

# Peace in the Middle East: A Jordanian Perspective

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
on April 11, 2008 by

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Perhaps there's no greater need, than the need of today for all our frames of reference in the way that we view the world to coincide and it's so difficult to actually achieve this. It reminds me of a few years ago my wife sat our little son down during the holy month of Ramadan and she explained to him what Ramadan was and that his father was fasting. After a lengthy explanation she looked at him and said, "Now, do you understand what I just said to you?" He nodded in approval and he looked at my wife and said, "Yes. He may be fasting but I'm still the fastest." I say this, of course, with reference to the mind of a young child, but one would be alarmed to realize the extent to which in the international world how often our frames of reference simply do not coincide and we argue endlessly, hoping that the other side will understand our point of view better when in actual fact our argument makes it only worse because we don't even begin to understand the points of reference that should be common to all of us.

Before I begin I would like to just lay out the challenges that confront anyone working in my field. It's a pronounced inhibition and a pronounced complication that arises whenever we try to anticipate future events. I will be trying to do that with you in the course of this afternoon in talking about the Middle East.

The first point I'd like to make is how difficult it is for us as international practitioners to read the script of unfolding events. It's almost indecipherable. The media will come and present images to us, articles, pundits will comment and yet it's very much akin to someone presenting to you a chessboard with a game in progress. You look at the chessboard and you can, through your own experience of playing chess and deductive reasoning, begin to understand why the two players have reached the point they've reached—how the opening sequences must have occurred, what each player is trying to do. But that's as far as you can go. You cannot know what each player is thinking or what may subsequently transpire. The other point is that you must have some knowledge. When we look at the world as it is today it's a sad comment perhaps that professional historians really only write for professional historians. Those of us in society follow the latest research done on certain periods of history are very, very few almost infinitesimal in terms of being percentage of our society. So, we can't read the script of unfolding events very well, and we don't know very much about the past which then creates the third problem—the anticipation of future events. We are not prophets; we all recognize that, so our abilities to predict are very, very poor.

Going back to the chess analogy—it's worth reminding ourselves that when we have a game with 32 pieces where there are known powers of movement and attack, and millions and millions of combinations and possibilities in the middle game, this presents itself as a huge hurdle for the human mind. It's huge to fathom all these possibilities and then come out with some sort of

prescription on how to end the game. And yet this is only chess. It's not life, it's not billions and billions of possibilities and us not knowing which is the golden variable which in any point in time is going to determine the outcome of events.

Recently, I read a book which was a collection of memories basically, written by a Swedish diplomat who had served at the League of Nations. He wrote a number of books in Swedish, there's one book that was translated into English. What was so striking about the book is that he said we did not have to wait for the crisis in Spain in 1936 to know that Europe was in very, very serious trouble. The trajectories were all pointing in one direction. What we needed was some sort of positive force to interrupt those trajectories and I say this because to a certain extent that's how I think we view the Middle East now. We have a series of crisis, all of them quite acute, all of them needing solutions. In the absence of finding a solution, if there is none, then the possibilities begin to emerge into something much bigger: a political emergency quite unlike anything that we've seen since 1945, possibly with the exception of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

So the pressure on us to achieve a result is very clear and that pressure manifested itself in the resilience of the negotiations that are ongoing between the Palestinians and the Israelis, negotiations which we ourselves very much support, very much favor, and I think I can speak both on the part of Jordan and the United States on this. It is clear that both sides face enormous pressures. Prime Minister Olmert, and I don't pretend to speak on his behalf nor on behalf of President Mahmoud Abbas, but they have pressure from within. Prime Minister Olmert has to keep an eye on the right wing and he has the problem of how to deal with Hamas. President Mahmoud Abbas also has to worry about Hamas in terms of the domestic context and also has to be concerned that the peace process is ongoing and he's very much under pressure from the continuation of the settlement building and the actions that have taken place around Jerusalem. So, it's a tricky situation or stage that we're in.

But ultimately, I think, we've seen that there's no alternative and we have begun to realize how this whole conflict, if you'd like to describe it like that, between Arabs and Israelis can essentially be reduced to two central problems. The first central problem is the sheer inability on the part of us, the Arabs, to understand how psychological this conflict is for Israel. When I was Ambassador in New York I had to speak countless times before the Security Council, as did all my Arab colleagues, on the situation in the occupied territories and our approach was essentially legalistic. There were all the UN resolutions, the advisory opinions and we put that forward. And then one day some Israeli colleagues came up to us and said, "You still don't get it. It's not legal. So much of it is psychological."

