



Can the Two-State Solution Be Saved?

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Welcome/Moderator:
Marwan Muasher,
Vice President for Studies,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Speakers:
Martti Ahtisaari,
Former President of Finland

Lakhdar Brahimi,
U.N. Special Envoy to Syria and Former Foreign Minister of Algeria

Jimmy Carter,
Former President of the United States

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MARWAN MUASHER: Good afternoon, and thank you all for coming. We're truly honored to have with us three distinguished members of the Elders Club. Even though the Elders Club has been formed about six years ago by President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, this is the first event, the first public event for the Elders Club, and we're very honored that it takes place in Washington – first public event in Washington, I should say.

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So of course, we have with us President Carter, a Nobel laureate, an ex-president – I don't need to go through the introduction – President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland and Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N. envoy to Syria. President Ahtisaari also is a Nobel laureate and, hopefully, Lakhdar Brahimi will be a future Nobel laureate. (Laughter.)

The chosen focus for this meeting is the Israeli-Palestine conflict. This event actually could not have been more opportune, given Secretary Kerry's announcement Friday that bilateral talks will resume in Washington shortly.

The elders' delegation is visiting Washington at the start of their planned engagement over the coming year or so with the P-5 members to explore how they can be helpful. From Washington, they would go directly to London for meetings with Foreign Minister Hague. And at a later date, they plan to visit Moscow. Visits to Beijing and Paris will then follow.

Today, they held talks with Secretary Kerry and Susan Rice, mainly on the Middle East. And while, you know, they are not in a position to tell us what they told them exactly, we will be hearing from them about where matters stand regarding the peace process and what needs to be done.

And I thought I would turn first to President Carter to ask you of your impression, sir, of where matters stand. What can we expect from Kerry's latest initiative and upcoming negotiations? A lot of people in this town are still skeptical whether negotiations are going to lead this time to a breakthrough or whether we are going to see another endless process. You've been a peace negotiator, a leader who has been able to bring the two sides together. What can you tell us about this latest round and what can we look for that might offer us more hope that this time an agreement might be reached?

[00:03:14]

FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER: Well, thank you first of all for letting us come. And thank you, audience, for coming to be with us.

I think it's accurate to say that the elders have taken upon ourselves the responsibility of probing for progress in the Middle East since our very first day of meeting. This is one of the primary charges that we got from Nelson Mandela when we were organized. And we pursued this with numerous visits to the Middle East, to Israel, to the West Bank, and also to Gaza, as well as Jordan and to Lebanon and to Egypt.

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And so I think we have been able to keep in close contact with all those countries and their leaders as best we can. And, of course, as you may know, Lakhdar Brahimi, on my left, has been responsible, under the United Nations and African Union, for the peace process in Syria. And before that, Kofi Annan, who's now the chairperson of the elders, was the envoy for peace in Syria. So in many ways, the elders have remained quite deeply involved in the struggle for peace.

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We have a few characteristics. First of all, none of us are involved in politics directly. Many people have described us as has-been politicians. (Laughter.) We have held important positions in the past, but one of our requisites for membership is that we don't hold any public office. For instance, Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar was one of our members, but she stepped down when she was elected to the parliament.

So that's one of our, I'd say, openings to freedom. We go where we wish, we meet with whom we choose, and we say what we really believe. And we're not constrained by whether or not we'll be reelected or put back in positions of authority.

So that has given us a chance to meet not only with Fatah, for instance, but we meet regularly as we wish with the leadership in Hamas. And we also go to North Korea to try to bring some better resolution of relationships with North Korea. I need not go down the list of things that we do, but we go where we wish.

And so we have an insight which we always share at the end of our sessions with leaders who are directly involved and still holding public office. And that includes the president and the secretary of state, and, quite often, the secretary-general of the United Nations. I always send them a personal report very soon after we get back from any trip in which I'm involved with the elders. So all the elders have our own organizations to pursue.

