

The View from Israel: A Conversation with former Israeli
Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

Jane Harman:

Good morning. Good morning. I'd like to welcome all of you to the Wilson Center and acknowledge the presence of many of our board members in our front row, especially the chairman of our board, Ambassador Joe Gildenhorn and his wife Alma Gildenhorn, Barry Jackson, Sandra Gerber, the vicechairman of our board and his wife, and others, and supporters of the Wilson Center. Also, recognize Haleh Esfandiari, who is the -- who directs our extraordinary Middle East Program, and I'm looking for other staff, but let me just move on with this.

Ehud Olmert came to Washington late last night, I'm sure this is his thousandth visit, but he graces us by appearing today at an event moderated by Aaron Miller. And he will go on after this to some other of our friendly competitors, but he's coming here first.

[laughter]

We note this. Our -- the subject of Middle East peace has been addressed here for years. If you want to know, and I'm sure you will hear it today, who has made -- one of the few who have made the biggest effort for Middle East peace, he's sitting -- he's right to my left. A few weeks ago here, we hosted an event focused on getting to a two-state solution, a regional perspective. And we had, I just want you to know, my friend, an extraordinary group of people: Ghaith Al-Omari, the executive director of the American Task Force on Palestine; Marwan al-Muasher, whom I sure you know, the former Jordanian foreign minister; and Gilead Sher, the head of the Institute for National Security Studies and former Israel chief peace negotiator. Aaron Miller moderated that conversation and everyone who heard it came away saying, "Why isn't this happening?" And, "Oh by the way, if a few years ago an offer that Israel made had been accepted, we wouldn't even have to have this conversation."

Elected to the Knesset at the tender age of 28, Ehud Olmert began his career as, and continues as, a maverick. He has had a breadth and depth of experience in Israeli politics, including serving as mayor of Jerusalem, which is where I first met him, minister of health, minister of trade, in

industry and labor, minister in charge of the land administration and the broadcasting authority, and, of course, Israel's 12th prime minister. His more than 30 meetings with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas represented perhaps the most intensive effort yet to reach an agreement on final status. And the positions Olmert took on the core issues reflected Israel's most far-reaching efforts to reach a negotiated settlement. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her memoirs called some of former prime minister's -- the former prime minister's 2008 negotiating positions in the name of peace remarkable.

Today, Ehud Olmert is still out front pushing the importance of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. And I, for one, remain bullish that we will have it. It is not only in the interest of the Palestinians, but it is clearly in the interest of Israelis to do this. And hopefully, with conversations like the one we're having today and with efforts in the region, including the Arab Peace Initiative, which has been resurrected by the Arab League, there will be more pressure on both countries to reach a final status agreement.

As my friend David Ignatius detailed in his column last week in The Washington Post, a Kerry adviser emphasized that Secretary Kerry wants to convey to people in the region how peace would improve their daily lives. As you all know, Secretary Kerry has made four trips to the region since becoming Secretary and plans to remain keenly active, and maybe that initiative, which certainly I personally applaud, will also make a difference. I have a dream that the Mideast region becomes an economic powerhouse, a trade center focused on rich resources, information technology and the internet, and human capital. All countries in the region would win if this occurred, and surely Israel, living in peace with her neighbors, finally would not only be a winner but a great partner for others in the region.

I last saw Ehud in Herzliya about a month ago at a dinner. The next morning he was running -- planning to run a half-marathon in Tel-Aviv and then take off for the United States. He did these things. There was record heat in Tel-Aviv. A lot of people had trouble with the half-marathon, but he just told me it was one of his best times ever. And so, my friends, one of our best times ever is welcoming Prime Minister Ehud Olmert here, and then

following his remarks, our impressive Aaron David Miller will ask him some questions. Please welcome Prime Minister Olmert.

[applause]

Ehud Olmert:

Thank you very much, Jane. Thank you very much for inviting me and providing me with this opportunity to be at this very prestigious institute, very distinguished board members, Ambassador Gildenhorn, and all the guests sitting here, and of course my friend Aaron David Miller, whose family I know -- I -- for generations, starting with his grandfather in Cleveland. Since I'm going to make a short statement at the beginning, I'll leave some of the issues to perhaps later discussion with Aaron and then these questions coming from the crowd.

I want to make a statement which I think is a premise that must be understood and accepted and I think is the most important basis for the understanding of the conviction that I have and I think quite a few in Israel and many outside of Israel, that this is possibly the last, but also the best, time that we have to make peace, the last crucial peace that we have to make, with our neighbors. This is the peace with the Palestinians. I think, and I know that this opinion is shared by many, many in the defense establishment in Israel, that in the last 65 years, since the proclamation of the State of Israel, there never was a time in which Israel was in a better security shape than we are now. From a strategic point of view, the dangers that Israel faces today are smaller and are more manageable than ever before. When we look at the immediate surrounding of the State of Israel and the neighboring countries, the traditional enemies of Israel, the ones we looked at with a certain degree of fear, are not potential players in any possible attack that can jeopardize the existence of the State of Israel.

Look at Syria. Maybe we'll come back to it later. I don't know whether Assad will remain in power. I don't know whether he will be replaced. I don't know if he will be replaced who will replace it. I don't know who, amongst the different forces that are now fighting against Assad, will be the one that will take over and what his agenda will be. I don't know. I know one thing: neither he nor the possible future leaders of Syria will have the power,

the capacity, the energy, and the resources to fight with the State of Israel for the foreseeable future. I hear all these talks lately about the dangers in Syria. I think it's grossly exaggerated, and the first to know it are the Syrians. Therefore I don't think -- not that we don't have to look carefully at what happens in Syria; sure, we have to. Not that we don't have to be prepared for any eventuality that will surprise us; we have to be very careful and look closely at every point in Syria, and we have to do it in a pass and sometimes we were surprised and we had to take actions, not necessarily talking about it publicly, but taking important actions in order to remove dangers that may have come from Syria.

