIO: New refugees.

BOURAN: In one go. Now the Zaatari camp, Senator, is the fourth largest city in Amman. It hosts 105,000 Syrian refugees, and the rest spread in Jordan is something like around—totals to something like 4,000—400,000 Syrian refugees all in Jordan. The enormous, I don't want to say burden, because you know those are our brothers and sisters, and fleeing the horrible atrocities in their own country—we'll never close the *borders*, you know, the Hashemites and His Majesty will never, ever close the borders—but [at] the same time, we are taking that big burden. And I would like from this to thank you, and to thank the American government and the administration, for the great help and support that you have supported Jordan all through this. To help us—

SATLOFF: Alia…

BOURAN: help the refugees. So I cannot thank you enough and thank you so much for that.

SATLOFF: Actually, on this, Senator, the humanitarian aspect of the Syrian refugee issue, are we doing enough? Are we transmitting to the Syrians about what we're doing?

RUBIO: Well, the majority of the aid, if I'm not mistaken, is coming through UN organisms and UN entities, and the concern about that going forth is, to be frank, other countries that have made commitments are not following through. And the ambassador cannot say that, the Jordanians are not going to say that, but I will. I mean, there's countries that are not coming through. And, I think, one of the things we discussed is what we can do to improve the way we're delivering the aid to the

refugees and, in particular, from a U.S. national interest perspective, ensuring that the aid is branded and people are clear where it's coming from. It's coming from the people of the United States that are delivering this aid—because there is a significant amount of aid that is being given to refugees through the U.S., but someone else is getting the credit because of the way it's branded. And, again, that may sound selfish, but that's important—because we know the branding of aid has an impact on how people view us in the long term. Eventually these folks, we hope, will return to a peaceful and unified Syria—and, when they do, their view toward the United States and the people of the U.S. will be more friendly and more open because they will remember that the U.S. was there to help.

With regard to our allies in Jordan, we have a very important and very close relationship with the Jordanians on multiple fronts—on security, on intelligence, on economics. And this is a real—again, the ambassador's not going to use the term "burden"—but let me just say, it's a real strain on an economy that's already struggling with global factors in the region, et cetera. And so this is something we need to keep in mind as we view our aid programs as well.

And the last point, on the political transition: I would just say that I don't question the commitment of His Majesty, the king, and others to move forward on the political process. I think they're cognizant that, on the one hand, it has to be structured, because if it moves way too quickly, it could be counterproductive. And, on the other hand, if it moves too slowly, it creates frustration within a society. And we live in a vibrant republic where, I can assure you, we have real debates and people complain all the time. And certainly I met with some folks in Jordan who complained about the pace of these reforms. But, as long as the reforms are happening, I think that's important, and I think the king clearly understands that and I sensed a real commitment to this process. And I think that's a very positive thing in the long term.

SATLOFF: Thank you. Said Arikat, in the center here.

ARIKAT: Thank you, Rob, thank you, Senator. My name's Said Arikat, I'm a Palestinian journalist in town. Sir, so that I can understand you clearly, you said that the Israelis conveyed to you, and you seemed to concur, that resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is no longer a priority, hence the two-state solution ought to be shelved until after Iran disarms, after Hamas disarms, and after Hezbollah disarms.

RUBIO: Well, I think that's a little bit bigger than perhaps what I tried to convey to you. I think what I said is that, given the other priorities—I would say to you that the fact that Iran could get a nuclear weapon is a higher priority right now, in terms of . . . And I certainly would convey to you that I don't think the two issues are linked, in their mind or in mine. I certainly have always believed that the Israelis, and the Israeli leadership, would love to resolve the Palestinian conflict. But I think

that they feel, as I do, that it has to be part of a negotiated process and that the conditions need to be there for a breakthrough to happen.

ARIKAT: So you still assign the same kind of priority that administration after administration has assigned to resolving the issue.

SATLOFF: Said, I think you got your answer. Barbara, in front? . . . briefly, because we're running out of time.

SLAVIN: Barbara Slavin, from the Atlantic Council and Al-Monitor.com. Senator, two questions, quickly.

