Twenty Years After Oslo:
The Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (Panel 2)

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DANIEL KURTZER: Thank you. We’re going to start the second session, which is the session in which we try not only draw lessons from Oslo but actually look forward. For those who remain somewhat pessimistic as a result of the first lesson, I will note the presence of Landrum Bolling in the first row, who’s about to turn 100 and remains probably the biggest optimist in this room about the prospects for peace. So there is still a possibility. (Applause.)

What we’re going to try to do in 10-minute segments is hear from three experts on how they do assess the prospects as we move forward, both in the context of diplomacy and in the context of the politics in the region. And if we look at it through those prisms, we can see how big a challenge we do face because at the time of Oslo, there were at least five extraordinary changes in the environment that provided impetus for what the Palestinians, Israelis, Jordanians, Egyptians, Syrians did under the auspices of the United States and Russia.

There was the extraordinary change in the international environment, with the end of the Soviet Union; the extraordinary change in the regional environment as the result of a Gulf War, in which an international coalition with regional players stood together against Arab aggression against another Arab state. There were changes in the local environment, as we heard in the first panel, with respect to the intifada and the growing degree of activity of those on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza. There were changes in the United States, with a president, George H.W. Bush, and a secretary of state, James Baker, who did see it in the American national interest after the Gulf War to focus on the Arab-Israeli issue.

And there were leadership changes. We knew after the breakthrough at Madrid, and we heard directly from, for example, Prime Minister Shamir, that he would have negotiated for 10 years and not reached an agreement, and then there was the election of Yitzhak Rabin. So you had a combination of leaders in the region no less tough than the leaders today, but leaders who were prepared under the right circumstances to actually come together and who tried to move forward on the basis of agreement.

Question is, what do we do in today’s context when almost each of those five criteria is so different from what it was then? And so we’re going to examine these issues, both intrinsic to the negotiations themselves but also in this broader context.

And to do that, we have three excellent speakers. Professor Nathan Brown is a professor of political science and international affairs at GW here in Washington, special expertise, as you all know, on Islamist movement, Palestinian politics, Arab law and constitutionalism and the author of the latest book, “When Victory is Now an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics,” published by Cornell in 2012.
Geoff Aronson is the director here in Washington of research and publications at the Foundation for Middle East Peace, the editor of the foundation’s bimonthly report on Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and the author of – this is also the first chapter of the book, its (length ?) you’ll see – “From Sideshow to Center Stage: U.S. Policy towards Egypt” and “Israel, Palestinians and the Occupied Territories: Creating Facts in the West Bank.”

And our third speaker, from – sitting in Beirut at the moment, Yezid Sayigh, is a senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, focuses on the Syrian crisis, obviously, the political role of Arab armies, security sector transformation in Arab transitions, the re-invention of authoritarianism, so we hope, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and peace process. Previously, Yezid was a professor of Middle East studies at King’s College in London and was an adviser from 1991 to ’94 and a negotiator in the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks.

I’ve asked each of the speakers to give remarks for about 10 minutes, and that will give us ample time both for questions and answers and to conclude on time at noon.

Professor Brown.

[00:04:55]

NATHAN BROWN: OK. Thank you very much, Mr. Kurtzer. Coming after the last panel, it should be of no surprise to anybody in the room that the 20th anniversary of Oslo falls on Friday the 13th, and you’re asking if we can provide any optimism in this panel. I’m not sure I can. I’m going to draw on some of the things that were said in the first panel. They trespassed on our territory, so I will trespass a little bit on theirs. But I’m going to focus on things from a domestic Palestinian point of view, and not so much in terms of Palestinian public opinion, although that will come in, but a little bit a look of whether the ingredients you were talking about are there for any kind of diplomatic process, given the very deeply divided and really almost state of permanent crisis which the Palestinian political system finds itself in.

If we go back to 20 years ago, one thing that the Oslo Accords did was establish an entity that is still with us today, that the Palestinians call – the Oslo Accords don’t call it, but the Palestinians refer to it as the Palestinian National Authority, the PNA. And it’s the – I mean, it’s an interesting title. The – I draw on something that Shai said about the Oslo Accords this morning, that when they were there, there were sort of open-ended process, oh, you talked about the (Jaffee ?) Center report being neither – being silent on the issue of statehood, and the Oslo Accords were silent on the issue of statehood – and, in fact, deliberately silent, almost militantly silent on the – on the topic of statehood, as were all non-Palestinian actors involved in the process. When Hillary Clinton mentioned the idea of a Palestinian state – I think this was 1998 – the White House, where she lived at the time, repudiated her remarks, that she didn’t speak for them. So there was something unspeakable about a Palestinian state from the international perspective. And I think the logic behind that was that whatever – if – whatever Palestinian – that came out of was central to the bargaining process. This was something, in a sense, that the Palestinians could be rewarded for; that was a concession that others could make.

[00:06:59]
Well, the reason I go into that was there was always a disconnect from what was going on from a Palestinian point of view because the creation of the Palestinian National Authority, from a Palestinian perspective, from those people who were involved in it from the very beginning was a building – about building a kernel of statehood, and more than just a kernel. So they basically took any possible provision in the Oslo Accords and ran with it in order to create something that looked very much like a state. They created a presidency. They created their – provision for a Palestinian council. That quickly became the Legislative Council, the Parliament. There was a series of ministries. There was a national curriculum. There was a legal machinery, a security apparatus and so forth and so on. Those things were built. They were sometimes built badly, and they were sometimes built in an authoritarian manner, and sometimes they were not built so badly. Sometimes they were built well, some of them, and sometimes there were actual democratic elements in them. But in a sense, those institutions that were built, especially in the first five years or so, are still very much present in Palestinian political life. In that sense, it was a very impressive achievement.

