

8 April 1997

US Foreign Policy in the Middle East

HE Richard Murphy

[See photos](#)

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SUMMARY

Introduction by Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

I want to thank you all for coming here. This meeting should symbolize the fact that in spite of the difficult circumstances - the closure, the threat to Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem, the settlement policy, etc. - Jerusalem's Arab society functions. This should be a message to the Israelis. We are here, we function, we work, and we receive friends from Europe, the US, and Canada. We need the help of you all in building our civil society. Allow me now to welcome HE Richard Murphy. This roundtable meeting is part of a series of meetings in which we seek ways to rebuild the culture of peace that began in Oslo, but has been lost with Netanyahu, who has brought us back to a culture of fear.

HE Richard Murphy:

Thank you very much, Dr. Mahdi. It is a pleasure for me to be here in Jerusalem at PASSIA. I am here because you invited me a long time ago. I am on a trip through the Middle East at the moment, courtesy of USIS, and I am just coming from Jordan. Let me say a few words about myself. I left the US government a long time ago. Thus, I am not here to speak on behalf of Clinton. I retired in 1989 at the end of the Reagan administration. Before that, I was in the Foreign Service for 25 years and I have been overseas in many Arab countries. Under Foreign Secretary George Shultz, I became the assistant secretary of the Bureau of Southeast Asian and Arab Affairs. In 1989, as I said, I left and I went to the New York Council on Foreign Relations. I am also affiliated with the Middle East Institute and the Chatham House Foundation in the US. We have a program of study groups there, as well as task forces. We publish academic books, and we host groups to discuss matters of international affairs. Chatham House was established after the Versailles Conference. Our meetings are not open to the public and we enjoy the luxury of not being quoted directly in what we say in these meetings. I assume that when you say we will have Chatham House rules, the same applies here.

I am sure that in your view we in the US are not doing the right thing concerning the Middle East. I arrived at a time when tensions are high again. In Amman, people told me that the Oslo process is dead and it is time for Camp David style negotiations. Our role in the Middle East has varied over time, but basically, we have stayed on the sidelines. To illustrate this, I want to quote Tom Friedman on what he said about Reagan's second term: "The US has served as a caterer, only." The peace talks have basically been carried out by the Israeli-Palestinian leadership. I was at this impressive occasion on the White House lawn in 1993 as a commentator for a public radio station, sharing the microphone with Daniel Shaw. He interrupted me in my comments and told me: "Look at the faces. These are the faces of two families that have come together at a wedding, but that hate each other." And he was right,

as we can easily see now. We stayed on the sidelines because it seemed to be true that only direct negotiations work. Only Oslo worked; all the other mediated channels did not. The Oslo channel blossomed quickly and you arrived at agreements at the highest level, although these are sometimes ignored, as has become obvious in the present crisis. But the leaders have reached agreements, and thus, we think, they should be able to get over the impasse. But it is legitimate to ask if this is still enough in today's situation.

The US has two main interests in the Middle East: security or stability in the region and access to the energy resources of the Gulf. Therefore, the US is in favor of a durable peace as an end to this confrontation. We need the help of moderate leaders to link these two interests. Also, "Operation Desert Storm" is linked to the peace talks. We have reached agreements with the GCC states in order to avoid long and dangerous delays in action, as was the case after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Our presence in the Gulf is tolerated, which has never been the case in the past. Before, the Gulf States also wanted a US involvement, but they preferred that this support come from outside. A visible US presence was seen as an embarrassment. This embarrassment has been reduced with the rising success of the peace process here, in this region.

In this part of the Middle East, the process looked irreversible. And I think it is irreversible, even though, now, confidence and trust have been diminished. It is irreversible, but very fragile, more fragile than we had ever thought. The current crisis that began with the assassination of Rabin and Netanyahu's election has also meant a return to friction between the US and the rest of the world in the Security Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations. And the US certainly does not feel at ease in this role of the pariah. Now, it has lost its last ally in the Council besides Israel; it is not even joined by Costa Rica in its vetoes. There is an Arab League proposal to be discussed in the UN on reconsidering relations with Israel. Even in the Gulf Countries today there is a re-evaluation of the relations with Israel.

The question is: Should there be a higher level of US action? Will Clinton move in and involve himself as Carter did in the Middle East in 1978? We are still possessive of the peace process, and there is no real coordination of our actions with Europe. We are proud of our relations with Israel and with some of the Arab states. And there are still grounds to assume that as a mediator in the Middle East, there is no substitute for the US. If you want to make comparisons with Camp David, I have to ask: Can history be redone? First of all, there are no clear parallels between the Sinai and the West Bank plus the Gaza Strip. There are not even parallels between the leaders. You cannot compare Clinton and Reagan or Arafat and Sadat. The other question, is if we could define a framework for a final settlement, how could we be useful in this? As you all know, historically, there is a strong support for Israel in the US, not only from the Jewish community, but also from the Christian community.

