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Transcript

Can the Two-State Solution Be Saved?

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United Nations-Arab League Special Representative to Syria

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President of the United States (1977-81); Nobel Peace Laureate, 2002

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Rosemary Hollis:

I'm Rosemary Hollis, I'm a professor at City University and director of a scholarship programme there for Palestinians and Israelis, and it is obviously my great pleasure to have this opportunity to chair this particular meeting at Chatham House. This meeting is going to be on the record and will be live streamed to Chatham House members. There may be tweets coming in. I would ask you, however, those of you who are in the hall, to put your phones on silent, and it may be necessary to turn them off completely so as not to interfere with the equipment.

I would like to introduce very briefly to you the group to whom our distinguished panellists belong. It is called The Elders. You will have an opportunity perhaps later to find out more about the work of The Elders, but this is an independent group of global leaders. It was founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007 and he brought together these very distinguished statesmen, and former statesmen, to campaign for conflict resolution and human rights the world over, and it is now headed by Kofi Annan.

From The Elders, on my immediate left, we have Martti Ahtisaari. He's former president of Finland and a Nobel Peace Laureate, and an expert on international peace mediation, diplomacy and post-conflict state building. In the middle of our panel we have Lakhdar Brahimi, currently the joint special representative of the UN and the League of Arab States for Syria, and former Algerian freedom fighter, and foreign minister. He has also in the past acted as UN special envoy on Afghanistan and on Iraq. And probably no introduction, even reminder, needed: former president Carter, Jimmy Carter, former president of the United States, also a Nobel Peace Laureate and, frankly, a veteran peace negotiator, passionate advocate of human rights and democracy, and tireless in his pursuit of those causes around the world.

Now I'm fully aware that you're all going to have questions and you're all thinking that this is your great opportunity. What I propose to do is to invite the panel for the first 20 minutes, or just a little bit over 20 minutes, to touch on the following topics: If there is no two-state solution, what are we looking at, where are we drifting to; to say something about the Arab Peace Initiative and its relevance or usefulness; certainly to spend a couple of minutes focusing on the US secretary of state, John Kerry's initiative; to tell us Europeans – Britain – what it is that we could do more or usefully to assist the creation of a two-state solution, and then a little bit about, and what about the Palestinians and the Israelis, what about the dynamic in both their camps?

Now all of that in 20 minutes or so is a tall order, but after that your questions will be better focused. So may I ask you gentlemen, in whatever order you volunteer, to tell us what is the spectre that you're looking at, or we are all looking at, if there is no two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Mr President, I think you're going to answer.

Jimmy Carter:

Well it seemed to me the last few years in Israel that the coalition that's in power is moving away from a two-state solution and have assumed the right of Israelis to control the territory all the way from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. This, in my opinion and the opinion of others that I'll quote in just a second, will be a tragedy for Israel because they will either have to dominate the Palestinians who live in that area and deprive them of any rights whatsoever to full citizenship, which would be exactly the same as apartheid but worse than South Africa was, or either they'll have to give the Palestinians equal voting rights in order to help control and make the determination of the policies of the Israeli government, which means that it can no longer be a Jewish state. And this has been the alternative that's been avoided and condemned publicly, for instance by Ariel Sharon in his writings and in his conversations with me. It was the policy of Ehud Olmert, the last prime minister to serve before Netanyahu, as you know, and earlier ones, including prime minister Barak, who until recently was the defence minister.

So I think that Israel has a choice to make: either go by the international law commonly observed by every nation except Israel, that the basic line on which the border should be drawn is the 1967 borders before the 1967 war, which is known as the Green Line, with one exception – that is that there can be land swaps very near Jerusalem for the major Israeli settlements, and acre by acre or hectare by hectare the land that's given by the Palestinians to Israel for these major settlements will be repaid to the Palestinians on an equal basis. Sharon had a very good idea there, and that is to swap that land for a corridor between Gaza and the West Bank, which is just 36 miles, and on that corridor they could build a railroad and a highway that could be controlled by and operated by the Palestinians and defended by Israel. That's the kind of swap that sounds very attractive to most people and, as you know, the Arab League recently has said okay, they accept 1967 borders with land swaps. So that's the alternative that Israel faces: either devastation in the future for Israel itself and also the Palestinians who would live in subjection, or to abide by international law.

Rosemary Hollis:

Thank you very much Mr President. Is there anything that either of you want to add about what beholds us, what befalls us, if there is no Palestinian state alongside the Israeli state?

Lakhdar Brahimi:

Well our chief is Jimmy Carter on the issue of Palestine and Israel. He knows everything there is to know about it. I would like to add just one little thing. Secretary of State John Kelly told us a little bit about what he's doing, and I am deeply impressed by the amount of work and determination he has shown and continues to show.

But I think the Israelis have shown in the past, and probably will show again, that they don't see why they should make any concessions. And I think that the secretary of state is doing a great deal, all credit to him, but I think he needs a lot of help from all those who can provide help. Israelis and Palestinians are extremely capable people, very clever, certainly the best educated people in our part of the world, but they cannot solve their problems alone. They need help, and the European Union and other countries, Asian countries, China, Latin American countries, African countries, should all gang together to support a drive for this two-state solution.

