

OWNING A PIECE OF PALESTINE: SYRIA'S ASSAD REGIME AND THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

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MARINA OTTAWAY: OK. Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the Carnegie Endowment. I'm going to make a very brief appearance. I'm Marina Ottaway with – a senior associate in the Middle East program. I just want to welcome you and say we are very happy to be co-sponsoring this meeting with the American Task Force on Palestine. As you can see, we have a full contingent of speakers and, therefore, I'm not going to take any more of the time, and I'm turning over the meeting to Ziad.

ZIAD ASALI: Thank you very much, Marina. It is a privilege to be doing this program with Carnegie and have you with us, and we look forward for more associations in the future. Thank you, everyone, for attending this program. As you can see, it is about Syria, and the title is, "Owning a Piece of Palestine."

[00:01:11]

Since its independence in 1946, Syria has undergone too many changes to enumerate, from coup d'états, upheavals, wars, revolutions, unity with others, disunity, and further revolutions and coup d'états, up till one man took over charge in 1970. He was well-prepared for his job, and he induced and enforced stability in Syria.

His formula, which has lasted up till the present, has been fairly clear in the outline. He held all reins of power in his own hands, and he also controlled the three main elements of power: the Ba'ath party, the only political party allowed; the army and the security apparatus; and then the socialist economy, which was government-run. All of them were under the aegis of the president, and his tools to implement these degrees of control were, in descending order, the family, the clan and the sect, in leadership positions along all these levers of power. That power was contested and, when it was contested deeply, it was met with deep force, as we know what happened in Hama.

[00:02:47]

His rule was a continuation of the ideological policies of the past, but it bears saying clearly that there were two essential pillars: Arab nationalism and championing the cause of Palestine. Arab nationalism, as defined by the Ba'ath party under the first Assad, was in fact translated into a regional and international policy, which laid claim to Syria, the greater Syria, as a domain of influence of the government of Syria. This manifested in policies vis-à-vis Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine as well, up till recently, Iskenderun, which is part of Turkey.

The Palestinian issue on the other hand was a pillar of what was defined as resistance and rejectionism to any kind of a making deal without Syrians' involvement. As attempts at totally controlling and dominating the Palestinian leadership, as constituted by the PLO, were met with resistance by the leaders of the PLO, at many – (inaudible) – stages, and this led to confrontations – military confrontations included, on many occasions.

Eventually it was clear that Syria was – Damascus was the center of rejectionism that was leftist in the '60s, '70s, and turned to Islamist in this century. But, nevertheless, it was the seat of opposing any kind of a settlement and laying claim that Syria is an independent party to the decision-making and indispensable player.

[00:04:48]

Now, the relation between Syria and Palestine is multilayered on so many levels, starting with the claim, pre-independence, of Syria being actually the dominant party in Palestine. The – (inaudible) – Palestine was defined by

Syrians as well as Palestinians as southern Syria. So the very concept of Palestine was challenged right from the beginning. Later on, it was clearly identified as a separate problem, and acclaim of its leadership was and still is a very popular tool to gain political support anywhere. So in and of itself, being a champion of Palestine has political dividends.

I think just to sum up the last idea that I want to present here, these tools – of these two pillars of Arab nationalism and Palestinian ownership – have metamorphosed – changed over time – from being meaningful objectives to be achieved by the Syrian regime to excellent tools of maintaining control within the country.

I think this panel was put together because not enough attention has been paid to the particular relation of the Syria and the Palestinians under the Assads, and it – this would seem like a good time to do it. It's rather fortuitous that the Syrian government just recognized the state of Palestine nine days ago, way before – way before – after we put this conference together. So congratulations on being – dealing with this issue. (Laughter.)

[00:06:39]

We have a distinguished group of panelists here. Every one of them has special expertise in this field. I would start out with the order of appearance, as we expect it, with Hussein Ibish, senior fellow of the American Task Force on Palestine – and all their bios are with you so please take a look at them. I don't want to take much of the time of the group with this – our public intellectual and man of tremendous eloquence and presence.

Next is Robert Danin, who is presently senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations on Middle and North Africa. Prior to that he had headed the – Tony Blair's Quartet office in Jerusalem for four years and prior to that – and that's where the period when we met – was several assignments at the NSC and the State Department, very senior positions.

And last, but not least, is Radwan Ziadeh. We are very lucky to have Radwan in town during our presentation because he's been traveling back and forth all over the globe, really, from everywhere but Syria to visit with the conferences ranging from, you know, various places in Europe and Istanbul, and then met with the Russians too. He's heavily engaged with what's happening now. Radwan is a visiting scholar at the Elliott School at Washington – George Washington University and has worked in several universities in this town and is also highly involved with Syrian activities in this country and heads a couple of organizations. So thank you, all of you, and we welcome your contributions.

I am instructed to asked everybody here to turn off their TVs – I mean to turn off your cell phones – (laughter) – and also to – at least we will – we will try to accommodate everybody's questions, which the group will be –

MS. : (Inaudible.)

MR. ASALI: – try to answer. We'll look at – (off mic) –

MR. : Any questions – (off mic) –

MS. : Speak in the microphone.

[00:09:06]

MR. ASALI: This thing is not working anymore. So maybe – I’m done with my speech; so you guys, your turn, OK? OK. Thank you very much.

HUSSEIN IBISH: It’s not working at all?

MR. ASALI: Starting out with this –

MR. IBISH: Well, let me try it from up there, and if it’s really not working –

MR. ASALI: You can stay here.

MR. IBISH: You think it’s better?

MR. : (Those are on ?)

MS. : (Inaudible.)

MR. IBISH: OK, I’ll stay here then.

Thanks again. Thanks for everybody for coming out. This one definitely is working. Better, yes?

[00:09:28]

MR. : Better.

MR. IBISH: OK. Thanks very much.

What I’m going to do is try something that’s quite impossible, which is to give a little thumbnail of the relationship between Syria as an independent state and the Palestinian movement and organizations very quickly, and it touches on a lot of what Ziad was saying. But I think, while you can’t possibly sum this up, I could at least give you the briefest outline and that would help us in our conversation and at least get us off on the right track.

The policies of both of the Assad regimes that we’ve had so far in systematically trying to undermine independent Palestinian national leadership and assert control over the Palestinian cause and movement is a continuation and intensification of traditional Syrian approaches to the question of Palestine, as Ziad alluded to. These efforts by these two regimes to own a piece of Palestine, as said in our – the title of this panel, if not the whole thing, at least as an issue, are not unique among Arab states at all. And we can’t really single Syria out as absolutely unique in this regard. Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and others have also been involved in consistent efforts to deploy the issue, in one way or another, in the service of their own foreign policies.

[00:10:50]

None, however, has been as adamant about its right to define and control the Palestinian issue, the subordination of that issue to a broader Arab agenda, which it also defines, and to consistently oppose and undercut the independent Palestinian leadership by supporting opposition movements first, as Ziad said, from the far left and, more recently, the religious right under the rubric of open quote “independent opposition.” So you have an independent national leadership opposed by what supporters of this policy call an independent opposition, which is a, you know, nicely Orwellian touch. (Laughter.)

As the Ottoman Empire was being dismantled following World War I, as Ziad noted, most Syrians, Palestinians and other Arabs regarded Palestine as southern Syria, and particularly during the era of Prince Faisal's rule in Damascus, agitated for the "reunification," in quotes, if you like, of a greater Syria as opposed to the creation of several independent states – and this included the Palestinians at the time.

Over time, however, the Palestinian national movement gained an increasing sense of independence in several stages. First, the downfall of Faisal prompted the need to focus on defending Palestine from Zionist plans to establish a Jewish state, rather than on reunification with the rest of greater Syria, the focus of what might have been accomplished by that unification being perceived as having gone with Faisal, whether that's – any accuracy of that or not doesn't matter. That was the perception, I think.