People say, you can tell if a crisis exists when you look at the stock exchange and when you look at the street. When we look at Wall Street, we cannot see an impact of the Netanyahu government. Up to now, there has not been a pull away from Israeli shares and there has not been a dramatic collapse of the exchange rate. When we look at the Arab street, we do not see a second Intifada. The Israelis, by moving out of the cities, have managed to avoid a direct confrontation with the Arab street. But there might well be more terror and more lethal attacks.

The US perception is that there is no immediate threat of war in the region and that the differences will be settled. But if there is no peace, no end to the confrontations in sight, the lack of stability will prevail. The Palestinian-Israeli relations are the key and the basis for the normalization of Israel's relations with the Arab states. This process of normalization has

now come to a halt. The Syrian-Israeli negotiations were broken off by Israel last March. But the situation seems to have remained stable, and on the Golan, we have not had a single incident since 1967. Lebanon seems to be a more dangerous catalyst for a broader confrontation. We think that a stable situation can only be reached there after both parties withdraw from the borders. But the Palestinian issue is the benchmark. Today, as I understand, the Palestinian income has sunk to about two thirds of what it was before the Oslo process. This is not a great record, and the bad mood can be felt all over. For Israel, security remains the main concern.

Can we set a framework for the final status negotiations? What do we want? What do you want? What do the Israelis want? We know that between the Israelis and the Palestinians, there is no balance in standing - be it militarily or from the point of having a state, etc. How much time do we need for this? In general, I would say, we need time enough for the Israelis to institutionalize a security frame, and enough time to allow for Palestinian institution-building, but we should not wait too long so as not to allow further bombings to derail the peace process.

We have been avoiding the issue of Jerusalem for a long time because it is too emotional. The idea of Oslo was to first build trust and confidence and leave Jerusalem as one of the last issues. I do not have another answer today on Jerusalem. Studies are being done here, in Europe and in the US on the issue. Netanyahu says that he will never tolerate the building of a Berlin Wall in Jerusalem. But who wants this anyway? When I checked and asked people, I could not find a single person. The idea of Jerusalem as the eternal and indivisible Jewish capital entails the problem of exclusivity. Jerusalem is and will remain a major challenge. The other issues, I think, will be solved.

If the atmosphere in general remains one of conflict, however, every Arab leader that gains Israeli trust will lose support at home; only in an atmosphere of peace will it be possible to negotiate with one another and to move forward.

DISCUSSION

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Last week, Beilin and his team met with leading Palestinian (Fatah) figures in Ramallah to discuss how to build bridges between the Palestinians and the Israelis and how to go back to the negotiation table.

During the meeting the Palestinians made it clear that their re-entering the negotiations is conditional on the following:

a freeze on all Israeli actions that alter the status of Jerusalem;

the continuation of the Israeli military re-deployment according to the Oslo I and II agreements;

the opening of the safe passages between Gaza and the West Bank in order to maintain the integrity of the Palestinian territories;

access by the Palestinians to their two "lungs" - Amman and Cairo - in order to enable development in all fields without Israeli interference;

special consideration of the Palestinian security concerns.

Can Washington take such a basket and use it with Netanyahu? What is Washington's stand on this? What do you think?

HE Richard Murphy: It is a big basket that you have just outlined. Washington is and has always been biased towards Israel. Maybe the only exception to that was Camp David. But such a level of involvement as in Camp David is not likely today. You have to realize that only when there are ongoing talks can Washington exert influence. Imposing a basket, of course, would not be welcomed by the Israelis and we would not do that. The basic message is: If you want to see the one-sidedness of the US, then you just have to stay away from the negotiations.

In 1987, there was a remarkable change in the way in which the American public perceived the Palestinians. But if the present situation resulted in a second Intifada - I doubt it. I do not think so. You would be accused of only wanting to kill innocent women and children.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: If we want to learn from the Camp David experience: What about a new scenario today to close the gap between the Israeli right wing government and the Palestinians? I think we should bring in the regional partners, Amman and Cairo, with a US-EU umbrella in order to continue with what has been agreed upon for the transitional phase, and at the same time start the final status negotiations. What is the American stand towards such a scenario?

