

His Excellency  
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## Israel: What's Next?

I am very comforted, like all Israelis, by this outpouring of support and admiration for Prime Minister Sharon who is lying right now in the hospital. I'm sorry I do not have any news to report about his status, but we do appreciate the concern and support. He is a tremendous figure. He made a real shift in the geopolitics of the Middle East by his disengagement plan, and by forming a new party. No matter what happens in the future, what is quite evident is that his legacy will live on. The legacy of Sharon, which talks about a two-state solution, living side by side in peace and security, the vision that he shares with President Bush, the Road Map to peace, the way to move forward—Israeli politics will never be the same and that's his real legacy, irrespective of who will succeed him. Right now we have a Deputy Prime Minister, Acting Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, who's very well known in the United States. The transition of power was smooth and I think it's a testament of the long tradition that we have of democracy and strong institutions. This is what we would like to see around us in the Middle East and we will talk about it.

**We see women's empowerment more evident in some Gulf countries, we see a new energy in Lebanon which threw out the oppressive Syrian army**

We have the Palestinian elections tomorrow, we have the Israeli elections in two months; a lot is going on in the region and in the world. So where do I start? You know Charlie Chaplin came from Europe in the early years of the last century. He came to New York and every woman he met, he kissed her hand. His American friends asked him, "Why do you kiss every woman on her hand?" and his answer was, "Well, you have to start somewhere." So, where to start? It really looks like turmoil. I don't think that the Chinese saying "may you live in interesting times" was more evident than today. But let me start with an overview of what's happening in the Middle East from our perspective, and then maybe I can zero in more on the Israel-Palestinian prospects for peace and progress in our area.

There are two opposing trends in the Middle East right now—two diametrically opposing trends. One is of progress towards democracy, towards modernity, towards market economy. The other is for regression, radicalization, for holding back. I say that the good signs are that we have elections. We have had elections in Iraq very successfully, elections in the Palestinian Authority last year very successfully, and we're talking about Palestinian elections tomorrow; we haven't seen the results yet. We saw elections with multi-candidates in Egypt. We see women's empowerment more evident in some Gulf countries, we see a new energy in Lebanon which threw out the oppressive Syrian army—although the Syrians are not quite out of Lebanon because of the intelligence services and other forces there. But there is a

new trend in that respect. Libya, for instance, did give up voluntarily their program for weapons of mass destruction.

All this would not have happened, in my eyes, without the removal of Saddam Hussein. I don't want to go into the controversy of whether there were weapons of mass destruction or not, but the removal of Saddam Hussein, the liberation of Iraq, was the pivotal point, a watershed, which allowed a new Middle East. I believe historians in 50 or 100 years when they look back to our era today, will say this was the point where the Middle East began to change. Unfortunately the Middle East until now, or until three years ago, has been paralyzed, very backward, and did not keep up with the rest of the world, which caused a lot of bad phenomena, like terrorism and radicalization. I think that this has to change if we want to see a better and safer world. So in that respect the removal of Saddam Hussein helped a lot. He was an intimidating factor vis-à-vis his own population, but vis-à-vis the Arab countries around Iraq he didn't allow any progress and any moving forward. We do see some change now. It's not rapid, it's going to be very, very difficult, it's not going to change overnight, but we have to start some place and I think the beginning is evident and there's no turning back. It may take five or 50 years but there is no way back.

At the same time, we do see some opposing trend towards all that I have described ---what is called by Arab intellectuals the freedom that they see in the Middle East. We see in Tehran, we see it in Damascus, and we see it still in Leba-

non. There are still forces that would love to see the continuation of conflict; they would like to see the dissemination of very extreme Islam, which does not believe in coexistence, this Islam that they promote also supports terrorism. If you look at the hot points in the Middle East—whether it's the insurgency in Iraq,

that pulling together our resources is necessary.

Tomorrow, we have elections in the Palestinian Authority. What is more democratic than having an election? The question is, who participates in this election? On the face of it, everybody should

want to keep our democracies. This was not the case in the Palestinian Authority unfortunately, and Hamas should have been barred from running. This was our position and I believe this was the position of any and every decent country. Now they are running because Israel relented.



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Israel made a strategic decision not to interrupt and not to interfere with these elections. We are not governing the Palestinians. On the contrary, we would like to see peace and we would like them to be independent. We don't want to meddle in their affairs but we would expect them to be responsible, to be committed to peace, to be effective and to really build institutions with transparency and the rule of law. I think they failed this by allowing Hamas to run.

Now, what could be the implications? Hamas is very popular. It's not because the Palestinians necessarily believe in their ideology, Palestinians, by and large, are a secular society. The vote for Hamas by many of them is a protest vote because it's against the ruling Fatah. The Fatah they see is corrupt or ineffective. The Fatah is split so many ways it's a problem. But if Hamas wins, if they are allowed to be a part of the government, Israel will not negotiate with them. You cannot negotiate with somebody who's committed to destroy you. What do you negotiate with them about? Also, we do not negotiate with somebody who comes with a bomb or a rifle to the table. So, our basic conditions are, and I think it should be understood, especially by the Palestinians, that in order to be a legitimate partner they have to dismantle the terror organization and infrastructure, disarm, and also change the charter. This is something that is very important and it's up to the Palestinians. Tomorrow we will know which way they vote; whether they vote for the way for negotiations and peaceful settlement or terror and violence. It is clearly in their hands.

terrorism coming out of the Palestinian territories against Israelis, what is happening in Lebanon, what happens with proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it's all a result of the action by Damascus, Tehran and their proxies Hezbollah, and the terror organizations of the Palestinians, whether it's Islamic Jihad or Hamas, the Popular Front, or what have you.