[00:12:17]

Second, before, during and immediately after the establishment of Israel, several Arab states, particularly Syria, Egypt and Jordan, were maneuvering to try to both mitigate the damage that it was going to cause and was causing them and to foreclose each other's ambitions, which is exceptionally important. So they were sort of maneuvering around each other and around the Palestinians. The idea didn't die until the '60s, entirely. It was really the collapse, first, of the United Arab Republic in 1961 and particularly the crushing defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 that confronted the Palestinians with the unavoidable necessity, an urgent necessity, of creating independent national institutions and decision-making.

Of course, several Arab states sought to control this process, but the Palestinians under Arafat proved adept in playing one off against the other to gain as much space as possible. Syrian governments initially supported Fatah as an insurgent challenge to the first incarnation of the PLO that was perceived as entirely dominated by Egypt, but rapidly turned against the organization, at least at the ideological level.

[00:13:26]

From the '60s to the '90s, Palestinians were divided into three main ideological camps: first, independent nationalists led by Fatah; second, Arab nationalists, broader speaking, led by the PFLP; and three, Marxists-Leninists led by the PDFLP. Syrian regimes strongly preferred the second of these two groupings, but much more their own self-created Palestinian institutions, particularly the PFLP-GC and al-Asifa, which is, again, been the main vehicle for proxy wars of Syria as well as Syrian-dominated elements of the PLA, an armed force – theoretically the main armed force of the PLO, at least in its earlier stages – that was entirely dominated by various Arab armies and military intelligence communities.

Of these three forces, the – all of these forces supported by the Syrians have – came to blows within mainstream national leadership, at one time or another, throughout the decades. The pattern was intensified following the establishment of the Ba'athist regime under Hafez al-Assad in the early 1970s. As a Ba'athist, he was, by definition, part of the absolutist Arab nationalist camp; however within the Syrian Ba'ath party, he was the leader of a pragmatic and Syria-first camp.

So from these twin and often seemingly contradictory ideological positions, he was able to continue – continuously harass the PLO for decades, frequently accusing its leadership of treason and betrayal of the Arab or Palestinian causes or deploying Syria's national interest – one or the other. Both were available to him in these twin – sort of Janus-faced existence inside and outside of the Ba'ath party. The PLO – by the way, this – I should say the Syrian position consistently was that the Palestinian cause was subordinate to a broader Arab revolution and that

Palestinians should be the vanguard of a transformation in the entire Arab world first before their own cause was attended to. In other words, you have to change the Arab world, and then you can change – you know, address Palestine. That was the idea.

[00:15:38]

The PLO, under Arafat, took the essentially – the contradictory stance that the Arab states and societies had a responsibility to assist the Palestinian cause by whatever means possible, but that Palestinians had a completely free hand in decision-making, in the early decades, including launching attacks against Israel from the territories of those states. So neither position particularly of – coherent and defensible, I think, although, of course, the stance of having an independent national leadership makes eminent sense.

The Assad regime repeatedly confronted the Palestinian national leadership with force, including numerous assassinations, proxy conflicts, and occasional direct armed conflict – Ziad did refer to that also. But this was most dramatically expressed in Lebanon, where in the 1970s, the Syrians continuously sided with anti-PLO elements, whether Palestinian or Lebanese, and militarily intervened on behalf of forces confronting the PLO and its allies in the mid-'70s.

[00:16:36]

It was even more starkly – I think even more dramatically revealed by the strong Syrian backing and direct support of the Shiite – the Lebanese Shiite forces in the war of the camps, when the PLO – and in Tripoli also – when the PLO tried to reassert its presence in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion of 1982. However, in spite of all of this and continuous machinations and attempts to place their own subordinates in key leadership positions in the PLO, that never succeeded, and they never managed to break the independent decision-making of the PLO leadership.

Now in the late '80s and early '90s, following the Gulf War, the First Intifada, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Syrian and Palestinian calculations shifted. The PLO completed the process of moving away from a program of armed struggle to one based on negotiations and eventually entered the Oslo Accords with Israel. Syria, on the other hand, became the leading opponent of this approach, the leading rejectionist state, and shifted its support from left and nationalist groups that had lost support and momentum after the collapse of the USSR to Islamists, particularly Hamas, while the PLO had carefully avoided numerous efforts to get it to locate or relocate its headquarters in Damascus, understanding the implications of such a decision.

For the bulk of its existence, Hamas' politburo and much of its military command has been based in the Syrian capital. By shifting its attention from left and nationalist Palestinian opposition to that based on the extreme religious right, in spite of the ideological incoherence of that shift, the regime of Bashar Assad has continued the tradition established by his father of confronting and trying to co-opt the Palestinian national agenda by whatever means possible.

[00:18:20]

Events since the Syrian uprising began illustrate the cynicism of this approach – the manipulation of the border regions on Nakba and especially Naksa days, respectively; the killing of at least 11 Palestinian refugees by the pro-Assad PFLP-GC at the Yarmouk refugee camp; the virtual split with Hamas because of its refusal, its inability, to side openly with the regime against the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood; and the recent move to recognize an independent Palestinian state, as Ziad said, in contradiction to all ideological pronouncements of the past, every one of them – and almost a century of Syrian policy that has opposed such independence demonstrate that, for the

regime, as with the last one, the Palestinian issue is a card to be played in foreign policy, regional affairs and now in a bid to stay in power.

In fairness, I think it should be noted that the other Arab states have also tried to manipulate the issue to similar ends, although none with the same intensity and harm to it caused by that of Syria's. It's also worth noting, again in fairness, that none of the Arab states or very few of the Arab states, anyway, have had any comment on the brutal suppression of the Syrian uprising by the regime, and that includes the Palestinian national leadership. So, fair is fair.

Now, just to conclude, were the regime to survive its present difficulties, it's almost certain that the rhetorical recognition of an independent Palestine would prove as cosmetic as Syria's recognition of Lebanese independence. In neither case has the regime or its supporters truly accepted that these are independent societies and states, and in both cases efforts to exercise Syrian hegemony at an absolute minimum over their leaderships and decision-making is virtually guaranteed, and so is the determination to continue to open quite – quote “fight valiantly,” close quote, against Israel, at least until the last child in Gaza and southern Lebanon, that is.

Thank you.

[00:20:13]

MR. ASALI: Rob? Right back – (inaudible).

ROBERT DANIN: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here today, and thank you very much. In looking over the history of the issue of Syria, the Palestinians and American involvement since 1945, since the Cold War, I thought I – it would best serve to root this discussion within the context of the U.S.-Syrian bilateral relationship because in many ways, looking at the U.S.-Syrian bilateral relationship, this relationship has always been one that has been based on geostrategic interests and has been derivative of other issues in the region rather than a purely bilateral relationship.

And just a few caveats or observations, and then I thought I'd just briefly summarize what I see as four distinct periods in the U.S.-Syrian relationship as it relates to the Palestinians – first of all, the U.S.-Syrian relationship has never been particularly warm and fuzzy. Historically, it's been one of strain, operating within a framework of an adversarial relationship.

As I've said, the issues that we have dealt with have often been derivative, be it Lebanon, be it Iraq, be it the question of Palestine as opposed to pure bilateral relationships. In fact, the bilateral relationship is quite narrow and limited. We don't have much commerce with Syria, we don't have much cultural, economic, political dealings except when it comes to this larger, geostrategic sphere.

Now, to put this in context, as I said, I saw in essence – reviewing the literature and reflecting on my own experience, I started working on Syria at the State Department, really, at the end of the Reagan administration and then throughout the Clinton and Bush and ending with the Obama administration.

[00:22:19]

We have, if you recall, the Cold War. It's easy to forget, but in many ways that was the framework for the – our relationship with Syria. Syria was a proxy of the Soviet Union, and we tried to confront Syrian expansionism and Soviet expansionism as well in the – in the region.