But when I look at Syria today, I know that Syria is not a strategic threat on the State of Israel, certainly not Egypt. We have formal peace with Egypt. We could have better relations with Egypt. Unfortunately, presently with the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, it may take more time to find a new basis that will be established between us and them that will improve the daily contact between the two governments, but I think the Egyptians are very careful not to cross a line which may be dangerous first for them, because they understand one thing, which sometimes when you come to power you understand and when you are in a position. In an entirely non-democratic country you may not understand that the responsibility for feeding 80 million people every day is far more important than entering into adventures that might end up with a terrible disaster for your own people and your own country. And therefore Egypt is certainly not in the picture for any development that may jeopardize the security and the strategic interests of the State of Israel.

So where is the danger? There is one danger: Iran. Iran is a danger, not to Israel alone. I was involved in dealing with this issue for almost 10 years in different capacities when I was a member of the cabinet of Sharon and then when I became prime minister myself. I think I am familiar with the basic facts just as much as anyone else any place. I remember that in 2003, when I was a member of the Select Committee of Ministers in the cabinet of Sharon that dealt with Iran directly on a daily basis, we were advised by the top experts that by the year 2008, the latest 2009, no question that Iran would possess nuclear power. Well, we are now in the middle of 2013. They still don't possess it. I think that we have to very carefully

look at it. I think that we have to take measures in order to prevent it. I think that we did take measures that were very harmful to the nuclear plans of Iran over the last few years and I am very proud that the government that I was leading was very active in many different ways, that obviously are not to be discussed in details publicly, that certainly did not help the nuclear program of Iran. And I think that we were assisted by friendly nations, primarily by the United States of America, which for no good reason was blamed for not doing anything, which is not true. But I think, and I said it then and I still think --

Male Speaker:

I'm appalled that the Wilson Center would host a war criminal such as yourself --

Female Speaker:

Oh my goodness.

Male Speaker:

-- or who would be sure that you -- the international community will hold you accountable for your war crimes.

Male Speaker:

Elliot [spelled phonetically] --

Male Speaker:

In solidarity to the Palestinians, all of you should be appalled [inaudible] --

[applause]

Male Speaker:

-- [unintelligible] for all these threats to Israel, is Israel and itself. You're pushing the line farther and farther.

Ehud Olmert:

You know, I always wonder, these guys that heckle me sometimes in these meetings, they don't remember that I'm a graduate of the Israeli Knesset. When someone has been nine terms in the Israel Knesset, do you think that one heckler can shake him off?

[laughter]

I mean, let's take it seriously.

[applause]

We come from a democracy where such voices -- why did he leave? He should have stayed.

[laughter]

Tell him that he can come back. I will not hold it against him.

Anyway, so, I think that Iran is a problem. It's a serious problem. It's a serious problem for many countries, and this issue, as I used to say time and again when I was prime minister, must be led by the United States of America and other major powers in the world, because if Iran -- hopefully not, and I'm certain it will not -- reach the point where they possess nuclear power, it can change entirely not just the balance but the stability not only in our region but maybe much further, and it can create turbulence and force other nations to possess nuclear powers and this can create a danger. And I'm not certain that President Obama wants that the legacy that will be left after his second term as President of the United States will be a nuclear Iran, and therefore, while we have to see how America will react to this in the future and what the measures that America will take with others in order to realize what the President made as a commitment, but it still echoes in my ears what President Obama said, what Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said, what Secretary of State John Kerry said: "Iran will not be nuclear."

When the President and the two of the most powerful and important secretaries of the United States say in no unclear terms, in the most explicit manner that Iran will not be nuclear, I assume that they know what they're talking about and I take very seriously the impact of their commitment as the leaders of the western world and the ones that ought to lead this campaign against Iran. Therefore, I made all these preliminary comments about the dangers basically to say that indeed I share entirely the analysis made by Secretary Kerry yesterday night when he said that this is the best time, and maybe the last time, for the State of Israel to engage in a serious dialogue in order to achieve peace with the Palestinians. This is --

Male Speaker:

[inaudible] of resisting your occupation. This is what [unintelligible] and the rest of the American people think of your peace process. To hell with you and your occupation. Free my people and free Palestine. We will never be silenced.

[applause]

Ehud Olmert:

He doesn't look like a Palestinian. [laughs] He looks like an American. That's fine. Even Americans are allowed to protest. That's all right. We have some Israelis who do it the same way, but I think that this is the right time. This is -- there can be no better time. This is not only the right time, this is possibly, as Senator Kerry -- Secretary Kerry said last night, may prove to be the last time that we can make an agreement with the Palestinians and therefore I hope that both sides will take serious measures in order to participate in this process and that the Americans and the American administration will move all the forces that are needed in order to support such a process between us and the Palestinians in the very near future. Thank you very much.

[applause]

Female Speaker:

[inaudible] you are wanted in several countries and many of you do not know that. This doesn't even explain his war times, okay? Look into it. You're a murderer. Shame on Woodrow Wilson for inviting a war criminal. This is disgusting. Fourteen-hundred people were killed in Operation Cast Lead. My former partner was there. It was her job to collect the bodies. She was working for the American Red Cross. She saw Israeli soldiers playing soccer with the head of a two-year old child. She found a woman's body with maggots crawling out of the bullet holes. You might have prevented this.