HE Richard Murphy: You are setting your hopes too high at all levels. Why should we not just keep up the process that was planned in Oslo - meaning that there is time left until May 1999 for the final status negotiations. This is not a lot of time to solve the four major pending issues. Why should we change the timetable and rush even more now?

Awad Mansour: Do you think that the tensions at the regional and the local level are a phase or are they critical?

HE Richard Murphy: Maybe, we could say, they are a critical phase. The tensions are at a height right now due to the drop in confidence in Netanyahu. But if these current tensions were solved, there would still remain problems. People have been encouraged to keep up with the peace process for a long time, to make investments, etc. You, the Palestinians, need to catch up with the train before it has gone. But this train is speeding up. Israel has jumped on this train and it can compete with other hi-tech states - which is also an effect of the Arab boycott, that made Israel concentrate on other parts of the world and on defense industries. Israel has its markets and partners outside the Middle East. Time has moved on; the vision of the New Middle East has already been passed by.

Naim Ateek: Sometimes, I get the feeling that the problems concerning the final settlement do not come from the Netanyahu government, but from the US. Maybe, the Palestinians should hold direct negotiations with the US about the framework of the peace process. The US, which has replaced the UN in the peace process, is now the address. But the US position seems to be unclear: Has the US abandoned the UN resolutions as a basis for conflict resolution? Has it decided to accept whatever the two sides agree upon? Or is there still an interest in a just solution?

HE Richard Murphy: I know of no one in Washington that has dropped these resolutions as the basis of the peace process. The land-for-peace formula still stands. But there is a desire to have people work things out, and there is a belief that they can do it because they have

worked things out in 1993. I believe in progress, but this progress can only be based on trust. And there is no evidence at the moment that this is happening - because there is no symmetry in power and status.

Iskandar al-Najar: My impression is that, unfortunately, the US is not acting as a great power; it does not help and it does not want to help. For me, it is beyond comprehension that if an Israeli shoots a Palestinian, you send him to a psychiatrist, whereas if a Palestinian shoots an Israeli, he is called a terrorist and sent to prison.

HE Richard Murphy: I can only say it again: The US can only get involved when there are negotiations. Also, it would be a very sound idea if there were closer coordination between the Palestinians and the US administration and if the former improved their public relations in general.

Dr. Gabi Baramki: Sometimes, I wonder if we are talking about moving the process forward or if we are only justifying why the process is not moving forward. Israel does not want peace, and the US is on the sidelines and does not want to become involved. So, there is a real danger of an impasse. A process for the sake of a process, that is what Israel wants. There is something wrong. I am not convinced that the US has the will to do something. And I think that it is merely a question of will. What about the UN and Europe? Why do they not act?

HE Richard Murphy: The Israelis want peace, but they want it at a fair price the way they perceive it - the same as with you. This means, you both need the process to lead to a lasting peace that satisfies both sides. I do not know what you want the UN to do. Europe is another point. I think that we should coordinate more with the Europeans. Up to now, we have had a distorted picture about what France and Britain want in this process.

Yes, we have been one-sided. But have we not proven that we are ready to confront Israel if necessary? Think about the pressure exerted in the Suez crisis in 1956, the arms program under Nixon and the rejection of loan guarantees under Reagan. But such pressure is only useful when it can lead to a new phase of negotiations. I assume that you do not doubt that there is a will for peace as such in the US? I think the question is rather if there is enough will here. Clinton has to be convinced that it is "do-able." But even then, he does not have the same personality as Carter; he will not get himself engaged the way Carter did in the Middle East.

Samir Huleileh: The whole Oslo process has been based on an American concept that includes starting with the easiest issues, then, allowing a process of confidence building before, finally, dealing with the difficult problems. Thus, in phase one and two, we should mainly have measures of confidence building; an environment conducive to peace should have been built during the transition period. But we have not arrived at a stage where the Palestinians can experience feelings of confidence and trust. So, it does not make a difference if we negotiate for six months, two years or ten years of forever. With this government, there will be no delivery.

HE Richard Murphy: It is true, part of the reason why we are stuck right now are the measures taken by Netanyahu. And Clinton is very unhappy about that. As I said, the process remains fragile, but some achievements are irreversible as you can see on the Jordanian-Israeli track. I know that you, the Palestinians, have the toughest issues of all. The West Bank and Gaza are just not comparable to the Sinai; they will not and cannot be resolved that easily.

Samir Huleileh: Is not confidence the most important prerequisite for reaching a solution?

