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Honorees:

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ROBERT SATLOFF: Let me begin by once again asking you to join me in congratulating Elliott Abrams and Dennis Ross. [Applause] Gentlemen, I know you’re both good friends, so let’s cut right to the chase: Guys, thirty years you’ve been trying to make peace. There is no peace. Why? What could we have done differently, when we look back over thirty years, to try to say that, today, there is peace between Israelis and Palestinians? Is there anything that we could have done, or is the main reason why there isn’t peace something that they—whoever they are—could have done? Dennis, why don’t I begin with you.

DENNIS ROSS: Okay, so let’s talk about the Knicks. [Laughter] They might actually be good this year. Okay. Look, the premise of the question reflects what I think is something that many people, particularly in the Middle East, want to be the case, meaning, if only the U.S. did something differently, we would have peace—as if the U.S. were the party to this and it were up to us to ensure that there was peace. That is not to say that maybe there were some things that we couldn’t have done differently. But my own view is—ultimately, if there’s going to be peace, we will play an important role, maybe an indispensable role, but we’re not going to make peace for the parties; they’re going to have to be prepared to take the hard steps themselves.

Could we have done some things differently? I think we could have. Certainly, I think, during the Oslo period, there are some things that we might have done differently. But I still don’t believe that it would have made a difference in the end, because I think that [Yasser] Arafat was someone who was quite prepared to do a lot of agreements, but he wasn’t prepared to do an end-of-conflict deal. To do an end-of-conflict deal meant that he had to redefine himself. He was defined by conflict and struggle, and to end the conflict meant that he had to change his identity, and that was not something he could do.

I’ll tell you one quick anecdote that, for me, was quite revealing of ultimately who he was and why he was profoundly limited. I had just finished negotiating the Hebron deal. This was the second of two twenty-three-day shuttles, and so I went down to see him the day after we had done this. I’m sitting there alone with him—no one’s spent more time with him than I have—and so I joked with him and I said, you now, “I’m going to take a vacation.” And he says, “You can’t leave, you have to stay here.” And I said, “I’ve been here long enough. I’m going to take a vacation.” And I said, “You could use one.” And he says, “Well, the last vacation I took was in 1962.” So I said, “Well, you could really use one.” [Laughter] And he says to me, “How can I take a vacation from my people”? Now, there was nobody there to impress. This conflict, this struggle, defined him. He would wear his keffiyeh in the shape of Palestine. And what we were asking him to do was to give up the conflict, which was the same as giving up himself.

So I can list things that we might have done differently. I wish that we had—as one example—been much tougher on the issue of terror. I wish that we had basically made it clear that if he didn’t do the things we were asking—that he wouldn’t go through the motions—but, basically, if he didn’t do what was necessary, we would walk away. But I will say, once you create a negotiating process, it’s not so easy to walk away. And the pressures, particularly, on everybody involved are to find ways to stay in it, not to walk away from it. Had we done that, would that have changed him? I don’t know. Because he still—whether he could have changed that identity, I don’t know, but I would have liked to have seen if we could have done that and what the impact would have been.
SATLOFF: Now, Elliott, is the fact that we have no peace because we didn’t do something or because they didn’t do something?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Let me start, as someone who’s not part of the Institute, just by thanking all of you who are part of the Institute for this wonderful award. It’s extraordinary. It’s great to share the evening with Richard and Lorraine and Dennis and to see a list of prior winners: my old professor Henry Kissinger, my old boss George Shultz, and my old friend Natan Sharansky. To be put in that group is a great, great honor. And, as long as I’m not answering the question, let me add . . .

ROSS: Very good technique, by the way, I just wanted to . . .