[00:05:58]

Mary Robinson is one of our group. She's the former president of Ireland, as you may know, and was the United Nations high commissioner on human rights. And she's now been given a charge by the United Nations Security Council to deal with the Great Lakes region, which includes, as you know, Rwanda and Burundi and Tanzania, Congo and also Uganda. So she's working on that. She was with us today. She had to leave and go for another meeting.

And Kofi Annan and Gro Brundtland have been – would be with us today, but they've been in Russia meeting with the foreign minister of Russia to talk about some of the same subjects, and to make arrangements in a way for our next visit to a member of the – permanent members of the Security Council that will be going to Moscow. So that's what the elders do in general.

We have seen with great pleasure and excitement the intense effort that John Kerry has made to recommence the peace process in the Middle East after, you might say, five years of quiescent state. No one has known what he was doing exactly because his mission has been very quiet.

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We do know also from the news media – I’m not quoting anything that John Kerry has told us – but we have known that Netanyahu has a coalition in Israel that is heavily dependent on extreme right wing groups who are not in favor of a two-state solution but have been wanting to move to a one-state, with Israel controlling all the area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. So he’s quite dependent in his government for their support. And that opens up a very good chance that if he should conclude a peace agreement based on the ’67 borders or based on anything concerning settlements, he will probably lose his support and have to form a new coalition, which is a possibility.

On the other hand, as you know, Abu Mazen – Mahmoud Abbas is the head of the PLO, but he has very little support politically speaking from his own people and certainly not from Hamas, who now have concentrated their presence at least in Gaza.

So both leaders in the two, I’d say, adversarial worlds in the holy land, are seriously constrained by their own constituency. And I think if they – and when they do come to the peace talks, they will have shown a great deal of courage politically and personally in bringing about this chance that they might be embarrassed later when they have to make some concessions.

We’ve been very much impressed by things we have heard indirectly about the massive effort that is being made not just to bring them to the peace table, but also to try to correct some of the devastating blows that have been done against the Palestinian community economically. And there are so many things that can be done in – I’ll say Palestine to abbreviate – to improve their economy and make sure they have some assurance that no matter what they do, they can at least survive – and have – and have I’d say, an economic life of their own. So this is what’s been going on so far.

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We also met with J Street CEO this morning, Mr. Ben-Ami, and he explained what he thought were some of the attitudes of the American-Jewish community and other with whom he’s familiar.

And I believe, from my own experience and from what we’ve learned today, that if an when progress is being made – which we pray will happen – toward a two-state solution with an independent and free and safe Israel living next-door to a Palestinian state, that they will have support not only on a worldwide basis but also overwhelmingly in America, even from some of those who might in the past not have thought this was possible or feasible or even advisable.

So I think we’ll reserve my time later to any questions specifically that you might have. Thank you very much for giving me this chance. And I’ve outlined things, I’m sure, most of the audience already know.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you, Mr. President.

I’d like to turn now to Mr. Brahimi to give us an update of the latest efforts to bring a negotiated end to an extremely difficult problem in Syria.

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LAKHDAR BRAHIMI: Thank you very much. Indeed, Marwan, it's a pleasure and an honor to be here and to see many friends and very distinguished people that are – it's always a pleasure to meet.

[00:10:48]

I'm sure that everybody here is familiar with the situation in Syria. I don't need to recite the depressing numbers that characterize this situation: 100,000 dead; 2 million at least refugees; maybe 3 (million), 4 (million), maybe 5 million IDPs, the destruction which you see on your screen every night that makes cities in Syria look like pictures of Berlin in 1945. So to say that the situation is bad will be an understatement. The situation is bad and getting worse, and it has been bad and has been getting worse for now two years.

The important thing to mention I think here is that at long last, the Russians and the Americans have got together and they have said a little bit of what I've just told you. The situation in Syria is bad. It is extremely dangerous not only for the Syrian people, but also for the region. We believe – we Americans and Russians – they said, believe that there is no military solution, but a political solution is necessary and possible. And we – Americans and Russians – are going to try and work together and with others to see that this political process happens.

