Transcript Q&A

Can the Two-State Solution Be Saved?

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**Question 1:**

President Carter mentioned that Iran has accepted the King Abdullah plan of 2002. However we see that Iran is vociferously against Israel, at any juncture has said that ‘we are against Israel, we don’t want to deal with Israel’, and has told Palestinians not to negotiate with Israelis. As recently as three days ago, the Iranian speaker of the parliament condemned the upcoming talks between Israel and Palestinians sponsored by John Kerry. I would like to ask President Carter, do you think with the Iranian opposition and the financial muscle that they have, can they derail the peace process between Israel and Palestine?

**Question 2:**

Isn’t the elephant in the room the population explosion, in fact too many people trying to live in too small an area?

**Question 3:**

Can I ask quickly about the politics of it? We've had elections on the Israeli side where we had a lot of populist politicians getting elected and now joining the cabinet. Is there actually a mood for peace or are politicians trying to manoeuvre it that they actually deliver something, that actually they want to actually do something good for once?

**Rosemary Hollis:**

One of the Israeli alumni of the scholarship programme, the Olive Tree, at City University, worked out the figures for me, and she tells me that according to the Israeli media at the moment, Netanyahu could get a majority in the coalition minus Likud if he needed to – and, indeed, minus Naftali Bennett and the Jewish Home. This is an interesting calculation so I don't think we should take it as a foregone conclusion that an Israeli majority cannot be put together in the Knesset or in the public. But could we go back to the Iran question – could Iran play spoiler effectively?

**Jimmy Carter:**

I think one of the – because what I said to you was this was Iran's position in 2005, and they've had a change for the worse, I think, in the president, now they've had a change for the better in the president, and I believe that maybe
the new president might be more amenable to that than was his predecessor. I don't think that Iran has the authority or power over even the Palestinians because of a sabotage of a good faith effort to have peace. If the PLO can negotiate a reasonable solution that would be acceptable to the Palestinian people, I think Iran's tendency to sabotage it would be completely fruitless.

Rosemary Hollis:
Okay, that’s very helpful. Anybody want to comment on whether the Israelis could be brought around to a cohesive position at leadership level?

Jimmy Carter:
Well you know, Netanyahu has been warned by his two major coalition partners that if he puts 1967 borders on the table they're going to withdraw their support – which would not leave him with a majority by the way. But I think that the negotiators and John Kerry can avoid saying we’re negotiating the 1967 borders – they don’t have to say that – but the United States’ position is 1967 borders with minor adjustments on land swaps, and that's what the Palestinians say. So that can be finessed for a while. And I think if Netanyahu decides in the future that he's going to be a historic hero in being the one who brought peace to Israel, I think he would forego his right-wing supporters and have a majority if he was the peace hero among the more moderate and reasonable people in Israel.

Rosemary Hollis:
And in the Knesset, I'd perhaps confused a coalition, yes.

Jimmy Carter:
Well I'm talking about votes in the Knesset, yes.

Rosemary Hollis:
Right. Too many people in too small a space; I'm sure there’s many parts of the world that you could say that about, and surely if people are to live amicably together they have to accept differences in any community. But does anybody want to tackle this issue of how do you squeeze all the
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Palestinians and all the Israelis into a two-state solution between the Jordan River and the sea?

Lakhdar Brahimi:
They are already there.

Rosemary Hollis:
And the refugees?

Lakhdar Brahimi:
Yeah. The refugees are also there, you know. I don't think…

Rosemary Hollis:
The refugees are in Lebanon, in Syria, a lot in Jordan.

Lakhdar Brahimi:
What you are talking about is solving a terrible problem that has been there for a very, very long time. Yes, Palestine is tiny, but it is the home of two peoples who want a piece of that land for themselves. I don't think the Palestinians and the Israelis are going, all of them, to live all the time in that territory. You have a lot of Israelis in New York and probably a few in London, and you have Palestinians in Lebanon and elsewhere. Some of them will go; some of them will not go. It is a problem but it is not an insurmountable problem.