Male Speaker:

[unintelligible] --

Female Speaker:

You could have prevented this. You're a murderer. You talk about peace. You could have prevented this. You could have prevented the death of 1,400 Palestinians during Operation Cast Lead --

Jane Harman:

I'd like to request that law enforcement move down to the front here. I'd also like to repeat that the Wilson Center is proud of inviting people to express a broad cross-section of views. As the president and CEO of the Wilson Center, I defend that process. I also defend free speech in this country, but it is unfortunate that people feel it necessary to disrupt a gathering where they could peacefully and civilly ask questions. Would law enforcement please move to the front in case there are any more disturbances?

[applause]

Jane Harman:

Thank you. Aaron, please proceed.

Aaron Miller:

Ehud, I must say, first of all, you continue to impress and surprise and I will formally apologize to you, too. I mean, we live in a democratic polity. People have the right to express their views. I've been here for quite a few years now and rarely if ever have I seen this sort of rudeness. And you have dealt with it in an extremely graceful and classy manner, and I appreciate that, too.

Ehud Olmert:

Thank you very much. I just want to say, Aaron, just before you continue, that these guys made a mistake. They don't understand that for me, in Israel, there couldn't be any better PR than their comments because so many Israelis who are pissed off with me because they don't share necessarily the opinion of Jane Harman that what I did in order to close the gap and make peace between Israel and the Palestinians, offering the most far-reaching concession that Israel has ever offered in the history of the State of Israel, that it was good. They thought that I was betraying the principles of Israel. Now these guys come and say that I'm a war criminal. For many Israelis, it may restore some of my reputation.

[laughter]

So, you guys, you know, think about it, if that's what you want.

Aaron Miller:

I really do want to get to questions for our guest, but I want to drill down in three areas. And let's start with the peace issue. You know, if you look at the history of peacemaking on the Israeli side, it really is a history of transformed hawks. It's really not a story of persistent doves. It's largely men who, as a consequence of changes on the ground and their own changing calculations, have reached out and responded; Begin, Rabin, Sharon in terms of withdrawal from Gaza. You very much belong to that group of transformers. So, your discussions with Abu Mazen are among the new urban legends of the peace process. There's a lot of misunderstanding that swirls around these discussions over a period of a year or two. So, can you get to the main issue here? What exactly happened? Did Mahmoud Abbas accept part of it, reject it all, failure -- fail to get back to you? I mean, you talked to tower.org and you said that you're still waiting for Abbas' call, which I assume means you never got a formal response. But what is the story here?

Ehud Olmert:

Number one, I met with Abu Mazen maybe 36 times, four hours each time. Most of the meetings were private; just four hours, him and me. It always started with a lunch in the residence of the prime minister in Jerusalem with the staff, then we left the staff, they remained in the dining hall talking, smoking, and we went to my study and we talked for hours. On the first meeting on the 23rd of December, 2006 -- which means a year before Annapolis, okay? I say to Abbas when we left for the study for a private talk, I said to him, "President, everything is on the table. Everything means everything: refugees, borders, Jerusalem, the holy sites, everything." So, I -- not that I don't have preconditions. I managed to talk about everything and I don't tell you now that I have preconditions that Israel will have a military presence in the Jordan Valley, that Jerusalem will not be discussed or will not be, what they call, divided, I think share this much better is much more accurate because that part of Jerusalem which the Palestinians really are insisting on is not really part of what we thought Jerusalem was for generations. Abu Dis, Isawea [spelled phonetically], Jabel Mukaber, what do they have to do with what we consider to be the important part for us for Jerusalem. Therefore, I thought this was sharing. Everything is on the table. So, from day one Abu Mazen knew that I'm serious and that I'm

ready to hit on all the issues that could ultimately resolve the outstanding differences between us and the Palestinians to start with.

I remember and I respect that in one of those lunches that was followed by the private meetings with Abu Mazen, one of the attendees, I think -- I don't remember who he was -- he said to me, "Yes, you say that you are ready to accept the Palestinian state, but you guys have a mistake. When we talk about the Palestinian state, we talk about a normal state like any other state, a sovereign state without any presence of any soldier of the neighboring country inside our sovereign territory and you must remember it if you really seriously, genuinely want to appear as a peacemaker between us and you." And my immediate response was, "I understand it and my peace plan does not include a military presence of Israel in any part of the West Bank and the borders that we will agree with on the basis of swaps of territories based on '67." And I think that this approach that I am prepared to put out entirely, except for the three centers that President Bush was talking about, hey will be swapped with territories that were part of the State of Israel prior to '67. I think that they finally understood that I mean business, that I'm not here to just fool around. And also, and I said it in Annapolis, but I said it before Annapolis in the presence of Secretary Rice and the envoy to the Middle East, Tony Blair, former prime minister of Great Britain, of many of your congressmen, including Howard Berman -- at that time he was the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the House and others -- I for the first time talked about the suffering of the Palestinian refugees and the fact that Israel is not indifferent to the suffering and that I believe that within the context of an agreement and within the framework of the -- our peace initiative, the refugee issue ought to be dealt with and resolved.

And I talked about also compensations, which will be paid to all those that suffered from the wars between Israel and the Palestinians, including Jews that suffered a lot. There were hundreds of thousands of Jews that were expelled from Arab Muslim countries because they were perceived to be affiliated and identified with the Jews that were fighting with the Arabs. And they also deserve compensation, but that there will be an arrangement with the support of the international community. In other words, I have addressed myself to all the issues. And

finally, I have proposed Abu Mazen a comprehensive plan, including a map of the borders of the Palestinian state and the State of Israel with the territorial swaps and the territories which were part of the State of Israel prior to '67 were indicated very clearly on the map.

I saw two weeks ago there was someone, that got probably from Abu Mazen, now he wanted me to give him the map --

Female Speaker:
Israel is a terrorist state.