The problem, however, as I think from a Palestinian perspective, that Palestinian National Authority is no longer married to any kind of viable statehood project. That is to say, it’s there, it’s an inevitable part of Palestinian political life, but it doesn’t seem to be leading towards statehood in any meaningful way. And of course, that Palestinian National Authority that was built from – essentially the years 1994 to 1999, still exists, but since 2007 it has been split in two.

And let me just say a word about the two halves. On the West Bank, you’ve got a Palestinian National Authority that is well-entrenched but really without a clear raison d’être. It’s not clear I think to anybody but the top leaders why it is there or where it is going. And it’s not a persuasive part of any kind of political solution. There is no diplomatic process which I think engages Palestinian public; that came up in the last session. The – I just – I saw Shibley walk back in the room; I was hoping he would skip this session because – oh, yes – oh, he’s sitting in the front row – because I was going to make claims about public opinion. He’s sitting in the front row and actually leaning forward, ready to correct me. (Laughter.) But – so I’m not going to give you hard data; Shibley’s got that. I’m not going to give you figures. What I am going to give is just a vague impression about mood, and that is the extent to which the Palestinian public has simply disengaged from any kind of diplomatic process. This is simply irrelevant to their lives. I was there in June, right as the American efforts to start the process was going, and what was absolutely startling to me was that nobody was interested in it, nobody was talking about it. This was something that very top leaders. There was a little bit of disgust with the top leadership for kind of going through with what most Palestinians saw as a charade. But there was very little investment or interest in the process itself. So the West Bank PA has not raison d’être.

In Gaza, I think Hamas is in a – is in a similarly bad position, especially since the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza (sic). When Palestinians look at Hamas, they look at an organization – I’m – any – I’m sorry, yes, that’s – fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They’re very much there in Gaza. But Hamas, you know, is an acronym. It’s the
Movement of Islamic Resistance. And when Palestinians in Gaza look at the Movement of Islamic Resistance, they see something that's no longer really a movement. It has become just a big state. It's no longer – is no longer offering resistance in any kind of way. Its main resistance is just to stay there. And nor is it any – offering any kind of Islamic agenda. So the two halves and I think serious legitimacy problems. Neither one of them is able to offer to Palestinians a viable project for realizing Palestinian national aims.

And there’s where I going to switch a little bit to the task and look a little bit into the future. What to me is remarkable about the current moment in Palestinian history is – I said I was going to look forward, but I'll look back for just one more moment – the Palestinian national movement since its inception in the early 20th century has always been about, in some way, shape or form, Palestinian statehood. And I think that it decreasingly the case. It is not that Palestinians do not want a state, but the idea of statehood, which was so powerful – I mean, there were very, very different conceptions of what that meant and how to get there – but no longer animates Palestinians I think nearly as much, and there is no convincing alternative in which any political actor has been able to produce any kind of other viable vision or program.

And what I'm describing therefore sounds like an extremely unstable situation. Leaderships that have lost legitimacy, that offer their people no kind of vision, that offer kind of a barely acceptable present and nothing in the future sounds a little bit unstable.

[00:12:02]

If only. My sense is, although the leaderships have in a sense lost legitimacy, the sense, what I get, the analogy that I would have is Egypt in the early 2000s, Egypt 2003, Egypt 2004, of a regime that has in a sense lost its hold on the population but in which any viable political alternative cannot make itself felt. The various entities of the West Bank and Gaza are so deeply entrenched and political space for new actors is so narrow that I don’t see a new alternative arising.

The only alternative that does sometimes come up, and Leila Hilal mentioned it this morning, is the idea of some kind of popular mobilization. And indeed, for the last few years the idea of a popular resistance has sort of taken off, although I think the talk of it has probably declined a little bit in – over the past year or so. And the idea being that instead of leaving it to the leaders, you would have something like the first intifada, in which you had some groundswell grassroots activism directed in some way, shape or form of realizing Palestinian aims.

The problem has always been, who’s going to lead it, what is its agenda going to be. And you saw a brief upsurge of this kind of activism in 2011, where some Palestinian sort of entrepreneurial youth tried to spark something that looked like, you know, the Palestinian version of the Arab Spring. It fizzled. I think it is not impossible that something like that will happen again, but the – but the people who would organize it I think are not yet visibly on the scene. So I don’t think it’s going to happen anytime soon.

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From 2011 I would say until 2013 the main – you know, the question is, you know, if there is some upsurge of popular activism, who is it aimed against? Is it aimed against the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank? Gaza? Is it aimed against Israel? The actor that was probably quaking the most from 2011 to 2013 was probably the West Bank Palestinian Authority. I’m not sure that’s any longer the case. And that’s where the fall of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, if I get that right, actually has – brings the crisis home in Gaza a little bit more. So my sense is right now it’s probably Hamas that’s a little bit more nervous about an upsurge of popular activism.

But my point is – and here is where I’m going to fail in my job of looking to the future – even if such a wave does hit Palestinian society, and I think it’s unlikely – it’s not impossible – it’s unlikely to happen in the next year or two, but it’s not unlikely to happen in the far – the future farther out – these sorts of ways can take very, very unpredictable paths, especially because you’re dealing with often new leaders, you’re dealing with sometimes leaders who are competing against each other in order to sort of make a mark, you’re dealing with groups that sometimes have a real difficulty organizing any kind of coherent agenda. The Palestinians do remember the first intifada much like Leila Hilal described it, sort of this upsurge of grassroots activism, this time of national unity. But in fact, it was a time in which Palestinians were divided and in which the divisions of that period, especially between the Islamists and the national camp, really took hold in Palestinian society in ways that they’ve never – they’ve never completely coped with.

