Twenty Years After Oslo: The Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (Panel 1)

Thursday, September 12, 2013
Washington, D.C.

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Transcript by Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.
MARWAN MUASHER: Good morning, everyone. And I apologize for the late start. Shibley Telhami is stuck in traffic and will be 15 minutes late, so we’ll start without him and I’m sure he will join us by the time he is ready to speak.

I want to welcome you to the Carnegie Endowment for Peace and thank you for coming here. It’s difficult to get anybody focused on anything other than Syria in the Middle East these days, so you are all brave people to come here 20 years after Oslo.

Of course the first Oslo Accords were signed 20 years ago, almost to the day. Tomorrow that will be exactly 20 years. The agreement was considered a historic breakthrough at the time and was meant to be the first step on the road to a permanent resolution to the conflict, based on the principle of two states – one Israeli, one Palestinian – living side by side in peace.

Then, over a five-year period, the Oslo process was supposed to deliver a permanent agreement on the framework for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, if I remember correctly, it was supposed to be May 10, 1999. But at any rate, as you are all aware, it did not work out this way. The years that have followed Oslo have been full of bitter disappointments and often a lack of real progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

In some respects we have moved backwards, not forwards in key areas. And in intermittent years the term “peace process” has ceased to mean much. Earlier this spring, U.S. Secretary of State Kerry stated his views that time was running out and that the world had no more than two years before the window would close on the two-state solution.

And so to discuss all that, we have this morning two expert panels who will discuss both the past, looking at the legacy of the Oslo process, as well as the future and what the future might hold. We will look at the lasting impact the Oslo experience has had on American, Palestinian and Israeli attitudes and approaches towards the conflict.

We will also consider the current dynamics on the ground and in the region more broadly, and what they mean in the context of the most recent U.S.-engineered effort to resume bilateral talks between the parties. We’ve all been working on this issue for a long time, but we are here today because we don’t think we can afford to give up. An Israeli-Palestinian settlement is in the best interests of both parties and the broader region.

I want to thank you for joining us today and move directly to the first panel, where we have – where we will hear three views – as Shai would remind me, not “the” Israeli, “the” Palestinian and “the” American views, but an Israeli, a Palestinian and an American view on the legacy of the Oslo process. What, in their views, has been the experience, the
lessons learned over the last 20 years of peacemaking between Arabs and Israelis? And I thought we would start by asking Leila Hilal to present the Palestinian view, Shai to present the Israeli view, and then hopefully by that time Shibley would have arrived and he can represent the American view.

Leila Hilal is director of the Middle East Task Force at the New American Foundation. Her work has focused on Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and issues related to U.S. foreign policy. She worked at UNRWA as an advisor – a senior policy advisor before, but she also worked as a legal advisor to the Palestinian negotiators from 2002 to 2008, so she’s well equipped to talk to us about the Palestinian view.

Shai is director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies and professor of politics at Brandeis University. And he was previously also the head of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University from ’97 to ’05 and also served as a member of the U.N. secretary general’s advisory board on disarmament matters.

So with that, let me turn the floor to Leila.

[00:05:21]

LEILA HILAL: Thank you. Thank you, Marwan, and thanks to the Carnegie Center for hosting this important event and for inviting me to be part of it.

I need to clarify one thing. I am not Palestinian. But I feel very much solidarity with Palestinians and of course have lived in the West Bank for about seven years when I was working with the Palestinian negotiators and then with UNRWA. So I hope to be able to represent what I think is something close to a Palestinian perspective or a view on what – on how some Palestinians may look at the Oslo legacy.

I think in that regard there is probably 12 million legacies and – there are so many stories that have sort of emanated from the past 20 years due to what has been essentially, you know, a condition for two decades of – in position of a tightening closure regime, extensive and unprecedented settlement growth, the construction of a separation wall, housing evictions, deaths, injuries, imprisonment, detentions, new and secondary displacements, and protracted refugeehood and statelessness.

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So I think if you spoke to Palestinians, you would hear 12 million different stories that represent the legacy of Oslo in these different ways – individual, family, community stories, all interwoven around the experience of loss of land, immense hardship and waiting. But we are in Washington so I don’t want to dwell on narrative and I’ll go straight to policy. I was asked to keep my comments to five minutes and I’ll try to do that. I just want to –

MR. MUASHER: You can take 10 minutes.
MS. HILAL: Take 10?

MR. MUASHER: Yes.

MS. HILAL: It’s because Shibley’s late. (Laughter.)

So in thinking about what the Oslo legacy may look like from the Palestinian perspective, at the policy level I see the different institutional manifestations as well as political manifestations that I think that we should focus on that go beyond sort of the physical obstructions to the two-state solution.

So institutionally we have, you know, the main institutional representation of the Oslo legacy, and that’s the existence of the Palestinian Authority. It was intended as an interim governing authority and an administrative body, and it’s essentially now functioning as the representative of the Palestinian people because it is – it is the counterpart which is engaged when we talk about Palestinian interests and the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. So it’s outlived the five-year timetable. But more than that, it’s created a high level of dependency through the provision of salaries, through the economic system that has sprung up around its existence.

And it represents a conundrum for the Palestinian people, I think, because they do benefit from its existence. They do want to see an independent authority separate from the Israeli occupation. At the same time they understand, I think, that the existence of the PA creates an illusion that the occupation is somehow not there and an illusion of equitability between – or equity between the Palestinians and the Israelis. So that’s one institutional manifestation that I think is quite important when we think about what’s happened and what we do going forward.

The other institutional manifestation are the interim arrangements that have grown out of the interim accords signed after the famous initial declaration of principles on the White House lawn between Rabin and Arafat. This is a regulator system that defines the occupation and the relationship between the Palestinians and the Israelis, particularly now in the West Bank – between the Palestinians in the West Bank and Israel.

This regulatory system determines the tax collection system, the VAT collection, which amounts to, I think, nearly a billion (dollars) in revenues, which is a primary source of revenue for the Palestinian Authority, and which gives Israel primary control over – over how that revenue is collected and amounts to a system by which the Israelis are able to extract Palestinian compliance with the international order, which is built up around this Oslo legacy.
The regulatory system also includes jurisdictional control over different parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and has created certain security arrangements around, you know, areas that the Palestinian Authority police and security forces control, and what is under Israel control. And this is, again, the system that was put in place to last for five years but has now pertained for years. And it’s a reality, and it’s become a normalized reality.

I think the other institutional manifestation to think about is that the peace process itself has become an institution by which, you know, elements of conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, incidents of conflict – whether that be an announcement of settlement growth, or the mass attack on Palestinians by Israelis or an Israeli, or Palestinian attack on Israelis – is always fitted into this prism of the peace process. We’re always delaying dealing with the question of how your resolve the conflict waiting for a bilateral peace process to produce an end of conflict. And the other implication from this institutional arrangement of the peace process is that international law has been increasingly sidelined as a basis through which we view acts on the ground and issues of accountability.

Now, turning to political manifestations, I think the primary impact, from a Palestinian perspective, of – you know, Oslo has essentially produced a high degree of fragmentation – fragmentation of Palestinian land. Palestinian cause has been deeply fragmented. And the people have been fragmented. Land-wise we have division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Before the signing of the declaration of principles in 1993, there was an ability to move – well, actually slightly earlier this was changed, but there was, previous to the peace process, an ability to move from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and now that movement has been stopped completely.

Land fragmentation, we have areas A, where the Palestinians have the most extensive jurisdictional control; areas B, where they have some security control; and then you have areas C, which is under – it’s 60 percent of the West Bank under Israeli control.

So the situation for Palestinians in the West Bank within these different enclaves has created, you know, land fragmentation. The East Jerusalem is now considered separate from the West Bank. That’s due to the closure regime, which is checkpoints but also the permit system. And it’s becoming a normalized way in which we talk about the West and East Jerusalem. Facts and figures of settlement growth are divided up between East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and the reality of the Palestinians is different in these two increasingly jurisdictionally defined areas of land.

