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Maybe to launch the conversation, I would like to draw on your knowledge of Syria, because you are very well known, among your other capacities, as being a very knowledgeable expert on Syria. Could you share with us your analysis of the current situation in Syria? Since His Royal Highness ended his intervention with his own proposals towards a solution, which massively involves Iran, and would you elaborate a bit further on this issue?

Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute

The Saudi royal house has been an immensely successful ruling family for more than a century. We saw a major representative of this house speaking with such command of the subject matter and with the most refined manifestation of Arab culture, being able to convey in subtle and indirect ways what we Israelis in particular tend to do too bluntly, and I am full of admiration.

Regarding Syria, I agree that the only solution is a political-diplomatic one; there will not be a military solution, in the sense that the opposition is in a very sorry state right now. Certainly, what we mistakenly call the secular opposition, or the Islamist, non-jihadi opposition, as distinct from the jihadi opposition, are trying to defeat the regime, and what seemed in 2012 like the imminent collapse of the regime is definitely not the case. There has been a changing of the tide since June, since the battle of Quseir and other developments, but the regime is inching its way forward; it is not about to suppress the rebellion, and I cannot see the regime re-establishing an effective rule over the whole of Syria any time soon. Therefore, in order to stop the carnage in Syria, the humanitarian crisis and the spill-over effect into the neighbouring countries, there has to be a political-diplomatic solution very much along these lines.

It will not be easy, because the opposition and many others will insist that Assad has no legitimacy and has to step down, and obviously he does not intend to do that. There is also a primordial fear by the Alawite community that the removal of Assad could result in a bloodbath in Syria, and of course it is also a major investment for Iran. Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria itself are major assets in Iran's quest for regional hegemony, and they regard the removal of Assad as the first step in the destruction of what you might call their colony in Lebanon and Syria, and they will oppose that. I am not sure Russia will support the removal of Assad. Geneva II is potentially an important step, but it will take more than that.

Thierry de Montbrial, President and founder of the WPC

When we talk about the removal of Assad, are we talking just about his removal or the removal of the regime, which is not exactly the same?

Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute

Yes. We all know that the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, in retrospect, was a very sorry event, but there are some lessons to be learned from it after all, and one of them is that, if you do want eliminate someone like Saddam Hussein, it is better to go for regime decapitation than for total dismantlement of the regime, because if you totally dismantle the regime there is anarchy in the country, which is what happened in Iraq for several years following 2003.

The same applies to Syria: if you decide that not just the Assad family and their cronies but the army, intelligence and the governance regime have to go, there will be anarchy in Syria. Ideally, a coalition should be put together of elements of the regime who, to borrow a phrase from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, do not have blood on their hands,



and elements of the opposition, at least for a transitional period, that would gradually enable Syria to move to a different political phase.

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Let us continue for a little along these lines. Suppose that there is a way to remove Assad himself, which would probably be more reasonable in many ways, many elements of the regime would probably be part of the new regime. Who would be the others? Today it is not very clear who could join a government composed of former Assad elements.

Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute

Before I respond directly to your question I want to say a word about Assad. His Royal Highness spoke a lot about John Kerry and his credibility in trying to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but John Kerry himself said a few months ago that Assad has lost all legitimacy and has to go. How will Palestinians or Israelis trust the US if it does not stand by that policy in the Syrian context? Remember also that John Kerry gave a very powerful speech on the need to penalise Assad for the use of chemical weapons, and half an hour later the policy was changed by the President. There are linkages between the different parts of the Middle East, and what happens or does not happen in Syria affects the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the Gulf and other areas.

Unfortunately, from very early on the Syrian opposition has been affected by divisiveness, reflecting to some extent the divided nature of the country. Let us also remember that the political history of Syria is a history of a very fragile country, a country that in 1958 actually gave up its independent existence and merged into the United Arab Republic with Egypt. It was in a way symbolic of the weakness of the countries that were put together by the French and the British after World War One, often along very artificial lines reflecting imperial and colonial interests and not realities on the ground. Therefore Syria has been a weak state and a divided society for decades.

I would say to the credit of Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, that he was the first to build a powerful Syrian state and a coherent political system, at a terrible cost, but he did. However, that was a different era, and the opposition from day one has been very ineffective. There are political groups based in Europe and Istanbul; the leader of the Syrian National Coalition has been replaced several times in the past three years; they do not necessarily have a great deal of impact on the people fighting on the ground; there is presumably the Free Syrian Army, but the real power is in the hands of the local coordination committees and the groups that fight on the ground.

I am not saying all this because of His Royal Highness's presence here but they have been the most successful recently in putting together a group called the Islamic Front which comprises several Islamist but not jihadi groups, and this seems to be more effective than other groups. The bottom line is that there will have to be a coalition in Syria, but with the realistic expectation that it will be a while before we see a coherent, stable system in place, even if the Assads leave.

Thierry de Montbrial, President and founder of the WPC

You remind us that to some extent the borders in the Middle East are artificial, as they are, by the way, in other parts of the world, in Africa for instance. However, at the same time, we insist that borders should not be changed, in that the integrity of Syria should be maintained. Is this not a contradiction?

Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute

Borders are artificial in Africa and the Middle East, of course, and it is a consensus, in a way, of the existing states that you do not change borders because they realise that once you pull the first brick out of the wall the whole wall might collapse. However, there is a danger of partition; we know that in Iraq the Kurdish area is quite autonomous, and unfortunately, one of the most effective jihadi groups in Syria is called ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. That group represents the radical Sunnis in Iraq, unhappy with the current Shiite domination, and is saying that the border between Syria and Iraq is meaningless.