So my final note is that I – that kind of popular surge of political activism may very well occur, but exactly what impact it would have I think is almost completely unpredictable, even for the people who would lead it.

MR. KURTZER: OK. Thank you very much. Your job in the audience is to pick up on the question-and-answer period where Professor Brown left off, since he did focus a lot on the past, and to press him on what that all means for tomorrow and onward. Geoff, please.

GEOFFREY ARONSON: Great. Thank you all very much, and particular thanks to Carnegie for, in a sense, forcing us to review the last 20 years of Oslo. I often compare this process to reviewing a bad marriage, but like a bad marriage, if you understand what went wrong, maybe the second time around, it’s a triumph of hope over experience. And in some respects, the negotiating process today is just that, the triumph of hope over experience.

The other element – or there are two lessons or elements that I try to bring out from this morning’s conversation. One is the suggestion that what many observe as shortcomings of the Oslo process were actually understood at the time and are understood today by its architects as advantages. We won’t go into that now, but it’s important to keep in mind that much of the critique is a mirror image of the – of the objectives that were articulated by the architects of Oslo, principally Israel, and that remain – that remain in force today and inform the future.
The second point on this issue I’d like to make is, in the spirit of a bit of the self-promotion that my predecessors engaged in, I was part of a process that resulted in a policy paper of a group headed by Ambassador Tom Pickering and Admiral Bill Fallon. It’s outside. This is it, “U.S. Policy in a Time of Transition.” And it – and it looks at the question of how to reorient diplomacy between Israel and the Palestinians to get to an effective end.

And the – and the lesson that we learned and I think that others have also learned from the last decades and again informing the future is that left to themselves, the parties are incapable of coming to an agreement and that without a guiding hand, without somebody helping them or instructing them in the picture that they need to draw, we’ll just be running in the same place, more or less, we’ve been running over the last two decades.

Now if we look to the future here, it’s important to understand where we are today, and what we have today in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in particular, less so in Gaza, is a system of occupation and settlement that has endured for almost half a century.

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The second point is there’s been no agreement between the parties of any consequence since October 1995, which is almost 20 years, but nonetheless, in the absence of agreement, this system remains intact.

Now the main achievements, if we were to look at and try to isolate the important things that have really happened since 1995, one is Defensive Shield, which was Israel’s formal reoccupation of the entire West Bank, the closure regimes and checkpoints and so forth in 2002, April 2002, and the second major event, the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 – both of these were outside and in critical respects contradicted the widespread if mistaken notions about the Oslo process. They both occurred without negotiation. They were both unilateral. The Americans played absolutely no role in them. In one case, Hamas, not the PLO, was the – was the – was the de facto interlocutor in Gaza and so forth.

So we’ve seen a system that is in some respects a legacy not only of Oslo but of the decades before it, maintaining itself, enduring. To the extent that there have been changes in that, that system, they’ve occurred outside the orbit of Oslo, and they use a language other than the language that Oslo has used – negotiations, mutual advantage and so forth.

Now we’ve seen elsewhere in the region, particularly in Syria and Egypt today, the resilience of existing systems there – of rule, at least as they’re compared to those challenging them both in Syria and Egypt.

Now this is also the case in the occupied territories. This system that Israel instituted in June 1967 is, in its basic parameters, still intact.

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Now having said that, what are the characteristics of this system, and why is that important as we look toward the future? The first point here is Israel is the sole and as yet unchallenged architect of that system – unchallenged, essentially, by the PLO, by Hamas, by other external parties, including the U.S. This has been the case since June '67. It's reflected – this idea of Israel as the architect has been reflected in the Oslo DOP, II – Oslo II, Defensive Shield, disengagement and so on.

Now this does not mean that other parties cannot affect it. Certainly that is not the case. For example, in 1976 you had elections in the West Bank where Israeli expectations of the victors were upended and you had the introduction of those forces associated with the PLO, this new generation of young nationalists. You said – you – we saw that the seeds of the Gaza evacuation were born in 1988 with the first intifada, right? We've seen certainly the evacuation of the Gaza Strip in 2005.

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But nonetheless, this – these reforms in the system are a measure of its strength. The system has been innovative, flexible and adaptable throughout the last decades.

Now – and again, as Israel understands it, historically, the reconciliation that resulted from Oslo was only the latest in a series of accommodations Israel was able to make with Palestinian forces to enable it to proceed in implementing its major objectives in the West Bank and Gaza – i.e., unchallenged security control and settlement. OK.

Now what about this idea of the flexibility of the existing system? And again, why is that important in the future? OK. In 1967 who would have thought that Israel would turn to the PLO as a – as a partner? Who would have thought that they would turn to Hamas as a partner in Gaza, a de facto effective partner in Gaza? Who would have thought that in terms of the Palestinian Authority, it could remain intact, coherent and be seen by and large as legitimate in an arena where there have been no negotiations or no effective agreement for almost two decades? Who would have ever thought that the Palestinian security services could remain a coherent agent in this kind of environment?

One skeptic in particular was General Keith Dayton himself, who over five or six years ago said, without a political horizon, these guys can’t stay in the chair more than year or two. And it’s been years since then. OK. So this is a strong system that exists today, and we have to understand and appreciate that strength as we seek to modify it in this current environment.

Now what are the – what are the important characteristics of the system, other than Israel as the architect? Number one, we have areas A, B and C. I'm of the view that Israel would have done A, B and C or some version of it with or without Oslo, because it’s a clear expression of its interests, and we can talk about that later.