We saluted this development with a great deal of hope when it happened on the 7th of May of this year. And Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary Kerry have met several times since. I think they will meet again here in maybe a couple of weeks because Lavrov is visiting New York and Washington.

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We, the United Nations, have met with both of them, the U.S. and Russia, twice. And we've been trying to see how – what are the conditions that are necessary to bring about that will make a conference, an international conference, a U.N. conference on Syria possible with a good chance of success. We – I don't think we have those conditions already there, but I think everybody is working to create those conditions.

The elements of a solution are already there. They've been there for exactly one year, one year and a few weeks. On the 30th of June of last year, there was a conference that was organized thanks to my predecessor, Kofi Annan. And the result of that conference was a detailed sketch of what the solution for Syria – what the solution for Syria should be.

The idea now is to organize another conference that is called – that is referred to as Geneva Two, but it's not going to be a repeat of the past Geneva because this time we hope that there will be – hope – there must be a Syrian delegation because Geneva One had said that what is needed is to bring the Syrian present regime and the opposition together so that they can put together a plan and process, implement the decisions of Geneva One.

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So this is what we are trying to – these are the conditions that we're trying to create. We're not there yet. We are discussing with – directly or indirectly with the government of Syria, in

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Damascus, with the opposition, with the neighbors of Syria because I think it's not a secret that the crisis is dangerously mutating into regional conflict.

Ask the Lebanese and the Jordanians and they will tell you that these two countries are really – I don't know what word to use – are sinking under the weight of the refugees. I think you have perhaps 1 million in Lebanon, more than 1 million in Jordan.

Somebody was telling me the other day that Tripoli, in Lebanon, the second city in importance in the country, is now inhabited by – almost 50 percent of its inhabitants are Syrians. So if you remember of the flow of – flow – the few refugees that went to Italy from Libya two years ago, the whole of Europe was up in arms. They cannot receive these about 20,000 people. So think – you know, little Jordan and little Lebanon having already more than 1 million refugees. And I think that the flow of refugees is more or less, you know, every day and it is still continuing, 3(,000), 4(,000), 5(,000), up to 6,000 refugees going into Lebanon and Jordan maybe, a little bit also elsewhere.

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So, you know, the situation, once again, is extremely bad. It is – you know, the country is being destroyed. I was, you know, heavily criticized by both sides a few months ago when I said what they are doing really is cooperating to destroy their country. And therefore, you know, their plea that is addressed to both the opposition and the government is to show some kindness to their people, to their country and also to their history.

You know, I – I'm sure there are many of you who know Syria and know how rich culturally this country is. Now, in Homs, there is a church that goes back to the year 57. It has been destroyed or very badly damaged. There is a mosque, the Khalid Walid mosque also in Homs. It has been destroyed. The Omari mosque in Daraa has been destroyed. The market in the – the covered market in Aleppo has been burned. And, of course, you know, in situations like this, you have a lot of artifacts that are stolen and taken out of the country.

So it's not only the present and the future of Syria that is under threat. It's also their past and our common history, really, that is being destroyed.

Well, how hopeful are we that a solution will be found? We are very hopeful. I mean, there is no other way but to hope and to work for a solution, but also one shouldn't lie to oneself or to others. It's not going to be easy. Thank you.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much, sir.

President Ahtisaari, I thought we can ask you about the linkages between Syria-Iran and Israel-Palestine, including the role that Iran could potentially play under Rouhani. Is there an opportunity to seize here for Iran to be a more constructive player? What do you make of all these inter-linkages in the region?

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MARTTI AHTISAARI: Thank you. Allow me to start from last year. I was asked by my Elders colleagues to come to New York and talk to the permanent members of the Security Council and to find out what the attitudes in the case of Syria were.