Syria had broken relations with the – with the United States after the Six-Day War. And indeed, the U.S., working with Israel, had confronted a potential Syrian move against Jordan in 1970. Relations were only restored following Kissinger's disengagement efforts. And lest we romanticize even that period of Kissinger and Nixon, I recall – and this may be apocryphal – a story of how when Nixon visited Damascus, a rare visit for a president to a country in which we had no bilateral relations, the Syrian security guards were asked to – those who lined the motorcade for Nixon's trip from the airport to Damascus were asked by the Secret Service to face away from the road rather than towards the road, lest there be any threatened – threat to the president on the way into Damascus from the Syrian security. So it just gave you a flavor for this; it was hardly a warm visit.

Now, from 1974 on, this relationship did remain strained. There were periods of cooperation within this framework; we (countenanced ?) Syria's intervention into Lebanon in 1976, and in essence, Syria's siding with the Phalangists against the Palestinians there.

[00:24:07]

With the Israel-Egyptian peace treaty, in essence, what was concretized was an alliance of what we called moderates versus radicals in the region. Following the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the growth of the Syria-Hezbollah relationship, the United States found itself on the – pitted against Syria, leading in 1983, if you recall, to the bombing of the American barracks in Beirut by Syrian-backed Hezbollah forces.

Now, 1989 was a watershed and led to what was – what I call the second period in our relationship. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria was isolated and in search of a new partner and new patronage. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iraq (sic) provided an opportunity for Syria's resuscitation, recuperation, rehabilitation in the eyes of Washington. Syria joined the coalition that was put together to roll back Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. And once again, Syria and the Palestinians were pitted on opposite sides, and ironically the U.S. more closely allied at this point with the Syrians as it had been in Lebanon than it was with the Palestinians, who had sided with Saddam's invasion of Kuwait – the Palestinians, I mean the PLO.

The prize for Syria here was an unspoken, tacit ratification of Syria's continued occupation in Lebanon despite the Taif, or perhaps because of the Taif Agreement of 1989.

Now, this ushered in what I call then the third phase. And we have throughout the 1990s the on-and-off-again peace process that began, really, in Madrid in 1991, the prize being bringing President Assad – or bringing Syria, rather – to the table in Madrid alongside the Israelis. The period that began in Madrid really continues on through and ends, really, with Camp David.

And throughout this period, you have the efforts at Shepherdstown, at Wye Plantation, and many – in Geneva and elsewhere to broker a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty. But here, I just want to note two important points: The effort at the time was to play – from the United States' perspective – was to engage with the Syrians, at best in hopes of trying to broker an Israel-Syrian peace agreement, and then after the Oslo Accords to at least minimize the damage that the Syrians could play on the – on the Palestinian track.

[00:27:04]

You have then on-again, off-again efforts, prioritization by Israel and by the United States whether or not a Syria-first versus a Palestinian-first approach should be adopted. And in fact, within the administration, that division was replicated. You had some people who were advocating a Palestinian-centric focus for the peace efforts, others

advocating a Syria approach. It proved to be moot because we wound up with neither – 2000, ushering in a third phase – what I call the “Second Intifada” phase, which then – which overlapped with, in essence, the Bush administration.

And here, what you see is a dramatic inversion of the approach. Under the Clinton administration, there were no illusions about Syria. There was recognition that Syria was a state sponsor of terrorism; it continued to be on the list of state sponsors of terrorism despite the negotiations and engagement with Washington and Israel.

But nonetheless, the effort was to try to subordinate all the outstanding issues – support for terrorism, occupation of Lebanon, the occupation by Israel of the Golan – to mitigate and resolve all these issues through comprehensive peace.

[00:28:30]

Really, with 9/11 and the focus then on terrorism, and then the Iraq War of 2003, this approach was flipped. In essence, the United States adopted a pay-first-and-deliver-later approach, I would call it, in which Syria was called upon to change its behavior, and the prize then would be a peace process rather than the other way around.

And so Syria was called upon to stop supporting jihadists transiting Syria into Iraq; stop support for Hamas, which was working against the road map; halt its occupation of Lebanon, and hence the support for the Orange Revolution in Lebanon – and ultimately, an improved U.S. bilateral relationship with Syria that could come. But again, all this had to come with change in Syria’s behavior, not through a peace treaty.

And this marked a dramatic change. Ultimately, the United States withdrew its ambassador after the assassination of Rafik Hariri. And it was only then with the – what I would call the fourth phase, the Obama administration’s approach that we returned our ambassador to Damascus – I’m –

MR. ASALI: Not much time.

MR. DANIN: If that look is – you’re running out of time – (laughter).

Once again, I would say the paradigm for thinking about Syria and ultimately the Palestinians shifted, though it didn’t necessarily produce much in – by way of results. If the Bush approach had been calling on the Syrians to change their behavior in order to lead to an improved U.S. bilateral relationship and a viable peace process with the Obama administration and the rise of concern for – about Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and the delivery vehicles to cause harm to the region and elsewhere, the geostrategic logic was, if we can pick away Syria from Iran, then this would be a strategic change – and hence, the move to engage Syria, less so for peace process reasons but more so for Iran-centric reasons.

[00:30:54]

The assumption always was that Assad was a cryto-reformer; he had lived in London, after all. And so, you know, if we could get him – just get him on board, then all our problems would be resolved.

That brings us to the present day and the Arab Spring. I would submit to you, having worked on this and through the story I just told, that our – it’s only been with the Arab uprisings that we’ve actually been forced as a country to

deal with Syria (quoi ?) Syria, and to try to develop a Syria-centric policy rather than a derivative policy that is geostrategic and derivative of other issues, be it the peace process with the Palestinians, be it Lebanon, be it Iraq.

And we can get into this further in our questions and answers, but in short, the approach has been to try to urge President Assad to reform for fear of instability and the uncertainty and unknown of what would follow him.

[00:31:58]

But this, too, seems to be – have run its course in the last few days with comments coming out of the administration saying that President Assad has lost credibility.

I think I'll end at that point, and we can take it from here in the Q&A.

MR. ASALI: Thank you, Robert. Radwan?

RADWAN ZIADEH: Thank you. Thank you, Marina; thank you, Ziad, for hosting this event. I will start actually from the conclusion, then will back to the introduction.

It's in conclusion that the Assad regime never recognized the Palestinian that they have own rights to have own state. And this is not only because Palestine, but this is actually the continuation of the Syrian foreign policy toward neighbors. If we just remove Palestine, it's the same regarding Lebanon.

But in a state of – (inaudible) – peace of Palestine will be – (inaudible) – of Lebanon. And this is why we back to the history. And Hussein and Rob explained that; I will not go back to the history. But the personal relationship between Yasser Arafat and late President Hafez al-Assad affect everything in the relationship.

And this is exactly back to the – to the war camps during the civil war in Lebanon, where actually the PLO and the Syrian army have attacked each other and begin very strong fights at that time which affect Hafez al-Assad himself, and considered the Yasser Arafat at that time as enemy number one. And this is why never the relationship get out of these personal issues, even that Arafat, he visited Hafez al-Assad many times later on.

[00:33:55]

But one of – one of the visits in the '80s, he was considering to arrest Yasser Arafat himself. But he was asking himself, what's the impact of this detention would be on –

The Assad regime policy toward Palestine actually depends on three things: first, always competing the Palestinian organization each other where actually there is no one organization became as a leading voice of the Palestinians since they don't have their own state, and always became the story – that's who has the right to speak on behalf of the Palestinians.

And this is why sometimes even that's creating some problems between Hamas and Islamic Jihad inside Damascus, because Islamic Jihad much more closer to Iran, and Hamas much more closer to Saudi Arabia, and always trying to manage how they – but at the end, should be all of them actually under the control of the Assad regime, as the Assad only – they have the upper hand on them. And this competition between the different Palestinian organization – always give the credit for Hafez al-Assad in any way because if the PLO failed in the peace process, we'll say, look, we are the right side because we supported other organization.