[00:25:50]
Now what are – what are the goals of this system? And again, these are important as we try to evaluate what’s going to happen in the future. The first goal is the prevention of the creation of a territorial base for the exercise of Palestinian sovereignty west of the Jordan. Now there are many other goals – (chuckling) – which I don’t have time to go into, but perhaps in the current Q-and-A we can move further. Thank you.

MR. KURTZER: Thank you very much, Geoff. Now Yezid thinks that he has the advantage here because I can’t pass him notes about time. (Laughter.) But Yezid, we do have the plug in the wall of the video conference. (Laughter.) So we’ll ask you to give your presentation.

(Phone rings.)

MR. : Who is it?

YEZID SAYIGH: There I am. Apparently I control the mute button, not you, Dan. (Laughter.)

[00:26:56]

So I’ll go straight into this, so as not to run out of the moderator’s patience and my time.

It was often said for a long while that the authoritarian regimes in places like Egypt or Tunisia and elsewhere weren’t going to be threatened by grass-roots movements and uprisings, but that has come to pass. And of course the question has often been posed in the past couple of years that there may be yet another uprising, another intifada, in Palestine and that the Arab Spring might come to Palestine.

(Technical difficulties begin at this point and persist during the video conference.)

(I think ?), maybe ironically, that in fact it’s the other way around, that the country or the territory that produced most of the early intifadas in fact doesn’t face that prospect. And this is for a couple of reasons. One, which I’m not going to discuss and Geoff was just describing, I think very accurately, is the Israeli system of control, which is sophisticated, which has been resilient and which has been place since 1967, building of course on a previous (legacy ?) of dealing with the Palestinian population. But (more interestingly or ?) more importantly for me here is to say that the other reason why the pattern that emerged in Arab countries since 2011 won’t happen in Palestine, in my view, is that the principal political actors in Palestine – and here I mean both Fatah and the Palestinian Authority of the West Bank and Hamas – have been focused centrally on a state-building drive. And this is something that Nathan, I think, also very correctly was saying earlier on. This emphasis on state building has actually led to pretty much all civil-political factions in Palestinian society over the last, I would say, at least 40 years working ultimately within the outer envelope of Israeli control. This is exactly what happened with Oslo. And so their active drive for statehood has pulled them even further into the status quo, rather than towards challenging it.

[00:29:22]
And so whereas the Arab Spring has opened up everything for renegotiation in Egypt or Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, possibly Syria – identity, constitutions, societal relations, the role of the army – all these things are up for discussion, for – (audio break) – for contestation, in Palestine that dynamic is fundamentally different, and I think that is – (audio break) – and will continue to result in a different trajectory. And I think that is one that will consolidate and get deeper, not converge with what (is happening ?) in the wider Arab region.

Now what I – (audio break) – next is that if we come back a little bit to the sort of here and now of Palestinian politics, that regional trends have – (audio break) – of late undermined or disappointed the (sort of ?) hopes that Hamas had entertained since the start of the Arab Spring and since the election of the Muslim Brotherhood to parliament and then the election of Morsi in Egypt, in particular. They right now, I think, have come – (audio break) – the true limitations of what the Arab Spring offers and doesn’t offer.

One main consequence is that domestic politics dominate, whether it’s in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and in other countries that haven’t gone through that sort of – (audio break) – what we have seen since 2011 and I think what will be on the agenda for the foreseeable future is domestic politics, is a renegotiation, realignment of (social ?) forces, a redefinition of agendas and so on. And this will be the principal determinant of how – (audio break) – behave (in foreign ?) policy.

The (second ?) element there is that the scale and the nature of the deep social and economic problems facing these Arab societies, as we see in Egypt, for instance, as we see in Libya and Yemen in various ways – (audio break) – scale and nature of these problems are such that these societies will be mired in struggling over the issues, the causes and on – obviously over how to resolve them for years to come. I’m talking about not even five years, but 10, 15 years, I think, is the sort of vista we should be thinking of.

So what happens to the Palestinians, I think, is going to happen somewhere over there, very much separately from – (audio break) – is going on in these Arab societies, the sort of hopes that people like – (audio break) – and others had that the Arab Spring would transform the regional landscape in ways that gave them new options. I think these hopes have been proven unrealistic, without, however, giving genuine hope or genuinely new alternatives and options for Fatah, the Palestinian Authority and the two-state solution. I mean, that – (audio break) – of paradox that what – has shown the limitations of what Hamas can expect and the – (audio break) – of its model of implying a willingness to co-exist with Israel while maintaining a rhetoric of resistance and independence and so on, that – (audio break) – hollow, but that doesn’t mean that the other side is now, therefore, gaining an equal advantage. It isn’t, for other reasons. And this is what I want to move to.
I think on one hand – and again, to come back to the regional perspective – that from an Israeli perspective – and I won’t discuss Israeli policy or Netanyahu’s private or public – (audio break) – and inclinations and so on – one little lesson or conclusion that some Israelis, I think, are reaching from what’s happening in the region is that something less than statehood is also an alternative. Look at Kurds in Syria or Iraq, for instance. The most obvious example, and maybe not necessarily the only one in the Levant, that the challenge to the Sykes-Picot boundaries is one that may not change formal state boundaries but it may give rise to new forms of co-existence of – (audio break) – within and across some of these state boundaries, and therefore why should the Palestinians be any different?

