

**THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY
THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION**

THE FUTURE OF SYRIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

**A LUNCHEON DISCUSSION WITH
BUTHAINA SHAABAN,
SYRIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESWOMAN**

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MODERATOR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Please do continue to enjoy your lunch. We're going to try not to speak and eat at the same time up here, but please, you should feel free to listen and eat at the same time, so please do continue with your lunches.

I'd like to welcome you here to the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. We're really delighted that you were able to join us today.

As I am sure all of you are well aware, this is an interesting moment for U.S. relations with the Arab world more generally and with Syria in particular. We're hearing a host of different ideas emanating from the administration itself. We're hearing a host of different ideas coming from people outside of the administration, from people in the region about how U.S.-Syrian relations might proceed in the future. Obviously, some of the ideas that are being tossed about are somewhat more ominous, somewhat more concerning, and it is, I think, no coincidence that at this point in time, as in every point in the past when there is an interesting moment in Syrian-American relations, Dr. Buthaina Shaaban comes to Washington, and we are delighted to have her here with us on this particularly interesting occasion.

Dr. Shaaban is a well-known figure in the Middle East and here in Washington. She is an accomplished academic and journalist. She is—something I learned today and I don't know how many of you know—she is simultaneously the director of Media Relations at the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in my mind perhaps even more impressive than that, she is also a lecturer at the English Literature Department of the University of Damascus. As someone who struggled through my English literature classes it is truly remarkable to me that Dr. Shaaban is able to hold both appointments simultaneously and perform them both so well.

You will join me in welcoming, please, Dr. Buthaina Shaaban.

DR. BUTHAINA SHAABAN: Thank you.

(Applause.)

MODERATOR: Before I do allow Dr. Shaaban to speak, I should note that while her remarks will be on the record, she has asked that in reference to questions, she may be able to answer some on the record; others she will have to answer purely on background. So please be aware that she may say after a question is asked: that one I'm going to have to take on background.

DR. SHAABAN: Thanks very much. I would really first like to start by thanking the Brookings Institution for allowing me this opportunity to be with you here today. My thoughts are that the more advanced the technology is and the more advanced the means of communications are, the more in need we are for personal contact, because this huge advancement in technology and means of communication unfortunately is as capable of producing misinformation as it is of conveying information, and that's why I feel that it is perhaps more urgent nowadays that we do establish personal contact and get to see each other, and talk to each other and exchange opinions as candidly as possible every time a crisis persists in our lives.

As a person from the Middle East, I'm sure I have a very different perspective of what is happening in the Middle East than the perspective that is held by many in Washington. On mentioning some of the facts that are a daily—that constitute the theme, really, of the talk of Arab streets at the Wilson Center the other day, I had quite a few people coming to me afterwards and saying, why did you mention that? I said, because everybody in the Arab world is talking about it and because it constitutes an important factor in the thinking of people there and in the image of the Americans in the region. The answer came to me that, you're not coming here to improve the image of the American people; you're coming here to speak about the position of Syria and the Syrian-U.S. relations. But I think we are at such an interesting juncture in history that what the United States does in the region is of extreme importance to us and the image of the performance of the United States in the region is a matter of life and death for people in the region. That's why we are interested not only in our role, but also in the role of the United States in the region and how this role is being perceived both by policymakers, by the American people, and by perhaps the international community in general.

Having established this point, I would like to go back a little bit and talk about how the region thinks of the United States' performance after 9/11. Now, if I can take you for a minute to the time before 9/11, the region had its own tensions and its own problems and its own conflicts, not least of which is the conflict between fundamentalists and liberal-minded people, between fundamentalists and secular people in the region. I know that for a few years before September 11, when I was on tours in the Arab world lecturing in Tunisia or Morocco or Egypt, our biggest problems were how to defend our colleagues who are being kicked out of their country or ordered to divorce, like Nasser Hamid Abu Zeid from Egypt, for example, who is a professor at Cairo University—he was at that time—and there was a court ruling ordering him to divorce his wife because he was considered a blasphemer—or talking against the Koran. That was the main theme in the region; that how could secular, liberal-minded people, democratic-minded people overcome the difficulty of a black fundamentalist mentality that is trying to take over our ideas, our thoughts, our universities, our research?

I also remember at that time, in the fall of 2000, I was a McAndless professor at Eastern Michigan University. I had the honor to occupy the chair for a term and to teach at Eastern Michigan University. For doing this contract, I had to give two public lectures, and I remember in one of my lectures talking about women in the Middle East and the Arabs and Muslims. You know, I just threw in the note that there's nothing more

dangerous to women in the Middle East than bin Laden's way of thinking. I don't think many people here had heard of bin Laden at that time, or even cared to hear about bin Laden, but I never entertained the idea that one day I am going to be considered in the same basket with bin Laden simply because I am a Muslim. That would have been beyond my imagination.