ABRAMS: . . . I was last in this room in September 2008 with George Bush, because he was at his last UN General Assembly, and he gave his party for heads of delegations in this room. And it is a very famous evening in diplomatic history because, above this room on the twentieth floor, was the suite of the sheikh who was—and, I think, is—the foreign minister of Kuwait. And the elevators were terribly jammed, so he thought, why do I have to go down to the lobby and wait, and then wait, and go up again to the eighteenth [floor]. So he got down in the stairwell to walk down two floors to the eighteenth, not realizing, of course, that the Secret Service and the NYPD would close off the stairwell, and so eighteen times he said to a New York City policeman, I’m the sheikh of Kuwait. And eighteen times, a New York City policeman said, “Right, I’m the tooth fairy. Walk down the stairs.” [Laughter] So, it didn’t work. He was pretty angry.

You know, I would say two things in answer to the question. First, there is a terrible and tragic problem with the quality of Palestinian leadership. This is true from Hajj Amin al-Husseini to today. I agree with Dennis—and I think it’s also true about the current leader, President [Mahmoud] Abbas: I just don’t think he’s going to sign anything. If he would not agree to what Ehud Olmert offered, he is not going to sign anything.

I think there’s one thing we could have done differently, over three administrations, really—of both parties. I think we were too focused on a comprehensive agreement after Camp David. Everybody wanted to replicate, you know, the White House lawn. And [for] the Bush administration, it was Annapolis. And, therefore, we paid too little attention to, actually, the real world on the West Bank—and, at that time, the West Bank and Gaza. And we—everybody said, sure, we’ll do that, absolutely, yeah, it’s very important, but we always had it at the margins. And I think that if we had, over twenty years, concentrated more on, if you will, the real world—the real Palestinian life as it is being lived—maybe, by now, we could have created . . . we would be further along in creating the institutions of a future Palestinian state—and peace someday.

SATLOFF: So, do you think that someday there will, in fact, be peace between Israelis and Palestinians? Will they overcome all the problems you’ve cited and—when they’ve exhausted every other option—will, in fact, there be peace in the Middle East? Elliott?

ABRAMS: Well, it depends partly on what you mean by peace. Do you mean the absence of war, or do you mean the kind of peace that France and Germany now have? A real deep peace among peoples. I think we are generations away from—and maybe a century away from—having that kind of peace. But I think the absence of war is something we can attain. We have attained it for [much]
of the last couple of decades. And if you think of the Middle East—pick a number and say ten years from today; first of all, without Bashar al-Assad, that won’t take ten years—but, without the Islamic Republic of Iran—someday the people of Iran will overthrow that vicious regime. . . . The terrible problem of international terrorism really began in 1979, with that revolution and that terrorist state. And if, in five or ten or fifteen years, that state goes down, the Middle East will be a much safer and more peaceful place, including in this context—because you won’t have the Iranians promoting war. Those Fajr missiles weren’t built in Gaza.

SATLOFF: Dennis, will we have peace?

ROSS: You know, I’d like to be more optimistic. I’m afraid that we’re going to probably go through another period where things actually become even less likely—because I’m worried, right now, that the rise of political Islam makes it increasingly difficult to reconcile with Israel. I think, here’s where the U.S. does have a major task—which is to create an unmistakable set of redlines and boundaries that make it clear that if you want help from the United States, and the kind of help that we can mobilize with others, the one thing you have to do is, in the case of Egypt, respect your peace treaty and, in the case of others, realize that unless there is at least the absence of war, you’re not going to get the kind of help and you’re not going to address the problems you have on the inside. But there’s a big difference—and Elliott was sort of getting at this. . . . We’re not going to look at what I think is a peace of reconciliation for a long time to come. And you see it partly because there is a psychology that’s now so embedded on the Palestinian side—and, to some extent, even though the Israelis want peace, there’s such a disbelief on the Israeli side—that the ability to break through that now is going to be profoundly difficult.