Now, we might say, well, the U.S. is now, among others, committed to Palestinian statehood or a two-state solution in some form or other, but I mean something that we recognize as a state. And I’m not so convinced – and here again, I won’t go into the detail of Secretary of State John Kerry’s initiatives since June, but I’ll throw out a line I picked up from Harry Truman addressing a member of the Anglo-American Commission in 1946, who said, and I quote: It has been a most difficult problem, and I’ve about come to the conclusion there is no solution, but we’ll keep trying. This was in 1946, and here we are, what is it – do the calculations, I’m slow, but just under 70 years later.

I don’t think the U.S. in fact today has even deeper convictions than Harry Truman had at the time, and therefore, where there isn’t that sort of conviction, I don’t see that sort of push that’s going to be necessary.

[00:34:60]

Now, I want to come back to the real implications, in my view, looking forward of all this. And I was struck while preparing my remarks for this conference that – how much the 20 years of Oslo actually, now that we look back at them, look like what emerged in Israel in its relationship with the (Arab minority ?) between 1948-49 and 1967. In fact the Oslo phase has now been slightly longer than that first phase of Israeli-Arab relations within the newly established state of Israel, where, you know, there was an Arab minority living under martial rule until 1966, with limitations on movement and residence and so on, two communities within one legal space, but with distinctions in economic space – (audio break) – administration space, but again distinctions in terms of municipality powers and budgets and so on.

And we also have – (audio break) – the way in which the Israeli security establishment and ultimately the political establishment prior to 1967 co-opted the patriarchs, the elders of clans and families, the mukhtars, to try and control political dynamics within the Palestinian Arab community, something that was ultimately challenged by – (audio break) – the Communist Party, nationalists of various types, Azmi Bishara, among others.

[00:36:30]

And in certain respects, maybe superficial in some ways, but nonetheless this is pretty much what has happened since Oslo. I know Shai Feldman, a good colleague, is in the audience, who was on the panel earlier. And as he keeps reminding me, we were on an island in Greece in 1993 when the news broke of the Oslo Accords. We put together an impromptu panel. And while I welcomed the breakthrough at the political level, I pointed out that the structure of the
proposals was one which reinvented Israeli control but we shifted it sideways so that it operated from outside a small envelope within which the Palestinians operated.

And I think in a way, that is pretty much what has happened. There are, of course, big differences between the Israeli Arab experience within Israel in ’48 to ’67 or since 1967, but one – pointing out really is if we look back over this entire 65-year stretch, a 65-year stretch, we’ve got a 47-or-so-year stretch since 1967, 46 years, and then a 20-year stretch in Oslo. And they do seem remarkably similar, in the sense that Palestinians, in their striving (for statehood?) – and I think Nathan was absolutely right in saying that this has been a central political dynamic for even longer than 48 – that this striving, along with the nature of Israeli sophistication, the nature of the relationship it has with the West, in particular, has actually given rise to a fundamentally different type of dynamic in the Palestinian-Israeli relationship than in all other Arab relationships.

And so to conclude, the most likely trajectory I see coming is one of a continuous, deepening integration of these two societies, these two entities, obviously on very unequal terms, an embedding of fundamental inequalities, not only between Jewish Israelis and non-Jewish Israelis or between Israelis and Palestinians very broadly, but also between different subsets of Palestinians – those in Gaza, those in East Jerusalem, those in the West Bank and those, of course, in Israel.

And so we may find it difficult – and this is my last comment – to see how such a trajectory can endure in this day and age, looking at – I’m talking about 10, 15 years ahead, maybe longer – and that this trajectory is bound to face challenges both within and without. But actually I can’t see how this trajectory cannot endure, given the lack of genuinely capable and fundamental challenges to it. And I’ll stop there.

[00:39:30]

MR. KURTZER: Thank you, Yezid. Before I turn the floor over to you for questions, I want to pull a Wolf Blitzer. And in this respect, I hope that Jon Stewart doesn’t call me on it. And that is to do the following. John Kerry is now sitting in the front row, and he says to our panel, each of you has two minutes to give me a piece of advice on what I should do now in the peace process. Nathan.

MR. BROWN: I have no advice on the peace process itself. None. What I would say is that any serious diplomatic effort has to be built on a recognition of the deeply dysfunctional nature of the Palestinian political system and cannot postpone it. There are things, I think, that the outside world could do to help repair that. I’m not sure it’s going to be an easy or short-term job. It’s not going to be done within the term of one secretary of state. But I think there are specific signals that could be given, opening up Gaza, especially to the West Bank, essentially some sort of opening to Palestinian reconciliation, some kind of move towards elections, and starting with the realities on the ground I think makes an awful lot more sense than going back and pretending that we’re still living 10 years ago.

MR. KURTZER: OK. Geoff.

[00:41:03]
MR. ARONSON: Well, I would say, Mr. Secretary, your administration has declared solving this problem to be a national security interest of the United States. If that in fact is the case, we can’t leave the security interests of the United States hostage to the demonstrated incapacity of the parties to reach an agreement. Doing so puts – makes – leaves our interest, our national security interest hostage to their shortcomings. And that’s unacceptable.

[00:41:39]

So if that in fact is the case, it’s incumbent upon us, the United States, to draw a picture of a final agreement which, number one, satisfies our interests and in doing so both enhances the security of both parties and meets the minimum requirements of the ability of Palestine to operate and rule in a sovereign fashion.

Absent that, we’re just making an existing problem worse, and we’re doing, as our good friend Yezid suggested, empowering the past as we move into the future.

MR. KURTZER: OK. Yezid.

MR. SAYIGH: I think the first thing is to reassert the basic concrete outlines of a deal something along the Clinton parameters, fundamentally, with the assertion that no matter how long it takes and what Israel has done in the meantime in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, these are the parameters that the U.S. recognizes and seeks to shift the incentive structure among Israeli voters, as George H. Bush did – President Bush senior, in 1991, in a way that helped Rabin to power in June 1992 because new immigrants to Israel understood that there was a choice to be made between investing in settlement in the occupied territories versus homes in Israel proper. That’s the sort of incentive structure that needs to be effected.