[00:35:31]

If actually came that with some problems and some terrorist attacks in Israel, and Hafez al-Assad discredit for this supporting Hamas, he say that we support the peace process and we have the negotiation with PLO – always give the credit for that.

And this is why the second point about when the Palestinian card be the winning card and when it be the losing card – it's because you have one card sometimes be the winning and sometimes be the losing depends on the time and the context.

During the negotiations, of course, the Palestinian card will be the winning card because if he doesn't like the negotiation, will ask Hamas or the Ahmed Jibril or other organization to make troubles for Israel in the south of Lebanon, as they did that during the negotiations in the '90s.

But sometimes during – after the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri, the Palestinian organization became as a losing card with huge international pressure from the United States and other international community – but always actually be playing on the Palestinian as a card.

The third point, it's to Palestinian refugees. And this is always Assad saying that, look to the Lebanese, how deal with the refugees; look to the Jordanian – always the Palestinian refugees have the same right like the – like the Syrians, expect (sic) they don't have actually the political vote, which something important in Syria.

But even that, I think that this is not because – if we back to the history in 1949 when actually Adib Shishakli was the president of Syria after the military coup in 1949, he accept to host the Palestinians. It's back to the history, to the '50s and the '40s where actually the Syrians host the Palestinians as brothers and as always – as he had started that – always Palestine recognized by the Syria, and Syria recognized by Palestine. This is not – I think this is not to give credit for Assad regime other than actually to give credit to the Syrian people who (helped ?) the Palestinian all of the time without having any even that internal conflict or internal problems with them like what's happened when they actually host the Iraqi who would actually – they come from different cultures.

[00:38:10]

But with the Palestinian, we never heard any – they mixed each other; they married to each other, and this has always became the story.

And this is why when the uprising started, the Palestinian themselves had been targeted by the Assad regime – four in al-Ramla (ph) camp, in Latakia, had been killed. And unfortunately, the Bashar al-Assad adviser, Bouthaina Shaaban, from the first week of the uprisings, she mentioned the Palestinian as making troubles. And this is – we actually – we are very concerned about the safety of the Palestinians. And unfortunately later on, when actually the Syria regime orchestrate what's happened in – (inaudible) – and Naksa Day, which Hussein mentioned – pointed out before, that the Palestinian themselves in Yarmukh camp attacked the office of Ahmed Jabril, the Palestinian organization supported by the Assad regime, because they see themselves that the Assad, it's orchestrating everything, and the Palestinian at the end will pay the price from their sons and youngs.

[00:39:22]

And this is why I think now it's still – it's still – the Assad regime has continue as his father, Hafez al-Assad, playing on the Palestinian as a card. And last week, they recognized Palestine as independent state, which was never been the case in the last 40 years. And this is give more in the discussion that how the Syrians play on this card.

This is the last point, which I need to speak, that always playing on the Palestinian card as a channel to sending messages rather than sending messages to Israel, to the United States or the international community – because when we recognize Palestine, we'll say, OK, we'll send a signal to Israel that we have issued not – or made more pressure on us during this – the uprising. And otherwise, we'll send some fighters there – (inaudible) – in Israel, that if there were more pressure, that – or if United States do more pressure on that, we'll make some troubles on the borders. And this is why it's always – the Palestinian card became as a channel to sending messages to the international community and to the United States.

And I will end into that. Thank you very much.

MR. ASALI: Thank you very much, Radwan. And thank you, all of you, for excellent presentations here. I'm sure there is a great deal of interest in the audience. And, as we said earlier, I think the decision was made to take three questions in a row. I would please ask everyone to identify yourselves and your affiliations. And if you have a particular person you want to address your question to at the – at the panel, please say so. Yes, sir?

[00:41:20]

Q: George Hishmi (ph). I have a column –

MR. ASALI: One second, one second.

MS. : (Inaudible.)

Q: Sorry?

MS. : (Inaudible.)

MR. ASALI: The microphone. We actually have a microphone.

Q: Hi. My name is George Hishmi (ph), and I write a weekly column for papers of the Middle East.

[00:41:34]

I'm just curious why Israel could do this – couldn't negotiate a peace treaty with Syria, since the border between the two countries were the quietest in the region. What was the real problem there? Was it the question of the Lake Tiberias – that Syria claimed that strip on the lake? Does the U.S. have a position on that point or not? I would like Mr. Danin and Ziadeh to respond to that.

MR. ASALI: OK. Thank you.

Q: Thank you.

MR. ASALI: Yes, sir? In the middle, yes. Said (ph)?

Q: Thank you. My name's Said Erekat (ph) from Al Quds daily newspaper. My question is to Mr. Danin. The issue gets raised time and again in the State Department about the viability of maintaining or keeping Ambassador Ford in Damascus. Do you see this as viable? And when does it cease to be viable? What is he doing? They keep telling us that he's conducting a great deal of work, that he's working with different groups and so on. How effective is he? And how would that – how would it be impacted if he was to be recalled? Thank you.

MR. ASALI: Thank you. Barbara. Here. Right here.

[00:42:42]

Q: Thanks. Barbara Slavin from the Atlantic Council. Hi, Radwan. Nice to see you again.

Kind of a two-pronged question: one is, to what extent are the Palestinians participating in the disturbances, the uprising in Syria? Are they vulnerable to being deported? You know, is there a reason, perhaps, that they might not participate? And the other is sort of the question about how you might use this issue, because if you read the Iranian state media, they keep saying that the uprising in Syria, well, it's not the same, it's not part of the Arab Spring because this is a country that takes the right position on Palestine. So I'm wondering – I guess it's mostly to you, Radwan – how you might be able to use this issue in a way to discredit that argument. Thank you.

MR. ASALI: OK. So I think maybe we'll start with you, Rob, on the answers.

MR. DANIN: Sure. Well, on the question of why Israel and Syria did not make peace, I think we could devote a whole different panel to that question in its – I won't try to take off the whole – the whole pie here, but the question of the American role, and whether or not there was an American position, I think – I would say, as we know from both – two of the negotiating sides – from Itamar Rabinovich's account of the negotiations and also from Dennis Ross' account of the negotiations – that there was a deposit that was provided by the late Prime Minister Rabin that was then used by Secretary Christopher, the late Secretary Christopher, which was in essence a full withdrawal for full peace. Defining full withdrawal and defining full peace became the subject of the negotiations from there on in.

[00:44:34]

What's interesting, actually, just parenthetically, is that when we did have a resuscitation of the Israel-Syria track in – just a few years ago – this was done outside of the United States, channeled actually via Turkey, not as part of an American-facilitated process. But again, this is well beyond the scope of what we're talking about today.

On the question of Ambassador Ford, I think that up until a few weeks ago, you had calls from certain quarters in the United States calling on the United States to recall Ambassador Ford arguing that engagement there had served no purpose, that he did not have access to senior members, if any, within the Syrian government, and that his presence there only served to legitimate the Syrian regime.

I think, with the visit to Hama and the reaction that it had, which was quite galvanizing and quite dramatic, those voices have now been quieted. And now the – you know, to the extent that what Ambassador Ford is engaged with the opposition in Syria, and – which – and it is the Damascus or the Syrian-based opposition that does seem to have the real primacy within the opposition, his – that role is important.

Obviously, it is hard for us to know exactly the nature of that, but I think the strategy, as far as I can tell, is to – for the Ambassador Ford to push the envelope as far as he can, and one of two things will happen: Either he'll

continue to have – make inroads with the opposition and provoke the regime’s ire, or be declared persona non grata as a result of that, in which case, then, the benefit of having withdrawn him will be achieved. And, presumably, that would lead to a reciprocal step.

[00:46:29]

MR. ASALI: Thank you. Radwan, please.

