

The Post-Saddam Middle East:

A View from Israel (full transcript)

Apr 14, 2003



In-Depth Reports

WALTER STERN: Good afternoon. I'm Wally Stern, vice president and Executive Committee member of the Institute. I want to welcome you to the closing session.

It is a rare opportunity to have a chance to hear directly from a national security advisor, especially in war time. It is even rarer still to hear from two. And after listening to the comments of Dr. Rice before lunch, it is my pleasure to introduce her Israeli counterpart, Ephraim Halevy.

Mr. Halevy has given a lifetime of service to promoting the security and well-being of the State of Israel. Some of this has been in secret with Mossad, and ended with his appointment as director of that agency. Some of this was in the open, when he served as Israeli ambassador to the European Union, a key link between Jerusalem and a number of important European states. Last year, he was named by Prime Minister Sharon to be head of Israel's National Security Council.

In Israel, the NSC is the new kid on the block in terms of national security institutions, younger than the defense ministry, Mossad, or the foreign ministry. But the appointment of Mr. Halevy, the first incumbent who does not come from the military establishment, is a milestone. And the fact that he has a close personal relationship with the prime minister is a guarantee that, as in the United States, Israel's NSC has come of age as the central focus of national security policy planning.

From its inception, Israel has always known threats to the security. But the dangers posed recently and still posed, first by Iraq and then by other regimes that combine terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and a willingness to use both to achieve their goals, is of an order of magnitude unlike much of what Israel has faced in its five decades. How Israel navigates this in the post-Saddam era, how it works with allies, friends, and at times neighbors to protect against the regional threats that are, sadly, going to outlive the Saddam regime, and how it safeguards its security while still pursuing opportunities for peace, these are the questions of the day, and we at the Institute are delighted that Ephraim Halevy can be here to address those. Mr. Halevy. [Applause.]

MR. HALEVY: Good afternoon. It's a singular pleasure for me to be here this afternoon with you for what is, for me, a first appearance before a non-Israeli audience in public. I want to thank the Washington Institute for providing me this opportunity. In particular, I would like to thank Ambassador Dennis Ross for inviting me to come here and addressing you here as the final keynote speaker.

As I walked into the hall this morning, I saw many familiar faces, people who I'd known many years ago during the time that I served here in the embassy in Washington, in the early '70s, under the ambassadorship of the late Yitzhak Rabin. Such a long time has passed, and in many ways for me this is a culmination of a dream to come back here in a different capacity and to be with you today in a totally different environment. March and April 2003 will long be remembered as defining months in forging a new Middle East scene. Before addressing the now commonly termed challenge of the morning after, we must look at the region as it reacted during the war. This will be our point of

departure in evaluating possible options of the players on the morrow.

First, let us turn our eyes to the war against terror -- international, regional, and local terror. Our assessments on the eve of the war envisaged a possible rise -- some thought a very steep rise -- in violence and terrorism both in the region and worldwide. It was believed that the Iraqis, maybe others, would give the green light to launch operations both large and small against select soft-belly targets throughout the world -- Israeli targets, Jewish community targets throughout the globe. Some foresaw a steep rise in violence in the Palestinian territories.

But all this, as you know, did not materialize. True, Palestinian terror against Israeli targets continued unabated, with grievous losses. But due to highly successful foiling measures, there was no quantum leap. Moreover, major elements with high potential, like the Hezbollah, both its military wing deployed on our northern border and its international terrorist wing operating worldwide, stayed their fire.

Let me note that this was the second time that the Hezbollah acted in such a way. They did not lift one finger when the IDF moved into West Bank in the spring of 2002, following the dastardly operation carried out against innocent noncombatant citizens in the Netanya Park Hotel on the seder night. Hezbollah acted then, as now, solely out of self-interest, and in my understanding will continue to do so.

About a week ago, bin Laden sent one of his messages, through the Qatari TV station al-jazeera, exhorting his fellow believers to carry out operations against U.S., coalition, and Zionist interests. So far, this call has not yet been translated into action. Indeed, the war against the al Qaeda threat has been pursued relentlessly, parallel to the Iraqi campaign.