I, too, believe that we ought to be setting our sights on more practical approaches and using those practical approaches to try to change the context, try to change the psychology, and try to restore belief. My feeling at this point is that it’s not a loss of confidence between the two sides—and I mean here the publics—it’s a loss of belief and faith. Confidence, you can restore. Faith is really something that’s quite fundamental, and that isn’t something that’s like a light switch that suddenly you’re going to flip and things are going to change. So, I think our task is: focus on practicalities, preserve the option of a two-state outcome—don’t lose the option of that—but don’t set your sights on those things you know you can’t achieve right now, because what that does is it adds to the cynicism and deepens the disbelief. That’s one of the problems.

Now, to get back to the point you were making, Elliott, that by focusing so much on let’s do a comprehensive peace when it wasn’t achievable, what we did is we raised the set of expectations. We couldn’t possibly deliver on those expectations. And by frustrating those expectations, we made it seem as if, well, that’s never achievable. And that’s part of the price that we’re paying today.

SATLOFF: Let me ask you, since I don’t want to dwell on what sounds like a very negative scenario in the Middle East—I want to ask both of you to look back thirty years, your own personal careers: in the Middle East, single greatest achievement that you accomplished in the Middle East. Dennis?

ROSS: Well, first, I retained my sense of humor, which is no small task. You know, I do think the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty is a very important achievement. I feel that I did make a real contribution to that. And it creates one of these baselines. Again, if you can—just like what I was
saying before with Egypt . . . I hope that Jordan retains stability and evolves, but whatever happens in Jordan, there should be an understanding that if you want help from the outside, you have to respect that. So, I would say that’s probably the most important one that, at least, I think has meaning and endures.

SATLOFF: Very good. Elliott?

ABRAMS: I’m going to have to give you two—divide them in half. Working for [Henry] “Scoop” Jackson and Ronald Reagan on what ultimately became a million Russian Jews moving to Israel, which really has changed Israel. [Applause] And then the famous letter: the April 14, 2004, letter of President Bush to Ariel Sharon, Prime Minister Sharon, which for the first time said clearly: Israel is going to keep the major [settlement] blocs, and there is no “right of return.” [Applause]

SATLOFF: Ok, very good. I want to ask what would be in the game show world a rapid-fire: yes or no answers.

ROSS: So you’re talking to two people who are negotiators, you want yes or no answers?

SATLOFF: Exactly. Yes or no answers. Will peace between Egypt and Israel last through the end of this decade?

ABRAMS: Yes.

ROSS: Yes.

SATLOFF: Was the Iraq war a mistake?

ROSS: Maybe.

ABRAMS: Too soon to tell.

SATLOFF: Will there be a Palestinian Authority a year from now?

ABRAMS: Yes.

ROSS: God willing. [Laughter]

SATLOFF: And, this is not yes or no—but who succeeds Mahmoud Abbas as leader of that thing you said will still be around?

ROSS: You know, it’s an interesting question, because he’s done nothing to prepare the ground for succession. This is not unique, by the way, in Arab countries or among Arab leaders. But it means that there is a—there is no clear, obvious successor for him. And it’s one of the reasons that the need to preserve the Palestinian Authority, on the one hand, needs to be joined with, again, practical approaches right now to build a Palestinian stake in the Palestinian Authority being sustained.
SATLOFF: So I’ll take that as, you don’t know.

ROSS: Yes, you can say I do not know. I can give you a list of candidates, but I wouldn’t bet on any of them right now.

ABRAMS: I would just say, some Palestinian guy. [Laughter]

SATLOFF: Will either America or Israel employ preventive military action against Iran’s nuclear program? Yes or no?

ABRAMS: Yes.

ROSS: Yes.

SATLOFF: Will this happen in 2013?

ROSS: Yes.

ABRAMS: Yes, I agree.

SATLOFF: Will this happen before the night is over? [Laughter]

ROSS: No.

ABRAMS: Also agree, no. . . .

ROSS: We’re on a roll.

SATLOFF: Alright, a bigger question: . . .

ROSS: That wasn’t big? [Laughter]

SATLOFF: So far, the Arab Spring hasn’t turned out so well for many in the Middle East. Is the Middle East really doomed to an Islamist winter, or is there something Middle Easterners or we can do to help prevent that outcome? Elliott?