MR. ZIADEH: In the question of the negotiations, it’s a long story. But I think Hafez al-Assad in 1999 was serious, very serious to reach the deal. But at that time – he’s very old-style, and he need to get the 4th of June, 1976 (sic), which actually give him more lands than what’s the international border, 1923, because it’s – there’s three different lines that – the line of 1923, which actually, the international line; then you have the 1949, which the armed forces – the line then – the 19 – of the line of 1967 line, which – he need to get – and according to the – the Israeli to withdraw – to before that, so the war happened, which give him more lands, which – because he considered that this is not the Israeli land, rather than Palestinian land, according to the French and the British agreement in 1923.

But when the Israeli actually – they reach this – that there is no deal without giving back all the lands to the Hafez al-Assad, but he get with him more security, more security arrangement, more normalization; he agreed to change the textbooks of the Syrian schools. And so they get to the negotiations, in full negotiations to change everything, but he need to get the land back of 1976 (sic), which, actually, the Israeli under Ehud Barak at that time, it was in treaty because it was minority government and coalition government. And later on, actually, Hafez al-Assad died, and we start from the beginning.

[00:48:30]

The second question regarding the U.S. ambassador: I think it’s important to keep the ambassador there. I just reading a book about a memoirs of the U.S. ambassador in Romania under Ceausescu. And his role, at that time in the – in the uprising – (inaudible) – became a vehicle, actually, for the change in the country. Now actually is a very critical moment in the Syrian history. And I think being a U.S. ambassador at the – at the ground, having contact with the opposition and, more importantly, having contact with the senior and the army will be – give you more, actually, a role, rather than actually withdrawing the ambassador there.

And the last thing: I don’t – I cannot say that the Palestinian has been participating by a large number in the uprising. But, you know, many Palestinians, especially, who actually born in Palestine, later on they emigrate to Syria before the 1976 (sic), they consider themselves Syrians. And we already – we have – we have quite number of them in the Syrian opposition, as a speaker.

And – but the response of the Syrian regime – always, they dealing with them differently. Like the case of Fidah el-Herani (ph) – she is actually the head of the Damascus Declaration Council – her husband, Palestinian, actually. He – they kicked out of the country, even that he has Syrian and everything. They had – they – the Syrian regime is playing on that and investing on that, and we – this is not good for Syria at all.

The last thing – actually, being Syria as a land of resistance, it’s all gone. When you – when you – actually, the blood every day, and – nobody believe it or buy it among the Syrians right now because it’s one of the slogans from the day one of the uprising that the Syrian regime always is playing on that – everyone actually it’s traitor and spy, it’s agent. And the Syrian in the protest, they said from the day one, that’s who kill his own people, he’s a traitor. And this is became actually the chanting of the Syrians from the day one. This is why I don’t think now anyone is buy this argument, the resistance of –

[00:51:24]

MR. ASALI: OK. Thank you, Radwan. I want to ask a question, if you don't mind, which is – you alluded to it. What is the present status of Hamas in Syria? And what – how do you see the relation – the recent evolution of the relation and its prospects evolving? This is for you to think about as we get questions for – (laughter).

Q: Thank you. Nadia Bilbesud (ph), Embassy Television. My questions are either for Hussein or Radwan.

I think you articulated an accurate description of the Assad regime vis-à-vis the Palestinians, but I'm just wondering how they managed to convey a completely different message to the Arab streets and show themselves as very pro-Palestinians over these years including – (inaudible) – that's almost forgotten. What enabled them to do that? Was it an emotional Arab street, that they believe all the stuff that we grow up on? Or is it something different that's more sinister?

[00:52:23]

MR. ASALI: OK. Anymore questions now? OK, let's then see. First, Radwan, please?

MR. ZIADEH: Regarding Hamas, Hamas is a part of the larger organization, Muslim Brothers. And the Muslim Brother, they have different branches during the uprising in Syria. The Egyptian one was hesitant, actually, to support the uprising. And later on, of course, when the high number of people have been killed, they joined other organization. The Jordanian, also, they have the same position.

The Hamas, in the beginning, actually, they support the regime. And they say that in their statements. This is why, actually – and Hamas – (inaudible) – became actually conflicting with Khaled Meshal in Damascus saying that we are in support of the Syrian people rather than supporting on the Syria regime.

Now, what we heard, actually, some rumors that Hamas is moving toward Egypt. They will have, actually, official office in Egypt, especially after the deal have been – between Fatah and Hamas in Egypt. And they are thinking to move all the leadership from Syria to Egypt since make them is very difficult situation in Syria supporting of the Syria regime where the killings carrying out every day in Syria.

[00:53:57]

MR. IBISH: On conveying a different message, I think it's a great point, Nadia (sp). You're right, I think the Syrian regimes – the two Assad regimes, especially, but – managed to somehow convey a very different picture than the one that, well, we've all described in terms of this relationship to the Palestinian cause. And how did that work?

Well, the first thing is, it works rhetorically because these regimes have deployed – as I said, outside of Ba'athist and Syrian, but especially within party circles – have deployed the most absolutist rhetoric about nationalism, broader Arab nationalism that is precisely designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator in the broadest swath of the Arab world. It might – if it falters, it'll falter, first and foremost, among Palestinians who have a sense of their own national imperatives. But if you outbid everybody by saying, not only are their national interests, but everybody's national interests are subordinate to a broader cause that is greater, that is more noble, that is more – and we define it and we embody it and we are the – you know, the only way around it for a certain constituency, which used to be very big and is still large, is to actually outbid that speaker on those very terms. So (in other words

?) you can't – you can't really defeat that sort of rhetoric with – by pointing out that it's insincere or that it's inconsistent with behavior.

The only way to do it is to meet it on its own terms and outbid it itself. It's a little bit like Iranian rhetoric about the Holocaust. I mean, the only way to sort of outbid it with a certain constituency would be to outbid Ahmadinejad – as he used to speak, anyway. And no one was going to do it, so at least with a certain constituency he – you know, he had outbid everybody else.

[00:55:56]

And second, is that the tactic of supporting extreme opposition groups, whether from the far left or now from the religious right, is presented as a – as a twofold demonstration of the – or sort of legitimating force for this argument. One is, it's presented as a sacrifice. We are confronting the world; we are confronting, you know, the powers that be by supporting fringe groups, marginal groups, et cetera, as if it were some kind of noble sacrifice rather than a consistent policy of trying to undermine the Palestinian leadership.

Secondly, the fact that those groups also are on the extremer ends of both sides of the political spectrum is used to reinforce the outbidding thing again. We are sincere, therefore we support groups that are sincere, whatever form their sincerity might take. It's all just an expression of our natural commitment. There's no price we won't pay. There's no burden we won't bear, et cetera.

And I think that's how it works. And, of course, people are not necessarily – they don't have very long memories anywhere in the world. I mean, the United States, I think we all know where postmodern subjects would know historical memory, but that's everywhere. (Laughter.) Secondly, people aren't particularly critically minded. And if you keep telling them something again and again and again, they might go for it, and they do.

[00:57:28]

MR. ASALI: Radwan, do you have any insight as to why all the Arab people somehow believe that the Assad regime has been the champion of Palestine and Arabism and the Greater Syria?

MR. ZIADEH: It's actually – because that depends on different stages in the history. When the Egyptian have actually negotiation and reach the Camp David – Camp David agreements, the Syrian opposing that. And that's – from that point, they build a history on the land of resistance. Later on, actually, when the Palestinian agreed and the Syrian oppose and support Hamas and later on – and this is why – and the last – the last card was Hezbollah cards, especially with the war with Israel. And this is three – let's say, three times that always the camp of the resistance will be headquartered in Damascus. And this is why I give the Assad regime more credit on that than others – others who claiming to do that.

But always, always the question, that's why there is no – the Syrian-Israeli borders are very quiet and fighting on behalf of others. This is always the question which make the Syrian arguments very weak because, OK, if you are serious on that, why you don't open the border and fighting the Israel face by face?