The cause – the Palestinian cause is now broken down into five permanent status issues – refugees, settlements, borders, security – when in fact the question of occupation and the rights of the refugees are really sort of the primary questions before – you know, that defined the Palestinian cause at this day and time. But we’re not able to really think of it that way, and certainly U.S. foreign policy does not relate to the Palestinians in that regard.
And then you have the PA, which represents an increasingly narrow segment of the 12 million Palestinians. They are representing, through electoral systems, the Palestinians that lived in the West Bank and Gaza Strip previously, now the West Bank. And what about the other Palestinians, the millions in the Diaspora, in the refugee camps, et cetera?

People-wise, obviously this has had an impact on creating divisions between the Palestinians and Israel, Palestinians in the territories, the Palestinians in the Diaspora. When you’re unable to actually reach each other, that means you’re not able to maintain family and community connections. And then there’s the Hamas and Fatah divide, which is creating polar—which has contributed to the polarization of the people and the cause.

So I think generally, you know, what this means, you know, is that the paradigm of the two-state solution is at political risk. I mean, we always think about this—we always say that the two-state window is closing, and we—we speak about that with respect to the diminishing territorial area of a future Palestinian state with respect to settlement growth. But I think that the fragmentation of the Palestinian cause and the people, and the institutional hangover of Oslo, has meant that people are very cynical on the Palestinian side about the two-state solution.

And the political imagination of the Palestinians have not—has not moved beyond the two-state, but I think that the concept of two-state as the 1967 borders with the compromised solution on refugees and, you know, some kind of sharing of East Jerusalem is no longer animating the Palestinian imagination. And yes, that means that one state is more relevant, but it doesn’t—it doesn’t have a political vision. So one of the legacies of Oslo is that we are left with a political vacuum on the Palestinian side.

And so in closing I just want to comment a little bit about the process legacies of Oslo. Before Oslo—and I think what brought about Oslo was a campaign of civil disobedience in the Palestinian territories. And that process was very—was one of unification and consensus building; you know, had the unified leadership committees that were mobilized throughout the West Bank. And, again, you had strikes and the people were active.

Oslo essentially supplanted that, supplanted that process and turned the process of political action within Palestine toward this bilateral peace process, which continues and lingers today but which is not producing results. And I think we’re increasingly seeing, in the Palestinian scene, an intention to return to those tactics and to the notion of a Palestinian populous mobilized around nonviolent action.

And so I think that that is one positive legacy that people are saying, OK, enough with this two-state or bilateral endless process that doesn't produce results, and let’s go back to—to a process of collective mobilization and nonviolence. And I think, you know, that’s something that we need to think about going forward, because what that means is that within
the peace process – so for instance this current initiative led by Secretary Kerry, we can no longer afford to ignore the Palestinian people and focus solely on what happens at the secret negotiation table between principals in the negotiations.

So with that –

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MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much, Leila – a very critical assessment of the Oslo process. It resulted in fragmentation, international law has been increasing the sidelines, and the PA representing a tiny fraction of the Palestinians all over the world.

I will leave the issue of the one-state solution and nonviolent action maybe to the second panel, where we look at prospects for the future, but I think Leila presents an interesting and a powerful idea that the paradigm of the two-state solution is at risk not just because of the diminishing territorial aspects of the problem but also because of what she calls the fragmentation of cause and people, which has brought cynicism into the whole Oslo process, which might require everyone to think more creatively in the future.

Let’s move to “an” Israeli view from Shai and, you know, and see what kind of assessment, Shai, you would like to give us about the last 20 years.

[00:21:36]

SHAI FELDMAN: Thank you. I’m also glad to be here today. I will definitely not give you – not even “an” Israeli narrative – I’ve kind of left the narrative to other writings – but will try to give you my sense, first of all, of what went wrong; in that sense, what the negative legacy of Oslo is. And I think there are at least two big lessons to draw from this negative legacy that is very important now as those that are trying to negotiate us out of this impasse need to bear in mind.

For emphasis I have to say that I’m at least encouraged by the fact that we don’t have the foggiest idea of what goes on in these conversations. I take this as a sign that it’s serious. If it weren’t serious it would have already leaked. So I’m going to focus on that, but also, because in the last 20 years it’s become such a pastime to criticize Oslo, I want to end by putting all this in perspective and to remind ourselves that Oslo was a significant, significant breakthrough. And why was it such a significant breakthrough?

So first of all, what was the Oslo grand bargain? I think – and I thought that the grand bargain was fairly simple. Israel made two major concessions and the Palestinians made two major concessions. The Israeli concession were, number one, Israel, for the first time – actually you could say for the first time in Palestinian history – agreed to transfer control over some territory – some territory that the Israeli right wing defined as parts of the greater land of Israel – to Palestinian control.
And the second Israeli concession was to accept the PLO formally as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, but even more profoundly as Israel’s partner. And Arafat is Israel’s partner. And I’ll go back to this, you know, in my second set of – or second remarks. This was a huge change on the Israeli side.

Similarly, the Palestinians made two major concessions. The Palestinians did not reject, until Oslo, the idea of a phased process, but the Palestinians insisted until Oslo that they are willing to contemplate the process that would be implemented in a phased fashion, but one where the final destination will be crystal clear. That was the major Palestinian concession with Oslo. In Oslo, for the first time, the Palestinians accepted what we called a, quote, unquote, “open-ended process,” where they accepted the principle of a phased process without a promise of what the final destination will be.

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And secondly, there was a commitment in Oslo essentially to end, quote, unquote, the “arms struggle.” Now, the problem was that this agreement, because it was an open-ended process, did not reach closure on any of the issues that both sides cared about. It did not actually result in meeting the Palestinian national aspirations. And for Israel it did not result in the end of the conflict.

So now, what does it mean? What does an open-ended process mean? It means that when the Oslo agreement was reached was not the end of the bargaining. It was the beginning of a new set of bargaining. And in that sense the Oslo agreement was simply a prelude to future negotiations. Now, the problem is that this didn’t take a genius to understand. This was clearly understood by both the Palestinian leadership and the Israeli leadership. And since they both understood that they were simply entering future rounds of negotiations, each side essentially felt that it has to maintain and keep leverage – leverage for the future negotiations.

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Now, what was the leverage? On the Palestinian side leverage meant that the violence had to remain an option, because Arafat, with all the verbal general commitment to, quote, unquote, “end the armed struggle,” understood, from his perspective, that to continue to be able to press Israel to move in a direction that was not promised in Oslo he had to keep violence as an option.

And on the Israeli side, leverage meant that you don’t give up the entire territorial card because there were all other nonterritorial issues, that Leila mentioned as permanent status issues, that those – and I’m not talking about the right wing that opposed giving any territory. But even from the standpoint of Rabin, who signed the agreement, there was a feeling that you can’t give up the entire territorial card. Remember that that was also the critique of Barak when he became prime minister is ’99 and wanted to go directly to permanent status agreements. I mean, his notion was that this phased process gradually deprives Israel of the territorial card which it would need in a permanent status agreement.
So what happened is that neither side’s expectations from the bargain of Oslo were met, OK? The Israelis expected end of violence. They didn’t get the end of violence because violence continued, either by some elements within Fatah, but they were initially mostly through Hamas because – because the Palestinians never really fully abandoned the armed struggle. And again, a non-Israeli view of this says of course they didn’t. They couldn’t because they had to maintain leverage. And the Palestinian side didn’t get what it wanted from this process. It didn’t get the end of occupation because Israel continued to hold on to important territorial cards.

And the second element, which is connected to this, is that not only did each side try to maintain leverage, but also neither of the two sides – in that sense, neither Arafat nor Rabin were fully willing to fully confront the opponents of the process within their own camps. So Arafat never fully confronted Hamas, and essentially allowed Hamas to begin the campaign of suicide bombings in '95 and '96, which led to – eventually to Likud defeating Peres in '96.