If it doesn't happen soon then it will be dead. What will happen after that? Nothing good. That is what's certain because the Israelis will never accept to give full citizenship to the Arabs in the West Bank and Delta. That is just out of the question. What will happen? Conflict. How that conflict will evolve, it's very difficult to say for the moment. Israel is strong – very, very strong militarily, it's very, very strong economically, they are doing extremely well – but they will probably have a problem and certainly the Palestinians would suffer a great deal.

Rosemary Hollis:

Thank you very much. Now what do you gentlemen think could be done to bring about a two-state solution at this stage? Mr President, you've talked about the visions, the options considered by previous Israeli leaders and governments, but right now with John Kerry trying to start a process, what needs to be done to rescue the possibility?

Martti Ahtisaari:

First of all, at least I can say from my behalf that the meetings we had in Washington convinced me that this is a serious exercise that is being started. And when you asked what the Europeans should do, I think we should support what the secretary of state and US government is doing at the moment. The worst thing I can see developing is that everybody is trying to do something and that's done in a very uncoordinated manner. As I mentioned in Washington already that I think this is the best I have seen for a long, long time, and we have to be able to support it, whatever decisions we have made. I think in the future, in Europe, I hope that we will coordinate with American friends and see that they really make our best efforts so far, and let's hope that it will yield the results that we all hope.

Rosemary Hollis:

Could you speak a little bit more about the logistics? Do the talks need to happen in Washington or somewhere else? Do other Arabs need to be in the room apart from Palestinians?

Jimmy Carter:

No. Well to answer your question, I think the plan is for the participants to come to Washington, and the delegates from the two forces are already identified. And there is a very serious problem to be overcome – and I think John Kerry's gone a long way, to my great surprise, in doing this – that is that Bibi Netanyahu is in a minority in his own coalition in saying 'let's go to peace talks where the borders might be discussed'. And Abu Mazen is in the minority among his coalition in saying 'we're willing to discuss this without an end to the settlement', without freeze on the settlement. So both of the leaders are ahead of their own coalition in the government, *but* I think they are with the majority of their own people, who want to have peace.

I saw a poll just recently that showed that 81 per cent of the Palestinians are willing to have a two-state solution with the 1967 borders, living side-by-side with Israel in peace. And there's always been like a two-thirds majority in Israel that also want to have peace. But they haven't heard much in Israel, I understand, recently about the prospects for peace. I think this concept that John Kerry has pursued now secretly, very secretly for five months, I think it has much more chance of success than I had believed before we met with him the day before yesterday.

Rosemary Hollis:

Mr President, all of us working in academia, and once upon a time some of us as students, learned about the diplomacy that you effected in Camp David, and were always told that you get the main protagonists together – this of course was between Egypt and Israel – and that you isolate them and you have private conversations and you use your personal charm as the leader of the most... and you get them talking about their children. I mean where does this formula, this model, fit into the prospects for the Israelis and Palestinians?

Jimmy Carter:

Well first of all I would say that John Kerry is probably more charming than I am. Secondly, he has the opportunity, if possible, to have some degree of isolation on a daily basis, but I ordained the first day of the 13 days at Camp David that no one would communicate with the outside world. And of course I knew we had telephones but we spread the word out, which wasn't accurate, that all the telephones were tapped. So I don't think there were any secret messages going out.

I must say that the Egyptian delegation, in total about 50 people, were less accommodating than Sadat, and then the Israeli delegation you had exactly the opposite. Everybody on the Israeli delegation, again about 50 people, were more amenable to peace than was Begin. And one of the key calls that we know was made by Begin towards the end was to Ariel Sharon, who was a powerful right-wing politician in his government, and Sharon said 'take the peace proposal', and I think that was a major key in him doing it.

So I don't think they'll have a chance to go into Camp David and isolate themselves on a sustained basis, but we'll just have to worry about instant communication these days and let them communicate outside. But I think the negotiators, for instance, on the Israeli side at least, I think she is known to be in favour of peace talks more than Netanyahu, and I know the Palestinian-side negotiators better than I do Miss Livni. So I think that the negotiators will be exploring ways of being flexible more than perhaps their bosses back home would like, but that's a good sign, it could be done. I think if they come out with mutual concessions that are attractive to the people back home and is clarified, then I believe that in a referendum – which is inevitable on both sides – they will accept.

I might add one thing quickly that might be news to the audience. I have met many, many hours with Hamas leaders, and they have assured me for a long

time that they will accept any negotiation that is successful between the PLO and Israel *if* it is put to the Palestinian people in a referendum. And of course Netanyahu has said that any agreement will also have to be put to the Israeli people in a referendum. I don't fear that because I believe that both constituencies in private citizens are more amenable to a peace agreement than perhaps their big shot bosses are.