When there was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz we had a debate at the General Assembly in the UN and alas, none of the Arab countries wanted to participate. I participated on behalf of Jordan but the others didn't want to participate. I went to great lengths to explain to them that these crimes constituted crimes against humanity and we are part of humanity. It is very important for humanity and for us to understand this. Their approach was that this was a colossal crime committed in Europe, by Europeans, against their own nationals and really we had nothing to do with it. But what it showed and demonstrated is that we are simply unable to comprehend the depth, or the extent, to which this issue is a psychological one for most Israelis. And if the Arabs don't show some understanding of it, it creates a major inhibition in terms of moving the peace process forward.

The second problem is more on the Israeli side and this is the difficulty that Israel has in assuring itself that its security demands are being met and will be considered by its Arab neighbors. For that reason I think we will all very much pleased that the present king of Saudi Arabia came up with the peace initiative which subsequently became the Arab Peace Initiative because we felt that all the central components that concern Israel, were being addressed by the 22 Arab states and the Arab states were putting an offer forward, a very clear offer: the occupation and you have practically everything you want. You have mutual security guarantees, you would have no further claims once you decided on the peace settlement the refugee issue which would have to be agreed to, both sides would have to agree to the formula that ultimately must present itself. And on all these issues we felt that the Israeli government at the time should be comfortable. But we understand also that these things take time, and for that reason we were very much relieved that there was no initiative on the part of the Arab states at the Damascus summit a few weeks ago to withdraw the initiative. We think it's important that it remains.

His Majesty, the King, has also emphasized that when we speak of an Arab peace initiative, in essence, it's not just the Arab world. There are 56 members of the Organization of Islamic countries, many of whom, once they see the Arab world reaching a point where they're normalizing their relationships, establishing diplomatic relations, with Israeli flags in all their capitals they will quickly follow suit. So what you're actually talking about is a much larger group of countries that would integrate or assist in the integration of Israel into the region commercially, trade wise and so forth. So it is of fundamental importance that we keep the Arab Peace Initiative.

Now, of course, there are those who do not support the peace process and, of course, failure on our part is oxygen for their efforts. We have to ensure that we succeed. If we don't succeed it is zero sum but not zero sum, in the context that most people like to portray it that if the Palestinian side makes a gain it's a detriment of the Israelis or if the Israelis make a gain it's a to the detriment to the Palestinians. Really, it's a case of whether the peace process wins, and all of us win, or it fails and all of us will be made to suffer. Such is the weight of the crisis that we have to face in our region.

If you'd allow me to touch briefly on the situation of Iran which has impact. We were very concerned last year with what we saw in Lebanon in the refugee camps. These camps were oxygen to a small group, a very determined group, of extremists and it took the Lebanese government three months to root them out. We feel that unless we make definite progress this could be a sign of things to come. So, the warning is there for us all and if we are unable to support the Iraqi government the way that we should support them, unable to see them succeed, the complications in our region only intensify. So, the picture seems to be difficult but for that very reason I think there's enough incentive on all our parts to see it succeed.

Finally, a point about the general state of the world, when you see how much we're spending on weaponry every year—all of us—collectively, a trillion dollars a year is spent on weapons. This is an argument made quite often by a number of people, Jim Wolfensohn among them. It's inconceivable that we can maintain a safe planet over time but we can't find enough money to rescue the billions of people in poverty. It's estimated that if we spend \$60 to 70 billion dollars a year, on raising those people who subsist on one dollar a year that we could end poverty the way that it exists at a grinding level throughout much of the world, but we can't find money for it. We can't find money for that but we can find money to spend on weapons. Ultimately the region and beyond will face a very difficult period unless we inject some common sense into it. Often, I think, when we see and suffer setbacks it reminds me of a comment made by a British author who



died a few years ago but in 1936 published a wonderful book on his recollections of World War I, Cecil Lewis, and in one passage he makes reference to the invincibility of man's stupidity. Often when we think of the Middle East this is what we see. Our hope is that we can overcome this. Incidentally, there's no mention of women's stupidity, but only of men. It's something that we must overcome and together I hope we'll be able to do that.

Thank you very much.

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