And it – and Arafat refused all of Israel’s urging at that time to establish what the Israelis called a monopoly of force, to engage in what, in the Israeli discourse with Arafat, was called the “Altalena moment,” which is – goes back to the analogy of what Ben-Gurion – how Ben-Gurion dealt with the opponents of compromise. And Rabin never fully, fully confronted the opponents of the process from the right wing, and especially among the settler community. And the outcomes of this avoiding of the confrontation was certain obstacles on the process, like the massacre in Hebron conducted by a settler from Kiryat Arba, Baruch Goldstein, or Yigal Amir, who eventually assassinated Rabin.

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So if you take these two elements, which is, number one, the fact that the two parties continue to hold onto elements that they thought were their leverage, and the fact that both sides avoided fully, fully confronting the opponents on both sides of the process, really answers the question of how what was conceived as a confidence-building process became a confidence-destroying process.

And the second element here, facet of all of this, is that – is that Oslo never included a verification and compliance mechanism. So there was never a – there was never a mechanism put in place. And in that sense – I will be happy to hear Shibley’s version of the American role here, but both parties negotiated this agreement basically without the Americans but came to the Americans. As of the signing ceremony, in a sense it could have been the American role to help define some kind of a compliance verification and enforcement mechanism to hold the parties responsible for their commitments and obligations, and that was never put in place.

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So you can see that I don’t assign any particular responsibility here. I think the Israelis played their role. The Palestinians played their role. The American side I don’t think played its entire role that it could. There’s plenty of blame to go around, but I think what’s really important is to understand why what went wrong went wrong. And in my view, if
there’s any lessons to be drawn for this for what is going on today – and I’m not going to invade the second panel – is just to say two things.

Number one, we really have to understand the pitfalls of an open-ended process. So all I can say is I hope to God that whatever is actually being discussed – and as I said, luckily we don’t know what’s being discussed – is not meant to produce another open-ended process, because it’s going to be as disastrous in that sense as the current one. And secondly, whatever will be agreed upon by Israelis and Palestinians, with America’s help now, has to have some kind of a mechanism for compliance verification and enforcement, because otherwise each party will continue to “cheat,” quote, unquote, because it will feel, especially if it’s an open-ended process, that it has to maintain cards for future negotiations.

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Let me end by saying a few words about something that kind of slipped the discussion over the last 20 years, because it’s very – in a sense we know that the process has not met either the Palestinian expectations or Israeli expectations, so it’s very easy, in a sense, to criticize this process. So I just want to say a few words about putting all this in perspective and appreciating that in the end of the day this was a huge, huge breakthrough. And let me put this in a – in a very personal note.

Leila mentioned correctly the civil disobedience, although I think if you went to the Israeli narrative about how to characterize the first intifada I think the Israelis won’t exactly call it civil disobedience. There were some uncivil dimensions to it. But at the same time, I have to say this, which is after – I was at the time – actually, when this whole thing began in December ’87 – I came here for a year to the Wilson Center and came back to Israel by the summer – summer of – summer of 1988, which meant almost nine or 10 months into the first – into the first intifada.

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For us at the Jaffee Center it became crystal clear that the world after the first intifada is not going to be similar to the – to what happened until then, and that essentially the pre-intifada situation is not sustainable. So we embarked on a huge project, which at that time was called “The West Bank and Gaza: Israel’s options for Peace.” And we looked at six options that Israel was facing. We actually mobilized 13 working groups to deal with the 13 facets, ranging from security, economics and so on and so forth, and made a serious exploration of these – of these six options.

And in the end we took a very controversial stand of actually – separately from the book that is still somewhere available by Amazon, I think – I would think – has this very detailed analysis of these six options, their plusses and minuses. In a supplemental paper we actually came up with a recommendation. And the recommendation was – because the options ranged from an independent Palestinian state to annexation, and our recommendation was essentially – and this is a paradox.
I was one of the two co-editors of this so I take full responsibility, because we recommended an open-ended process, OK? And we recommended an open-ended process which did not exclude but did not promise or commit that at the end of this process the result would be an independent Palestinian state. So I repeat, it did not promise but it did not exclude. That was the first part of our breakthrough in 1989 when this was published.

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The second part of this was that we basically reached a conclusion that Israel has not other partner than the PLO to negotiate this, OK? Now, you have to remember, the PLO was defined – was seen by Israelis merely as a terrorist organization up to that point. So you can imagine, first of all, the media attention that that report assumed.

The other thing that happened that morning is that Prime Minister Shamir announced publicly that he’s never, ever, ever going to read this report. (Laughter.) The result was that the phone never stopped ringing because everybody wanted to read the report that the prime minister said he was never going to read. (Laughter.) So in that sense we should have paid – or actually we didn’t have to because he did all the advertising – all the advertising for us.

But all this just gives you – I just wanted to – not to emphasize our role as prophets here, or even as people who directed the country or began to direct the country in the direction of Oslo because this was, again a major revolution also because the Jaffee Center was not considered – at least until the report came out – a leftist organization. It was considered to be a centrist organization led by a former general, one of the 1967 War heroes, that for the first time told the country, we have no choice but to enter a process that will not exclude the establishment of a Palestinian state and where the negotiation partner would be the PLO. This was a monumental revolution, and it took from 1989 to 1993, to the signing of Oslo at the beginning of negotiations in early ’93, for somebody like Rabin, who all of his life regarded the PLO as a terrorist organization, to come around.

So all I wanted to say is, yes, it’s very easy to, either through narratives or analysis, you know, pooh-pooh today, 20 years later, the Oslo process. I just wanted to remind ourselves that before we do this we also have to remind ourselves that it was a major, major, major breakthrough. Thank you.

[00:38:45]

MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much, Shai. And I think what you said goes very well into what we’re going to hopefully hear from Shibley.

Shai of course sees the process – this Oslo process as a very important breakthrough. He listed the reasons for it. He also lists what I think are two also very critical points about this process – one, that it was open-ended, and as a result this was one of its major shortcomings.
Neither Leila nor Shai mentioned, for example, the issue of settlements, but the issue of settlements is a direct result of this open-ended process, when, at the time of the signing of Oslo, the number of settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem were about 250. There are today 500,000-plus. So in the 20 years that separate us from Oslo, the number of settlers doubled, precisely because it was an open-ended process, when of course the argument at the time was that it was a five-year process and people thought that they could afford to ignore the issue of settlements for a couple of years if indeed in five years they were supposed to come up with a permanent agreement.

And the other idea, Shibley, that I also – you can comment on is the verification and compliance version. It is true that Oslo did not have a verification and compliance process. That was attempted to be rectified in the roadmap, which did have a verification and compliance process that was never implemented. Basically the Americans – the quartet, but led by the Americans, were supposed to provide that verification and compliance process to make sure that the two sides were meeting their obligations, but of course that process never – was never implemented in any serious way.

MR. FELDMAN: And it came 10 years after Oslo.

MR. MUASHER: And it came 10 years after Oslo. Absolutely.

So, Shibley, with this in mind, I hope you can – (chuckles) – enlighten us on what you think the American position throughout this process has been and what are some of the lessons learned as well.

SHIBLEY TELHAMI: Well, thanks very much. First of all, thank you for hosting this. And thanks to the Carnegie Endowment for organizing this. And I’m really pleased and honored to be on the panel with Leila and Shai. And these are friends. And in some cases, as in the case of Shai, we’ve known each other for more than a quarter century, and I think that goes for Marwan as well. And Leila is a more recent friend.

So, really, I’m not going to get into the detail of verification, although just to – as a footnote. And, Marwan, you may have mentioned this earlier – I apologize for coming late – but part of what I’m going to talk about is based on our recent book that I did with my colleagues Dan Kurtzer, Bill Quandt, Steve Speigel and Scott Lasensky, which we spent five, six years looking at American foreign policy since 1989.