Rosemary Hollis:

Very good. Mr Brahimi, can you tell us from your vast experience of working to mediate between antagonists what help their respective backers can be in a situation like this? If the United States is convening a process, what do the Palestinians need from other Arabs, and what Arab leaders are there out there that could alternatively deliver the Palestinians or help Mahmoud Abbas deliver the Palestinians?

Lakhdar Brahimi:

I think that the Israelis have always been saying that what they need is security. And their definition of security, as we understood it, was first of all a very detailed agreement with the Palestinians to make sure that they are not going to be attacked or anything, and you know, they are talking about the Palestinian state being demilitarized for a very, very long time, and that they want to have full peace with the Arabs. I think that the Arabs have given that now. First of all, Egypt and Jordan have full diplomatic relations with Israel, and every single Arab country plus every Muslim country have supported the Arab plan put out at the initiative of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, at the Arab summit in 2002 in Lebanon.

I think that there was something even additional to that recently when the Arabs said yes – because in 2002 the language was that on the basis of borders of 4 June 1967 and [UN Security Council] Resolution 242. The Arab side recently have said we accept also the idea that has been put out by the Americans with the Palestinians and the Israelis of minor land swaps between the two states. So I think that the Arabs are ready for full peace and diplomatic relations with Israel, if they have an agreement with the Palestinians. I don't understand what it means delivering the Palestinians; I mean the poor Palestinians are already delivered as a matter of fact, their hands tied and their feet tied. So they don't need to be delivered.

Rosemary Hollis:

But what would you say if you find on the Israeli side there is an argument that, in the current state of turmoil in the region, what good is a gesture from the Arab League, Arab leaders, what do they really mean? Can they deliver on peace? Some of them are challenged very seriously from within; we're not quite sure who the representative of Syria is at the moment.

Lakhdar Brahimi:

Sure. The thing is I think that there is a consensus in the Arab world. Syria under Assad, the extremists, the resistance and so on, they have signed on with everybody else to this commitment that if there is an agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, they will establish full relations. Of course they have also their problem with the Golan that needs to be solved at the same time, and I suppose it can be solved. Yes, we have some few little problems in the Arab world these days, but I think that the commitment, I think from all sides – whoever is going to be in charge in Egypt will be committed to this, will sign up to this commitment. If there is an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis they will support it. And this is true from Morocco to Oman, and this includes Muslim countries including Iran. They have all signed to this idea, to the peace plan of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia of 2002.

Jimmy Carter:

A very important thing – 2002 was when King Abdullah made the Arab peace proposal. In 2005 there were about, I think, 22 countries in the Arab League; there are 56 countries who are Islamic countries – the rest of them are not Arabs – and at the Islamic Conference there were 56 countries. Iran was presiding and they voted unanimously to accept the Arab peace proposal. So Iran is on record as having accepted the peace proposal.

Rosemary Hollis:

Ah, that's quietly slipped by the headlines hasn't it? Thank you very much for pointing that out. Going back to the Europeans, Martti Ahtisaari, Mr President, should the Europeans follow the lead of President Carter and talk to Hamas?

Martti Ahtisaari:

No, I have always said that, and my only experience is, that you have to talk to everybody if you want to find a solution to conflicts. It's actually fascinating to see that those who have been in the past conflicts branded as terrorists are now working as the peace mediators.

Lakhdar Brahimi:

Starting with Mandela.

Martti Ahtisaari:

Yes, the only person that I have openly said that I admire, and I don't – and I'm not even looking for anybody else in that category.

But the important thing actually is, if I may say, that I wish that when we will keep peace for the negotiations sometimes I have found it useful that if I have been able to agree with the parties that nothing is agreed before everything is agreed – because that has prevented in some of the mediation tasks that I have carried out the possibility to talk, to open difficult issues, and no one has run to the press and said that 'now we've got this which is absolutely vital for us'. And if the parties follow that, as they have done in some of my negotiations, it's a clear sign that they are trying to be serious in addressing the problems.

I think it is also, there are many things that can be done to facilitate negotiations and done by different actors, for instance the necessary economic assistance, so that people can actually manage their lives in difficult situations which are taking place at the moment. How to deal with the – so that you can keep your supporters informed, because that is a problem. There are many, many issues that have to be addressed by those who are at the same time negotiating, and in that sort of thing, their friends can also be of assistance, that generally everyone knows that where are we moving in the negotiations. I have had to use other NGOs when I couldn't use my own because we were stuck in the negotiation progress, and so these are all the type of issues that have to be addressed.

Rosemary Hollis:

So there's a job for everyone who wants to bring this about.

Martti Ahtisaari:

Yes, but in a coordinated manner.

Rosemary Hollis:

Okay – and coordination from Washington? I mean, you know, really?

Martti Ahtisaari:

Yes. Now because this is – let's be absolutely candid, that this is the only show in town. There's nothing remotely this serious happening, and if we don't now see eye-to-eye on how this should be carried through and give the full support for this, I think then we have failed miserably.