These are the two trends. I have no doubt which trend will prevail. The only question is how long it will take for victory and what will be the cost and the sacrifice until we get there. I hope it will be short, without much sacrifice, but I cannot promise that. It is very important first of all to understand what goes on in the Middle East and to also understand

participate, this is a true democracy. But when you look at the parties that participate, what is more important is the rule of law. You cannot have parties with private armies, parties who are perpetuating and committing terror activities and you cannot have parties who are racists, or Nazis, or calling for the destruction of other people, and this is the case of Hamas. In no other country around the world, whether it's in Europe or here in this country or anywhere else, would a "party" like Hamas be able to run. Or if they had been allowed to run there would be some conditions. First of all, disarm. You do not go to the ballot with bullets and you cannot go with an agenda and a charter that calls on the destruction of other people. These are the true limits, and the rule of law is imperative if we

I think that not negotiating with Hamas is not only a moral imperative—they kill babies in suicide bombings—but also it's a practical and very pragmatic point of view. Why? Because if you look at Hamas they are against any peaceful resolution. They're against the vision of President Bush of a two-state solution; they're against the Road Map

**We gave them a golden opportunity at a very high cost to us by pulling out of Gaza, by dismantling Jewish communities, some of which were there for three generations**

to peace, they're against reconciliation between the two people, Israelis and Arabs, they're against any kind of peace or truce. They believe in one Islamic state, a Palestinian state, under the Sharia, the Islamic law, without any room for Israel, and they are being backed by Iran and by Syria. There's no progress with these types of organizations and again, it would be the Palestinians who decide. We are not intervening, but we are watching very carefully. Tomorrow we will know better. I do not like to predict what the result will be. I like to predict—but not about the future—and especially not about the near future, but we will soon know where the Palestinians are headed.

In any case, Israel's policy is not going to change. As I mentioned, it is a very unfortunate situation that we don't have Prime Minister Sharon at the helm, but as I mentioned, his legacy will live on and the policy of Israel will not, and cannot change. We would like to see peace. We are stretching our hand in peace to all our neighbors, first and foremost the Palestinians. We gave them a

golden opportunity at a very high cost to us by pulling out of Gaza, by dismantling Jewish communities, some of which were there for three generations. It was traumatic for us. It was done in a very smooth and effective way, but it was a trauma. It was very costly for us, but we are out of Gaza. We are also out of four communities, which were dismantled in the West Bank. This is a great, great advance payment for the Palestinians. We didn't leave behind a scorched earth policy. Quite the contrary, we left all the infrastructure intact. We gave them all the maps of where everything is and how to move on. Gaza is open to the world; we allowed free crossings, we are not there any more.

Not only that but the pledge of the international community, basically the G-8 countries of \$9 billion is tremendous. Just for the Palestinians to take and build their country. We hope that they will make Gaza a showcase of good governance, of fighting terror and political stability and then they could really move on with the Road Map to peace. So far we do not see any attempt by the Palestinians to move forward. They do not govern themselves, there is a major anarchy and lawlessness in Gaza. We are waiting to see what happens in the elections and if they really get their act together. The money is available, the investments are there, it's just for them to take and they haven't done it yet. In any case, as I mentioned, we are ready to help them. We are ready to continue on the way to peace and we're waiting.

Of course, we will have our own elections on March 28, about two months from now. I'm not so much concerned about the Israeli elections. I don't know and can't tell you who will win, but we have strong institutions and we have our policies and strategies which will not change much and which I trust. I don't know which way the Israelis are going to vote, the latest polls show that they're going to vote for Sharon's party, the new

party he made, Kadima, which shows all of us that Kadima wasn't just a one-man party, it's also an ideal, it's a message, it's a political way. The Israelis should get a lot of credit for choosing what is best for them and what is best for the region.

So we have a period from now, tomorrow for the Palestinian elections, until our election, in two or three months when we can really organize ourselves, really prepare ourselves for moving ahead. I think this was the legacy of the prime minister. I think he prepared the Israeli public for what he called painful compromises and we're willing to make and take painful compromises for a genuine, real, durable, secure peace. I think we showed that and we're going to show it more in the future. We just need to see the same kind of attitude from the Palestinians and then the sky's the limit.

**The textbooks in the Palestinian Authority are still not teaching reconciliation or coexistence and this is poisoning the hearts and minds of the next generation**

What is very troubling to us is not just the lawlessness and the fact that Hamas runs and the fact they do not fight terror yet, what really worries us is what they teach their children. The textbooks in the Palestinian Authority are still not teaching reconciliation or coexistence and this is poisoning the hearts and minds of the next generation. This is imperative, and this is also a commitment that the Palestinians took under the Road Map to peace—to change the curriculum, to stop the incitement, to fight ter-

ror. We have yet to see that happen, and when that happens, we can really move forward.

Meanwhile, we wait. We're going to continue building our anti-terrorist fence, which is very important. It is really working. Wherever there is a fence, there is no infiltration of suicide bombers. Where there is no fence they can come in like they did last week in Tel Aviv. So it is imperative for us to continue with the fence. I believe that this fence will

prove itself a cornerstone that will allow stability and peaceful negotiations. Hopefully when the relations are such of trust between the Palestinians and Israelis, then there won't be a need for this fence and hopefully it will render itself obsolete when there is no terror and no potential terror.

It is always a great privilege to be here and I'm sure we will meet again. Thank you very much for coming on such short notice.

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