I think one of the deliberate or inadvertent, or undeliberate or unfortunate consequences of 9/11 is that to the Arabs, the perception—I'm not saying this is true, but the perception of many Arabs and Muslims is that the United States treats all Muslims as terrorists, all Arabs as terrorists, and that the policy or the talk now is that all of these should be in one basket. And it is very different, if you are a Lebanese, for example, if your name is Michel or Mohammad if you apply for a visa. You will get very different responses simply because your name is different. That is the perception. As I've said, I'm not saying that this is true, I'm not saying that this is the intention to do it, but I'm saying this is the perception.

Now, people like me who have worked for ten years for the peace process, who have been all the time working for women's emancipation, women's empowerment, and secular people's empowerment are really devastated by such a consequence, because how could we now give a lecture at al-Assad Library in Damascus for example, which I used to give very much, to speak about how good [it is] to benefit from the West, to embrace Western ideas, to speak about the United States as a country that wants to lead the world probably in the right direction? What I can say now is that after 9/11, people like myself, our situation is a lot more difficult. We are not being held at all by the events that happened afterwards, and to speak about Islam as a terrorist religion or Muslims as terrorist people or—you know, I'm not saying anybody else said that, but I think this is the insinuation and this is the inference that many people conclude by—due to different factors.

What is the attitude now, or where do we stand now? I think there are two narratives, we could say: one narrative that says, well, the United States is a huge military power, it has global plans, it wants to control the entire world and the plans in the region are part of the global plan so that the U.S. can remain the major power in the world, and hence going into Afghanistan, to Iraq, probably to other countries in order to try to re-map the world and re-map the region. The other narrative is that the United States, as the first, the best, the greatest democracy, the greatest economic power in the world, is really interested in bringing other countries along and in democratizing other countries and getting away with mass destruction weapons with horrible regimes and enabling the youth to perform better, do better. I think which of these narratives is going to prevail very much depends on the United States' performance, very much depends on the United States' discourse.

One idea that I would like to test with you is the fact of WMD and Iraq. Before the war, as you know, Syria stood against the war. Syria still stands against the war because it was, we believe, an illegitimate, unnecessary war. We believe that the Iraqi people are the ones who paid the price. Nobody I think in the world is sorry that Saddam

Hussein is out of the picture. I think everybody in the world is happy that the regime is out of the picture, but I don't think this is the point. I remember coming to Washington and talking to people when I was hearing that Iraq constitutes a threat to the security of the United States and to the security of Britain. This is not the point that I want to handle; there are hundreds of specialists and parliament members who are handling this point, but what I am concluding from that is that we really have to scrutinize the information we get. We really have to make sure that what we hear is correct before we spread it around and before we take it as a given.

As a professor at Damascus University, I think this is the most important point for me—is that to make reality speak for itself and to ensure that whatever we're saying is right, is correct and reflects reality, and then nobody could be unhappy with that, and I think we will all be better off for that.

My country, Syria, is a country that suffered a great deal from misinformation, from mal-information, from misinterpretation, and our position has almost always been misrepresented. During the peace process, Syria was the country that agreed to Madrid, and Syria was a very important country to launch the Madrid Conference. I remember at that time the secretary of State, Mr. James Baker, came to Damascus, met with President Assad—and I was the interpreter—and he said to him, “I am coming here only to say thank you for making Madrid's conference possible. I didn't want to send a message; I wanted to come and thank you in person.” So it was the late President Hafez al-Assad who made the Madrid Conference possible.

I was in every single meeting since Madrid until Shepherdstown, and I know that Syria was a country who was determined to make peace, who wanted to make peace, who knew the value of making peace and bringing in stability and security to the region. And I remember at one point after the Oslo Accord was signed, Senator Arlen Specter came and visited with the late President Hafez al-Assad, and he said to him—they established a very good relation; I think Senator Specter must have met over eight times with the late President Assad—and he said to him, “President, if you sign a peace agreement tomorrow, you might get the Nobel Prize, and your picture would be in newspapers all over the world. Tomorrow, your picture and mine will be not only in Teshreen newspaper in Syria, but if you sign a peace agreement with Israel, your picture will be all over the world.” The late President's answer was—and I think I remember it word for word—he said, “I don't care whether my picture will be in the newspapers all over the world. What I care to do is to sign a peace agreement that future generations will defend long after I die. What I see now on the table is not a peace agreement that Palestinian people could live with. I don't think the Oslo agreement is an agreement that Palestinians will defend or will even live with in the future because it doesn't respond to the rights of people.”