Ehud Olmert:
-- and I asked Abu Mazen, "If you'll sign initials in this map, I'll give it to you." He asked me why. I said, "I'll tell you, to be honest, president, I know that there is a danger which I can't afford to take, but I'll give you the map. You'll take it home. You may come back. You may not. If you'll not come back in two years' time, you'll come to another Israel prime minister and you'll say, 'Now, this I already had a long time ago.' Now if you want to start negotiations, let's start from here and move forward and I don't want to be used. So if you sign it, you can take it. If not, tell me what do you want me to do? This is the plan. I am ready to sign it right now. I didn't consult with anyone. I don't -- I take upon myself the responsibilities as prime minister of Israel to sign it right now. Sign it." And he said, "Well, it's very serious. It's very serious, but I'm not an expert on maps, so perhaps my map expert and your map expert we'll see tomorrow morning and they will discuss it and maybe we can sign it in two or three days." I said, "President, take my word: in the next 50 years there will be no prime minister in Israel that will offer you what I did. Take it now, sign it, let's make history. Let's go in two days' time to the UN Security Council" -- it was in September of 2008 -- "and we will go through the motions in the United Nations. We'll have a vote. I'm sure 15 -- all the members of the Security Council will support this and then we'll ask a general assembly to support it and then we'll go to the Congress and the joint session of Congress with the president of America and both of us will be standing there and will give us support. And then we'll go to the European parliament and there we'll ask all of the leaders of the world to come to Jerusalem, to the center of Jerusalem, to the point where the two parts will be merged and separated, if you want, okay? And they will say, 'This

is the peace plan. This is what we need to do.' And then I'll go for elections, you'll go for elections, and we'll win it." And he said, "I need two or three more days. You know, they will see tomorrow." We summon to the room my political adviser, [unintelligible] and Saeb Erekat, who is the chief negotiator for the Palestinians. They say, "Tomorrow we meet and we will go as the experts of maps," and so on and so forth.

The next day, Saeb Erekat got called and he said, "President, you know, we forgot yesterday that we have to be in Oman today, so let's postpone it for a week." I said, "Okay, a week is still a relevant time." They never came back to me. Now, it's true they never said no. They said it was serious. And what is more important is that fundamentally I think, based on what I heard from Abu Mazen time and again through all kinds of friends that went to see him and came to talk to me and vice versa, that fundamentally he understood that this is the shape of the deal. Now, that maybe there was still room for a little fine-tuning which had to be made, but there were other reasons that influenced him. But he kept saying all the time and he kept passing the message to me, "Don't ever say that I said no, because I didn't say no." And that's precisely why I think that this is the time now that this plan will be brought back to center stage, because this is the only time in the history of the conflict and the negotiations between us and them that the Palestinian leaders said that he doesn't reject something which was proposed by us as a real, genuine, serious basis for a conclusion of the conflict between us and them.

Aaron Miller:

Right. So the next logical question is -- the current government of Israel is probably too divided to do what you say. The Palestinians are weak and under great pressure. So the obvious implication of what you're saying is that somebody should, in fact, use your baseline as a point of departure to begin a negotiation with active mediation to achieve an end of conflict and, with Arab states' support, presumably, and American energy to drive the process. You might argue that now, in fact, is the time in order to achieve an agreement based largely on the parameters that you have accepted and Mahmoud Abbas has at least acquiesced in believing represent the shape of a solution. Is that fair? You can't speak for the Americans or the Arabs, but --

Ehud Olmert:

That's right. I can't speak for the Americans. I can't speak for the Palestinians. I even -- I think that if I can't speak for the government of Israel, perhaps I can speak for them less than I can speak for the others for obvious reasons. I don't think that the prime minister is in particular love with my opinions. So it's not personal. It's not that we have any personal feud, but, you know, he has a different policy and this is well known and unfortunately this policy is not supported by me and I think by the majority of the Israelis. But the majority of the Israelis, the fact is that the Likud and the Lieberman faction together received 31 votes, which means that they lost 25 percent of the political power in the last election. This was a stunning defeat for the policy and the only reason why Bibi is still prime minister is because there was no one that challenged him on that position for prime minister. No one of the others was -- except maybe for Shelly Yachimovich, but her candidacy -- self-proclaimed candidacy was never accepted by anyone to be very serious or very challenging.

So I think that, yes, Israel should have -- this is my opinion, that Israel, not because of the Palestinians, not by -- and even I take one step further and say I don't blame -- I never did, nor will I do -- Israel for not having peace with the Palestinians. I think we made terrible mistakes over the years. I am included, in previous times before I was prime minister in my different positions. But, as you say, you know, at some point in life when you take all these elements together and try to build up a comprehensive picture from this puzzle, you have to reach -- if you want to be true to yourself, if what you say, that you want peace, is genuine, then sometimes you have to change your opinions, you have to change your positions, you have to admit that you made a mistake. I made mistakes. I never tried to excuse myself. I said I have made mistakes. I admitted I was wrong. I misunderstood certain things which eventually I understood, and when I understood them I drew the necessary, inevitable conclusions, and at the end of the day I proposed. One can say it was too late, but I became prime minister only in 2006. I wasn't prime minister before, but when I became prime minister I was ready. And what I proposed, as Jane said before, was the most far-reaching peace plan that was

ever proposed by any prime minister in the history of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

So I think that we should adopt this now. But I think that the basic problem, the real basic problem that stays between us and the Palestinians is not an understanding about the nature of what will ultimately be the plan that will be accepted. I think that both sides understand that what I've proposed is it more or less. You know, there's a very tiny fine-tuning that needs to be made of a fraction of a percent here or there, you know, of another little piece of territory in the swaps there as against another place; tiny things because the fundamental basic things of, A, that Jerusalem is the capital of the Palestinians and Jerusalem is certainly the capital of the Jewish people in the State of Israel, no question about it, but it's also shared with the Palestinians that the borders on the basis of '67, that the refugee issue will be resolved in an adequate manner within the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative. I repeat again, all the accusations that Israel ignored the Arab Peace Initiative are untrue. I said it Annapolis. Everyone can read the speech. And I said it before in the Savant Forum [spelled phonetically] in Jerusalem with the presence of Condi Rice and others, that Israel is prepared to negotiate the refugee issue within the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative, and I proposed specific ideas about how to do it, and we talked and I said it would be part of the agreement about the suffering of the Palestinian people on the basis of -- just on the human basis, as a result of the wars between us and the -- as we will speak about the suffering of Jews over all these years as a result of these wars and so many terrorist actions that were perpetrated against innocent civilians in the State of Israel and which killed thousands of innocent people, and so on and so forth. So all this was proposed.