I think Nathan’s right about the dysfunctional nature of Palestinian politics, and that’s a major obstacle, but that also means that rather than set up conditions – or principles, as they’re labeled – for Hamas to meet in order to acknowledge that it’s there and that it has to be part of this, I would rather suggest here’s a clear commitment to the process, to end goals, and Hamas can choose for itself whether to be part of them. What I’m really saying is that we can’t keep using the Palestinian split nor Hamas’ approach that’s unhelpful and counterproductive, in my view, and hollow, as an excuse for not proceeding on the core outlines.

[00:44:05]

But fundamentally the U.S. needs to show that it is still as committed as ever to these goals, rather than start shifting things like swaps of large settlement blocs from being something to be negotiated and swapped to becoming a starting point from which we start the next negotiation.

I think there has got to be a willingness for the U.S. to stand up on these issues very clearly, not adopt a punitive approach, but nonetheless to show the parties what the costs and benefits are to shift the incentive structure.

MR. KURTZER: Thank you.
Now we’ll take your questions. Mr. Ambassador. Mic is coming.

Q: My name is Mohammed (Hussaini ?). I’m from the Arab League. I was just wondering, is this the right time for the Palestinians to negotiate while – when some of the Arab countries, which can influence, really, the course of peace or war in the region, are unstable and in chaos? Perhaps it’s for the Israelis the best time for them to negotiate, not because of what’s going on around them, but because nowadays I sense, and from here, even, in this think tank organization and others, they – I think that many Israelis and pro-Israelis think that a two-state solution is the best for Israel, for its future, because otherwise if peace – if the two-state solution is not achieved, Israel will not be a Jewish, a Zionist or a democratic state.

Thank you.

[00:45:57]

MR. KURTZER: OK.

Q: Mitchell Plitnick. I used to be with Jewish Voice for Peace and B’Tselem. Now I’m a reporter. What I want to ask about is the incentive structure that particularly Mr. Sayigh talked about. Right now Israel’s incentive is very unclear as to why they should be even wanting to make any sort of serious concessions and negotiations. The occupation is cheap. It’s largely bankrolled by Europe. At the same time, we’ve seen some examples of things that seem to be shaking the Israeli government. The recent EU decision, which affects, actually, very little on the ground, has sent deep shock waves through the Israeli government.

I think we’ve seen something about how that sort of incentive system can push Israel, give them the level of incentive, at least to some degree, that the Palestinians innately have because they’re the weaker party, and also it shows a bit of how much impact Europe could potentially have. And I have heard almost nothing about things that Europe can do and potentially getting the United States to allow and invite increased European participation in this process. So I’d like to hear everyone’s thoughts on that.

[00:47:13]

Q: Hi. I’m Marta Heianengel (ph). I reluctantly admit that I am from the University of Oslo. (Laughter.) It might interest you to know that this panel also takes place in Oslo, not today, but tomorrow, and that in Oslo they cannot agree on one narrative, as well. So there is – there are two different panels, so there is not only just the Palestinian and an Israeli and an American narrative, but there is a split Norwegian narrative there as well.

And I’m coming to – what I wanted to ask you – all the panelists, and perhaps, also, Professor Telhami if he is still in the audience – the role of a weak and, quote, “unbiased” mediator such as Norway for the future – is there still room for such a – such involvement? Or is it only a strong, U.S.-led mediation process that is the way forward? Thanks.

MR. KURTZER: OK. One more now. Gentleman in the suit.
Q: I'm Tom Getman (sp), an NGO executive. I'm wondering if it isn't time for more honesty and candid – for the sake of Israel as well as Palestine – doing what Jim Baker did and call a spade a spade and say what’s illegal, and be specific about the violations of international humanitarian law and the violations of the Geneva Conventions. Because, for humanitarians, it’s harder and harder to face the reality of incarceration of children, destruction of homes, taking of more property and targeted assassinations.

MR. KURTZER: All right, given our time, let me take one more question, because I think we're only going to have this one round. Please.

And I probably will give the last question to Landrum Bolling, so.

Q: Just to pick up on a number of themes. One, I'd just point out that if it's a bad marriage, second marriages fail at a higher rate than first marriages. (Laughter.) (Off-mic exchange.)

[00:49:51]

Picking up on another theme – (off mic) – you know, back to Shai prism thoughts – it seems to me that America is now looking at the world from a prism of isolationism. I think Syria’s at least bringing that – or you certainly can argue that. And if all the areas that domestically are – in the Arab world are concerned domestically – you know, my question is very simple. What happens if the world finally just gets tired of this and says a pox on all your houses, which a lot of people are saying these days, and stops funding it? What happens if the funding for – which is, you know, quite significant – that all dries up? Then what do the actors have to do?

MR. KURTZER: OK. Last question, Landrum Bolling. Here comes the microphone.

Q: Arafat’s name has come up earlier this morning. I just wanted to share with you a conversation I once had with Arafat in the years when I was one of several people who carried messages unofficially back and forth between the White House and Arafat. I said to him – I remember – you’ve been telling me for two years how much you want peace with the Israelis if only the Palestinians could have a state of their own.