ABRAMS: I don’t think it’s doomed. I am struck by the fact that in an election in Libya, the Islamists lost. In the presidential election in Egypt, [Muhammad] Morsi won 51–48. And you see now, in the streets of Egypt, people fighting against a Muslim Brotherhood–led takeover. So I think there’s a real resistance there. And we have a job: our job is to do better than we’ve done over the past few decades at upholding the standards of democracy and rule of law—of speaking out. And the speaking out cannot be done by the spokesman for the State Department; it has got to be by the president, whoever it is, and the secretary of state. If there’s ever going to be a turn away from this, it’s going to have to be in another free election, where they lose—because I think the people are going to find, as they look for jobs, that, you know, Islam is not the answer. But if there’s no election, they don’t get to make another choice, so it’s the rules of the game that we can help them
maintain—partly through our aid but more, I think, through moral and political support for the people in those countries—and there are many of them—who wish to avoid a permanent Islamist takeover. [Applause]

SATLOFF: Dennis? . . . You can applaud for that, that’s fine.

ROSS: Look, I would say a couple of things. One, there never was an Arab Spring and there was never going to be an Arab Spring. The very concept of spring was that this was going to be a quick transformation. We were going to see a new Middle East. It was going to be the flowering very quickly of democracy—that was never in the cards. The institutions for democracy don’t exist, the political culture for that doesn’t exist. What has happened is that we have seen an awakening. And the significance of the awakening is that people have discovered—and think they have the right to be citizens. And as citizens, they have a voice. Now, what’s interesting is people in Egypt, who haven’t had a voice for forty years, are not about to surrender it, which is one of the reasons we’re seeing the reaction to what Morsi has done.

When Morsi seeks to exploit the regional and international applause he got for brokering a ceasefire—he immediately sought to turn that into political advantage domestically. And it has produced a backlash. And the backlash is quite extraordinary and it is a reminder: people in Egypt are not just going to submit. If he thinks he can rule the way [Hosni] Mubarak did, he’s discovering that he’s actually going to have to govern. Now, that creates openings for us, because (a) he has needs—there are expectations on the part of his public that he has to try to address; (b) it means there are people out there who also need time to organize and to create an identity.

Elliott was talking about the importance of reaching out to many of them. We have to look at this as at least a ten- to twenty-year project. The Islamists in the near term have all the advantages. They have organization, they have an identity, they reach out to the poorest parts of society. The secular elite is precisely that, an elite. They have no connections to the 40 percent of Egypt that makes less than two dollars a day. So, it’s going to take time to create a political reality where they can compete. Our job is to preserve the political space so that they can compete. Our job is to create a set of boundaries so that Morsi, who realizes he’s got to address the expectations and the needs and produce something on the economy—he has to understand, you play by a set of ground rules, or you’re not going to get that help.

The fact is that he has two universes: one is ideological and one is what I’ll call economic. If the ideology was governing him today, then he would not have brokered a ceasefire with the Israelis and he might well have used this as an advantage to break the peace treaty with Israel. But he understood the price was too high. So rather than doing that, he went ahead and he brokered this. He gained something by it, by the way, unlike [Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip] Erdogan, who couldn’t broker it because he wasn’t talking to the Israelis. Suddenly, Morsi realized that even if he wasn’t personally talking to the Israelis, he gained for Egypt by, in fact, being a broker. But even more to the point, he understood: if I choose ideology, I’m not getting any help from the outside. [And if] I get no help from the outside, I can’t produce anything economically. And the expectations of this country are that if we, the Muslim Brotherhood, are going to achieve our aspirations, we’ve got to deliver something. That gives us leverage, and our leverage ought to be implemented—not in a way where we’re trying to dictate to them in a fashion that allows him to stand up as a sort of great
protector of Egyptian pride, and become the embodiment of protecting Egyptian nationalism, but in a way that makes it clear, you know, you can make your choices, we make ours.