Now, so therefore I can say that we are guilty of not having peace. I don't want to blame the Palestinians. I think that the Palestinians should also make clear that they are ready to complete, to conclude the dialogue on that basis. Now, if both countries will do it, then I think it will be easier for the Americans to use the energies of Secretary Kerry. And I admire his energies and his dedication, I have to say, and I have enormous respect for Secretary Kerry for his emotional involvement and his determination to carry on in this direction. I hope that

he will be successful in mobilizing the support, the more active support of the President on a daily basis, just as Bush did, just as Clinton did. I don't think that there was one day in the presidency of Bill Clinton that he didn't deal with the Middle East, and I think that Bush spent a lot of time on these issues and was familiar with all the details. I think that President Obama must understand that the key to changing the Middle East and the key to bring more stability in the Arab countries, which is now in a very shaky situation, is an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, and that this is not a minor issue. This is a vital issue, not just for us, but equally for the Palestinians, for the Middle East, for other countries, and therefore for the national interest of the United States of America. And I hope that they will draw the necessary conclusions.

Aaron Miller:

Ehud, thank you very much. I think it's time -- I have many more questions but I will not ask them -- to go to your questions. So let's start right here in the second row. There is a light --

Ehud Olmert:

And please identify yourself, if you don't mind, okay?

Aaron Miller:

Yes, thank you for reminding me of that.

Male Speaker:

Yeah, I want to begin by --

Aaron Miller:

Could you identify yourself?

Male Speaker:

My name is [unintelligible]. I want to applaud --

Ehud Olmert:

Banal [spelled phonetically]?

Male Speaker:

Banal [unintelligible]. I want to begin by applauding the former prime minister for being a peace activist. I really agree with you, we all need peace. And peace is a great notion that we all cherish. But I strongly believe that in our cherishing for peace and desiring to have peace, we

must not lose who we are. On the question of Israel and Palestine, I see a situation where you seem to be saying, like, "Israel -- if it means Israel losing who Israel is, they should do it for the sake of peace." And to me that frames things specifically on the question of Jerusalem. From all sources, ideological sources, and even present history, the question of Jerusalem not being the capital purportedly, as we all know because many people are saying Jerusalem is not the capital of Israel, I think this is something that is very fundamental, that Israel must not seem to be losing out its hat simply because we are trying to say, "Oh, let us reach out to our brothers, the Palestinians."

Aaron Miller:
Thank you very much.

Male Speaker:
Then question number --

Aaron Miller:
I think only one, because we -- but thank you very much.
Ehud.

Ehud Olmert:
Well, briefly, as you heard, I think that Jerusalem is and will always be the capital of the Jewish people. There is no question about it. It's obvious. I've never heard any other idea, nor will I have in the future. Jerusalem is the capital of Jewish people. The question is whether what is now defined as the city limit of Jerusalem is necessarily all of it, it's the part of Jerusalem which is of importance and of significance historically and in the future for the Jewish people. And that is about which I have a different opinion from some of my friends, who say different things and think different things from what they say, because when I ask everyone, "Tell me, do you really think that Jabel Mukaber has been the side for which Jews were praying for 2,000 years when they talked about returning back to Jerusalem," they all smiled, if they -- and they don't laugh. I ask if Shah Ifat [spelled phonetically] is the place that we all prayed for all our lives when we talked about returning to Zion, and they all laugh. So why is it important to have Israel sovereignty over those neighborhoods which are fully inhabited only by Palestinians, which are not part of the story culture, part of Jerusalem, why do they need to be part of the State of

Israel if this is the barrier between peace and war forever? And I'm saying it as a former mayor of Jerusalem. I was 10 years mayor of Jerusalem and Aaron [spelled phonetically] was at that time the head of Seats for Peace, which was located in the east side of Jerusalem and he visited there every week and he maybe lived in Israel for a long time. And he knows that I was a very tough fighter for the -- you know, they -- what they call the United City of Jerusalem, and I reached a conclusion to be true to myself only, that there are many parts of the city of Jerusalem which are not equal to other parts, and all these parts which are not equal in terms of the quality of life, in terms of the rights of the people, in terms of the daily living of these people, are the parts where Palestinians live. And I said, probably, the slogan of a united city is incompatible with the reality that we can create on ground. And this is not something that we can ignore for a long time. Therefore I reached the conclusion that we have to keep the part of Jerusalem which is essential for us, and this is the capital, and then it will be recognized by the entire international community. My dear friends, let's not forget it. We say Bill Clinton was a great friend of Israel, George Bush was a great friend of Israel, Obama is a great friend of Israel. Did any of them ever recognize Jerusalem to be the capital of the State of Israel? West Jerusalem, not east Jerusalem. That part which was part of the State of Israel, prior to '67, did they ever recognize it as the capital of the State of Israel as they promised before elections, all of them? No.

