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Itamar Rabinovich was Israel's negotiator with Syria, among many other accomplishments. He was Ambassador to the United States, which was not a bad accomplishment either. He has been a teacher, Head of Tel Aviv University, he is Vice Chairman of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, among many other things. Itamar, you have been here many times, Israel has a new government but a new set of relationships, so over to you.

Itamar Rabinovich

Thank you. I will begin with the Israeli government and then talk more broadly about the region. Two years ago, was a very optimistic time in Arab-Israeli relations, the Abraham Accords were signed, and it was seen as a milestone. Second, in Israel for the first time an Arab party, a softer version of the Muslim Brotherhood, joined the coalition and it seemed that Arab-Israeli relations were looking up. Nowadays, the perspective is far darker. The Abraham Accords are there, they did not develop into a larger regional structure. The Negev summit was mentioned, and some people thought this would be the core of a Sunni-Israeli coalition against Iran and its Shiite axis, but it does not seem to be the case. The Abraham Accords are limited to an actually very positive development in bilateral relations with the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, Sudan is not so important in this context, but it is not the nucleus of any regional structure. In Israel itself a good government that represented the gamut of Israeli politics, all the way from the left to moderate right and including an Arab party, collapsed after a year and a half. Not just the right-wing but the extreme right wing won the last elections, and it is probably going to form a very nationalistic government with probably negative implications for Israeli politics and society, and Arab-Jewish relations inside Israel and Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian relations in general. It is important to bear in mind that the elections were decided by very few votes and there was actually a plurality of the center-left block in the popular vote. However, Netanyahu is a very good politician, election strategist and he put the right-wing together in a very cohesive way. They did not lose a single vote and the center left lost quite a few, and the result is that we have this far-reaching change in Israeli politics. I doubt if it will hold, and I think this government is likely to implode. The policies the two extremist right-wing parties and the ultra-orthodox parties are trying to impose on the country will lead to either implosion or massive popular protests. I doubt if this will remain the case for very long, but I think we are in for a difficult year in Israeli politics, Israeli-Arab relations inside Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian problem in a broader way. Let us remember one thing,



Netanyahu is being tried on serious criminal charges, corruption and breach of faith and what interests him the most is his own legal situation. He depends on these partners in order to be in power and he remembers that when Prime Minister Olmert left the government he went to jail, he does not want to go to jail, he wants to be in control and to reshape the legal system. This is what drives him in the first place.

Let me now move more broadly to the region and I would use the word flux, I think the region is in flux on all three levels of politics, domestic, regional and international. On domestic, we have six failed states in the region, other countries on the eve of elections, as in Turkey, or in turmoil like Iran, etc. Regionally there is no structure, there used to be and the last one we had one was during the Syrian civil war and the Arab Spring when people spoke about the Saudi axis of Sunnis states versus the Iranian axis, but there is no longer an axis. What is very significant in regional politics is that the region has been joined by two large, powerful states, Iran and Turkey. They were not part of Middle Eastern politics for most of the previous century. It was only after the Iranian revolution of 1979 that Iran joined Middle Eastern politics and Turkey, in the first years of this century when Erdogan realized that Turkey was not going to be accepted into the European Union and he was looking for influence elsewhere, what is known as neo-Ottomanism. Therefore, we have two countries of about 100 million people with strong economies, highly developed civil societies, strong militaries that punch at their weight in the region. What is more recent and very interesting is that these two countries are now trying to play a larger global role. Turkey has been active all the way from Azerbaijan to Libya, in East Africa and Yemen, and now Iran has joined Russia very closely and has become part of the Ukraine war. This is not something we are used to. We are used to larger international powers coming to the Middle East to control it and suddenly we are seeing Middle Eastern countries trying to play a larger role.

One point you asked Mona about is where is Egypt? I think there has been a shift in the Arab world from the traditional centers of Arab nationalism in Egypt, Iraq and Syria. Egypt is sort of unto itself, Iraq and Syria are basically two failed states. I think the focus is shifting to this part of the Arab world in the Gulf, where you have stable, wealthy, highly-developed countries that are now playing a much more important role in the larger Arab world. Internationally, we will have to see what the implications of the Ukraine war for its position in Syria and its ability to be effectively active in the Middle East. The US always raises the familiar question of whether it is pivoting away or not. In fact, the number of US troops in the region has not declined but the message is not very clear. I think the US has a hard time finding solutions to what Minister Gargash presented eloquently yesterday. That is to say the tendency of Middle Eastern countries to say, yes, basically we are pro-Western, but we allow ourselves a sort of polygamy that you, Washington, needs to be able to handle.

Steven Erlanger

Can I just bring you back for a second into the Israeli interior politics with one question? The great experiment of the previous government was the Israeli Arabs or Israeli Palestinians, whichever you choose to say, getting involved with an Israeli government. Is that experiment over, or do you think it could come back again?

**Itamar Rabinovich**

No, it is not over. The Arab minority is 20% going up to 22% and the majority and the minority will have to find a long-term way to live with each other. Inside the Israeli-Arab minority there are two contradictory trends. You see a growing middle-class and professional class, and in my own university, Tel Aviv, the number of Arab students rose from 4% to 16%. In the Technion in Haifa, which is Israel's MIT, the student population is 37% Arab students. You can see a trend of younger people moving up, becoming professional, leaving their town and settling in Tel Aviv and Haifa and seeking integration. This is what Mahmood Abbas and his participation in the coalition represented in a way. However, there is a hardcore of people who still oppose the very essence of the state, and this will continue. It needs to be addressed by an Israeli government that will come to the Arab minority and say listen, this is a Jewish state, but you are a significant minority of 20% and we need to find a definition of the relationship, say cultural minority. Obviously, this is not the government that will do that.

Steven Erlanger

Of course, it would help if there were finally a settlement and two states because then people could decide where they really belonged, but we do not have to get into that right now.