And I did come – I was in New York from the 22nd to 24th of February last year.

MR. : Mic.

MS. : You're not mic'ed.

(Off mic exchange.)

MR. AHTISAARI: How did I manage to do this? (Off mic exchange, laughter.) So I met the permanent representatives or deputies because both the American and Chinese perm reps were in the capitals. And I must say – and while I was there, then Kofi Annan was offered to take up the special envoy's task while I was in New York.

I was extremely disappointed that the permanent members were so incapable of starting to talk because they are permanent members and I'm an old U.N. hand, as many of you know. I always say that permanent members have an important and responsible task which they have to fill. They have more responsibility than ordinary members of the Security Council. And from my talks with the permanent members, I didn't feel that it would have been impossible to find a common position then, without going any further on the details.

You had Lakhdar Brahimi say that what has happened and how the situation has deteriorated, but the day when I thought about these interlinkages – I'm today much more optimistic than perhaps a few months earlier for various reasons. Some have nothing to do with these three countries that our chairman mentioned.

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If I look at how I see that the permanent members are keeping their act together on other issues as well. I mentioned North Korea. Today, I see that we may have a situation developing where the Americans, Chinese and Russians can actually cooperate in the denuclearization. Every opening that leads to positive cooperation will help in the other areas as well.

There's now a serious effort starting hopefully this week on Israel-Palestine. And that is an important element here as well. And what we hear lately, not only here in Washington but in general, that finally we start hearing that we should seriously start looking for a political solution in Syria and not talk about a military solution, because I think far too little has been discussed and thought what will happen if one really seriously starts pursuing a military option in Syria? Because what are the consequences then and there?

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We have also a positive development, as you mentioned, a new president in Iran, which definitely gives an opening. I think this is a moment that we have to actually talk to everybody and start the dialogue not only on the nuclear issues, but on other issues as well.

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And therefore, I hope that these developments that I have mentioned now will actually – it will take time, but – that we will finally start looking for political solutions which I think we should have. I was disappointed a year ago because I thought that there would have been an opening to get it done, but as a special envoy of the secretary-general on a number of missions in the past, I know that how brilliant the special representatives are, if they don't have the main actors' support, they can't do a damn thing. That's something that is very important for you to understand.

And I don't think that – when Kofi Annan started, he didn't have the support of the permanent. I mean, support that would have actually led to concrete results. And it took a long time before – but thank God, now the United States and Russia are talking, and we hopefully are ending up in Geneva and seeing how we go from there.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much.

We'll open it up to questions. There's a lot of people in the room so please make your question short. And we have about 20, 25 minutes of question time. Yes, please.

[00:26:18]

Q: Thank you, Mr. President. My name is Saeed Erikat (ph). I'm a Palestinian journalist. I want to ask you, sir, after meeting with Secretary Kerry today, what gives you hope that this time around, there is a push and a momentum forward and it's not a déjà vu that harkens back to previous negotiations? Thank you, sir.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, I'm not referring to anything that Secretary Kerry said, but it seems to us, having met with him and having been involved in it for a long time that this is certainly a propitious time because it's been almost a five-year absence of any real effort to bring the two parties together. And they've been very resistant to any sort of move toward accommodation, enough just to sit down in the same room with each other with the Americans president. And so that in itself is an encouraging sign.

I mentioned earlier, which I need not repeat, how terrible the pressure is on both of the leaders not to go to the negotiating table if it involves the most crucial single element, and that is borders.

So the question is will the United States insist on 1967 borders with modifications based on land swaps? That has been the crucial unanswered question for a long time. And as you know, the Arab Peace Initiative, which began in 2002, has now been modified to include the phrase "with land swaps."

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So to some degree, both sides know that that might be on the table. The Israelis cannot say it publicly. Netanyahu cannot admit it publicly because he's been promised that his two major supporters on the right wing will abandon his government if he does. So he's going to stay mute I understand.