How did the Arab masses react to the Iraqi war? Initially there were demonstrations bordering on violence in key cities and locations throughout the world, throughout the Arab world. Public sentiment by and large favored Saddam Hussein -- or let us put it differently -- condemned the allies in their intrusion.

But as the war went into its second and third weeks, reactions became more and more muted. People began pondering the real significance of what they were seeing on their TV screens. Yes, they might still be angry -- very angry. But they were also coming to grips with new realities.

How did the Arab and Muslim states respond to the campaign? Firstly, and demonstrably so, the obvious absence of any unity has given way to acute disunity. The Arab League has become a ghost entity, some already advocating its dissolution. Every state has acted on its own, based on its own self-national interest. Each negotiated separately with the United States on its role and posture. Not one state, except Syria, came to the aid of Iraq. During the war, they turned a deaf ear to the appeal of the Iraqis to close their air space to the allies and to close facilities available to the allies on the ground. Syria, as I mentioned, was an exception. It certainly merits special attention.

But the leadership level in every state has gone through difficult and supreme tests during this war. By and large, the majority has emerged firmly in the saddle, at least for the initial formative post-war period, and they should be able to adopt reasonable, rational, and even bold positions on issues such as the Israeli-Arab conflict.

And here, I would like to add a note in response and maybe in elaboration of a point made by Dr. Rice. Over the past year, several key Arab states and several key Arab figures within these Arab states have begun to stake out positive positions of their own on the Palestinian issue, no longer simply echoing the policies of outgoing Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. They not only oppose his views, they have disassociated themselves from them and from him, and are prepared to launch and to embark on new paths in the Middle East conflict.

So in three key areas of concern -- terrorism, the Arab masses, the stability of current moderate regimes -- the worst of our fears have not materialized. Why is this so? Well, first and foremost because of the resounding success of the coalition forces. The show of might. Combat performance. The almost unbelievable low toll of losses and injuries --

given, of course, the grief for every fallen soldier. And the iron determination of the president of the United States. All this has the effect of an impact of a winning combination, and its effect has not been lost on the peoples of the region.

Moreover, the action taken by the president has demonstrated an almost unique show of credibility on the part of any statesman. Within a relatively short time span after he delivered his speech on the axis of evil, the president moved decisively and -- what is more important -- moved successfully.

What does this auger for the future? One of the important outcomes of the Iraqi war will undoubtedly be the realization inside the region that attempts at political, terrorist, or other blackmail will not be met any longer by submission. If need be, in extremis, forces outside the region will intervene to preserve world order in its larger sense. Each state will primarily tend to its own interests.

The first to realize this was no other than King Abdullah II of Jordan, who several months ago, sensing what was going to happen in the region, launched his policy within Jordan of what he called "Jordan First." And if you travel in Jordan today, you see these banners throughout the kingdom -- Jordan First. And this has been there for at least eight months.

The sooner Iraqi reconstruction gets under way, the quicker the Iraqis are able, with help, to put their political house in order, the better will be the chances of all the moderate regimes in the area not only to survive, but ultimately to flourish.

I expect many eyes will now be turned towards Baghdad. There will those who will rush to help positive, creative tendencies to take the fore; and there will be those who will act clandestinely to promote instability and strife. Iraq's future will become a test case, not in the sense of the success of the allied military campaign, but in the sense of a population which has been given a unique opportunity to engage in nation building almost from scratch. And much will depend on how this time is exploited by the victors.

On the other side of the region, Egypt will most probably engage in stock-taking following the departure of Saddam Hussein, a deadly enemy and a rival for leadership in the Arab world. Egypt will have an opportunity to turn events to its advantage. The year 2002 was a relatively poor year for Cairo. It was unable to prevail in the Arab arena, it lost leverage and clout in the Palestinian camp, it gave way, maybe temporarily, to Saudi Arabia in promoting ideas and concepts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But Egypt has a very strong potential, and on many key issues it played its cards very wisely. Egypt sided against al Qaeda on terrorism. It refused to bend to Palestinian pressure in March 2002 to change the profile of its relations with Israel. And on the Iraq war, it ended up intact, basically on the right side.