The overpopulated place is really Gaza – 1.5 million people in a tiny piece of land, and it's a big prison. It's a very, very big prison that's completely surrounded by – they cannot travel, they cannot grow, they cannot buy, they cannot import… after the destructions in 2006, was it, or 2008, they can't import even cement to rebuild a little bit their country. And that is very heavily overpopulated, but they manage; so that's not a very big problem.

Question 4:
You've all spoken about how you've just come from Washington, you believe this is, to use President Ahtisaari’s phrase, a serious exercise by John Kerry,
but how muscular do you think American diplomacy will be this time? We've seen in the Middle East that so far, to use the expression, Barack Obama has been wanting to lead from behind. How much of a priority is this for him and if there isn't 'muscular' American diplomacy with threats as well as incentives, will it work?

**Question 5:**
With the settlements expanding and the Israeli economy booming, and no obvious US leverage that I can see over Prime Minister Netanyahu, what is there, in your view, that would persuade Bibi Netanyahu, whose own father believed passionately that all of Israel belonged to the Jews, what on earth can persuade him at this stage to take the risk of peace? And if I may quickly ask another question: how do you get the Palestinians to give up on the right of return?

**Question 6:**
My question is about, what do you think this time around is different compared to the other 10 or so previous negotiation attempts? And what is your view on the Hamas and Fatah reconciliation process? Is it likely; is it a positive for peace talks, or is it a hindrance? Thank you.

**Rosemary Hollis:**
Well there's a range of issues in there. Why don't I ask each of the three of you to pick on the one that you like most and respond to it?

**Jimmy Carter:**
And we can avoid the ones we don't want? Well I think the most difficult one perhaps is the one about why would they want to make a change. Israel *is* thriving, and also settlements to continue to expand. I'm not optimistic about the entire thing yet, but I would say that the fact that Bibi is coming, or sending a delegation to Washington, is a good sign in the right direction, that he's willing at least to discuss the major issues. He knows that settlements will be on the line and he knows that the 1967 borders will be on the line, and he knows that to some much lesser degree – I would say just a token thing concerning Israel at the most – return will be on the line. I think any possibility
of return of the refugees will be basically to the West Bank and Gaza, and not to Israel, unless it’s just a few dozen or something like that.

So I think that I look on Bibi in many ways as I did with the horror of when Menachem Begin was elected when I was a new president, and I was hoping for peace and then this right-wing former terrorist who headed up, as you know, a terrorist organization was elected prime minister, who had sworn never to have peace and so forth. But he did, and what I mentioned earlier is that Netanyahu might eventually see himself, if a real glimmer of peace comes, as wanting to be the historic hero, the final leader of Israel that brought peace to his people. That’s a very attractive image to project, and with a possible Nobel Peace Prize coming and the accolades of the world and appreciation from his descendants for a hundred years in the future, I think that’s a very wonderful enticement. But I think like President Obama in Washington, he doesn’t want to stick his neck out too far in the future, but I think if he sees a glimmer of peace, he might become a champion of peace. And I might add, I don’t see anyone in Israel now on the horizon that might take his place as a possible peacemaker.

Rosemary Hollis:

I must say, I think we’re in danger of getting a little carried away here because outside this room, without your three charismatic presences, there is a sense that this conflict can’t be solved.

Martti Ahtisaari:

I have said on a number of occasions that I have never accepted that the conflict can’t be solved. Every conflict in the world can be solved. If the citizens of the world would realize how badly the international community has treated the problems in the world, they would lose their night’s sleep, but thank god they don’t know.

I think it’s so easy to say that this won’t work, it can’t be done, they are not serious. Why not accept the fact that perhaps there is this growing realization that if we can’t solve this problem it will pester us in the whole region forever, and make it difficult for not only these two countries but the whole region to suffer. As I said, I hope that we can unite as an international community now and find answers to the problems that you have been saying. If you ask, I haven’t talked to President Obama, but the mere fact that he has appointed Secretary of State Kerry means that he’s serious, because Kerry is serious
and he has been given the authority to take up these issues on his plate. So that’s a clear sign of support. Presidents don’t need to come to the public every week and say that ‘I support my secretary of state’, as long as he has appointed somebody who enjoys his confidence.