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And, of course, the United States is going to be asked by the Palestinians to repeat our position, which is long term, and is compatible with international law, that its 1967 borders are only to be changed with good faith negotiations and agreement by both sides, land swaps.

That is the key issue. I think if they can address that in a substantive way, then the other things are like symbolic, right of return and whether settlements will or will not be resolved. The other thing, obviously, is always difficult. That is Jerusalem. So that's a very encouraging thing.

The other thing that's very important is that with the step down of Prime Minister Fayyad, there's been kind of a negative reaction all over the Western world to the possibility of the Palestinians having any sort of economic progress.

And it's been announced in the press at least that one of the major breakthroughs has been that the Israelis and the Americans and others, Europeans and Arab members, are also dedicated to helping the Palestinians survive, even if the Israelis, for instance, cut off their income from customs and so forth. So this will put the Israelis back – I mean, the Palestinians back on the basis of being self-supporting during the troublesome time when they might be – make concessions that are not popular back home.

I think those two things are the most important for me. Nobody knows what's going to happen. They might meet the first time and adjourn. I don't know about that. But I think that also there's a pent-up pressure from the Palestinian people and from the Israeli people to have a resolution of this issue.

[00:30:00]

The Hamas, with whom we meet regularly, opposing any sort of peace talks, my experience in meeting with the Hamas leaders, particularly Meshaal and his former politburo members is they are willing to accept a peace agreement that has been negotiated between the PLO and Israel, if those terms will be submitted to the Palestinians for a referendum. And that can be a major step if the peace terms are concluded at the negotiating table. So that is at least a chance to bring Hamas on board, even though they're not going to be on board in the interim period.

That summarizes my reasons for being much more hopeful than I was a month ago or five years ago.

MR. MUASHER: OK. Over there. Please.

Q: I'd like to ask the three of you what happened to Resolution 242? All of a sudden, we talked here about – 242 was supposed to be based on peace or territory.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, as you may remember, at Camp David, the Israelis agreed to abide by 242, the key portion of which is non-acquisition of territory by force. And that meant that they were going to withdraw from the West Bank and from all occupied territories. And that's also in a text of the Camp David Accords from 1978, which was ratified by the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, and also by the Egyptian Parliament. That commitment by the Israelis early has been violated.

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So I think if the '67 borders do prevail, as we just hope for that that's still to come, I think that would in effect honor the basic thrust of 242. That is the Israelis must withdraw from Palestine, from the Palestinian territories, and live in peace side by side with a two-state solution. So I think that would take care of 242, which can be modified to some degree.

MR. MUASHER: Let's take a question from the back. Yes, sir. Please.

[00:32:03]

Q: Hello. President Carter – well, everyone, my name is Ming Lo (ph). President Carter, we have a domestic issue receiving international attention. Do you think that we have a form of two states and/or apartheid in the United States?

PRESIDENT CARTER: No. We don't have two states in the United States. We have separation between red and blue states and a polarization of the constituency brought about, in my opinion, primarily by the massive infusion of money, most of which is spent on negative advertisements that create divisions among the population that has to watch television and also to the two parties, and it carries over to Washington.

The thing about which I'm most concerned though is the growing separation in America between the richest Americans and the poorest Americans and also a basic negative attitude toward people who are different from us. One example and that is that the number of prisoners now incarcerated in America is 700 percent more than it was when I left office. So we are now putting people in prison and keeping them there.

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So I think there is a difference in our country but I have confidence that our country will survive. We'll overcome this problem even if it takes a new majority in the Supreme Court, who made the stupid decision, in my opinion, on Citizens United. And I don't think that Congress is going to change that. But if we see a more enlightened and wise and judgmental Supreme Court, we'll see the Citizens United reversed and returned back to a more honest election.

So it's a complicated problem that you've given me. I don't think we have apartheid in our country, but we have some divisions that are brought about by things that I've just mentioned.