And I was charged with drafting the section on Oslo and the failure at Camp David, so I’ve spent quite a bit of time looking into it. And yes, you’re absolutely right about there were verification issues. That’s one of the things that we very specifically talk about in the book, and there’s a lot of detail on it and lessons to be drawn. But I choose to talk a little bit more broadly about it, and I’d like to – to start by looking at it in historical perspective when you’re evaluating that decade, certainly up until the point that the negotiations collapsed in 2000 with the Camp David negotiations.
Look at it – looking it strictly from the point of view of American foreign policy, it wasn’t only a wasted opportunity. It was that, because you look at it in historical perspective and when you look how – to how close people got, certainly on the Syrian-Israeli track, and how this historic opportunity opened up on the Israeli-Palestinian track and in the end it didn’t come together, certainly that is a wasted opportunity. But it’s more than that. It’s a huge strategic failure. And I want to talk about that a little bit with two elements to it.

I know – you know, yesterday we commemorated a horrible tragedy for Americans: 9/11. And I know that, you know, when 9/11 came about, no one wanted to talk about linkage because linkage was a bad idea. And in some ways it is because there was no direct linkage in some ways. And yesterday, by the way, Ron Paul tweeted that 9/11 was a blowback for American policy in prior decades. He’s getting a lot of backlash on that.

But I think that misses the point. It’s not about that. I ask you to think differently about it. When 9/11 happened, the U.S. and the Arab world were in the midst of a major confrontation that was a result of the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the rise of Al-Aqsa Intifada, and bloodshed that was on television. This is the year that really made Al-Jazeera and the Arab Satellite as big as they were because this was the story of anger with America over this issue. That’s the context in which 9/11 happens.

Now imagine, in reverse, that in July, 2000 the negotiators succeeded and we did have Israeli-Palestinian peace and you did rally all the Arab states behind it. And what would the context have been for that tragedy in terms of this issue, them being an asset rather than a liability in implementing the anti-al-Qaida tragedy – the anti-al-Qaida strategy on the war on terrorism for the U.S.?

It is a huge contrast. And when you think about it, you could understand how much difference that could have made if it went the other way, and how much of a different – worked against the U.S. in public opinion – at a minimum was a distraction, but it was a lot more than a distraction, and it was a mobilizing issue that worked against American policy. So that’s one.

The second, I ask you to look at it in terms of the difficulty of mediation following that collapse, because that collapse wasn’t just a collapse of an episode of negotiations to return but it was really the end of belief in peace. And I think when you look at the psychology, that during the 1990s – you know, Shai rightly talked about sort of what it meant to Israelis and Palestinians in historical perspective; you know, what each hoped to get out of it.

But if you look at it even in the middle of all the ups and downs, including the downs, whether it’s the assassination of Rabin, the terrorist bombing, the Baruch Goldstein attack against – in the mosque, all of those things that did generate a
lot of backlash and frustration and more pessimism, if you asked analysts, if you asked most people during that decade, is the Arab-Israeli conflict on its way to a resolution or not, more people would have said it’s on its way to a resolution.

The bet was that it was unavoidable, even if people didn’t like the terms. People thought, you know, it was the wrong agreement. But if you – if you had to bet, you had to bet on moving in that direction. That’s one reason why the U.S. was able to mobilize many Arab countries who otherwise were sitting on the sideline. Now, in contrast, what you have is if you ask people whether they think it is even possible to have peace, majorities in both Israelis and Palestinians now believe it’s not possible. It’s impossible.

And so when you think it is impossible, you would be a fool to compromise. If you are preparing for inevitable conflict, why would you want to compromise? And so we have to put that in perspective in terms of the structuring of the approach for the parties when they are making an assessment that the chance of peace is not very high. In the 1990s, that’s the transformation. People believed it was high. Now they don’t believe it’s high.

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And by the way, that also frames attitudes broadly at the public level, including on issues like the degree of empathy with the other side, issue of incitement that we think is only instrumental. In fact, it’s not just instrumental. It has a societal role. When people expect conflict, they don’t want to empathize because they want to prepare themselves for conflict. They see incitement as mobilizing of the public for an inevitable conflict.

So even those – I’ve studied this, by the way. I have a whole study on the role of empathy and incitement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the attitudes of both sides. That pessimism frames those attitudes, and that’s what the U.S. is up against now. It was a different environment than 1990s. So I want to sort of put that upfront in terms of the consequences of that collapse that were huge.

Next I want to just focus on why the U.S. failed and what were the issues that were at stake in the American role? You know, obviously this is one of the things that we faced particularly in writing the book. And I know that Ambassador Kurtzer is speaking later this afternoon about looking forward and drawing lessons from what we had concluded, but I’ll remind you that the aim and focus on the American role is not to blame everything on America, just to say what America – and we know that the Israelis and the Palestinians did a lot that was wrong and there were a lot of failures, but our focus is strictly on the American side.

[00:49:19]

And also, to be further fair, I want to say that when the U.S. started this process after the Israelis and the Palestinians secretly negotiated the agreement in Oslo and the U.S. essentially adapted it – adopted it and actively pursued its implementation and moving forward toward Arab-Israeli peace, that the U.S. did inherit some problems that were not of America’s doings. And let me give you three of those.
First is the amazing asymmetry of power between Israel and the Palestinians, not that the Palestinians had no leverage. The main leverage is that Israel couldn’t do it on its own. And, you know, obviously and then you had the intifada, the first intifada still sort of, you know, in the background. But by and large it was an – it’s very – for example, if you contrast that with the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations in the 1970s that led to the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, Egypt was the most powerful Arab state that had just fought a very effective war in 1973, that Israel badly needed to have peace with if it was going to prevent a future war.

[00:50:39]

And so there was – separate even from the Cold War you had these two tough parties that had their own power vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the rest of the world. The Palestinian-Israeli asymmetry is huge, and for the U.S. that is a problem. It is a problem because it doesn’t matter what kind of mediator you – you want to be fair but you want an agreement. You don’t want to fail. And it’s always easier to get concessions from the weak than from the strong. And that is a – that is a real problem in the structure of power.

Second, the U.S. inherited the incrementalism of Oslo. It wasn’t America’s doing. That was a bad, lousy agreement. Postponing the final status issues ended up being a disaster. The notion that incrementalism was going to help build confidence exactly was the wrong thing, for two reasons. One reason is that buying time buys time for all the opponents to derail it – we discovered that – because, you know, these are historic type of negotiations that are never going to please everyone, and there is a lot of passion around them. And when you give opponents so much time to derail it, they will – they will exploit it.

[00:51:56]

But the second reason I think is a negotiation reason. If I’m negotiating on whether or not to, you know, pull out of a particular region or city and then I’m looking ahead, all the big issues – the voters’ security, Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, all the big issues, we said we’ve got to postpone them. Well, the problem is the minute you make a concession on a small issue it affects your posture on the next issue. And every – every agreement that you make in the interim in some ways has the potential of weakening your posture for negotiating for final status issues, which are yet to come.

And so in that regard I think there was a built-in reluctance to make the concessions in the short term. We saw that in various stages, particularly later when Barak came to – in to office and said, why should I make this? You know, this is – this will weaken me politically. I’ll wait to make the big deal down the road. And so here you are dependent on making progress incrementally, but incrementalism is made more difficult by the fact that you are postponing the major issue. That is something the U.S. may have been able to work around. You can say, well, the West didn’t exploit that sufficiently, didn’t work with it enough, but that the U.S. inherited. That came with Oslo. That was part of what – what the U.S. was handed.
The third thing really has to do with the nature of the American role. And that, you know, is a complicated story, obviously, in part because the U.S. is not a typical mediator between Israel and the Arabs. Obviously it’s not. I mean, on the one hand it is a mediator, meaning it is trying to fairly represent, you know, both parties’ interests and come up to a fair agreement. It’s doing that. But in part it is Israel’s central allies and protector, and so it has to look after Israel, and Israel is part of American politics. It’s not just separate from American – domestic American politics. And third, the U.S. has interests even beyond Israel and the Middle East, namely in the Arab countries particularly with regard to oil and other strategic interests.