If Egypt were to swing behind the developing American concept on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict -- that is, that whatever documents or principles any outsider might draw up, the center of gravity will be, and always be, the direct negotiations between the two parties. If Egypt were to swing behind this concept, it could play a very positive role and a very significant role, given that in advance it would normalize its relations with the incumbent Israeli government. I even hazard a guess that if Abu Mazin were consulted these days, he would prefer a direct confidential negotiation with Israel to any other mode of dialogue.

We must ask ourselves, you must ask yourselves, if there is any danger of a backlash in the region following the defeat of Saddam Hussein. There are those who predict a wave of anti-American sentiment, of greater threats of terrorism, of heightened fundamentalism, and of anti-Israeli and antisemitic action. So far, I see no immediate signs of this. And indeed, what can be a greater threat in the field of international terrorism than the already known challenges of the UBL al-Qaeda setup?

I do not believe that the Iraqi campaign has changed this for the worse, not by one iota. In fact, I think, the campaign

might even prove to have a salutary effect even on the terrorist fringe. I am aware of the general tendency to prefer and advocate worst-case scenarios. Recent events at least prove that better-case scenarios have an equal chance of realization.

In short, the day after is pregnant with enormous possibilities for creative, positive diplomacy and affirmative action. If Iraq becomes a model not only of nation-building but also of rapid economic rehabilitation, if it becomes a magnet for international investments, then other countries in the region will stand to benefit.

Is there a possibility of this happening? Well, the speed whereby the European states who opposed the U.S. on the war are rushing to join the bandwagon hurtling to Baghdad seems to me to indicate that they, at least, have become very quick to sense the impending change.

Generally speaking, the moderate or pro-American regimes in the region have emerged basically unscathed from the Iraqi campaign. I grant that this is a very sweeping statement. If I look closely at Jordan, at Egypt, at the Gulf states, and even at Saudi Arabia, I do not detect for the present any domestic energy building up to protest and to mourn the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime. As long as Saddam was riding high, he was a focal point of fear, of admiration, and, in many cases, of identification. For many, he represented the ultimate modern-day success of the Arab nation to stand up against the foreigner, the Westerner, the infidel. As such, he was a rallying point.

A posthumous Saddam is something else, at best a legend whose departure may be regretted, but nonetheless a relic of the past. The masses opposed to American so-called imperialism will have to find a replacement. And this might take quite some time. In this respect, we, you, all of us can use this time to good advantage, as I have just indicated.

Where does this leave us with the revolutionary regimes in the region? How will they react? What has the impact of the war been on them?

Well, first let me say a few words about Syria. The truth is that Bashar Assad has so far been one of our most bitter disappointments and most serious concerns. Not long after he succeeded his father Hafez Al-Assad, we were treated to a long stream of harangues against Israel. And this has continued unabated until the present day. But what has been more ominous is that the young Bashar has shown himself to be adventuresome, irresponsible, and prone to bad influence. His relationship with the Hezbollah is a case in point. Whereas his father met Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Hezbollah, only once, Bashar has met him on many an occasion. And there is evidence that Nasrallah has a very strong influence over his young companion.

On one issue, that of the al Qaeda, Bashar apparently cooperated in a limited way with the United States. But on all other issues, including terrorism, Bashar has been singularly uncooperative. And may I mention the ten refusal-front Palestinian organizations headquartered in Damascus, some of whose volunteers found their way to Iraq to fight against the U.S. forces.

And let me remind us all of the three Hezbollah operatives -- Hezbollah being under the aegis of Syria -- on the famous American short list of wanted terrorists wanted for the murder of American servicemen. This is surely an open account which must be closed.

In recent months, the young Assad has openly flouted the United States and has worked diligently to promote a warm relationship with Baghdad. During the run-up to the war, it became patently clear that something very, very sinister was afoot. Intimacy reached very real proportions. As the war unfolded, Bashar not only openly condemned the United States, but also sent arms to Baghdad. Syria has acted as a lifeline for Saddam's Iraq once the Jordanian border became problematic for the Iraqis. Bashar aligned himself clearly with Saddam Hussein. And now that the war is ending with the tyrant's defeat, it is obvious to me that Bashar cannot be left to his old tricks.