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MR. AHTISAARI: Can I say something on that issue? Because I have during the last one year, I have read three books which I formally recommend, "The Spirit Level," by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, which says equality is good for everybody; Jeffery Sachs, "The Price of Civilization," and Joseph Stiglitz, "The Price of Inequality."

Nowadays when I speak in my own country, I very often say that we don't in today's world need rogue capitalism. We don't need any sort of socialism. We need responsible market economy, which the Nordic countries represent at their best.

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I hope some of you read the Economist a few months ago when it – there was one of the subtitles, which said, if you want to experience the American dream, go to Sweden. (Laughter.) They could have mentioned any of us in the Nordic countries. (Laughter.)

MR. MUASHER: I have a couple of questions for Mr. Brahimi. Can you explain what is the holdup on Geneva? Is it Russia and the U.S. disagreeing on the invite list or is it the U.S. trying to help shift the balance on the ground to favor the opposition? And a corollary question: do you envision any solution to Syria with Assad staying in power?

[00:35:26]

MR. BRAHIMI: Very easy questions. (Laughter.) You know, what is holding the conference is I think, frankly, the opposition is divided. That's not a secret. And they are trying to get their act together, work their way to a truly representative delegation to represent the opposition in the conference. So that is – that is one of the problems.

There is no doubt that I think it is fair to say that – you know, the Russians and the Americans have gone a very, very long way to where they are now. It is really great that they are saying the things that I've said a while ago. This is a very dangerous problem. There is no military solution. There can be – there must be and there can be a political solution and we're going to work together. But I think they are still working their accumulated differences and – amongst themselves and they are talking to us, and I think that we are moving – we are moving forward a little bit.

That the opposition is working its way slowly, but I think if they get there, this is not time wasted. It is time gained. There is no doubt that there are also differences about who should attend this conference that hasn't been worked out yet. So these are the problems that are holding up the holding the conference.

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If you look at the 30th of June, 2012, Geneva Declaration, you will see a very detailed agenda for – to get from where we are now in Syria to what I call the new republic in Syria.

And one of the things that are clearly stated there is that – you know, the idea of getting these two delegations together is that they will agree on the creation of what is called in Geneva – in the Geneva One declaration, the governing body with full executive powers.

I think this is very clear. You are going to have an executive body, I think, which is really another name for a transitional government. That transitional government is going to have full executive power and that it will govern the country until the time comes for an election to take place.

You know, there is a lot of devils in the details there, but I think it is – you know, Geneva One did not speak about President Assad in one way or another, but I think they have indicated a role that will lead to a new Syria. And I think – I have been saying all along and this hasn't been, you know, popular with a lot of people – but the time for cosmetic change in Syria and elsewhere in the region is passed, and that – people are demanding real change, transformation of their societies, and Syria is no exception.

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MR. MUASHER: OK. Let me see. In the back.

Q: Yeah. Amen Walili (ph). I have a follow up to Mr. Brahimi, if you don't mind, on Syria. The impression in Washington or the talk in Washington is that Assad is winning. And if you look at the situation on the ground, it looks like he's making progress on the ground. If he's winning militarily, how do you think you're going to convince him to go to a process in Geneva to have a transition for – (inaudible) – that are going to undermine his authority and his government?

[00:40:10]

And my other question is, I'm very confused because I've been here for a year and a half, two years now, no military solution. And if 100,000 people have been killed, and you just said, Mr. Brahimi, as we all see it, that some cities are like Berlin, what is that? Is this a better solution? Thank you.

MR. BRAHIMI: You know, when I briefed the Security Council in November, people were extremely critical of me because I refused to say that the opposition was winning and that the regime was living its last few days. I think most people in November last year were convinced that the regime had lost, and the opposition was winning, and that it was a question of months, perhaps weeks. I think that was not correct.

Now you have a lot of people who are saying that the government is winning, the regime is winning. The regime is doing much better than it did in November last year. That is true. They are making progress.