So I want to be practical. I want to be -- to come to the point where we can solve issues rather than continue arguing about it forever without solving the problems and thus maybe creating a reality in which it would be impossible to make a solution that will maintain the democratic nature of the State of Israel and the Jewish nature of the State of Israel, which for me is essential, because my parents came from China in 1933 to live in the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and I don't want now that I will inherit to my grandchildren something which is entirely different. So, you know, in life you sometimes have to make compromises. And the compromise is that there are parts of Jerusalem will be part of the Palestinian capital, the Jewish parts of Jerusalem, including those parts which were built after the '67 war, will be part of the State of Israel or the Sovereignty of Israel and will be the capital of the State

of Israel, and the holy sites will be administered by five nations, as I said: America, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Palestinians. This will allow a freedom of religion, open access to everyone, and it will maintain and it will protect the nature of these holy places for all people that cherish them: Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This is my plan.

Aaron Miller:

Yes, right there in the blue shirt. Sorry.

Matthew Dawson:

Hi, thank you. I'm Matt Dawson with the Center for American Progress.

Aaron Miller:

Say it again?

Matthew Dawson:

Matt Dawson with the Center for American Progress. It's a think tank here in DC. A question first on the talks you had with Abu Mazen. There was an interview you gave several weeks ago with Avia Sokoroff [spelled phonetically], the journalist, in which you discussed the details of your talks.

Ehud Olmert:

Yes.

Matthew Dawson:

And, you know, you had said some of what you had said here about, you know, he didn't say no but he didn't respond, but the way that your remarks were spun, I think, by many here in DC, especially on the right side, was that this is more evidence that the Palestinians are simply not interested in agreement and there's no partner for peace. I wonder if you could just talk a little bit about how you interpreted that. Do you agree with that? And very quickly, on the Arab Peace Initiative, do you think that the current unrest in the region -- how does that impact the viability of a peace initiative as a basis for future negotiations?

Ehud Olmert:

Well, the first section is that I never said, and never did I mean to say, that the fact that he didn't say no was really just a more polite way of blaming him for not having

peace with Israel. I -- there were many reasons, some of which can be understood, you know? I kept saying all the time that, when people talk to me about Abu Mazen, and they say that he's not serious, he's not really -- he doesn't mean it seriously, he's very weak, and so on and so forth. So I say, "Look, everyone within the context of Israel understands that the pressures on Bibi from the right wing makes it very difficult for him to take a decision and must be understood and must be, you know, reconciled with -- that it's not easy because, you know, the settlers, the supporters, and some of the extreme representative of the Likud within this -- the parliamentary faction, and they are now more than they were in the past, make it impossible for Bibi. I don't accept it, by the way. I think that if someone in the position of leadership needs to take a decision against the tide, against the general -- you know, some of his members, he -- this is where his leadership should be tested.

"But," I say, "You understand it about Bibi and you don't understand it about Abu Mazen? Does he not have the Haran [spelled phonetically], who is ready to overthrow him any minute? And what about the Hamas, and what about all the others in his own party? Do you think that opposition is a creation only of Israeli politics?" So he's got his problems just as well, and I don't agree that he is not a partner. He said against -- he said that he's against terror when he was number-two to Yasser Arafat. In the middle of the second intifada, he stood up and said, "I'm against it," at a time when Arafat perpetrated it.

So I think that he is a partner for peace. And I don't know amongst the Palestinians who may be a better partner for peace. So if we want peace, we have to find the good excuses why to make peace with him rather than to say why he is not ready to make peace. And also, if you read -- you know, I'm not a sale -- representative for -- salesman for a Condi Rice's book or George Bush book, but if you read her book, she writes some stunning things about how senior Israelis came to her and to Abu Mazen and advised him, "Stay away from Olmert. Don't cherish his proposals because soon enough he will be gone. And who knows? Maybe you can get more," and so on and so forth. At the time when she said to the president that she is right, that when he said to her that Olmert wants peace, except that she thinks that Olmert will not leave. "He will die because they killed Raman [spelled phonetically] for far less."

So I don't want to judge. I quote you from the book of Condi Rice.

[laughter]

And it's written. It's written -- no. It's written. I wasn't present when she met with Israelis -- senior Israelis who told her, "Don't go forward with Olmert's proposals." I wasn't there. I can't verify it or deny it. I can only quote from what she wrote from meetings, and I don't see any reason that she would write it unless she says the truth. She's not an enemy. She's a good friend. She's a good friend of Israel, she's a good friend of me, she's a good friend of others in Israel, and I like her very much. And she was very constructive as a foreign minister. She visited me at least 25 times at the time that I was prime minister. This is not insignificant.

So I don't want to blame anyone. I don't want to blame ourselves, definitely. I don't want to blame the Palestinians and I don't want to blame the Americans. I want that all these forces will understand the urgency that we are in and that everything depends entirely on a breakthrough between us and the Palestinians, and that also refers to the Arab countries.

I think that we can't afford to have for a long time this coolness in the relations between us and Egypt. Egypt is a partner. Egyptians' interests are to have much better relations with Israel. For the time being, it's very -- psychologically, I can understand it's tough for the Egyptians -- Muslim brothers who spoke like Hamas and like others -- suddenly to create the same kind of spiritual relations that we had with Mubarak.

But it's something that must be dealt with. And I agree that the Palestinians will have an enormous impact on the ability of Israel to create a dialogue with all Arab countries and it will also help to quiet down the unrest among some of them, which is now quite a major problem for many of them. I think Turkey should be a major power in helping Israel to create this kind of dialogue, and therefore I was in favor of Awad-Rashmawi's [spelled phonetically] Turkey long ago. I said to -- I stated publicly in Israel three years ago, we will apologize to Turkey. Don't worry, we will apologize to Turkey. The

question is what we will pay until we apologize. If we will apologize now, the price will be little. If we apologize three years from now, it will be much higher, and unfortunately, again, I was right.