Now, the problem with this third part is that while it was very easy to identify and to accept in the American political mainstream, certainly beginning with the 1970s after the ’73 war and the Arab oil embargo, when American officials thought, in the context of the Cold War for sure, that there was an American interest in having Arab support and American interest in having Israel’s support, so they sort of balance each other up to a point and they led to an axiom that making peace was an American interest because otherwise it’s very hard to navigate this space between America’s interests in the Arab world and America’s interests in Israel.

And that certainly was the case. That’s certainly what drove America’s diplomacy in the 1970s. But you can argue that by the time Bill Clinton got elected and came to office in 1993 the Cold War had ended; foreign policy wasn’t a central issue. And certainly he and his administration were not looking at this as a national security issue. And that happened certainly as – if you look at how the U.S. ultimately got involved in the negotiations, it wasn’t over some strategic threat that – as happened, for example, after the ’73 war, but it was for different reasons.

And those reasons had to do with, number one, Israeli interests, meaning that Clinton – Israel wanted him to do this. He did it. Two, he did see a benefit to the U.S. from doing it – a historical opportunity that he could exploit. Over time he even learned to empathize with the Palestinians and the Arabs. And ultimately, when he came to Camp David, it became possibly part of his legacy.

But one of the things that we discovered in doing the research is there was no evidence at all that Bill Clinton, who spent so much time on it and clearly exhibited a lot of talent – and, as I said, he had this incredible capacity to project empathy, and he did that even toward the Palestinians when they blamed him of being pro-Israel. He still had that capacity to do so, which is very unusual and very helpful in negotiations, but he never – there was no evidence that he ever believed that this was strategically essential for the U.S.

And in fact, there’s every evidence that he thought that this was, you know, helpful, yes. People were telling him it was helpful, and he discovered it would be helpful but never thought it would be strategically essential for the U.S. And I would say that if you look at that decade particularly through the metaphor of Yasser Arafat, Yasser Arafat came to the
White House through Tel Aviv, and Tel Aviv ultimately kept him out of the White House. And there was no escaping that kind of relationship that he suffered from that, because that was just something that is unavoidable.

[00:57:54]

Just an example on this strategic importance issue. We happen to believe – I happen to believe, but I think all five of us who authored the book “The Peace Puzzle” believe, that the Arab-Israeli peace is – has been, is and will continue to be an important American strategic interest. We can talk about that in the questions and answers. I’m not going to give you our, you know, sense on that. But, second, that it is really impossible for the United States to effectively negotiation Palestinian-Israeli peace, given the gap that exists between them without having a president backing it and a president who believes it’s strategically important for the United States.

It’s too hard, too difficult, requires too many things to put up on the top of the priorities to make it happen. And with all the resources that Bill Clinton did, it wasn’t for those reasons. And one of the things that we saw, for example, in the way – separate from how Oslo, the negotiations themselves, proceeded. But if you look at the particular case of Camp David, where it was something that, you know, obviously was supposed to be a finale that could have clinched an agreement akin to the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David agreement, everything about it was not done with an eye to the strategic consequences.

There was never interagency preparation of calling the different agencies of government to say, what if we failed? What kind of – what kind of consequences might happen to us on that front or elsewhere in the Arab – in the Arab world? There was no consequences. There was no particular preparation on the question of Jerusalem, which we know in the end was an issue that derailed – well, it played a significant role in derailing an agreement.

And finally, the issue of blaming Arafat at the end, which was really quite critical, and I think rather consequential, because many of you who know this story about how what happened at Camp David, certainly Barak wanted this Camp David to happen sooner rather than later. Clinton, along with some of Clinton’s advisers, weren’t necessarily thinking this was a good idea. But Arafat particularly thought it was a bad idea. They thought there wasn’t enough preparation. He thought he would be cornered by Rabin and by Barak and Clinton at the White House, and he wanted a commitment that he would not be blamed for the failure at Camp David. And he got it from Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton gave him the word that he would not blame him, no matter what happened at Camp David.

[01:00:52]

We all know what happened toward the end. Many reasons for the failure of the negotiations. Certainly, both Palestinians played it badly, Israelis played it badly, the U.S. played it badly. But in the end, it was a decision to make about where you go from there. Clinton decided to go ahead and blame Arafat largely because he thought he was helping Barak politically. He was frustrated with Arafat. Don’t get me wrong. He was – he didn’t think Arafat did what he wanted him to do. So there was a lot of frustration with Arafat. And Arafat played his hand very badly at Camp David. We’ve –
(inaudible) – I mean, when you’re looking at it from – there’s a lot of blame to go around. So – but that strategic decision, I think, was particularly consequential for the way the Palestinians saw it, interpreted it and – in terms of Arafat’s inclination (ultimately ?) to do some very bad mistakes, particularly with the second intifada. But there again, there was never an assessment even in the meeting about consequences, and I just want to end with that for now.

[01:01:59]

MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much, Shibley, for a very insightful presentation. And I think one of the key issues that should be talked about it is this issue of, first, the support and commitment of the U.S. president and how important that is to bringing about the settlement, but also the linkage between that and the U.S. national interest and whether there has been such a linkage, which would actually be a good way to – a good issue to discuss in our next session, whether, indeed, with this latest round of negotiations we do have the support and the commitment of the U.S. president in this process, or is this a Kerry, you know, led effort that might or might not have the needed support of the U.S. president?

We just heard truly three very thoughtful presentations that looked at different angles of the Oslo process and the legacy of the last 20 years. We have half an hour for questions on the issue. What I will do is take maybe three or four questions at a time. Please, make it a question and please identify yourself before you do that.

So, please.

Q: Thank you. I am May Rihani (ph), worked all my life in international educational development. Thank you for this excellent panel, very informative. And if I’m allowed to ask a provocative question, I will.

MR. MUASHER: Please.

Q: The question is for Professor Shibley. Do you think a U.S. president would be in a stronger position of being a – (inaudible) – and of playing his role more strategically with regards to U.S. interests if he’s not held hostage to the historic alliance between Israel and the U.S.?

[01:04:23]

MR. : If he is not what to the historic –

Q: Held hostage.

MR. : To the U.S.-Israeli –

MR. : What’s the word that was used?

Q: Historic, historic.

MR. : Hostage.
MR. MUASHER: Wait, Shibley, let’s take a couple more questions before.

In the back there, sir. The – yes.

Q: Stephen Stern (sp). It’s for Shai Feldman’s formulation about legacies of Oslo and a later legacy. If we see the failure of Camp David and the intifada, based on the structure of open-ended and fragmentation of what was asked of people at Oslo, how does that legacy play out in terms of the latter part of the Bush administration and the Mahmoud Abbas-Ehud Olmert negotiations in which territories and the final stage seemed to be sincerely on the table?

[01:05:23]

MR. MUASHER: OK. Yes, ma’am.

Q: I’m Dr. Caroline Poplin. I’m a physician. I’m a member of J Street, but this is my question; it has nothing to do with J Street. For Dr. Telhami, you talked about how people were more helpful in the ’90s and less helpful after that. Where do you put the Arab peace initiative in all of that?

MR. MUASHER: One more. Yes, sir.

Q: Hi. My name is Kenneth Rothschild (sp). As to the approach that this panel takes and that it’s always been taking, it seems to be too academic. It doesn’t – it doesn’t grasp the reality of the people. I mean, this is not to attack you, Leila, but there should be a Palestinian on this panel.

MS. HILAL: There is. There is a Palestinian.

Q: Oh, you are a Palestinian?

MS. HILAL: No.

Q: Oh, yes. OK. Yes. (Laughter.) But not an Americanized Palestinian. (Laughter.)

[01:06:39]

But my point is that be, whatever it is, we’ve overlooked the reality of the people and what they’re suffering. Just a couple points. One, the American issue and the Western issue. I mean, Israel has represented basically the West’s interests in the Middle East. It’s Western-established. They’ve got the bomb, they’ve got the money for the military and things like that. These issues seem to get overlooked. And as far as Arafat goes, he was put in a position where he had no choice. He wasn’t given enough of a window to offer some compromise. So he was forced to take the militarized issue that he did. So my point being and my question – my generalized question is, how are we going to get to some of the real issues and the real suffering that’s going on? Because people will not grasp the reality of this if it just becomes an academic issue for us.
MR. MUASHER: Thank you. Just for the record, in fact, we did attempt to bring a Palestinian and an Israeli from – you know, from the region, not living here, but for all kinds of reasons that was not possible. But we did attempt to do that.