But in situations like this, making progress and winning are two different things. There are – look at Qusayr, how long did it take them to regain a ghost town? There was really – instead of – there was about 500 people in Qusayr. It took them weeks and weeks before they took it back. Look at Homs. You know, the two or three tiny little parts of Homs that are still in the hands of the opposition, I think there is – they said 2,500 people in there. And it has been now four, five, six weeks and they haven't gotten anywhere. So, you know, they are doing well for the moment. They are not doing well everywhere.

[00:42:25]

And that is why I and a lot of other people, including now the United States of America and the Russian Federation, we say there is no military victory for anybody. There is a lot of destruction. It can – you know, you can – you know, one day it's the opposition that has the upper hand, the next day it's the government that is going to have there. But the war is going on; the killing is going on; the destruction is going on. And you need to get out of this vicious circle to a political process that can end this conflict.

MR. MUASHER: Perhaps we can take three or four questions at a time so we allow as many people as possible.

MR. AHTISAARI: Can I say one aspect?

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MR. MUASHER: Please sir.

MR. AHTISAARI: I don't want to counter my real expert, but when the fighting goes on in a conflict for such a long time that we have seen now in Syria as well, it becomes very difficult for those who have been opposing the sitting government to accept that they should organize the elections. And to negotiate the sort of interim or transitional government is extremely complicated, as we have seen in many situations.

So I hope that one does not give up entirely the possibility, if it can be used – and it can't be always used – but ask U.N. to organize the elections, and – because U.N. is capable of doing that. And then monitor – even if U.N. does it, it should be monitored then properly that there's enough people –

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MR. BRAHIMI: By the Carter Center, of course. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT CARTER: We'll do it.

MR. AHTISAARI: That I beg for granting. I haven't seen an election yet in the world where the Carter Center would not be involved. And I want to compliment President Carter for –

PRESIDENT CARTER: We won't get involved in the U.S. election. (Laughter.) The United States does not qualify to –

MR. MUASHER: Yes, proceed.

Q: Hi. Good evening, gentlemen. Thank you for being here. I have a quick question for Mr. Brahimi and for President Carter.

[00:44:52]

Mr. Brahimi, my name is Rona (ph). I'm from Aleppo. I was born and raised there. And like many people here, I've been following the conflict closely and your work on the conflict very closely as well. You mentioned that the issue with Geneva Two and the hold-up is the members who will or will not come to the table. If you could, by some miracle, convince everybody to get along and come to the table, who would you think would be a crucial member at the table?

And then once, if the transitional government is created, how do you convince the people on the ground, who have a problem communicating with the outside world, that these are their legitimate representatives?

And then, President Carter, you have been a strong advocate of a peaceful solution in Palestine-Israel for years. I was just wondering is it any easier today than it was when you were president? (Laughter.)

MR. MUASHER: Let's take one more question, in the back somewhere. Yes. Please, the gentleman with the glasses.

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[00:45:56]

Q: President Carter, I would like to ask you – I'm Mitchell Plitnick from Inter Press Service. And I'd like to ask you – my sense from speaking with Palestinian civic leaders is that there's a lot of resistance now to things that have been sort of understood in the past, for example, an extended Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley, a demilitarized Palestinian state, only a token return of refugees, that there's more resistance to that among the Palestinian people than there was perhaps years ago. Do you think that's true? And if so, do you think that will be too big an obstacle to overcome, especially in light of the Hamas demand for a public referendum?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well – you want to –

MR. BRAHIMI: Please.

PRESIDENT CARTER: I don't think it's easier now than it was when I was there, but you have to remember that when I became president, there was no demand on me to be engaged in peace talks. There had been four terrible wars during the previous 25 years. And we felt that when Menachem Begin was elected, that was the end of any possibility for peace talks. But I found that Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin were strong enough and courageous enough and wise enough to reach an agreement. And so we just proceeded to make an effort.