[laughter]

So -- but still I think that Turkey should play a major role, not because Turkey's ideal, not because I agree with everything that Adwan [spelled phonetically] said or that he does. Not at all. Because there is no alternative. And Turkey, of course, again, with the assistance, with the umbrella support, with the energies, with the enthusiasm, and with the power of the United States of America, mobilizing all these forces, it still can be done.

Aaron Miller:

Let's take two or three questions together. I think that's probably about all we're going to have time for. Yes, right over here. Please identify yourself.

Male Speaker:

Yeah, my name is Herbert Grossman [spelled phonetically]. I'm a retired judge. When Barak pulled out of South Lebanon in 2000 and when Sharon pulled out of Gaza in 2004, the military -- Israeli military thought that they had complete control and they were prepared for everything, especially since they had unfettered control of the skies. You, more than anyone, should realize that that didn't come about, that in 2007 Israel suffered a great defeat in the Lebanese war because they had no response to dug-in with loads of rockets that they can fire within seconds. Yet a year later, you propose that Israel pull out of the high ground in the West Bank, in which you know that sooner or later Palestinians will dig in and will have tens of thousands of rockets that they are able to fire at the Netanya and Tel Aviv. What do you say to the people who say that the reason you're promoting all that is really because of your personal legal problems you are trying to ingratiate yourself --

Aaron Miller:

All right. So we have -- really, no -- we just -- it's not that. It's just we're running out of time.

Ehud Olmert:

Well, what do you expect from a judge?

[laughter]

Aaron Miller:
I want a -- is --

Ehud Olmert:
What do you expect from a judge?

[laughter]

Aaron Miller:
This is question --

Male Speaker:
What is your response --

Aaron Miller:
Question and answers.

Male speaker:
-- with regard to your military strategy?

Aaron Miller:
All right, so that's one.

Male Speaker:
Your military strategy that you didn't have in South
Lebanon? What is your military strategy against that type
of warfare from the high ground in the West Bank?

Ehud Olmert:
Judge Grossman -- Judge Grossman --

Male Speaker:
Yes?

Ehud Olmert:
I understood you. Believe me, I understood you. I will
answer you.

Male Speaker:
Okay. That's [inaudible] --

Ehud Olmert:
But --

Aaron Miller:
And that's one question.

Ehud Olmert:
-- Aaron --

Aaron Miller:
Let's do another two. Yes, right in the center here.

Wayne Glass:
Thank you. I'm Professor Wayne Glass from the University of Southern California, with my excellent students here, studying nuclear issues. Mr. Prime Minister, you said that -- at the beginning of the remarks -- that Iran was the largest remaining threat with respect to Israel. Let's dream a little bit and let's assume that we do reach a resolution with the Palestinians. How will that play out, in your opinion, regarding the Iranian threat? Thank you.

Aaron Miller:
Thank you. One more question. Yes, right here. Yes. That's right. I'm sorry.

Female Speaker:
Thank you. Paulette Leigh [spelled phonetically], communications consultant. Mr. Prime Minister, you have said -- I've heard other people also say that this is not only the best time but maybe the last time that a peace agreement can be reached. What do you mean by that? Why? It's been going for 65 years. Why not another year?

Aaron Miller:
Okay. So we have Israeli withdrawals, Gaza, Lebanon, we have nuclear, and we have best time/last time.

Ehud Olmert:
Yeah. Judge Grossman, I am sure that you're a great expert on legal matters. I doubt you are understanding about strategic politics. The war in Lebanon was the greatest achievement -- military achievement that -- in the history of the state of Israel and the history of the wars between Israel and the Arab countries. The first time that the result of a war, for seven years now, we have a quiet front. There was not one bullet shot from the north to the state of Israel since the last day of August, almost seven years ago -- 14th of August, when the ceasefire was declared. Is this a failure? This is a great achievement.

There wasn't ever, in any of the Israeli military confrontations -- the greatest war in the history of the state of Israel was a six-day war. Right? Three months later we started a war for of attrition in the border of Sinai and in the -- at the beginning in the north end -- we made an agreement in the north and after three years and after hundreds of Israeli soldiers killed, we made another agreement with cease fire in 1970 with Egypt, only to face the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

There was not one war which ended up with complete silence for seven years, without one bullet shot and with complete change of the quality of life for the entire north part of the state of Israel. So there was a misperception. It was a -- I'm not criticizing you. You're not supposed to understand it. You understand other matters, and probably very good, but in these matters others didn't understand at the beginning. Now they have changed their opinion. Why? Because the reality is stronger than the rhetoric. What can we do? And when you see that for seven years they -- Hezbollah refrained from doing anything. Now, not that things didn't happen in the last seven years between us and Syria and between us and the Hezbollah. Many things happened. I can't speak about some of these things, but it was published here in America, not in Israel, what we did in Syria.

Now, in order to save Assad, they sent thousands of troops of Hezbollah to Syria to fight against the rebels, but when it was attributed to Israel that something terrible happened in Deerzur [spelled phonetically], 450 kilometers from Israel, that Israel destroyed something which was strategically essential for the Syrian plans, no one responded, no one said a word. Why? Because we have created a deterrent in the war in Lebanon. So I am tired of disagreeing with your perception. I am tired with disagreeing with your understanding. That's number one.

Number two, the other lesson which we learned in the war in Lebanon in the castle operation [spelled phonetically]. Now, I understand that the castle operation infuriates -- infuriated some of the people that came here to heckle me and to take me to the international court of justice in order to arrest me for the rest of my life for war crimes, but I want to remind you that the castle operation started only after thousands of rockets were shot at innocent Israelis in their homes, in Ashkelon, in Beersheba, and in

Ashdod, and in other places. A million Israelis were sitting for weeks in shelters.