[01:08:10]

OK. Let me – Leila, you want to start?

MS. HILAL: The thing is, I – what I attempted to do was to talk about the legacy of Oslo not by saying what is it that we can fix, because I think Oslo has failed, and I think the sooner we – get – you know, accept that and move forward and start thinking about actually how do you build a sustainable peace process, the better. And I think, yes, OK, if the U.S. president got behind a peace deal, then he could see it through.

But the fact is, as someone who’s been on the inside of negotiations on the Palestinian side – and I assume it’s true also for the Israeli side – there’s a lot of dancing going on, where we know that you’re sitting at the table and you’re talking about formulas that may be able to – you may be able to get some agreement by the parties and a U.S. president may be able to push it through, but the fact is that if the people don’t accept the formulation, then you’re not going to get the leaders to sign off on it. And this is the major – the major problem with the Oslo process, is that we have been assuming that you can get an agreement on the Palestinian minimum – maximum concessions and a minimum Israeli concessions. And it’s not – it’s not even touching the real problem that exists between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and it’s not something that the – that the leaderships can sell to their peoples. And so I think we need to stop thinking about what is wrong at the secret negotiation table and what is wrong with the diplomacy framework and start thinking more about how you build peace from the ground up.

[01:00:12]

And so that is really what I wanted to emphasize was, you know, given the legacy of Oslo, what challenges exist within the Palestinian scene for building a peace process that will – that the people can rally around and that leaders then can take forward with confidence and clarity and purpose, because I think that there’s a lot of game-playing that we’ve been doing for the past 20 years, and I think, you know, enough is enough.

MR. TELHAMI: Well, let me take up the issue of the Israeli-U.S. strategic relationship. I don’t think any president at all can assume they can change that even if they wanted to. I think if you – if you look at – if you go into, you know, President Obama’s speech in Jerusalem, he said something really interesting. He said it’s the easiest thing in the world for me to just say I support Israel and go home because that’s what Congress wants, that’s what, you know, the sentiment is in Washington. So he’s working – essentially, he said I’m not going to do it because I think it’s important.

Now, I hope he means that he thinks it’s important, but the point of it is that’s the automatic pilot position here. This is where America is, this is where the American elites are, this is where Congress is, and so the – would it be easier – it doesn’t help because that’s already built in. So the question is even actually up to a point, if you look at the Arab-Israeli
negotiations – (inaudible) – successful negotiations, they understood that the U.S. has a special relationship with Israel, but they also wanted them to care about their interest in the Arab world.

So it’s not that they were saying just abandon Israel. I mean, nobody – maybe there are some people in extreme would say that, but in general, people want to work with that, but they want something else in addition. So yes, it makes it more complicated for the U.S., for sure. I mean, when you’ve got – when you’re playing these multiple roles, you’re Israel’s backer but you’re the fair negotiator but you also have your own interests, and there’s nobody else and you have an asymmetry on the ground between Israel and the Palestinians, it’s complicated. It makes it very difficult, and that’s one of the problems, I think, for America’s diplomacy.

On the Arab peace initiative, just one really interesting broad thought, which is I know I said that when you know, I do public opinion polls in the Middle East, I do them in the Arab world, I do them in Israel among Jews and Arab citizens so I have a sort of a sense of where the public is.

Now, it’s true that in my own polling, both – majorities of Israelis and Arabs have come to believe that a two-state solution is no longer possible. But when you ask them are you prepared to support it if it were possible, you get majorities who say yes, including in the Arab world – including after the Arab uprisings, including in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. So it’s quite remarkable that in some ways, there’s still an opening to it even among people who say it’s not possible.

One reason for that is that when you ask them what would happen if the two-state solution no longer became possible, the overwhelming majority in the Arab world say there will not be a one state, but there will be indefinite conflict for years to come. So they don’t essentially see a really good option realistically in their mind.

Now what happened on the Israeli side is a little more – that used to be the answer, which is if there’s no two-state solution, you’re going to have more conflict. In the most recent poll I did on that, I have more Israelis say the status quo will continue than more conflict, and the status quo is not entirely uncomfortable for Israelis. So the urgency in Israel is different than the urgency in the Arab world, and the urgency in the Arab world is certainly expressed in this revalidation of the Arab peace initiative, particularly among states that have a lot of other issues. They want to take this one off the table because that’s a complicating factor for them, and they prefer to do that.

And I think that issue, of course, is if an American diplomacy can work with it, I think one of the failures that everybody recognizes of the Bush administration was they didn’t exploit that and make use of it and use it as an incentive to Israelis to carry through. Secretary Kerry is trying to do that, but in a weakened Arab world without a really viable negotiation yet. So I think it could – it could be an asset.
MR. MUASHER: Try to address a couple of points here, but I have to, I would say, prelude these by saying the following, which is that the – what happened in the Middle East since – in Arab-Israeli relations since Oslo, you know, provides an – almost an infinite menu of things to address, and at least I try to focus on the heritage of Oslo because dealing with why what happened in all these years post-Oslo is, of course, a very complicated story, and if Shibley was allowed to give a plug to a book that was already published, I’ll give a plug to a book that is about to be published. (Laughter.)

And in November, we – that is to say my Palestinian colleague, Khalil Shikaki, my Egyptian colleague, Abdel Monem Said Aly, and myself are publishing the first university textbook on the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict that has been co-authored by an Israeli, an Egyptian and a Palestinian. And we made a – we make – we tried to – we made a very, very clear distinction between narratives and analysis, very clear distinction between what has been the Israeli, the Palestinian and the broader Arab narratives.

And our analysis and to the – to the point that was made earlier, I apologize. We make this analysis as three political scientists, academics. That’s our heritage. (Laughter.) Shibley and I, in fact, have been educated in the same place as academics –

MR. TELHAMI: With the same advisers.

MR. MUASHER: – with pride, with pride. So that’s number one. Number two, in the answer to the question in the back of the room, yes, 2008 Annapolis – the Annapolis process, in my view, was an effort to implement the lessons of Oslo by saying no, you know, this is not about another open-ended process. We’re going to try to create some finality, reach some finality to this. The problem is – and that relates to, you know, again, a number of points, and as I said, I – you know, this is all within the prelude of the fact that just analyzing why Annapolis failed is – requires another panel. And as I said, I thought we were talking about Oslo.

So – but just a couple of points which are related to the discussion we had here until now and how they apply to Annapolis. You have to talk first of all, about, you know, the parties themselves. You know, what – you know, who went – who was party to Annapolis as – in terms of the leadership and what kind of problems they – you know, they encountered, you know.

The Israeli leader who went to – who embarked on the Annapolis process, we have to agree, he was a wounded leader already, OK? He was wounded by, you know, what others will call the misconduct of the 2006 war, OK. He was one of the victims – you know, again, depending on the narrative, some people will say victim of his own doing, of how this war was conducted from the Israeli side. But he was a wounded – he was wounded. Politically, he was wounded, OK?
And secondly, the American role here was played – and it’s the – it’s the Bush administration that convened Annapolis, but it was a torn administration. You know, Shibley pointed to one aspect of this whole thing, which is, is the president behind it? Well, this is the administration that convened Annapolis, was an administration that was in an internal guerilla warfare as to, you know, the significance of the project, OK, because there was no agreement between the president – the president and – or put it this way. Certainly, we know where the secretary of state stood, OK? We know where the vice president stood and we know that they were not standing in the same place, OK? And that also includes the people who, of course, were around them.

[01:09:16]

And where the president stood is not clear. It’s clear that he gave the secretary of state, you know, the rope to try this, but he – it certainly cannot be said that the president met Shibley’s qualification, which is to say, you know, somebody who’s fully behind this. And here, I want to say just one word about why here.