Here are the ground rules: You respect minorities, because that’s a fundamental principle for us. You don’t exclude half your population—you can’t be a successful society if 56 percent of the women are illiterate and you’re going to exclude them. There has to be political pluralism, again, because that’s what builds confidence on the outside that you’re going to build an Egypt that can be successful. And that creates the space that we need to maintain. And you have to fulfill your international obligations, first and foremost the peace treaty with Israel. You do that, we’ll provide you help. You don’t do that, and you shouldn’t expect help.

ABRAMS: You know, I remember a lunch in Sharm al-Sheikh with President Mubarak, where we were just before an election in Iraq. And there was some discussion about the election in Iraq; it was about 2005, I think, and Mubarak scoffed at the election and said, “You don’t understand Iraq, and you don’t understand Arabs. Arabs need to be ruled.”

Now, I think that one would have to say that in November, December now, 2012, he hasn’t yet been proved wrong. I mean, what he was saying was that democracy is not going to work, that a king or a prince or a sheikh or a general like him had to be in charge, or you’d get chaos. And we did get chaos, obviously, in Iraq. You know, I agree with Dennis, this is a ten- or twenty-year struggle and, in a sense, we’re trying to prove Mubarak wrong. But he hasn’t been proved wrong yet.

SATLOFF: Guys, this is too lovey-dovey. [Laughter] You are supposed to represent opposite approaches to Middle East policy. So, I want to give people here their money’s worth. What is the biggest mistake—not that anybody in this room ever made, but the biggest mistake you think the other side in the American debate on Middle East policy has made?

ROSS: Part of the problem is I’m not sure we actually disagree on that. Look, I think the biggest mistake we made was thinking that we could define our strategic interest in the region in a way that was divorced from our values. For too long, and this gets back to Mubarak—and Elliott’s saying Mubarak hasn’t been proven wrong yet . . . On the other hand, Mubarak has helped to create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

ABRAMS: Yup.

ROSS: He made sure nobody who was secular or moderate or liberal had any possibility of organizing themselves. He wanted there to be a binary choice of him or the bogeyman of the Muslim Brotherhood. So, what he did was he made certain that was going to be the outcome. We, for too long, played along with it. It was always easy to rationalize why, at the moment, we shouldn’t do something, because there was always a price to be paid. But the fact is, we paid a price for that. And the longer this went on, the more certain it was that we were going to pay a price—first, because we were going to be too closely associated with, in a sense, those who were basically authoritarian [and], secondly, because we didn’t do what we could have done to make sure we even got credit for the good things we did.
You know, one of the things that always struck me—and this is something, when I was in administrations, one of the debates I always lost . . . In Egypt in particular, I used to go around and say, why aren’t our aid projects given an unbelievable profile? And I was always told—when I’d go to the embassy, the ambassador would say to me, Oh, you know, that won’t play well here. You don’t understand. That won’t play well here. You know, we have to keep a low profile. I said, you think it’s a bad thing if people think that they’re able to drink water because the U.S. has provided it? And it was a consistent thing—you know, Mubarak thinks this is a bad idea, Mubarak doesn’t want us to do that. You know, this should have been one of those things where we just said, forget it.

There was one point where I had a big problem with Mubarak. And it was actually when I was negotiating the Hebron accord—because, at one point, the Egyptians intervened in a way that actually, basically, tied Arafat’s hands for several days. And he made the decision of inviting [Jordan’s] King Hussein in as a kind of Arab alternative to help. And I realized immediately what he was doing. And so when we did the deal, afterward, I was asked: did Egypt play a helpful role? And I said no. And he hated that because he always wanted to be seen as—I have to say this about Mubarak: I never have dealt with an Arab leader who took more credit for things he did not do. And right after this, I had a meeting with him, and he wasn’t happy at all—so I used the meeting as an occasion to raise what had been a really ugly article in the Egyptian press. And it was completely anti-Semitic. And so I said to him, you know, “Why do you allow these kinds of things without any kind of response?” He says, “I have a free press.” So I said to him, “You know, Mr. President, there’s one thing I’ve noticed: you never get criticized in your press. So I suspect that if you had an attitude on something, journalists would take that attitude really seriously. If they knew that you were really unhappy about this kind of an article, I just bet that it wouldn’t appear.” And he said, “Well, I’ll think about that.” And he didn’t do anything about it.