I know, and I think Dennis Ross, last time five weeks ago, told me here in Washington—and I'm on the record—that he never saw the Syrians as forthcoming as they were in Shepherdstown. The whole American administration knew then that Syria is really interested in reaching a peace agreement, but I think it was then-Prime Minister

Barak who, for his own considerations, for his own reasons, would not come forward to sign the agreement. And I'm mentioning that deliberately. The last opportunity was Shepherdstown; it wasn't Geneva March 2000 because Geneva was not prepared, was not expected, I think, to produce any results.

I'm saying all this to say that I come from a country who always held a very honorable stand and very good strategy for peace, but the image of the country has been distorted for reasons beyond our reach. And there's no country that is more similar to the United States than Syria. I come from a country which is multi-faith, multi-ethnic. Tolerance is an example in Syria, and I could refer you to the June 7th article in *The New York Times* to see how people in Syria live on the religious basis.

I don't think we have anything to apologize for, but I think what we have to do is to make our views better known, and what we have to do is to establish channels of communication better. You know, even people who were against the war on Iraq, in their heart of hearts, now I think they would wish the United States to succeed in Iraq and to make Iraq a better place for the Iraqi people. But now two, it's going to be almost three months after the end of the military action, I think people are wondering why anarchy still persists and why the Iraqi people still suffer. I know it's not easy to establish a system after the fall of an entire system in a country, but I think the success of the United States in Iraq is important for the Iraqi people, is important for the United States, and it's important for the region.

As for the peace process, I really go back to remember what the late president used to say: only a comprehensive and enduring settlement will last; only a peace that all people in the region are willing to defend will last. For 50 years now, failed attempts have been tried. For 50 years now, separate peace packages have been tried, and even the countries in the region who signed peace agreements with Israel, I can say that they have an absence of war, but I don't think anybody can say that they are in a state of peace. Why? Because peace is not comprehensive and because the region has to witness a comprehensive peace if it is going really to witness stability and security. Of course, Syria is very interested in having the country a stable, secure, and peaceful place for the people of the region to live.

The rest are details. To condemn this or condemn that or support this or support that, it's all details. The biggest issue is to make an enduring and a comprehensive peace settlement. And interim stages and phase one and phase two -- I remember that President Carter, after leaving office he came and saw [Foreign] Minister Shara', and he said to him, I never imagined that Camp David One will stop with Sinai. It has all the details of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Arab-Israeli conflict, but of course, they never got beyond stage one. It's very dangerous to get these agendas and get—back down at one element and then leave the other elements apart. I think if the will for peace is there, the approach has to be different. If the will for peace is there, the approach would be to tackle the most difficult issues first; to tackle all the issues, not to postpone issues for years. In the meantime, hundreds or thousands of people would be killed. And if the will for peace is there, we wouldn't witness that one of the reservations or

amendments that Sharon wanted to have on the roadmap is to eliminate, to cross out the Arab initiative, the Beirut Arab initiative in which all Arab countries offer to make peace with Israel if Israel withdraws to the line of June 4th, 1967. I can't really see how could these go together, that if someone is interested in peace, how would he want to cross out an initiative that is for the first time expressing the will of all Arab countries to make peace with Israel if Israel withdraws to the line of June 4, 1967, and on the basis of Security Council resolutions? I really can't see how this could happen.

I think it would be good for all people of the region to think in those terms: you know, we are all human beings and we all try different ways, and we try which path to take. As this path has not achieved peace, as it has been tried time and again for separate packages, for incomplete, partial attempts, why don't we try something different? Why don't we have an alternative strategy? Why don't we listen to somebody else—to what somebody else has been saying for years? And we are accusing them of being intransigent or radical or against peace; why don't we choose a different path? Because I think choosing a different path will yield different results for sure, and Syria is a country to act constructively, faithfully, and sincerely for peace, and I think most people who dealt with the Syrians know that what I'm saying is absolutely true and I don't have to say anything I'm saying now, but I am expressing the real stand of my country.

Syria-U.S. relations: we want Syrian-U.S. relations, of course. We want our relations to be good with the U.S.; of course we want our relations to be good with the U.S. Why not? What is wrong between Syria and the U.S.? I think the only thing is the Arab-Israeli conflict.

I'll tell you another story. When we went to Geneva in 2000—and of course, as you know, Geneva, the meeting between President Assad and President Clinton was extremely fast and didn't get any results—so we were going out and President Assad said to Secretary Albright, “Okay, now that we don't have any peace process to work on, let us work on Syrian-U.S. relations; you know, we have more time now.” And she said to him, “President, don't be kidding. I don't think the U.S. would have good relations with Syria until Syria signs a peace agreement with Israel.” And so there's that element in the Syrian-U.S. relations, and we recognize that of course, we know that there's that element in Syrian-U.S. relations, but I really believe that the region is in such a state now and everybody in the region is paying a price for this situation, that everyone should be interested in tackling the issues and meeting them head on and in speaking the truth.