**Lakhdar Brahimi:**

Hamas and Fatah: in 2005 the PLO and Fatah were not at all in favour of organizing an election. It was the Americans who were enthusiastic and really forced them to organize that election. They did organize the election, the Carter Center observed the election, the UN, the European Union, and they all agreed that it was a perfectly free and fair election in January 2006. They wanted Hamas to enter the political process and so on. They not only answered the political process, they won the election, and when they won the election, they said, ‘no, no, no, we don’t accept that government’. So the original sin is there. Since then, the pressure on the Palestinians on this score has not changed. Fatah is being told every single day, ‘if you make peace with Hamas, we will cut all support to you’. This is the catch-22 situation in which they are involved.

**Rosemary Hollis:**

Well could I press all of you then, because if the coordination for this new process came out of Washington – Washington was the one lobbying most strongly against involving Hamas in the future.

**Jimmy Carter:**

Well Israel was its foundation – they convinced America to discount the perfect election that was held in 2006 in January. I was there, and Hamas reached out to Abu Mazen, who was then the president – I delivered a message: if you come you can stay on as president, you can have key appointments in the cabinet in the coalition government. I took that message to the international Quartet and at the Quartet level, the United States and Israel declared that all the Hamas candidates who ran were terrorists and that Hamas was now becoming a terrorist organization and therefore would not be accepted to lead any government. That’s what happened. And since then, as Lakhdar has just so wisely pointed out, they’ve been struggling – how can they find reconciliation?
Three years ago in Cairo, Egypt, the interior minister there – he was in charge of all security – negotiated a good agreement between Hamas and Fatah. Fatah signed it; Hamas was scheduled to sign it on 15 November. The United States found out about it and demanded that Egypt not proceed. And Egypt started to proceed anyway and the vice president of the United States was sent to Cairo in person to convince Mubarak, ‘do not accept any reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah’. So that’s a kind of thing that has prevented in the past the Palestinians getting back together and having another election, because Hamas might win!

**Rosemary Hollis:**
And do you think the Palestinians do need to get together?

**Jimmy Carter:**
Of course I do. In fact, the Carter Center and The Elders together, by the way, all of us have been meeting with Hamas, and the Carter Center and The Elders have been sponsoring a series of discussions in Jordan between Hamas and Fatah to say: under what circumstances can you come together? But every time that prospect becomes viable, Israel says, ‘if you do this we’re going to cut off all of your money coming in through your own customs collections’ and so forth, and the US Congress has also ruled, as Israel told them to, that we will not permit any American money to go if Hamas and Fatah get back together.

**Rosemary Hollis:**
So to press the point, Mr President, can John Kerry get round that congressional opposition to including Hamas in the future?

**Jimmy Carter:**
My belief, and John Kerry’s as well – I’ve talked to him before he was secretary of state, I’m not trying to quote him – is that Hamas will accept any peace agreement that is reached between the PLO, in which they are not members, and Israel; that Hamas will accept it if it’s submitted to the Palestinians for a referendum.
**Question 7:**

May I suggest to you that neither the Israelis nor Palestinians would ever accept a solution that does not include for themselves a state, and therefore the two-state solution is unavoidable? Thus the question is whether it comes about by design or disaster, whether it comes about soon-ish through discussions, agreement, peacefully, or eventually through violence and counter-violence, atrocity and counter-atrocity – that those are the real issues. And it underlines the importance of this particular process succeeding, and I'd like to very strongly support of what was said earlier, therefore the importance of ‘muscle’, and what I would call inducements, of a positive or negative nature. We can't afford to get this one wrong.

**Rosemary Hollis:**

It would be interesting to know if there are any people who would like to see a binational state and think it’s a better solution than the two-state solution who want to put their head about the parapet, but this may not be what’s coming from over here.

**Question 8:**

As the relative influence of the United States as a superpower appears to be continuing, will America’s decline make its leverage in a two-state solution and the Middle East peace process more generally weaker?

**Question 9:**

The speakers have said that they believe that John Kerry has injected a new dynamic into this process. I’d like to ask you a question about the position of President Obama. In his first term he declared that he wanted to move the Middle East peace process forward, and indeed he got the Nobel Peace Prize for it, unlike Bibi Netanyahu who presumably has to actually do something. In his second term he hasn’t really sort of signalled that but John Kerry has pushing his process forward. In your understanding, particularly President Carter, of the presidency, is he actually in a better position, is the dynamic actually better for him to implement this in his second term if things are right on the ground? Thank you.
**Rosemary Hollis:**

We only have about four minutes for responding to these three points. Please therefore ensure as you respond that you leave this multinational London audience with the message you most wanted to leave them with. Why don’t we start with you, Martti Ahtisaari?