And I’m getting back to the essence of the question: we didn’t take these guys on because we were always concerned about the strategic values. And, by the way, this was a Republican and Democratic approach. It wasn’t just one side.

SATLOFF: Elliott?

ABRAMS: I don’t disagree with that at all. Let me narrow it down to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I think we have let the Palestinians, for too long, get away with raising, now, two generations of Jew-haters. You know, the word we use is incitement, which is not as nasty a word as it ought to be, because we’re talking about terrible forms of anti-Semitism here. And it goes on year after year after year and, you know, you see it in MEMRI, you see it in Palestine Media Watch—terrible stuff in the Palestinian media—and in Palestinian schools. And, you know, at any given moment—if it’s Egypt, we have strategic values—well, we’re negotiating something with the Palestinians, let’s put that off, or, well, they’re so weak, you know, there’s a limit to what we can get out of them. Let’s put that off. And we have, over time, too often postponed things that are critically important because they are not emergencies of that day. It’s true, you know, the school textbooks—we can do that next year. But we never do it. And so the improvements are tiny, and public opinion polls throughout the Arab world, but particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, show that five- and ten-year-old kids have horrendous attitudes not just toward Israel but toward Jews. I cannot believe that if, over the last thirty years, the United States made this a central issue, we wouldn’t be in a different position. But we never did.

[Applause]
SATLOFF: Elliott, that response—actually both your responses—connects to the last set of questions I want to ask. Now, you have both been remarkably successful in a profession where being a friend of Israel is not normally a wise career move. What obstacles did you face along the way, and how did you deal with them? How serious of a problem is the American national security bureaucracy posing against those who think that the U.S.-Israel relationship is in America’s strategic interest? Dennis?

ROSS: First, I think we should start by noting that one of the previous honorees—and it is humbling to be in the same crowd with them—is probably the single most important person for changing the kind of political culture in the State Department. That was George Shultz. [Applause] Prior to George Shultz, if you were—and this is . . . I was not in the Foreign Service, but I started in the Pentagon and then I went to the State Department . . . One of the things that I was really struck by before George Shultz came on was that the—if you looked at anybody who worked on Israel who was in the Foreign Service, the other areas they worked on [were] South Africa, they worked on Taiwan. Israel was put in the category of being a pariah. And if you were in the Near East Affairs Bureau, you would work with the Arabs; there would be no cross-fertilization, you wouldn’t work on Israel, so there was no sensitivity to this at all. He made the decision that [that] ended, number one, and he said that if you’re going to progress in the Near East Affairs Bureau, you’re going to serve in Israel as well, or you’ll be on the Israeli desk as well. So, he helped to change the political culture, and you cannot exaggerate the significance of that.