This is why I think it's always – and after what's happened here in the uprising, and the Arab people seeing, actually, the Syrian army invading every city and occupying the Syrian cities, involving from the day one, killing more people with the older troops – young troops, actually, but because you have peaceful protest, this will work. And this is – I think will change everything because being in Egypt or in Tunisia or in Morocco in the last three months, huge change in the – in the attitude of the Arab people toward the Syria regime.

MR. IBISH: Can I add one thing very quickly? It occurs to me that – I mean, there is a slightly more sophisticated version of what I was alluding to, although I don't know how much of a percentage it accounts for. But it is a factor. There were people – who were not stupid, who understood a lot of the things that we've said – who nonetheless felt that Syria, its support for Hezbollah – maybe even Hamas but certainly support for Hezbollah – constituted a useful pressure on Israel. You know, that this is one of those kind of leverage that all kinds of people, including the PLO, might be able to use. And this is not an irrational conclusion.

[01:00:30]

It doesn't, however, survive what Radwan is describing, which is the conduct of the Syrian regime. So I think that was an argument that I used to hear sometimes in rational circles. And it's gone – evaporated.

MR. ASALI: OK. Can I – can I turn the question on its head and ask it this way: Would the prevailing sentiment of opposition to the United States and Israel in the Arab world in general about the concept of victimization at the hand of the West and Israel play, in Syria – inside Syria and everywhere in the Arab world, into the hands of the regime that claims the mantle of that opposition as just “standing up,” quote unquote, for the United States and Israel?

MR. IBISH: Please.

MR. ZIADEH: Yeah, I totally agree with you; yeah, exactly. And but at the same time, the Assad regime always tried to have good relationship with the United States because he understand that, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union that it's – the United States is a superpower and we have to deal with it in any way. This is why later he had been changing the rhetoric and the course toward Israel.

Before that in the media they never recognized the word of Israel in the Syrian state media – later on – been using Israel later on. And I do remember in 1993 when actually the Oslo where actually Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat at the White House at that time only showed Yasser Arafat; they never showed Yitzhak Rabin in the TV. They actually played on the TV at that time.

[01:02:20]

But later on was because when – since that's – the Syrian regime has a direct negotiation with the Israel, everything been changing. And more that we can see that the Syrian society, it's more changing also, specifically after the uprising. Myself, I never expected that Ambassador Ford would be greeted by red flowers in Hama and the olive branch because when you have actually blood on the street, everything will be changing.

The people now are looking for anyone for help. And this is why I think this is the message for the United States, as was pointed out, to lead on Syria – to walk more – to play more important role on Syria, rather than leading from behind and leaving that for the Arabians and other countries.

MR. IBISH: I have some views on the broader Arab constituency that you were asking about. I do think there is a powerful built-in constituency for anyone that can successfully present themselves as confronting the West, confronting the powers that be, even confronting to some extent the state system in the Middle East. I mean, when you've got very disgruntled people, which a lot of people in the Middle East are, there's a constituency for that in and of itself. And there's a particularly, I dare say, an imperative for a – what is nationally and even more starkly

regionally sectarian minority regime to, you know, sort of beef up its credentials, its nationalist reputation, et cetera. And that's, I think, been a part of this in recent decades.

[01:04:05]

But, the emperor has no clothes anymore. I mean, really people are just not buying it. And particularly after the Naksa Day followed by the Yarmouk incident, I mean, I think – I think it's – this is a – it's no longer possible for this regime to reach this constituency. But the constituency is still there, to answer your question. I don't think the constituency went anywhere.

MR. ASALI: Thank you. We have – we have many more questions. So right here, one, two, three.

Q: I'm Jim Burn (ph), I'm a freelance journalist and follow these things very closely. Could you give us some guidance on how to follow the uprising currently? What are, like, sort of watersheds we should watch for? And also, our secretary of State flat-out declares that the regime has lost its credibility; is she right? I mean, or is that just bar room chat? I don't know.

Q: Raeter Romali (ph) from the American Task Force on Palestine. My question is primarily to Radwan but I'd be interested in other views. Does Syria now have the interest, or more importantly, the ability to start to provoke – to try to provoke a war with Israel from Gaza or southern Lebanon to divert attention? Or has its grip on Hamas and Hezbollah weakened too much to be – to be effective? Thank you.

[01:05:30]

Q: I'm Tigar Anterpanjan (ph) from Embassy of Armenia. I want to address Mr. Ziadeh about the trump-card issue in Syria's foreign policy. Now that they have announced that they see Palestine as independent, how will they be able to use that as a trump card because their options are going to be a little more skewed? They can't take back that they're not independent anymore, or say it was a mistake. How will they be able to use that in the future, if they're able to stay in power? Thank you.

MR. ASALI: All right.

MR. ZIADEH: Yes. It's always the question why, actually, the Syrian uprising lost too much, and until at this point there is not actually a clear vision that – who has the upper hand because the protesters on the ground, they cannot get the momentum. Where at the same time, the regimes cannot crack down the whole protest, as Iran did in 2009, and always this is the case – on the mentality of the Syrian regime to repeat what Iran did in 2009. Actually because the Syrian army – because the question in Egypt and Tunisia was the army, where actually the number of the people who are protesting in Syria is much bigger than the number in Egypt or in Tunisia.

[01:06:47]

We have half a million in Hama and half a million in Deir al-Zour and through – and in Baniyas (ph). Those three cities actually out of the control; there is no state and institution operates anymore. Nobody pay the bills, no – there is no security, there is no police, there is no traffic even – traffic police either. And this is why it's – but the last question will be on the hand of the army. And until now, actually, the senior officials in the army still supporting the Assad regime. Unless that – the senior Alawi generals in the army, they see that Bashar Assad lost all his cards and now the time actually to go to the winning port – without having that, that will actually have more protest and more killings.

And maybe Ramadan will be – will be actually critical month because every single day is a Friday for the Syrians. And now the Syrians themselves they actually – they're thinking to eliminate Friday from – (laughter) – the day of the weeks. How we'll do with Ramadan where actually every day will be Friday – I don't think that the Syria regime is thinking to provoke any war with Israel through Lebanon or even that with the Syrian borders.

Maybe they play such kind of incidents sending some Palestinians refugees there, but rather than – they know because they will not be able to send bombs or to make any military operations there because they know actually the reaction from Israel will be very high. And may – and they are calculating that with having more domestic pressure and more international pressure will make for them no room for any deal or compromise with the international community which actually are looking to do that.

And this is to address the question of the Palestinian state. The Syrian government was actually the last Arab country who actually recognized the Palestinian state, which actually only eight or nine days go. And when al-Mouallem, Syrian minister of foreign affairs, asked in the press conference, he said, how can they support the Palestinian without actually recognizing the Palestinian state? And he said that this is not a card playing, rather than is our cause from the beginning, supporting the Palestinians.

[01:09:33]

I think now since Hamas is very quiet and moving out of Syria and Egypt back to play a role of mediation between the Israel and other Palestinian organizations, and since a lot of troubles for the Syrian regime to do any foreign policy, even that – it's not interested to do that in Lebanon, is not the right time to do that in Palestine. I think unless we have a certainty at who will win in Syria, Syrian regime rather than the protesters, I don't think that the Syria, they can do much more on the Palestinian card.

MR. ASALI: OK. Rob has something to add here, I hope.

MR. DANIN: Just two points I want to make. Just on the question of tipping points, I mean, and critical junctures, we still haven't seen widespread demonstrations in Damascus and Aleppo. And it seems to me that the – when we see the Sunni merchant class and Alawi regime supporters cross over then we'll have crossed a critical threshold. But as long as the army, and as particularly the Alawite officer corps within the army and the Sunni merchants are still at least quiet, if not opposed, then the regime still has a leg to stand on.

[01:10:58]

One – on the question of the Palestinians, I mean, one thing that's interesting is that – and the ripple effect and the interconnectedness of the Arab uprisings is that the unity government that – the unity agreement that was fostered between Hamas and Fatah only came about, really, because of the changes that took place in Syria. Hamas, essentially, came and – came to accept what had been the long-standing Egyptian position on the unity agreement. And it's not because Khaled Meshaal all of a sudden changed his views or saw the light of day or took a particular liking to Mahmoud Abbas.