[00:51:07]

But you know, many experts say that a Palestinian state would too small to be viable. Would you be willing to allow the Palestinians to be federated with, say, Jordan or Lebanon? He said, of course. But why not federated with Israel? We Palestinians should be federated with the Israelis. And later on, he brought up the same subject with me again. He said, I don’t understand why our cousins – he always referred to the Jews as our cousins – I don’t understand why our cousins don’t see what I see so clearly. We Palestinians are the most energetic, the most advanced, the most technologically competent, the best entrepreneurs, the hardest-working of all the Arabs. And together, we, with the Palestinians and the
Israelis could become the most powerful economic force in the Middle East. We could be a force for unity and peace and stability.

Now, that concept of a partnership between Palestinians and Israelis – it seems to me something that we have never quite fully explored over the years, and I just wonder if the comment would be, well, is there still any hope of a kind of practical partnership between Palestinians and Israelis?

MR. KURTZER: OK. Thank you. I’d ask each of our speakers, then, to take five minutes; maybe we’ll go reverse order. Yezid, if you could start, five minutes, covering the questions that you want to cover.

MR. SAYIGH: Thanks. Yeah. Well, first I’ll address the question from the gentleman who is with B’Tselem. A couple of things there. One actually ties into something that Nathan said earlier about the whole issue of Palestinian statehood being unspeakable as late as the late 1990s. I think that might have been true of the United States – the example of Hillary Clinton at the time, but that – actually, at that time, almost everyone else in the world thought Palestinian statehood was the obvious solution, and the EU, at the time, was officially committed to recognizing a Palestinian state within the year – this was the (Berlin ?) statement in March 1998 – if the final status negotiations didn’t deliver a state, never mind the non-aligned movement in the third world and so on.

[00:53:27]

So – but that leads into – the next question is – I mean, the second comment there is that, to come to EU sanctions and so on – the impact of the recent decision on – not, you know, providing cooperation funding for projects in the occupied territories. That’s true, and that’s part of shifting the incentive structure, but I mentioned the first thing about – the original EU position in 1998 – to show where the EU is today – how far it’s ceded the initiative on this to the United States – this is the situation it’s been for at least a decade, so I don’t see where a greater political resolve is coming from. And all I really would hope is that both the United States and the EU would activate the sort of rather modest mechanisms and incentive structures that they’ve already got in place without even having to get anything more ambitious just to send the right sort of political signal, that there is a cost.

[00:54:27]

I mean, if the U.S. today were to say something like, you know, you, the Israeli government, want to spend more money building in the occupied territories or beyond the 1967 line – that is your sovereign decision – or maybe not really a sovereign decision, but it’s your decision, however, we want to tell the Israeli public is that we will not come and – (inaudible) – Israel when it decides to evacuate this – (audio break) – base or that settlement in a year or 10 or 15 years’ time. If you’ve taken the decision to invest your money there, that’s your choice, but we are not going to compensate you for – (audio break) – just to give you a sweetener to enable a deal.
That is the sort of thing – (audio break) – that, of course, I don’t see coming from any U.S. leader today or for the foreseeable future, and that’s why I come back to see that the trajectory I ended my comments with is the one we’re going to see, and that effect – that relates to some of the other comments and questions.

The – (audio break) – pronounce the name correctly – on Norway’s role or the role of others – there was a precise moment in the early 1990s when this sort of peace was possible: the end of the Cold War, the Gulf War, domestic developments in politics within the Palestinian arena, within Israel. There was a conjunction of these three different levels that allowed a moment. I don’t think we’ve had that sort of moment since then. The Arab Spring hasn’t really dovetailed with that sort of development on the Palestinian or Israeli side, let alone internationally. We don’t have that virtuous conjunction.

And I want to move on quickly to the – well, I guess – by the way, my second marriage was much better than my first marriage, incidentally. That failed –

[00:56:24]

MR.: Mine also.

MR. SAYIGH: That failed too, ultimately – sadly – or, well, ultimate, you know, it’s not something – it’s all behind me now, but I’m not getting married a third time, and you can – (audio break) – that what you will. (Laughter.) But fundamentally, what I – I mean, what I’ve heard in terms of comments and questions from the floor simply confirms me in my feeling that whether it’s looking at domestic trends, regional trends or international trends, the absence of the sort of U.S. role we need – the inability of Europe to provide the support of role we need, the lack of the incentives that I think we all need – whichever way you look at it, I just – that is exactly what I was ending with, that given the lack of real challenges to the status quo, I don’t see why we should expect anything but a trajectory of continuous status quo, which is one of a deepening consolidation of this special relationship between Israelis and Palestinians – not exactly the one Arafat meant, or maybe others of us could imagine or hope for, but one in which Palestinians continue to get drawn in very, very, very varying ways, and possibly, at times, contradictory ways, into a wider matrix of Israeli control.

[00:57:48]

And to give you one tiny example of what that might be – and I’ll stop there – yes, why should the international community go on funding this situation? What if they pull the plug and a pox on all your houses? I think that – for all I know, that could be a healthy thing. There were times, certainly, a decade ago, when I thought all this funding was not helping the Palestinians, certainly, to develop a healthy politics and a healthy sense of accountability to themselves, let alone to others.

But, you know, for over a decade, Israel has argued several times privately to the EU and others not to cut funding from the Palestinian authority. This gives us a sense, I think, of the nature of – the understanding of – the importance of
this funding. It doesn’t mean that the EU will go on doing it or the Arab states will go on doing it. It could well simply mean that if they start really (cutting ?) it down, Israel will find ways of generating more revenue for the Palestinian authority, whether by relaxing certain controls or allowing greater access to Israeli markets – the sort of thing that operated, in other words, from 1967 to the early 1990s. That’s what I would expect.

MR. KURTZER: Thanks. Geoffrey?

MR. ARONSON: Yeah, I’ll just go in order here.