When I first came in, the first position I had was in the Pentagon. And I think I’ve told this story to you [Elliott Abrams] before, but I’ll tell it again—some, most, probably haven’t heard it. One of the very first issues that I had to review was Matmon C. In 1973, during the war, there was a major arms supply that was provided to Israel, starting after the first week of the war, and it was called Matmon B. In 1977, the Israelis requested a ten-year arms-supply relationship, and it was under the title of Matmon C. So, I was in the Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation, and I was asked to be one of about twenty people to assess this, and I went down to a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in what was called the Tank. And everybody was there, was going around the room, and I was by far—I mean, I was young at this time—the youngest person in the room. And they’re going around the room, and every agency is represented, from the White House, the NSC all the different offices in the State Department, in the Pentagon, and everyone’s going around the room saying, they don’t need it. They can beat any combination of Arabs. So, it gets to me, and I say, well, that’s really not the right measure, is it? And I say, you know, we should be evaluating this in terms of, does it enhance Israeli deterrence—because if it enhances Israeli deterrence, then it reduces the prospect of war, number one. Number two, does it reduce the need for us to have to resupply the Israelis quickly—because the resupply in 1973 contributed to what was a potential confrontation with the Soviet Union. And so, if we don’t have to resupply right away, then that may reduce the prospect of us and the Soviets getting into something. And the third thing I said was, we should be focused on the whole issue of rapid war termination—does this make rapid war termination more likely, because, again, it reduces the prospects of escalation. And, you know, from an American standpoint, this is really in our vital interests.

Now, everybody around that table looked at me—how many people here saw the movie *Annie Hall*? [Laughter] And you know when he’s with her family, and they look at him as wearing *payos*?
[Laughter] Everybody around that table was looking at me as if I had payos. And they’re going, we didn’t know he was Jewish. You know, in the beginning, I felt this a lot. Over time, after the impact of George Shultz, I felt it much less. You know, the fact is, I think being Jewish and working on Middle East issues became acceptable. Now, in no small part—look, I was our negotiator and I was Jewish and that oftentimes was seized upon by the Arabs to say, you know, that’s why he’s so tough. But, again, I think it created a certain kind of environment. You know, I can’t say you don’t face certain opposition, and even I can say that there were a few articles during the Obama administration that came out that sort of portrayed me in a certain light—obviously, not coming from my fans. But the fact is, you know, I don’t feel that the kind of prohibitions that once existed exist today. And so, that should be something we all feel good about, and I think that things have changed.

SATLOFF: Thank you. Elliott, what do you think?

ABRAMS: I think they have. I didn’t have any trouble, actually, dealing with most Arab governments, in particular the Gulf Arab governments, because it became clear to me after about six months that they viewed me as an intelligent, competent, trustworthy Israeli agent. [Laughter] And once that was clear, I was able to deal with them fine.

Dennis is right about George Shultz, and I want to tell a Shultz story that illustrates this. In the second Reagan term, I was handling Latin America for Secretary Shultz, and a Sandinista mob, at one point, set fire to the doors of a synagogue during a Sabbath service. Set fire to the doors, people were inside the synagogue. And there was a cable from the U.S. embassy in Managua saying, you know, this is an unfortunate incident, it’s a matter of concern, we shouldn’t go overboard on it—doesn’t really depict . . . It was an unbelievable cable, and I took it to Secretary Shultz and I said to him: for the first time, I understand what the State Department was like in the 1930s, when Jews were trying to get visas. And I wasn’t sure what his reaction was going to be, and his reaction was—he said, tomorrow morning at our senior staff meeting, I’m calling on you. So we all go to the senior staff meeting the next morning [and] he says, “Elliott has an interesting cable he needs to tell us about.” And he asked me to repeat the story, so that the message was crystal clear throughout the building, you know, and at all levels, what his view was.

Now, I have to say, I think that view has permeated the State Department; I agree with Dennis. I do not believe, unfortunately, that it has permeated the CIA and FBI. I still find young people who I think are at a disadvantage in getting into those services or in getting promoted or in getting assignments because of their religion and because of, really, quite limited connections with Israel. So, I think, thanks to George Shultz and some others, we’ve done it at State; we have not done it throughout the U.S. government entirely.

ROSS: That’s a good point.