He was simply – as he saw his own base of support literally drying up within Damascus, coupled with the call by the Palestinian people for unity, Hamas moved to accept, at least rhetorically, the Fatah's position on the unity agreement. This has now been stalled in the implementation, but were it not for what's happening in Syria, I think this would not have happened.

MR. ASALI: OK. I know you have a question, and you submitted, but we'll –

Q: Can they speak on international –

MR. ASALI: We'll provide the answer, in your absence.

Q: Thank you.

MR. ASALI: Hussein, I think you have her question.

MR. IBISH: Actually, it's just a request for my talk in writing.

[01:12:17]

MR. ASALI: OK.

MR. IBISH: OK. The answer is yes. (Chuckles.)

MR. ASALI: OK. We're looking for more questions. I think I would like to see the panel comment about where does Syria stand now that it has recognized the Palestinian state. Where does it stand, do you think, on the issue of unity, Palestinian unity?

MR. IBISH: It's a great question. I know I – one thing about the recognition that's maybe worth noting is that there's a sort of an irony or a parallel, I don't know which it is. But Radwan points out that Syria is among the last, if not the last, of the Arab League states to recognize Palestine. Well, the PLO was the first of the Arab League members to reconnect with Egypt after Camp David. And I think that was specifically –

[01:13:06]

MR. ASALI: Lebanon has –

MR. IBISH: Lebanon has yet too. Among – that's why I said among the last. I think it's true; Lebanon has yet to, and maybe there's another, I don't know.

Where they stand on unity is – I mean, presumably, you know, it would be part and parcel of their traditional policy of trying to undermine the PLO – the national leadership of the Palestinians. So that if they felt that going beyond the agreement to make an agreement, which is what we have, but no actual agreement on any single point whatsoever – as far as one can tell – would serve the interests of the PLO and the government based in Ramallah, I don't think they would have any interest in supporting that at all.

But if they thought it undermined them and – not out of any particular liking for Hamas, which they no longer have, but certainly as part of a bigger agenda of disrupting Palestinian independent national leadership, I'm sure they'd be all for it and enthusiastic. In other words, I don't – I don't think their basic orientation has changed, I think they, again, are trying to play the Palestine card as asked in the last round of questions. But my sense is they played it – they played it on Naksa Day and it's gone. And I don't think you can keep playing that again and again and again.

MR. ASALI: Any thoughts on that, Robert?

[01:14:30]

MR. DANIN: Well, just to add the thought – I mean, if anything the Nakba (ph) Day and Naksa Day protests have been counterproductive. They've precipitated backlash within Syria – why are you putting us at risk? Why are you – why did you send us to the border unarmed? So I think this was a tactic that actually proved to further undermine the legitimacy of the regime. And two, at this point I don't think that Syria has much of a foreign policy other than – I mean its foreign policy is its domestic policy, which is survival.

MR. IBISH: By the way, the document that Radwan helped people know about that was first publicized by Michael Weiss and the Daily Telegraph about Syrian military orders regarding Naksa Day was very damaging, I believe – exceptionally damaging. You know – so encouraged people to go to the border. If shots are fired in the air, that's fine; things like that. You know, it's extraordinary stuff – very cynical.

Q: Nalas (ph), the American Task Force on Palestine – a question for Radwan. So if Adib Shishakli was willing to house the Palestinians, why didn't they? Why didn't they solve the problem then?

[01:15:45]

Q: Hi, I'm Layla Gama from Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. This question is directed to all three of you –

MR. ASALI: Little louder, please?

Q: I'm Layla Gama from Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. This question is directed towards the three of you. You touched on it very briefly; it's to do the Golan Heights. And due to everything that has been happening in Syria and that still is going on, do you think at some point what is happening to the Syrian people, but also the question of Golan, which is often forgot about or kind of pushed to the side in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that there may at this point maybe be some sort of a final solution to it? If not final solution, maybe a sort of an ease on restrictions at the Syria-Israeli border perhaps, which I believe it now stands they allow students from the Golan who go to Damascus; they only open the borders once a year. May there be some sort of, like, lessening of the restrictions or perhaps allowing families on either side to be reunited?

MR. ASALI: OK. Well, two questions.

MR. DANIN: One was – (inaudible) – Zaideh.

MR. Zaideh: Yes. It's regarding Adib Shishakli, actually, and the record – the archives shows that when – after the first war, Arab-Israeli War, in 1948 it was actually a deal by – I think the Eisenhower administration at that time – when actually – (inaudible) – was interested to visit Syria, make a deal with Adib Shishakli to host 150,000 Palestinian refugees and give them the Syrian citizenship at that time. But because at that time it was very tense between the Syrian and the Israel and others, quite difficult for any leaders to accept to host the Palestinians rather than actually being –

[01:17:52]

As you know, all the military coups happened. And the first one – the first one in the region, Husna Zaieme (ph) done on behalf of the Palestinian issue. And that communiqué number one in all of these military coups – that we have to liberate Palestine. And our previous ones did not that; we have to do that. And this is why it became – and

Hafez Assad himself in first communiqué repeated that, because actually the hesitance of the Syrian army to do that – and we take our responsibility to do that. And still the Palestinian there and – and this is why it became an issue.

All of the concerns right now, actually, it's about domestic issues. The Syrian uprising is nothing to do with their foreign policies, nothing to do with the relationship. With only now it's relationship between Syrian and Iran became as a domestic issue, and this is why the Syrian burning the Iranian flags, the photos of Hasan Nasrallah every day because there is a lot of actually rumors and maybe confirmed by many eye-witnesses saying some of the Iranian helping – backing the Syrian regime financially and giving them the expertise in the communication – how they cut the Internet, how they can actually – they cut the calls in specific cities, not the whole of the country, as they did in Egypt.

[01:19:20]

And all of this expertise has been – and also with some Iranian presence helping the Syrian regime, some rumors also about some Hezbollah members there, especially in – (inaudible) – in – (inaudible) – area. And this is – the way it worked was, very tense fight between some Syrian soldiers who defect from the army along with others who did not defect and start fighting each other, where actually the Syrian regime proclaimed that 120 security persons have been killed. But when they show actually the photos, there is three they have huge – (inaudible). And the Syrian army's forbidden to have a – (inaudible). And this is why the rumors came that there's some Hezbollah members there on the ground.

[01:20:08]

But this is – it needs more, actually, investigation and more verification. But for sure that – (inaudible) – in there, backing. Otherwise, actually, all the – all the – the focus of the Syrian people right now about domestication – it's called as uprising, as a revolution for dignity and freedom. It's nothing to do with Israel.

But the same time, there is consensus among, actually, the Syrian opposition that will endorse and support the Arab Peace Initiative in 2004 if the Israelis withdraw from all occupied territories, among them, the Golan Heights – will have full – a peace treaty with the Israeli government with full peace and with the region. And this had been acceptance by all the Syrian opposition leaders, endorsing the Arab Peace Initiative in 2004.

MR. IBISH: One thing that was surely a factor in the late '40s and throughout the '50s vis-à-vis Syrian policy towards Palestine, the potential for making a deal as you've described – which was, you know, pretty advanced, I think, at a certain point – is that – is the internal instability within Syria was so great, and the ability of people to launch coups, especially legitimated by this issue, as you were saying – that various communiques, number one, that – not only that, just the rhetorical opposition on it, I think, making such a deal difficult and also hard to sustain against a likely coup response by who knows who.

The other thing is that I think that a lot of the Syrian governments – many Syrian governments during that period were exceptionally – were very, very concerned about what they perceived to be regional plots – Egyptian and particularly Jordanian – regarding the Palestine issue and the issue of water – I mean, I don't want to use the word "paranoid," but let's say a high – a very high level of concern about what their Arab neighbors were up to on this front.