And Shibley talks about one role of 9/11: you know, how would the reaction to 9/11 been different if we had peace in Oslo and so on and so forth, or even peace in Camp David and so on and so forth.

But we also have to remember that 9/11 conditioned the perception of the Palestinian side in this country because Bush, rightly or wrongly, saw Arafat as of that point in – through the prism of the so-called war or terror.

Now, again, you know, Palestinians have their narrative, Bush would have his narrative, but the reality is that that was the prism through which Arafat was seen by a combination of, you know, the perception of 9/11, the feelings that the president had, that Arafat lied to him and cheated to him, the pinnacle of which was the incident around the Korean aid ship of Iranian arms going to the Palestinian side and so on and so forth.

[01:20:34]

So again, I don’t – you know, again, when we come to this, we also differentiate very clearly about what was the Palestinian, what was the Israeli, what was the American narrative about what happened there. But the reality is that the systemic factor – again, we come from the same school of international politics – the systemic factor was that the war on terror then became a prism through which Israeli-Palestinian relationship was seen in the global and regional sense, in a way a kind of microcosm similar to the fact that if you look at the Arab-Israeli conflict in the ’50s and ’60s, you cannot isolate this from the Cold War; everything or almost or almost everything important in the Middle East in the ’50s and ’60s was through the prism of the Cold War. So that’s number two.

My last point is this. I think that we are actually faced with two, you know, monumental problems going forward. You know, one problem, as I said, was inherent in the Oslo process, which is how to deal with the opponents of the process, the Israeli opponents and the Palestinian opponents of the process. But I think there is huge significance to what,
you know, the data that Shibley provided because that points to the fact that we have a major problem in the center of the map, you know, something that our chairman called the Arab center – well, there is an Israeli center, there is a Palestinian center. And the problem with the centers right now is that they remain as – in terms of expressing, as Shibley made clear, their preference for peace, but they’re so pessimistic. And the problem is how to generate, you know, optimism in this situation. And that’s tough.

[01:22:27]

And in a way, I would say that on the Israeli side – and again, I apologize if I’ll do like a tiny little venture into the – or invasion of the next panel – which is there used to be a time that the principal locomotive – and I speak here only on the Israeli side – was positive. In other words, the process was to – was to achieve a positive outcome. Now, I think that it’s possible that under the present circumstances, you might get to a equally positive, let’s say, direction from a negative standpoint in the sense that the purpose, at least for the prime minister on the Israeli side, the current prime minister, may not be, you know, some kind of a positive vision, you know – again, with the extreme example on the other side is Peres, OK, Shimon Peres, who is driven by a positive vision of Israeli-Arab peace, OK? Netanyahu is driven by a negative vision. And a negative vision is what’s the default option if there was – is no peace, OK?

And what drives him – and I – if there’s any hope here, it’s that Netanyahu is driven by this very strong conviction that was certainly very important in understanding Olmert, despite all the problems that he had in 2008, that a one-state reality is a disaster. So he’s in this game, not to – not to create a positive reality, to avert a negative reality. But it doesn’t mean that trying to avert a negative reality is less effective in getting the desired outcome then being driven by a positive reality. And, you know, only in six or seven or eight months from now we’ll know the answer to this question.

MR. MUASHER: OK. I’m afraid we have room for one more round of questions before we move to the other panel. Yes, sir, please.

[01:24:24]

Q: Hi. Philip Swagerd (ph), Foundation for Middle East Peace. Thanks so much for giving this very interesting presentation.

MR. : We can hardly hear you in our advanced age.

Q: Sorry. (Chuckles.) I have a question for Leila and for the other panelists here. You mentioned that you see pieces being built from the ground up. Could you elaborate a little more on that, especially given the fragmentation that exists post-Oslo among Palestinians, and also Israeli apathy?

MR. MUASHER: OK. Yes.
Q: George Assoussa (ph), Palestinian living in London. Yes, I think it’s been a great panel and a lot of insights. I want to ask the panel, we understand that the Oslo process has failed. Has anybody won, or have we all lost, the three parties – the Americans, the Palestinians and the Israelis?

[01:25:23]

MR. FELDMAN: That’s an easy question. (Chuckles.)

MR. MUASHER: Yes. Please.

Q: Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, United States Institute of Peace. This probably can be combined with the question about peace from ground up. I also had a question, Leila, about your comment that the people aren’t going to buy in, the Palestinian people – (inaudible) – no leader will sign an agreement on a formula that the people can’t buy into or support. And I think that’s absolutely right. But when you take Shibley’s poll results and you see that certainly on the Palestinian side, a little more complicated on the Israeli side, that despite intense skepticism, ultimately, even the lack of a better alternative, there would be support to a two-state solution, it seems that what you’re looking is that there is a vacuum of leadership there, that leadership has a role to place in getting the – bringing the public along with it, with him in this case. So I wondered what your thoughts were on what the leadership isn’t doing, is doing in that regard, could be doing better on the Palestinian side, and also the question on the Israeli side too because I think it’s an equal concern.

MR. MUASHER: One more? Yes.

Q: Sarkus Balahian (ph). I’m from Syria. I just moved to D.C., so – my question - (inaudible) –

MR. FELDMAN: You’re from Syria, and you came to a panel on 20 years to Oslo? (Laughter.)

Q: My question is directed to the entire panel. As Mr. Shai mentioned, the context of the Palestine-Israel conflict was viewed in the post-9/11 era from the prism of Islamic terrorism and war against terror. But isn’t it actually a more effective and a more right approach would be viewing the various issues in the Middle East and the various conflicts in the Middle East from the prism of the Israel-Palestine conflict? And let me contextualize that a bit.

[01:27:23]

For example, if we look at dictatorial regimes, such as the Assad regime, starting with Hafez al-Assad after the ’73 war and continued with Bashar al-Assad later on, the dictatorial regimes usually approach – use the Israel-Palestine conflict as a nutrition to impose their authority and to impose their will upon their own people by representing Israel as a direct threat to their national security and a direct threat to their nations. And at the same time, if you view both the Shiite Islamic terrorist groups and if you view the Sunni terrorist organizations on both sides, from – if you look at Hezbollah or if you look at al-Qaida, they use Israel as the nutrition to convince and basically convince their constituency that the Israel-
Palestine conflict and the injustice caused by Israel as the legitimization of their terrorist act. So isn’t a more correct approach to view the various issues in the Middle East that are prevalent today, whether they’re terrorist attacks or the dictatorial regimes, from the prism of Israel-Palestine conflict? Thank you.

MR. MUASHER: All right. Who wants to go first?

[01:28:54]

MS. HILAL: I just would – I think that we have to remember that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one of colonization. And it’s not a situation of civil war where, you know, you get the right people in the – in the room, and you real with the spoilers, and you figure out, you know, trust-building mechanisms, and you get the diplomatic framework in place that you may have progress. It’s not that kind of peace context. And I think we forget that because 20 years of Oslo has suggested that, you know, there is this – there are two states that are trying to negotiate a solution. You – the Palestinian – the problem is one, really, of – as – in terms of saying it’s a – it’s a problem of colonization, it means that the Palestinian issue is a popular one. And when the Palestinian leaders sit down to negotiate, they are thinking of the popular expectations of their people. And they themselves hold that as victims and as a people who have struggled historically for a long time on behalf of Palestinians. And so they particularly – I mean, the Israelis may be in a position more and more of one of willing to accommodate Palestinian needs, but ultimately, the Palestinians have to address the popular expectations of their people, which are very historical.

And I think that, you know, for instance, around the refugee question, the U.S. and the Israelis have not allowed the Palestinians to address their people on this issue adequately because it is such a taboo for the Israelis to even think about the notion of recognizing refugee rights that a Palestinian leader is very hamstrung to actually go to the people and say, you know, we recognize that you have these rights, I support – I recognize – you know, I uphold the right of return, 194 is important, but let’s talk about what we really need in order to get to a situation where you can be living in a better condition where we may be able to achieve some of this right in practice.