**Martti Ahtisaari:**

I don’t think that the US position has weakened in that sense, that if there’s a serious effort which is supported by the government, as was the impression that we got, I don’t see that sort of worry. Of course I haven’t seen President Obama, but when I see him I have decided to tell him that one good speech is not enough to get a Nobel Peace Prize. It was a damn good speech but he has to deliver; perhaps we will now see that he is delivering, when this exercise is started.

**Rosemary Hollis:**

Thank you. Any passing message for your fellow Europeans in London?

**Martti Ahtisaari:**

I defended his getting the prize because, if you look at the committee, it has given many prizes to those who have had some sort of involvement in the Middle East efforts, so it has been a totally logical decision from the Norwegians.

**Lakhdar Brahimi:**

Well the Palestinians have had a very raw deal for a very, very long time. They have been abandoned by practically everybody. The Israelis feel insecure apparently, although they are extremely strong — they have the strongest army in the region, maybe the second or third army in the world. As has been noted, their economy is booming, better than any other country I think in the world, but they feel insecure and they need to be reassured.

It is really extremely difficult to understand how a world where now individual rights and collective rights are so terribly important that the United States and Europe, they sometimes want to go to war when a group of people somewhere in the world are having a raw deal. But when you come to the
Palestinians, everybody forgets these beautiful principles. I think it's high time that the international community, and especially the West, Europe, be consistent and help the Israelis and the Palestinians solve their problems. Because once again if you leave it to them they will not solve it, because one party is very, very strong and one party is very weak.

**Jimmy Carter:**

Well, there are a couple of questions here about Obama in the second term. Well I think the bottom line is that Israel and its policies in the 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem and the West Bank, is in violation of all the international laws supported by Great Britain, supported by the United States, supported by almost every other country in the world. And what the Palestinians are demanding – that is the 1967 borders and the right of return and so forth – is completely compatible with international law as declared in the United Nations and supported by all the countries, even Israel at the time some of them were voted. And I think one of the things that’s been a handicap in the past has been the quiescence of the European nations just saying okay, let the United States handle it, let the president get battered by the politics when he takes a bold stand and so forth, while the countries in Europe have just sat back and said we’re not involved.

Just a few days ago the European Union decided that on a very tiny portion – somebody said 0.05 per cent, I think Daniel Levy said this in his article in the International Herald Tribune yesterday – 0.05 per cent of the European aid that goes to Israelis in the occupied territories will be cut off. It didn’t say that all of the countries in Europe would be cut off; it’s just what came from the European Union organization, which is tiny. That sent a wave of tremors through Israel, just that tiny indication that the European countries condemned, in tangible form, the rapid building of settlements. So I think that in some ways the Europeans could say, okay, we abide by the international law too, and we’re going to try to promote peace by imposing international law. That would be very helpful.

I don’t think there’s any doubt in my mind that President Obama will be fully supportive of John Kerry. He’s not going to say it publicly, I don’t think he ought to; but John Kerry assures us that he has the complete backing of President Obama. And we met with Susan Rice – the new national security advisor, who has been the representative to the United Nations – she assured us of that fact. So the entire United States government will be backing John Kerry in what might be the last chance to bring peace to Israel.
And I stop my sentence there, ‘peace to Israel’, because there’s no way that Israel can have peace unless its neighbours can also have peace and justice.

I think the comment over here that was made was very good. If we don’t have a two-state solution there will never be peace in the Holy Land. I think everybody should remember that and I think no matter what kind of position you hold, in government or out of government, in business or whatever, you ought to support international law, which is what John Kerry is trying to do at the negotiating table.

Rosemary Hollis:
Gentlemen, it’s been a real privilege to sit with such dedication, such statesmanship and experience, and the energy that you put into your efforts to bring peace to this conflict. We thank you very much for talking to us about it.