I think that what Jerry Kerry faces now is maybe even more formidable than it was back in those days. I can't say that for sure but it's hard to judge between. Both times are very difficult.

But the key issue is whether the Palestinian people and the Israeli people want peace enough to prevail on their leaders, whoever they are, let's make some compromises for peace.

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I think as far as the Palestinians are concerned, the Jordan River Valley was never mentioned as being part of Israel or controlled by Israel, I believe, until Bill Clinton was in office and went to Camp David and so forth. But I never dreamed when I was negotiating back in earlier times that Israel would control the Jordan Valley. We anticipated then that Israel will withdraw from all of Palestine, from East Jerusalem and from Gaza and from the West Bank, east of the 1967 green line or borders. So that's a difference now. And I'm not sure that the Palestinians will ever accept Israel controlling the Jordan River Valley as well as a major portion of the rest of the West Bank. What they're talking about now is some land swaps.

And that's been a very interesting thing because I met with one of the most conservative leaders that Israel has ever had. And he pointed out a land swap that I thought was intriguing, that the audience might find interesting.

And that is that the Palestinians would grant to Israel the major settlements right around Jerusalem, let them have it, and an equal acreage of land would be granted to the Palestinians to form a land corridor between Gaza and the West Bank, which is about 36 miles. And on that land corridor would be built a railroad and a highway whose security would be guaranteed by Israel but it would be owned and operated by the Palestinians. So that looks like a very wonderful, you know,

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future possibility that it might occur. So I think that these things that you mentioned are very effective.

The last thing that you mentioned was a right of return. I don't think there's going to be any amount of refugee returning to Israel, except just a very few families that Israel might grant, like a handful or a dozen, a token response. I think the return might be, though, just in the West Bank or just in Gaza and nowhere else.

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So those are the three things that you mentioned. They're all difficult. And I think that the referendum is good because, as you know, Netanyahu said he's not going to agree to anything, even in this latest Kerry proposal, unless he submits it to the Israeli people to approve in a referendum.

That's exactly the position that Hamas has had ever since I've been meeting with them personally for the last 10 or 12 years, that whatever peace agreement is reached between the PLO and Israel, they will accept it basically if the Palestinian people in a referendum approve it. I think that's kind of a good way because, eventually, if the leaders at the negotiating table accept a peace agreement, I believe that almost guarantees that the people back home will accept the same thing.

MR. BRAHIMI: You know, the – you know, the Syrians do not deny the fact that their society is breaking up, that they are divided in so many ways and in so many different ways. So what is really wanted is that the main groups that compose the opposition agree on a political platform and on a fairly well representative delegation.

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I think that the Syrian people and also the opposition, they understand that it is impossible to represent everybody in a process like this. And I don't know of any process in a complicated conflict, situation of conflict, where, you know, the people who negotiated were accepted as fully representative by all the people.

When we were in Bonn, in Afghanistan, when we concluded the meeting, I told the Afghans who were there, you are not fully representative of your people. But you have come to an agreement among you, just 35 people in all. You've come to an agreement. If we go back to Afghanistan and implement this properly and enlarge the basis for this process, nobody will remember that you were not representative. But if we fail, of course, then people will say, of course, this agreement was signed by 35 people who represent nobody.

So this is, you know, a similar situation. If we get to Geneva and we have a fairly representative delegation, then there will be a hell of a lot of work to do, but it may be doable.

MR. MUASHER: Mr. Ahtisaari, would you like to say anything before –

MR. AHTISAARI: No.

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MR. MUASHER: OK. Well, I'm afraid that's all the time we have. Let me first just say a few words. You're all invited to the reception which will take place on the first floor, on the ground floor. All our guests will have media interviews for 10 minutes, and then after that, they will join the reception. But I would like to ask you to, one, remain sited until they are able to leave the room and go to the media interviews. And I hope you join me in thanking what has been truly an admirable panel. (Applause.)

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