And that again is – I think you're dealing with a set of regimes at that time that are largely reactive and defensive on this issue at that point in time.

[01:02:26]

MR. ASALI: OK, I think it's probably also useful to add that the negotiations or conversations between Adib Shishakli and the U.S. government representatives just came to a complete stop in 1952 after the Egyptian revolution.

MR. IBISH: Right.

MR. ASALI: How about the answer to the question about –

MR. IBISH: The Golan Heights.

MR. ASALI: Golan.

MR. IBISH: Easing restrictions on the Golan Heights.

MR. ZIADEH: I don't –

MR. IBISH: She asked, what about – would – is there any prospect for an easing of restrictions on the Golan Heights, more – freedom of movement, opening border, et cetera?

MR. ZIADEH: I don't think so, that – even that, if you are Syrian citizens, and you go to the al-Quneitra governments, which actually have access to the Golan, you have to cross at least three security and army checkpoints. And you have to get the permission before. And this is why the question, how actually those Palestinian crossed the – they crossed all the security and checkpoints with this large number and – (inaudible).

[00:83:35]

And by the way, there is – was actually, when I communicate one of the people there at the ground, the day before actually, the Syrian state TV, they have three video cameras to prepare everything. And because all the statistics and the number who have been killed, we have from – only from the state TV, this is why we have a lot of question about exactly the number of the people who have been killed, and what's happened there.

But lifting restrictions on the Golan will be actually – always you have to get the permission from the security. And I don't think that the Syrians will play this card again. It's become actually a losing card after what's happened, especially after the troubles happen in Yarmouk area where actually the Palestinian demonstrating against the Assad regime – why you sending our sons there to be killed in unarmed area, in (armed ?) area, et cetera?

And this is why I don't think any way for the Syrian regime to play this card again. It's done, gone.

MR. ASALI: OK. I had a final question. I think – had quite a collection of questions. My final question to every one of you, which is: What is your assessment of the Israeli government's policy to the Assad regime as we speak? (Laughter.) What do you think? Has there been any change in their – in their evaluation of the Assad regime's potential for surmounting its obstacles or surviving the present uprising?

[01:25:29]

The three of you are welcome.

MR. ZIADEH: (Inaudible) – with Rob. (Laughter.)

MR. DANIN: Thank you. You know, I think – I haven't – I haven't been to Israel since – well, I have been since the uprisings began but not engaged on this issue at length. But my sense is that the invocation of Israel, Israel's policy of wanting to see Bashar stay has been overblown in the discourse here.

I mean, it's true; there is a – there has been a long-standing strain within the national security establishment in Israel of seeing Assad – Bashar, primarily – as a force for stability. I think what we've seen is that the – is that the – or, rather, Hafez. I mean, what we've seen is, Bashar is not his father's son. And whereas Hafez was absolutely brutal, he was restrained when – unless forced otherwise, he was reliable; he was predictable – all these things that were missing from Bashar.

Bashar is unpredictable; he's reckless. He overplays his hands. So, all the very qualities that made Hafez a respected interlocutor and adversary were removed with Bashar. And I think this is – led to a more open thinking in Israel, as well as otherwise, that in fact this is not a force for stability, which was the ultimate reason that Bashar was – the Assads were seen as someone you could do business with.

[01:27:09]

I think now, there's been a shift in thinking, in certain circles within the Israeli national security establishment, that because Bashar is not a force for stability, that therefore other possibilities may be welcome. But there still is a great deal of uncertainty and a great deal of concern about what would follow. And I think that is – taking Israel aside, I think that is also what drives American policy today, is as much as we all now recognize that Bashar is not the answer, people are still unclear as to what is the solution and how you can have a transition to something better.

In the Middle East, things can always get worse. (Laughter.) And so as much as you think, you know, well, it can't – well, it can. And so I think it's the lack of predictability that gives people hesitancy of just assuming that Bashar's departure will lead to something better.

MR. ASALI: Radwan?

MR. ZIADEH: It's – yeah, I agree with Rob that always the case with Hafez al-Assad, that it's a quite difficult to negotiate with him, but he – when agree or give pledge for something, he always delivered that. But this is not the case of Basher Assad where actually, always he say something and do something differently, and all has double face.

I do remember that in 2007, as example, where he says something publicly about there needs to have a peace treaty with Israel along with U.S. delegation, and next hour, he has a meeting with some Ba'ath party members, and he said that we have to eliminate Israel on the map, and we have to – and by the way, that two news, it was on the first page of Al-Thawra – (laughter) – newspaper next day – and became confused, actually, with the Syrian position.

[01:29:19]

And this is not something you can see under Hafez al-Assad. There is a huge difference in the personal at that time.

Regarding the Israeli position, actually, yesterday the Israeli president Shimon Peres, he said that the days of Basher Assad is (counting ?). And I think that's – but the most important question, to know exactly what the – what the –

what's the national security establishment position toward what's going on in Syria. This is the most important, I think.

But in my – in my estimate that anything, there is a great article by the Foreign Policy which actually make a survey for 96 countries who have transitioned. And none of them, they have a radical government – or actually later on, all the transition after actually 1970, all the – all those countries, none of them they have a radical government, or actually –

[01:30:35]

And this is give always the case that all the transition happened after the third wave of democratization more focus about the domestic issues, how to deal with actually the economy.

Syria under a severe economic crisis. And this is why I think it's – any government after the Assad regime will be much more willing to have – to deal with the Western countries, especially with the IMF, the World Bank, to get more loans. It's need \$86 billion for the infrastructure. And when only available \$1 billion, it's a huge number between – and this is why I think – the reality that of course there is always question about unpredictability of the Syrian foreign policy. But I think right now it's much more concerned about the domestic issues.

And Israel has to understand that having actually democratic partner will be good for it rather than having a hostile regime.

MR. ASALI: Hussein?

MR. IBISH: I think – I actually think there has been a shift in attitudes. And it's still – I mean, still a lot of divisions. There were a lot of divisions a few months ago when to all appearances, a plurality at least of Israelis who were concerned about this sort of thing probably were – would have preferred to see the regime survive as opposed to the many risks that they anticipated. But I do think that's shifted a lot.

And I think there are three, at least, factors that are clear: One is, as both Rob and Radwan were saying, you can't regard this regime as a source of stability anymore. That might have been an argument that might have been made for decades. But it just can't – it can't be made right now at all. I mean, in no way is it a source of stability.

On the other hand, I think there's also a growing sense in Israel, here and in many parts of the Arab world that this Syrian regime is not going to survive. It's not going to survive intact; it's not going to survive in a healthy way. And whatever happens, there's no going back to the way it was before.

[01:32:56]

So yearning for the continuation of something that is truly gone is a pointless policy. And that gets – you know, it takes time for people to deal with that and recognize it and factor it in. But I think – I think it makes itself – it imposes itself on everybody.

And the third is a line of thinking that I think has been going on in many different capitals, including in the Israeli one, that maybe – and all of this is not preferable, it's not the optimal scenario, but there might be a plan B or a silver lining, or however you might want to put it, in the sense that maybe Iran has more to lose than Israel or Saudi Arabia or the United States if the Assad regime falls, even if it is followed by some chaos, even if it is followed by some instability. And it's a painful, you know, birth of a new Syria rather than an easy one.

[01:33:48]

So I do agree with Rob, finally, that I think the Israelis, like the United States, would like to see a managed transition to a new Syria rather than a kind of dramatic regime change with all the dangers that that confronts. But I think the U.S. at least has an able ambassador, as you were discussing earlier, to help that. And I'm not sure how much the Israelis can do to facilitate that. I think that's harder for them.

MR. ASALI: Right.

MR. IBISH: Yeah. Thank you.

MR. ASALI: Well, thank you, Hussein, Radwan and Rob, for excellent presentations and insights. And thank you, Marina, for being with us on this program. And thank you, everyone, for your continued interest in the program. (Applause.)

[01:34:30]

(END)