Is it the right time to negotiate? Well, as we all know, people often sit around the table not only to reach an agreement but for all other reasons, and we don’t have time, today, to go into those, but I think it’s fair to say that there are reasons above and beyond the simple desire to reach an agreement that are underpinning the existing diplomatic efforts now under way under U.S. auspices. The question about the EU, I think, is an interesting and an important one.

In my prepared remarks, I didn’t have – didn’t make the time to make one of these points that as we look to the future, what are – what are a couple of the important points that are worth raising? And one was my observation that there’s been a tremendous change in elite Israeli Jewish opinion about the merits and advantages of occupation and settlement over the decades.

[01:00:07]

Certainly, there’s been a tremendous change, and I would call it a disaffection among a large segment of moderate, liberal Israeli political opinion regarding the advantages, the need, the effort invested across the green line. This is a tremendous change, since the early years of occupation, especially the first decade, when the basic instruments of settlement were put in place. In part, this is a function of politics. Many of the opponents, such as they are, of occupation and settlement, are opponents of the Likud and the right-wing elements in Israel and more supportive of Labor Party and parties to the left.

But even in those parties, the Labor Party was the architect of occupation and settlement. And what we’re seeing is, again, evidence of the strength of this system, because not withstanding this growing sense of – among this part of Israeli electorate about the disadvantages of this policy. It goes, in a sense, from strength to strength. It still remains part of a national enterprise, which, of course, is why it can maintain its integrity over so many years and decades. And even among those elements who were, in some respects, estranged from this policy, again, its adaptability has meant that they may be opposed to settlement and occupation, but they support the idea of settlement blocks, whatever that means. They support the separation barrier, for example, as a way of solving the security problem. They support the disengagement from Gaza as a – as a way of solving the demographic problem, as they call it.

[01:02:09]
So it’s – as we look to the future, to me, it’s – and the EU is one element of this – the EU, as Yezid suggested, is beginning to think, well, why shouldn’t we exact a cost for Israel in its maintenance of this policy? And why shouldn’t Israelis generally feel, in some respects, the pinch of this? Maybe that will force a change.

OK, well, we’ll see, but again, the resilience of this policy and the adaptability of this policy is well-proven over time. The question of a role of a third party – certainly, Norway, in many respects, sort of forged the way here in its successful effort in early 1990s. And there’s no shortage of those efforts today; you can be certain of that. There’s a lot of people trying to get going track one and a half, track two negotiations between Israel and the PLO and Palestinians – Israel and Hamas and so forth. The fact of the matter is, as Yezid pointed out, the ingredients that were, in a sense, unique in that era haven’t been duplicated, as they cannot be, certainly. But even more than that, we haven’t seen a revision of those kind of ingredients that have enabled success.

On Baker – you know, in laying down the law, two points are important here. James Baker talked about – and George Bush talked about denying Israel money for settlement construction as a way of – for Soviet immigration, but again, we have to recognize that its concerns about settlement more or less evaporated when Rabin was elected in July 1992. And Rabin inaugurated unprecedented expansion of Israeli settlement over the next three or four years. So it’s important not only to stand up and be angry, but to do it within a policy context to which you are committed. Baker wasn’t committed to the broader context. Hillary Clinton wasn’t committed to the broader context of a settlement freeze, and failed as a consequence. So don’t say something unless you’re prepared to see it through, I would think. That’s it.

MR. KURTZER: Nathan.

MR. BROWN: OK. I’m going to try to be very brief, partly because my colleagues have, I think, addressed the questions as well as they could be, and also, in an effort to end on what will have to pass for an optimistic note, I think – and that is to say that, kind of the image that you’ve heard on this panel – especially, I think, from Geoff Aronson and from Yezid Sayigh of a – of a very well-entrenched system right now, and one that Yezid says flatly he sees continuing indefinitely into the future, even strengthening itself, I think, has certain implications for both sides.

My sense is that the political class on both sides – and I would guess broader publics as well get this. They understand that that is what the situation is now, and that’s where it’s going. Palestinians don’t know what to do about it, and their leaders have no answer for them. I don’t know exactly what kind of talking is going on in Israeli circles, but I go back to what – to where the situation that Shai described was going on a little bit more than 20 years ago in some Israeli circles.
The situation that Yezid describes, I think, most starkly is one that obviously is unacceptable to Palestinians, but they can’t do anything about it. For Israelis, it does actually have real costs. It may costs that they’re willing to pay if there’s no alternative, but it’s not necessarily a very pretty picture, and you do hear Israelis talk about, essentially, some kind of fear of what I would call the South Africanization of Israel. They are very well-entrenched within their own system, but on the other hand, it has increasing international costs; it’s not necessarily the kind of place where you can imagine your grandchildren growing up in.

[01:06:19]

And whether that sparks creative thinking – we heard from Shai about how, essentially dealing with the PLO – Palestinian state – the unspeakable became speakable, and then they could advocate for it – it became possible in that period. I don’t know whether that kind of thinking is going on. My sense is that those kinds of discussions are beginning on the Palestinian side, but again, they don’t know – they don’t know where to go, and it’s very much the weaker party. I’m not sure we’re going to get an awful lot in terms of creative answers from them, but that’s probably where to focus on, and it’s probably those longer-term dialogues at which people face up to the fact of not what’s going to happen next week, but where they’re – what kind of society they’re going to be living in five to 10 years from now, and whether there’s anything they can do about it.

MR. KURTZER: Well, I know I speak for all of you in thanking our three panelists, also thanking Marwan Muasher and the Carnegie Endowment. (Applause.) And our session is closed. Thanks.

[01:07:15]

(END)