Secretary Powell has said that the United States did not plan to go to war against Syria and Iran. However, there are

many measures short of war that can be employed to draw the fangs of the young, arrogant, and inexperienced president of Syria. Indeed, by far the most troublesome aspect of the current situation is Bashar's singular lack of good judgment. Syria has a considerable arsenal of missiles and other weapons -- including chemical weapons, as stated just yesterday by President Bush -- and a miscalculation on its part could have very serious consequences.

I have seen indications that knowledgeable Syrians have become conscious of their difficult predicament now that the war is ending. It remains to be seen if they will succeed in sobering the approach of their brash president and if the clear statement of President Bush yesterday will penetrate the hitherto impenetrable wall of Syrian rejection.

The second major revolutionary state which warrants our attention is, of course, Iran. For Teheran, the Iraqi campaign carries with it a mixed blessing.

First and foremost, Iran is rid of its archenemy, who waged an eight-year bloody war against it, inflicting upon it hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded. They are rid of any real threat from Baghdad for a very long time to come. Secondly, the American-led coalition operation in Iraq relieves Iran of any real fear that they might be the object of a similar operation in the foreseeable future. And thirdly, Iran can now contemplate extending real influence into Iraq through a Shiite majority in Iraq. All this gives Iran a stronger hand in the Persian Gulf.

However, there is a debit side to this. Iran is now virtually surrounded by American or pro-American countries. The United States appears determined not to stop now in pursuit of the axis of evil. And as said above in relation to Syria, there are so many measures short of war that could be employed in containing Iran and its most ambitious pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

One must hope or assume that in Teheran people are pondering the true significance for them of the allied campaign. There are also internal forces in Iran who may draw strength and encouragement from the U.S. commitment on the axis of evil and who might now be able to be more bold and to move to change the regime from within. I am a minority view of one on this in Israel. But I still think that there is an outside chance that this could happen.

In the meantime, Iran's rush to construct and develop nuclear facilities must be a source of the gravest concern. And this was mentioned, as you will recall, an hour ago by Dr. Rice. The most recent visit of the director general of the IAEA in Teheran at the end of February 2003 produced much disturbing data. In certain respects, Iraq's removal from the equation for the foreseeable future gives added urgency to the whole issue. And in conclusion, one way or another the growing Iranian threat will loom even higher on the horizon and will consume ever greater international attention.

A few days ago, the spiritual leader of Iran, Khomeini, delivered the Friday sermon condemning the evil regime of Saddam Hussein, but simultaneously lambasting the United States presence on Iraqi soil. For the first time over a long period, he spoke in Arabic and not in Farsi. He was addressing the audience in the Arab world. This was a very strident statement this last Friday. But there are other sounds emanating from Teheran that should be heard, but at the same time, we must not allow ourselves to be misled by them.

How will the Iraqi denouement influence other players? How will a man like Muammar Khadafi translate what he heard and saw in Baghdad into policy? And when he listens to President Bush reiterate his commitment on the issue of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, how does he compute this in his mind?

I think it would be wrong for us to second-guess what is passing through the minds of the people in Tripoli. The scope and nature of the operation in Iraq was such as to merit much reflection throughout the region, from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf. This will take time -- not too much time, but there will be a hiatus and we should take maximum advantage of this.

There is one note of caution I would like to sound. Whereas the victory is so resounding and complete, there is much apprehension throughout the region that the installation of what might be construed as a puppet regime in Iraq could reflect negatively on existing pro-American leaders in Arab states. This issue will surely be handled with infinite patience and care. I have listened very carefully to statements made by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair on this very point, most recently at the end of their meeting in Northern Ireland. And they are clearly very much aware of this. But since this is a thought I have heard from several senior Arab interlocutors in recent weeks, I thought it worthy of mention.