Ironically, the greatest danger to the integrity of state of Syria comes from the regime, in the sense that if the regime is afraid it might be toppled and a bloodbath might follow, they might retreat to the Alawite mountains and either declare a statelet or revive the Alawite state of the 1920s and 1930s. The Kurdish area of the northeast in that case might become autonomous, if not declare independence, and Turkey itself could be rattled by the fact that there would be autonomous Kurdish areas on two of its borders, in Iraq and Syria.

There is a serious threat to the whole state system which is part of the calculus at the core of the Syrian conflict, and it needs to be terminated, not just for the sake of Syria but for the sake of regional stability.

Thierry de Montbrial, President and founder of the WPC

Let us move now to Israel. I will start with a provocative question, to what extent is Israel the same country since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the massive inflow of Russian Jews? I think the proportion is 20%, which is a huge number, and I understand that it also has immense implications for networking of all kinds, including, by the way, some illegal channels. How has it changed the country itself? That is a provocative question.

Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute

It is not difficult to answer. On the whole this has been a very successful wave of immigration, of a highly educated population; in professional terms, people who value culture very highly. What we call the Israeli miracle of the start-up nation was aided by this influx. The first Zionists who came to the then Palestine came from Russia, Poland and Eastern Europe. We have in the meantime integrated Jews from the Middle East into the Israeli system.

The one negative by-product of the Russian immigration is that the immigrants tend to be on the right wing in terms of Arab-Israeli relations; they do not support concessions, and they have called it the Russian legacy of the hostile attitude to Islam and Muslims. They are used to living in a very large country, and the idea of shrinking the country where they live is alien to them. The older generation tends to vote for what we call right-wing parties from my point of view, that is a minus, but in the bigger scheme of things it has been a wonderful addition to the country.

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I would like to ask you the same question as I asked His Royal Highness, about the best- and worst-case scenarios for an Israeli-Palestinian deal before the end of Obama's term. The fate of Obama in this respect might influence the next election in the US, and if we have a right-wing Republican succeeding Obama and a right-wing government in Israel, that could make everything more complicated in the next few years.

Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute

I will put on my hat as a former ambassador to Washington who knows something about American politics. I think the healthcare reform and other issues will be more important for the outcome of the next election. Jimmy Carter was successful in Camp David and was defeated; George Bush had the Madrid conference and other huge achievements in foreign policy and did not see a second term. Therefore, Obama's future depends mostly on domestic issues; even though Americans care more about domestic politics, they do want to see the President as being capable of leading the free world, and it reflects badly on the President if he falters badly on foreign policy.

However, it is important to us to see these negotiations succeed, not because of Obama's political future, but because of our own future. I belong to that camp in Israel, which by the way gets 70% in public opinion polls, which wants to see the issue resolved. There has been a recent poll showing over 60% agreeing with a hypothetical, and it is my strong belief that if it is not a hypothetical, if a done deal is put before the Israeli voter in a referendum, more than 70% will support that, because people realise that the continuation of the status quo is first and foremost bad for us. Demographically speaking, we are risking the future of the state as a Jewish state, and in terms of Israel's international standing, we see a creeping delegitimation, and these are two very dangerous developments for us.



Therefore, beyond the merits of the case, and the promise of what a peaceful solution could mean for Israel and the region, there is a creeping danger to us, and it is to our benefit to try to resolve it and take advantage of the fact that there is an American Secretary of State who has made it his mission to try to resolve it.

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Could we expect in Israeli a miracle equivalent to the election of Rouhani in Iran?

Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute

The miracle does not require an election; it requires a decision on the part of the Prime Minister. There have been three Israeli Prime Ministers, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon, who showed that they could go against the grain at the crucial moment: Menachem Begin when he made the peace with Sadat; Yitzhak Rabin, for whom I had the privilege of working, who in the 1990s decided to take the Madrid Process and use it in order to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and negotiated very seriously with both the Palestinians and Syria and made peace with Jordan; and Ariel Sharon, who did not believe in negotiations, but this man, who used to be the leader of the radical right wing and created most of the settlements, decided that this had become untenable and that his legacy should be different, and he took us out of Gaza and dismantled all the settlements there.

The fourth person could be Netanyahu, who has been Prime Minister for a very long time now. I would hope that he asks himself how he wants to be remembered in history when he decides to step out of his position. He has an opportunity to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it is a question that is for him; none of us knows what the ultimate decision will be, but we do not need an election for that. You can have a different coalition, by the way; this coalition is not suitable for that, but there is an alternative. The Labour Party just elected Mr Herzog, who is a great believer in this approach, and will be very happy to replace some of the right-wing components of the coalition. Mr Netanyahu can pull it off.

However, the question is not just about Netanyahu; there is a serious question about Abu Mazen. I cannot forget that when Ehud Olmert put a very attractive offer on the table in September 2008, 94% of the West Bank, partitioning Jerusalem, etc., Abu Mazen did not take it. Reading the memoirs of Condoleezza Rice, she was bewildered why he did not take it. It is not easy for him; he is a refugee from 1948, and to sign on the dotted line about the end of conflict and the end of claims is not a simple issue, but I do not take it for granted that if Netanyahu rises to the occasion, so will he. I hope he does, but I do not take it for granted.