[01:31:30]

The peace process over the past 20 years has narrowed the space for the Palestinian leaders to be able to talk to their people and in honest way because of the oversensitivity to Israeli taboos and because the Israeli public is not willing to really tolerate – you know, they get upset at the notion, if we raise the right of return, that this means, you know, that the Arabs are coming to take and destroy the Jewish state. So that narrows the space for the leadership to be able to engage their people in terms of building a consensus around a compromise solution.

And so I think that, you know, we’re – this discussion is very much talking about what happens at the table. But again, we need to think more about, you know, how peace is built between leaders and their constituents and what kind of messaging is needed and what kind of political space needs to be created, not so much at the table but within the environments. And there needs to be more outreach to the Palestinian refugees and to the diaspora. And it’s not – you
know, the West Bank Palestinians, their agreement on a compromise solution is not going to enable a peace. It’s just not enough. So – and which means, I think, that we have a long road ahead of us, and we need to start thinking about different kinds of processes and even paradigms in order to get progress.

[01:33:14]

MR. TELHAMI: Let me address the grounds up very quickly. And I – you know, I’m obviously a supporter of grounds up. I served on so many groups that help sort of people-to-people, and I think it makes a difference. But that is not the problem, I think. I think that when I look, for example, at the – at the research evidence, particularly when I research Israelis and Palestinians, and I think, compared to other conflicts, what I see is that, yes, interaction and positive interaction can help. We find that, for example, people who have friends on the other side have a slightly more capacity to empathize and to have more conciliatory view toward the other.

But while that makes a difference, the trend is still the same because it’s defined by these bigger structural barriers, namely, how people assess the conflict, their collective identity issues and the bigger aims that they have. So I think that they all fall into this psychology, particularly when there is – when there is conflict. Doesn’t matter what bridges you built; the minute you go into this zero-sum mentality, and you think you’ve headed to conflict, you just rally and you – and you just forced to take – to take sides. So I think it’s – I think it’s a good thing to do, it’s helpful, but let’s not think that that’s going to be the way to solve the problem.

Who won and who lost? Of course, you know, we here as analysts could, well, both Israel and Palestinians lost and the U.S. lost and I’ve made the case that the U.S. lost. But let’s be realistic about that in every country, there’s a battle going on.

[01:35:01]

So when (we talk about ?) we have an assessment of what the national interest is – but we do have in every case, there’s a battle going on in Israel for what they want to see. You know, you – so if you’re – if you, you know, really want, under – whatever cost you want to pay to control the West Bank as part of greater Israel, you’re winning, or you think you’re winning, at least. If you’re Hamas and you don’t want to ever accept Israel – at least, you say you don’t – I think you’re winning.

So I don’t – I think there’s certainly groups that came out of this that you can argue, they’re winners. I mean, obviously, part of, you know, Yigal Amir, when he assassinated –

MR. MUASHER (?): Yitzhak.
MR. TELHAMI: Yatzhak – I mean, his aim was very explicit. He was going to make the – make sure that (he doesn’t have any ?). He has more supporters today than he did when he did it. And so you can say that some people, for sure, are winning.

MR. MUASHER: Shai.

MR. FELDMAN: So some of my job was done for me, so I won’t have to repeat just to make sure you understand where I stand. So on who lost, I agree completely with Shibley; everybody lost. Everybody, that is to say, the three parties lost; within the three parties, someone – I still think the majority among the three parties – or at least, the Israelis and the Palestinians lost. I also completely agree with him on number one, the importance of people-to-people, ground-up. I’ve been involved in this in different ways than Shibley has, but I have no illusion that that’s a substitute for leaders reaching a grand bargain, because no one can substitute that. And without a grand bargain, we cannot really address the fundamental, you know, issues that are of concern to the people.

[01:37:00]

I want to make just two last points. One, I agree with you completely on this whole issue of how the Arab-Israeli conflict was played, and of course, I think, on this one, although he really didn’t actually emphasize this; he emphasized this in a different panel some weeks ago – this kind of – practically the only thing I tend to disagree with Shibley. Because I think that it actually – and I kind of agree more with what I understood you to say – it’s been a convenient tool within – but my point about this is to say that actually, it’s becoming less and less effective. Like, when you think about, you know, Assad, in the last 2 ½ years, I mean, that’s what he tried – he tried to play this card by saying, oh it’s all a foreign conspiracy; it’s an Israeli-American conspiracy, and tried to sort bring back the Israel factor in the hope that it would help him, you know, unify and close the ranks behind him and so on and so forth.

[01:38:02]

You know, frankly, I think that there are less and less people in the Middle East that are buying this – excuse me for the expression – crap, you know? You know, because frankly, most people wake up, even before the last 2 ½ years in Damascus, and wake up in the morning in Cairo and wake up in the morning in Riyadh or Jeddah, you know – I mean, they have three, you know, more immediate concerns. But I think that one of the reasons – not the most important one, neither for Palestinians or Israelis – but one of the motivations that has always driven me was precisely to deprive those that are simply manipulating this tool for their own interests in the region.

Finally, I want to just say one word about this, and here, again, I apologize for insisting on trying to differentiate here between analysis and narrative. I recognize that from the Palestinian standpoint that this is seen through the prism of colonization. And again, I said a number of times, each party has an equally legitimate narrative.
There is an Israeli prism, OK, and the Israeli prism is, in my view – again, I’m not talking again about the extremes on both sides, either Hamas or the extreme right in Israel, and so on – the middle of the map, the center with which we have a problem – the center in Israel is driven by fear, OK?

Now, these fears, for a – for people who are older than I and weren’t born in Israel – I’m fifth generation – is driven by the Holocaust, OK? And it’s also driven by more recent experiences, which affect Israeli judgments about what kind of risks they can take. And the heritage of the 2006 attack by Hezbollah and the rockets rained against Israel and the Qassam rockets from Gaza, from – again, from the Israeli center’s standpoint is, what’s the lesson? The lesson is, Israel withdrew from Lebanon; Israel withdrew from Gaza. It got – it got Katyusha rockets from Lebanon and Qassam rockets from Gaza. Now, you can battle this, but the reality is that many, many Israelis see this problem through this prism, OK?

[01:40:26]

And finally, Israelis, without taking sides in this, are simply appalled by what they see in Syria in the last 2 ½ years. Now, this is a completely different prism from how this was reflected here for two reasons. Number one, the American media doesn’t show 5 percent of what Israelis see, because they – because the Israeli media picks up from YouTube and everything – all these much more horrific pictures than are seen in the American media.

And again, it’s not good guys and bad guys. I mean, Israelis are horrified by the al-Nusra and al-Qaida types, and they’re equally horrified to see the Hezbollah now being involved, but that’s not the point. The point is for Israelis, the – again, the center, not the analysts – excuse me for this – not the academics, not the academics; it’s, God, if Arabs can do this to one another, you know, what happens if we show weakness? You know, that’s the – that’s the – so my point about this is that the challenge – and here is where I differ with some of my European friends – the solution to this issue is not to pooh-pooh that Israel has security concerns. The challenge is to persuade Israelis – and it’s possible, and I think John – General John Allen, who is now assisting – again, that’s an invasion of the next panel – is trying to do this, is to persuade Israelis that there is a nonterritorial solution to this problem, the – but not to pooh-pooh the problem, because you’re battling against a very strong prism, just as strong as the colonization prism moves Palestinians in this process.

[01:42:09]

MR. MUASHER: Shai, thank you very much. I think you will all agree that this has been an excellent panel, an excellent discussion. We’re going to take a very short break, because Ambassador Kurtzer will have to leave at noon. So it may be five to 10 minute-max coffee break, then we’ll reconvene to have a session about the prospects for the future with Ambassador Dan Kurtzer, Geoffrey Aronson, Nathan Brown and joining us via VC from Beirut, Yezid Sayigh.

Thank you very much – (inaudible). (Applause.)

(END)