One last thought on the morning after. In the eyes of any resident in any Arab or Muslim state peering out into the wide, wide world from his original vantage point, looking at the run-up to the war, the dispute between Russia, Germany, and France versus the United States, it is so obvious that, whatever weight should rightly be attached to Europe, nobody from the outside can really hope to play off the United States against Europe and gain political dividends. On the major formative issues of today, the leadership of the United States is virtually unsurpassed and undisputed.

No European support can offset or negate a firm United States position and policy in the Middle East. Moreover, Europe itself cannot sustain an alternative policy on any key issue in the region. Europe, neither united nor divided, can or would wish, really, to go it alone. And this, of course, has never been better understood in the Middle East of today.

Thank you. [Applause.]

MR. ROSS: Thank you, Ephraim. I think you demonstrated what many of us who have known you over the years have understood, which is you are a first-rate analyst in addition to all the other things that you've done throughout your career.

I'm going to kick off the questions with one that takes account of some of what we've heard so far in the conference, but maybe comes at it in a slightly different way.

This morning with Shafeeq Ghabra, and I would also say with Dr. Rice, what we heard is that it's very important to have what amounts to a comprehensive agenda in terms of how we pursue the next period in the Middle East. By that I mean Shafeeq made the point that it is very important not only to rebuild Iraq in the right way, but it's also important to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian question in a serious way, and that if you do that, you can create the right kind of model for reformers and create a climate where reform can also succeed. And I think that Dr. Rice also reflected the importance of looking at all the different pieces of an agenda and not somehow creating one, or creating a priority of one over the other, but trying to pursue all of them.

Now, I have heard some raise a different kind of approach, in the sense that they will say, look, if we want to be able to rebuild Iraq, that's one thing; but if we want in fact to produce reform, we'll not be able at the same time to work on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Or vice versa. The point being that some of the very Arab governments that we want to assume responsibilities may feel that if we're pushing the reform agenda, that works much more fundamentally against their own survival as it exists.

So for them, it might well be a tradeoff between peace and reform, and I wonder if you would comment on that sort of thinking.

MR. HALEVY: I think last year has been a very interesting year on the issue of reform. I think it's a year now since the reform was launched, the concept of reform, in the Palestinian Authority. And I think it would be true to say today, in retrospect, that we were there very close to the inception, and we found that for the very first time almost in the history of the dispute, we found a unique coalition behind the concept of reform. It was not only Israel, the United States, not only Europe, not only Russia, not only China, Japan, but also major elements within the Palestinian

society and major elements within the Arab world. And I believe that the Arab world of today, the leaders of the Arab world of today are ripe for a reconsideration of their own interests as far as the future is concerned.

I believe, for instance, that the fact that Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia launched his proposal about a year ago -- I think it was March of last year when he first spoke to Tom Friedman, if I'm not mistaken -- I think that this was also, time-wise, the very same time that we began to talk about reform in the Palestinian Authority. And if I ask myself and I ask you why was it that Crown Prince Abdullah raised this issue at that time -- was it just a gimmick or was it something more serious? I think it was more serious. And it was not related necessarily or simply to a desire on his part to play a role in the Israeli-Arab conflict, something that the Saudis had always shunned over the years. They didn't want to play a major role. They didn't want to be up front.

But why is it that now they were up front? Because it touched their own national interests, their own national interests in terms of what was important for the society of Saudi Arabia, given the cleavage on the issues such as bin Laden, who came out of Saudi Arabia, out of Wahabi puritanism. It was a serious problem within the Arab world, and this was recognized, this was identified.

And I think that therefore, in response to what you're saying, Dennis, I believe that there is no real danger of a tradeoff here. On the contrary, there is a real chance, a real hope, you might say, on the part of several key Arab leaders that this whole new world, this whole new ballgame will turn to their advantage and they will be able to refashion their societies in a way which will be conducive both to the future of the region and the future of the world.

And it could well be that as a result of this unique combination of what has happened on the localized level in the Palestinian issue and on the regional level, with what has happened with the United States moving into Iraq the way it has never been done before -- I cannot recall any other case in the past that the United States has moved in this way, into a country, in one single country so far from the shores of the United States with such enormous consequences for a whole region. And the Afghani example is not an example. It is a more localized example. And certainly the effort which was expended in Afghanistan is no comparison to what was done on the issue of Iraq.