Now, I don't know -- and I say it to world leaders -- whoever talk with me -- that any country in the world, whether America or Great Britain or France or Germany or Italy or anyone else -- or Spain -- would have said, "Quiet," without responding when one of their cities would have been attacked by 20 missiles by another country or from another border, and they would have immediately respond in order to save the life of the citizens. This is a primary responsibility of every country, is to provide security for their people.

But -- and this is very important, and I urge all of you to remember, particularly those who are experts in either international law -- during the 33 days that we were attacking -- we were responding to the attacks from Lebanon, there was not one time that there was any movement in the United Nations against the state of Israel, including by Arab countries. Not strange? No. You know why? Because Israel pulled out entirely from Lebanon and we responded from within territories which the international community recognized to be part of the state of Israel. And therefore we exercise the fundamental right of self-defense for the Israeli people. That's why we could do it in spite of the fact that, from a technical military point of view, maybe -- I'm not certain -- that pulling out from Lebanon gave a certain advantage to the Lebanese.

But the fact that we were out of Lebanon justified the Israeli reaction in the eyes of the international community, which is not insignificant. The same is for castle operation. There was not one motion in the United Nations against Israel by any country. And at the end of castle operation, may I remind you, all of the top leaders of Europe, with a notice of less than 24 hours, came into the residence of the prime minister of Israel: Gordon Brown, Sarkozy, Angela Merkel, Silvio Berlusconi, Topolanek, the leader of the EU, and Zapatero, prime minister of Spain -- not the friendliest to Israel previously, and all of them, with about 12 foreign ministers of other countries, stood up in front of the televisions and said, "Israel had a right to defend itself." You know why? Because we did it from within boundaries which were recognized by the international

community to be ours. Now, it's true -- do you think that the Palestinians can't shoot rockets, if they want today, on Natanya, Inkfasaba [spelled phonetically], and Tel Aviv? The distance between the territories which are now controlled by them, and these places, given the range of the rockets that they have, they can shoot any time they want. So if the range of rockets that the Palestinians may possess is a criterion by which we will judge which borders we need to have, then we will have to go up to Iraq maybe.

Is this the solution? I'll tell you what. A terror is a serious danger, and I may assume that even after the end of all the conflict and the signing of peace treaty, there will still be terror here and there. Israel is strong enough to deal with it. It's much better to deal with it than to be isolated entirely in the international community for being perceived as occupiers of territories and of a country which denies the fundamental human and political rights of few million Palestinian people. I don't want to live in such a country.

[applause]

Now, this is one thing.

Aaron Miller:

You can choose one -- either the nuclear issue or the [inaudible] --

Ehud Olmert:

Well, I'll make it short. I'll make it short.

[laughter]

I think -- I don't think that the Palestinian problem -- there is resolution, professor. I actually met yesterday afternoon someone who studies political science in the University of South California. He was in New York in one of my lectures. So maybe he's your pupil. I don't know.

I don't think that it will resolve the issue. That they -- resolution of the conflict did nothing. Palestinians will remove the Iranian freight from the agenda. It can create a much better atmosphere amongst many of the other Arab countries. It may help create a much stronger, united front of moderate Arab countries which sympathize entirely with the Israeli attitude, which are as opposed to the

Iranian nuclear plan, just as we are, but which are weak and which are a little bit scared of the divisions amongst themselves and of the emergence of radical forces there, and therefore they hide their real attitude. If there will be a breakthrough between Israel and the Palestinians, it may help create a much stronger united front of the moderate Arab countries together with Israel, together with America and Great Britain, France, and Germany and others in order to deal with Iran in a very effective manner. And I think that, for this, we still have the time.

Now, what we may not have time for is to divide -- to separate from the Palestinians before it's too late, because how long do you think Israel can keep four millions or five millions or six millions and one day nine million Palestinians without voting rights? Forty-six years already they live under the leadership -- under the control of the state of Israel without having the fundamental human rights and political rights that everyone wants to exercise. Now, what does it mean to have a Palestinian state either Palestinian residents and citizens are not allowed to decide for themselves what they're doing? And this can be only if there will be separation. But there may come a time -- and it's not too long -- that the Palestinians will say, "You know what? We don't want to divide the land. We only want one person, one vote." When this will come, we'll be in great trouble. And you know what? At least I can say that in December of 2003, prior to the decision of Ariel Sharon for disengagement, I made a statement on the grave of David Ben-Gurion, and it started the process that ended up with the disengagement. Now I think that we have to repeat it in order to bring this process into a conclusion by a peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians.

Aaron Miller:

Ehud, I must say, I'm sorry for the disruptions but I have to say they were trumped, frankly, in an amazing way, number one, by your patience, but even more impressive than that, in my view -- and I have worked with many Israeli prime ministers, all kinds of parties -- by one other thing: by your clarity and your honesty. It is so hard for leaders to look at a mirror and understand that when you want to make a change, frankly, the place to start is with yourself. And the fact is it's really quite stunning. And I -- you honor and grace the Wilson Center with your presence. Please join me in thanking --

[applause]

Ehud Olmert:

Thank you very much. Thank you.

Aaron Miller:

One additional point. Can you remain seated until the prime minister departs, which will only take 30 seconds? Jane.

Ehud Olmert:

Thank you very much. I was really honored to have had this opportunity to be a guest at Woodrow Wilson Institute. And thank you, Jane, very much, and you, Aaron, for inviting me. And thank you for your patience. And I only regret that those who oppose me didn't have the courage to remain in this place and listen to me. Okay, you want to heckle me? Heckle me.

[applause]

You want to yell at me? Yell at me. You want to think that I am a criminal, this is legitimate, but stay in and listen to me. Maybe I will even convince you. Thank you.

[applause]

[end of transcript]