HE Richard Murphy: I want to remind you of the hatred that had waged between the French and the Germans for hundreds of years before the establishment of the European Community. In the 1920s, nobody could have imagined that the two peoples could live as friendly neighbors; today, nobody can imagine that the two peoples could go to war against one another. And there were hard issues to be worked out.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: But we have a totally different case here. We have two peoples in one land. Netanyahu does not want to pull out of the occupied territories. We now face his intentions to share with us the West Bank and Gaza - not on an equal basis, but in an apartheid system.

HE Richard Murphy: That is a very powerful accusation!

Dr. Mohammed Jadallah: From my point of view, nobody in the Arab world expects a change in US policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There is no illusion about this. Therefore, I am surprised to hear from you that there are elements of influence such as the Palestinian street that can change the American standpoint. But then, in your lecture, you moved on to talking about terrorism. I want to state clearly that the only terrorism we have here is the Israeli military presence and the actions of the military in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian street's reaction should be considered by the US as legitimate and not be labeled as violence or terrorism.

HE Richard Murphy: But that is what I said, namely, that the Palestinian street in 1987 changed the US public perception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Before that, the US public was not able to distinguish between Arab actions, the legal situation and the forceful Arab speeches that it perceived as threatening. But I do not think that a second Intifada would have the same effect. In your confrontation with the Israelis you are much better off with a non-violent approach than by using violence. The Israeli public relations are much better, more persuasive. They have managed to ensure that in the public opinion the Arab street is identified with violence and terrorism. You need to change this picture.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Now, we have come to a stage where there is no real Palestinian opposition because there is nothing to oppose; there is no peace process to be against. Nobody delivers anything.

Dr. Joel Peters: I have just come back from a trip to Washington, so I want to make a couple of comments regarding US foreign policy. My impression is that at the moment, there is a paralysis in US foreign policy because at all levels, there are overloaded agendas. The second impression is that in Washington, over the last three years, there has been a development in opposition to the Oslo process. This has been the result of lobbying by people supporting Netanyahu or Arabs opposing the process. This is one of the problems. The other thing is that unlike at Camp David, where we had a clear US policy, a clear situation and a full checkbook, there is still the question of whether or not there is the possibility for the US to develop a coherent policy at the present time.

HE Richard Murphy: You did not mention one thing that is also complicating the issue and that is the problem of foreign policy formation in the US. There is a lack of a big enemy to rally around, no clear foe to make action seem indispensable. You are right: There is no detailed blueprint concerning US policies towards the Middle East, and the checkbook is not ready at hand either. Only when there will be a substantial upgrading of perspectives regarding a solution will it be feasible to expect Congress to take action. Now, there is no mood at all in Congress to become involved in these issues. There is a strong feeling that

we cannot and should not write the treaty. But I still think we should do more than what we are doing at the moment. Washington is floating in foreign policy, that is true. And Clinton is feeling very uncomfortable with this. He is worried because there is a sense of drift and great frustration.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Is there no fear of the “clash of civilizations” [as envisioned by Samuel P. Huntington in his article “The Clash of Civilizations” in: Foreign Affairs, 72 (Summer 1993) 3, 22 - 49]? Has not Islam become the new enemy?

HE Richard Murphy: This clash of civilizations is a mere bubble on the academic’s screen. In my opinion, it does not explain anything and it certainly does not determine US foreign policy.

Adnan Husseini: We have only one choice and that is to accept negotiations - in spite of everything that is going on, and in spite of the fact that it will be an unjust peace and that the street will not accept it, and that we will have to deal with all the ensuing problems.

HE Richard Murphy: I do not say that you have to accept *the* Israeli peace. But I say that negotiations are the only way to come to any agreement.

Ismail Tazziz: In all this talk about self-determination, democracy, etc. where do the Palestinians fit? What does the US really want for the Middle East? Do you want a balanced solution? After the Gulf War, the US tried to establish the New World Order in the region. You are a biased sponsor. This becomes clear in your vetoes in the Security Council. What can we expect from such a sponsor?

HE Richard Murphy: A significant step has already been taken on the White House lawn. But there are no quick solutions, and Washington is not ready to impose solutions. Our interests are not identical with Israel's. How can you trust us? To be frank, I do not see an alternative to that. I do not see “them” out there, the others that are waiting to help you. But do not push us in the UN, you will not succeed this way. This becomes obvious when you look at what happened with Abu Ghneim. We are clearly negative about the building of the settlement. As I understand it, the settlement is part of a master plan that was drawn up in the early 70s. Again, our interests are in peace in the region and in the free access to energy resources in the Gulf. And to us, these two issues are clearly related. In the 1973 boycott, it was the US consumer that suffered because of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Our interest is very clearly a comprehensive peace in this part of the world on the basis of UN resolutions 242 and 338.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Thank you very much for being with us and sharing your ideas today.