This is an event without precedent, and therefore the chances of change coming about within the Arab world as a result of this and other elements which I've mentioned are also without precedent.

MR. ROSS: Thank you. I see a hand all the way in the back, but I couldn't see who it is. Please stand up.

QUESTION: Alan Gerson. Mr. Halevy, in keeping with your opening comment that in charting a new Middle East we have to take into account how various players acted during the course of this war, I wonder if you might comment on the role of two actors. One, Russia; and two, Saudi Arabia. For example, I was at the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva recently and I saw how Russia voted with countries like Sudan and Libya in both anti-American and anti-Israeli resolutions that went far beyond what, say, France or Germany might do. Could you comment on both Russia and Saudi Arabia, please?

MR. HALEVY: I think one must differentiate, with all due respect, between voting procedures in U.N. and other bodies and basic strategic interests. I don't think if we look at the way Russia performed in practice on the issue of Iraq -- I'm saying in practice -- I don't think the Russian position, although they sided together with France and Germany in the Security Council and prevented another resolution from being passed in the Security Council, I don't think the Russian played a major role here. And I think the Russians were very conscious throughout of the necessity to preserve their very unique relationship with the United States.

I am not privy to everything that has gone on between the United States and Russia. But I note that just before the summit in Northern Ireland, Dr. Rice traveled to Moscow and she saw President Putin and she saw the leadership there. I am not aware of the content of this meeting, but I can only assume that it was not a mission of confrontation, but rather a mission of finding ways and means of putting things back together in place. That is the impression I got.

I think Russia has a very, very clear role. And it's a role which propels it to see its own local interests first and foremost. And Russia is very conscious of the limitations which are placed upon it. But Russia is also very active on other issues, such as the Middle East peace process. And I can tell you that the Russian envoy on the peace process in the Middle East, Mr. Vdovin, who is a very, very fluent Arabic speaker, has been extremely influential in pressing the leadership of the Palestinian Authority to go in the right direction. And there are those who have told me that in his conversations one-on-one with the outgoing leader of the Palestinian Authority in his own language, things have been said that nobody else has even dared to say.

So I think we must look at Russia in its entirety and not only on its voting record on this or on that body.

There is also one other thing one has to take into account. You know as well as I do that Russia has problems when it comes to dealing with the issues of human rights in U.N. and other bodies. And it looks for allies. And it so happens that the allies for Russia on those votings are the Muslim states and the Arab states. And they are looking for those votes in order to preserve their positions. So as you know, when you go into voting and you have to do politicking on votes, then you win some, you lose some, you sell some, you buy some. And that's, I think, what they'll be doing. It's as simple as all that. [Laughter.]

MR. HALEVY: I mean "buy" politically. I don't refer to my past. [Laughter.]

MR. HALEVY: When it comes to Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia is going through, I think, a development which is amazing in terms of history. It's hurtling through hundreds of years within a very short space of time. It's sort of crashing in from the Middle Ages into modern history with a bang. And things are happening in Saudi Arabia. We're not aware of everything that's happened inside Saudi Arabia, but I believe that events in Saudi Arabia are of enormous significance internally and externally.

And I believe that the Saudi role -- for instance, on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Beyond the Saudi plan, which, as you know, originally was a plan which was not rejected out-of-hand by Israel, but subsequently when people added all kinds of embellishments on the plan, it became impossible for us to accept. As one person said, it was like a Christmas tree after hanging all the presents on the tree -- you saw the presents and you didn't see the tree.

But the fact of the matter is that when there was a showdown last year between the Palestinian Authority and Israel on the first time that we besieged the Mukata, the headquarters of Arafat -- and at the time, you will recall, there were six wanted people in the Mukata that Arafat was sheltering. And we demanded that one of the elements of a deal of lifting the siege would be that these six people would be incarcerated someplace under American and British supervision, as is now the case. And Arafat balked. It was the Saudis who more or less ordered Mr. Arafat to do what was asked of him.