SATLOFF: Gentlemen, let me just close by asking, since everybody in this room cares about the American-Israel relationship, let me close by asking this: when you look at our political culture and our political discourse and our political debate, should you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the direction of American-Israel relations? And what can we, everybody in this room, do to help move and tilt that arrow into the optimistic direction? Elliott?
ABRAMS: Well, if you go by public opinion polls, the support for Israel in the American people has been steady. The composition of that support changes, but the number at the top is pretty steady. What can we do? First of all, we can pray for our evangelical brethren [Laughter], because the more of them there are, the better off Israel’s gonna be. And I’m serious about that. The second thing we can do is to take note of the changing demography of the United States. We need, for example, Asian Americans, Indian Americans, certainly Latinos, Hispanic Americans, to come to know Israel better and to understand why this relationship is so critical to our country. And if you or your parents are fairly recent immigrants from Bombay or from Guatemala City, you’re not going to be raised with that. Somebody has to talk to you about that. And most major Jewish organizations, I think, are aware of this, but clearly over the next, let’s say the next decade, this has got to be a kind of assignment for the American Jewish community. We can see the demography changing, and that outreach has got to be a central task, I think.

SATLOFF: Dennis?

ROSS: I agree with that, because the traditional constituencies that have supported Israel are going to undergo a change. And we have to take account of that, and we have to think about how you do outreach.

I would say something that fits more the Institute’s role. On the one hand, I think that I have a reason to feel somewhat optimistic, partly because when you look at the Middle East, it’s going to become more clear over the next five years anyway, given the kinds of changes I think are going to take place there, that the only country that is unmistakably a democracy, with all the efforts we’re making, is Israel. So in some ways it becomes an easier sell—because you look at the contrast. The rise of political Islam, the intolerance associated with that, I think—notwithstanding all we need to do to try to channel it—also is a reminder of who they are. And that, I think, actually plays well to the future of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. But I think it also puts a premium on scholarship to highlight this.

And, you know, I’m doing a book now that is entitled *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israeli Relationship during a Time of Change*. And the first part of the book is actually on history. And I’ve mentioned this to you, Rob—I mean, the thing I’ve been struck by is just how all the arguments, going back to Truman, all the way up through Obama, are, for the most part, with some differences, largely recycled. And you find not only on Israel but you find also analysis that is based on an interesting premise that’s just wrongheaded. And the premise is, the more radical, the more authentic—that somehow if you look at the Middle East, and you want to find who’s authentic, we should be accommodating those who are most radical. This is not new. There’s a consistent theme. You [Elliott Abrams] actually were the one who pointed out a memo signed by President Eisenhower, November 4, 1958—not that I’ve been spending too much time on this [Laughter]—which basically says we have to accommodate the radical Arab nationalists. And that’s actually a quote. And you can find that same memo being written today, just substituting Muslim Brotherhood for radical Arab nationalists. And it’s that same impulse that reflects a nonunderstanding of the region.

Let’s be clear: the notion that somehow we could accommodate them and they would change their identity was what was guiding the assumptions. And that was never going to be the case. And the importance of, sort of, doing more of the historical work to show the continuity, and where lessons
have not been learned, and the importance of learning lessons—I think this is an important responsibility for the Institute, but it’s an important piece of what we can do, I think, to try to affect the U.S.-Israeli relationship and where things go over the next decade. [Applause]

**ABRAMS:** I would just—of course, I agree with that . . . Here—we’ve said a lot of nice things about the State Department—here, the State Department’s a problem, because the purpose of the State Department, in the eyes of the people in it, is to get along with foreign governments. You’re the ambassador to country X—you’re supposed to have a smooth relationship with country X. That is why relations with Israel—it’s one of the reasons—have been and need to remain in the White House, primarily—because we need to be sure that the people who are in charge of this relationship are not primarily worried about getting along with the thirty countries that surround Israel, but have a different sense of what America’s security interests and principles require. So, this is a question you didn’t ask, which is, will U.S. policy toward Israel remain primarily in the White House? And the answer to that is yes.

**SATLOFF:** Friends, please join me in thanking and congratulating two true scholar-statesmen. [Applause] Friends, that closes our evening. On behalf of all of us at The Washington Institute, thank you. Thank you for being with us tonight.