SATLOFF: One question, quickly.

SLAVIN: Alright.

RUBIO: How 'bout I give you two answers?

SLAVIN: Did you disagree with anything the Israelis presented in terms of their security perspective, and would you tell us if you did? And, on Iran, would you support any sanctions relief in return for measures that would at least extend the timeline for an Iranian nuke substantially.

SATLOFF: Okay, you get one . . .

SLAVIN: . . . substantially.

RUBIO: Alright, just—and I think they're related. I think that, look, I don't think there's any . . . The only dispute between American policymakers and Israelis with regard to Iran, for example, is not . . . I think we agree, as the world does, about what Iran is working on. I think, to the extent there's been disagreements publicly has been over what the right methodology should be toward handling that. I think the administration and many policymakers in the U.S. want to give sanctions the full opportunity to work. They want to give sanctions as long as possible for them to succeed. And, as I've stated here today, I hope that they succeed. I want them to succeed. I hope that, tomorrow morning, the Supreme Leader wakes up and says, "This is crazy. I can't destroy my country's economy over a weapon. We don't need this weapon. And, you know what, we're going to abandon that and hopefully get these sanctions lifted." I hope that that's what he'll do. But I'm also being honest: I don't think that's what he'll do.

I think the Israelis are probably less patient—because of their proximity; because they feel there's a conflict. I mean, my view is that, ultimately . . . I do not believe that, ultimately, sanctions will force Iran to abandon their nuclear ambition. I do not believe that they will work. I hope that they will work. I hope that I am wrong. But while I agree with the Israelis in the sense that I think, ultimately, Iran will continue

forward, I think that the one thing that I would say to you today is that I'm still willing to allow these sanctions to work—but not forever. And I would say that, in that regard, while I ultimately believe that the sanctions will work in terms of inflicting, you know, damage to the Iranian economy, I don't believe it will work in terms of causing their leadership to abandon their desire for a nuclear weapon. But I think we have to give it a chance, and that's what we're trying to do here. But time is running out, and time will eventually run out on this process.

SATLOFF: We only have a couple of minutes left, Senator, so I'm going to have to apologize to the audience and ask you this closing question: President Obama is going to follow, more or less, your itinerary in a few weeks, going to Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank. What message do you hope the president brings? What message do the Middle Easterners hope he brings—but what message do *you* hope he brings to the region?

RUBIO: A few things: Number one, I think it's important for him to clearly state that the U.S. is involved in the long term, that we're not going to abandon our allies and our friends in the Middle East, that clearly we have other issues that we're concerned about—we obviously have a newfound emphasis on Asia; we are hoping to restart more economic cooperation with Europe; we certainly care about the Western Hemisphere—but we're not going to abandon the Middle East. We have long-term allies and interests in that region, and we intend to continue to be involved in a positive way.

The second thing is that we're firmly committed to democracy and freedom. We understand countries are in different processes toward that but that ultimately we want to encourage that and be helpful in that regard and that nations that choose that direction, we're going to be helpful to [them] in that regard. But our foreign aid is always a two-way street—that we also have national interests that we want to see reflected, not just in who we give aid to but how that aid is delivered.

And, last but not least, we are firmly committed to the security of our allies: our allies in the Gulf and our allies in Israel. We're committed to Israel's security, and when there are disagreements between the U.S. and Israel, [the president should indicate] that they will be handled the way they are handled between close allies—that is, in a form that does not undermine the relationship or in any way encourage our allies' opponents or enemies to act out in ways that are irresponsible.

And that's what I anticipate the message the president will take to the region will be, and . . . One thing about foreign policy is that by and large it is not a partisan issue, it certainly shouldn't be on most instances. I think we all want to act in the best interests of the United States. We live in a democratic and open society where we can have a vibrant debate about how best to further that. But I think, from what I've read and seen, that that is largely the message that the president will take to the region. And, if he does, then that's a positive thing.

SATLOFF: Friends, please join me in thanking Sen. Marco Rubio for joining us at The Washington Institute. [Applause]