So you have to look at the Saudi performance in more ways than one. And I think that on the Iraqi issue, I'm not privy to everything that went on between the United States and Saudi Arabia, but I didn't see any major complaints about the Saudi performance concerning the Iraqi campaign. I saw all kinds of reports about problems that were there with Turkey, for instance. I didn't see any real reporting about serious problems with Saudi Arabia. Maybe it was not paraded on the front pages of the press, on the media. But maybe it wasn't necessary. Maybe on the contrary. Maybe that was the way it should have been done. But practically, the end result, I think, was a very positive one from the point of view of the United States, the way I understand it.

MR. ROSS: Ephraim, having gone through that process at one time myself with you, I think the exact terminology is "renting" votes. [Laughter.]

MR. ROSS: Jerome Segal.

QUESTION: I have a two-part question. How has the Iraq war affected the military importance of Israel retaining

portions of the West Bank? And the second part of it is, Do you believe that at the end of the day a peace treaty with the Palestinians can in fact be reached if Israel is not prepared to make a territorial withdrawal roughly similar to what the Barak government offered?

MR. HALEVY: To answer those questions I'd need at least a couple of hours. I think that I heard before that there are plane schedules which have to be met, including my own. So I will answer you very, very shortly and in very concise terms.

I think the question of territory, from a strategic military point of view, is a very, very complex issue. And I've heard those who've said, including prominent Israelis, in the era of missiles and missilery and the type of weaponry which has been used, for instance, in Iraq, the highly sophisticated technological developments, territory is not necessary, it's unimportant, that depth and that strategic depth are unimportant, or less important.

That is not so. And I don't want to go into all the details of this, but ultimately, if you take the Iraqi campaign, with all the technology that was involved, in the end the forces had to enter Baghdad. Ultimately, without your divisions entering Baghdad and entering Tikrit and entering Basra and entering Nasariyah and Najaf, it was not possible to bring this war to what is now closely to its end.

So let us not overestimate and overvalue technology and let us not denigrate the importance of territory, regardless of what the issue is on the political side. I'm talking purely from a strategic and a military point of view.

You've asked me whether peace with the Palestinians is possible without us making a Barak-style -- how would I put it? Settlement, okay? I don't know. I don't know the answer to that question. But I do know that without putting the Palestinians to a real test, we will never know. And the Palestinians have never been put to a real test.

Let me say simply this. If you look at the history of the Zionist movement from its inception till today, at every crossroads of decision making on the issues, the Jewish people/the Zionist movement/Israel have opted for a compromise solution, for compromise solutions along the road. Up till now, to the best of my knowledge, the other side, the Palestinian/the Arabs, whoever it was who represented the other side, so to speak, never really accepted compromise solutions.

So we've always had this incompatibility. This is not to say that the compromise which was accepted by the Israelis or the Jewish side was accepted without a very fierce debate within the body politic in Israel. You know that very well. There has always been very fierce disagreement within the Israeli body politic, within the Israeli community, within the Israeli society as to what the right solution should be. But at the end of the day, when it has been incumbent upon us to make a decision, we have opted for compromises. And the other side has never opted for compromises. That is the fact.

We will know whether a solution is possible once we have a credible partner who is really willing to go for compromises. And I'm not speaking about tactical compromises or short-term compromises or interim compromises. I'm talking about real compromises, the compromises the type of which the prime minister referred to yesterday in his interview. There has never been something comparable stated by the other side. And once we see something stated in similar terms on issues which are so cardinal to them on the other side, then we will know whether there is a possibility of a peace solution between us and the Palestinians. And then the contours of such a peace solution will be able to be worked out.

But let me add one other thought. Ultimately, at the end of the day, if the Palestinians and Israel are really able to work out a peaceful solution between them, then borders have less a significance.

But this goes very far beyond the horizon of today. And the first step along the line must be a very real process within the Palestinian body politic, within the Palestinian community, to reach the point where they are willing to face up to

the necessity of making very, very painful decisions on matters of principle to them. This has not yet happened.

MR. ROSS: I recognize there are a few hands out there. This is always going to be the case. But I also promised Ephraim he would be able to leave at a certain point. I want to thank him very much for what was a very interesting overview. Thank you. [Applause.] ❖

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