I think daring to speak the truth is not easy at a time when stereotypical images tend to persist in front of all of us, but I think it would be—that's what history will remember: people who took a brave stand and stood out and spoke what they believe in are the ones who are good for their people and for future generations. I hope that I always try to do that.

Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

MODERATOR: Thank you, Dr. Shaaban. We'll be taking questions now. There are mikes that are floating around, and as I call on you, if you wait until the mike gets there before you ask your question. Why don't we start right down here with Ambassador Marc Ginsberg?

MARC GINSBERG: Dr. Shaaban, it's very nice to welcome you back to Washington, and I appreciate someone who follows U.S.-Syrian relations very carefully.

DR. SHAABAN: Thank you.

MR. GINSBERG: The sincerity of the interest of rebuilding bilateral relations with the United States, I think, is something that many of us would like to see as well. An issue that you didn't touch upon, although you did peripherally, because of the importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict, is the issue of Syria's continued presence in the United States as viewed as a state sponsor of terror.

Now, we have relationships—the United States has cordial relationships with countries that have not signed or entered into peace agreements with Israel that are Arab countries. When Secretary Powell went to the Middle East recently he had announced that there had been an agreement that had been reached between your government and the United States to at least begin the process of closing offices that represented, at least in the minds of many Americans, terrorist organizations. Why doesn't Syria wish to remove itself from this list as a way of improving the bilateral relationship despite the disagreements that may exist and continue to exist between the countries until a peace agreement is signed between Syria and Israel as well?

DR. SHAABAN: Thank you for your question. I don't think that anything that Syria will do is going to remove Syria's name from the list of terrorist countries who are harboring terrorism because I don't see that that name was put there for anything that Syria has committed. The name was there much earlier, you know; when the Oslo Accord was signed and there was no problem between these organizations and the United States, Syria's name remained there. And when Syria went to Madrid, Syria's name remained there. When Syria worked with the U.S. very closely on the Ta'if agreement, Syria's name remained there. I think let me refer here, to be totally honest with you, on a difference of culture. I think if Syria had the same culture as the United States, it would have said years ago that I wouldn't do this unless you remove my name from the list of terrorism, but this is not the way we work. I think the late President Assad would not want even to mention the list and say it's an American list and I'm not going to talk about it and I don't want to enter into that, and he would never want to put a condition that if you're doing something you want something in return.

Now, another example that should have taken Syria's name from the list of terrorism, if we had the same culture, if we had the same approach, was Syrian cooperation with the United States on the issue of terrorism after September 11th, which the Secretary of State said that Syria was the country that saved American lives. I think

saving American lives should have been seen by the United States as something that deserves a reward, because I believe this is the best you have, this is the most precious thing you have, American lives, and yet no mention was made of the United States wanting to remove Syria's name from the list of terrorism.

As I said, if I understand the American culture—I assume quite well—and I understand of course my own culture, and if the United States was in our shoes it would have said, we will do this for you if you take our name out. But we don't believe in that. Our culture is a very shy culture in bargaining and trying to break deals with people when you want to do something. We believe that you do something and the other person by himself will come and say to you, thank you, this is your return.

As for the definition of terrorism, we do differ in that, and I did say at the beginning that it is unfortunate that the definition of terrorism has become so loose to include even 300 children under the age of ten who were killed in the occupied territories in the last two years. You know, just before coming here, three-years-old daughter Afnan was killed on the streets with her mother, and this is part of combating terrorism. I really believe, as many Israeli writers are writing in the last ten days in *Ha'aretz*, that the problem we have in the Middle East—and I believe that as an intellectual, not as a spokesperson for my country; I'm only now expressing my own opinion—the problem we have in the Middle East is that Sharon does not have a strategy for peace, and this is bad for the Israeli people, this is bad for the Arab people, this is bad for the Americans, this is bad for everyone.

I think history will prove right that this is not a strategy of peace. The worst times the Arab-Israeli conflict passed through was in '82 when Sharon was in office and now in the last three years when Sharon is determined to defeat the Palestinians, not to make peace with them. Ya'alon, his chief of staff, said the first thing we have—and this is an article by Henry Siegmann who quoted Ya'alon who said, "The Palestinians have to feel in their deep consciousness that they are a defeated people before we can make peace with them."

I think what we're talking about here is an issue of dignity and a great deal of vagueness, a huge deal of vagueness. Who is a terrorist and who is not a terrorist? Whose country is occupied? Whose territory is occupied? And who is the occupier and who is the occupied? And who is right and who is wrong? That is what Syria is saying. What Syria is saying is that if there is a will to make peace, let us sit down and do it. Do you know how much we need? Three months. Three months we would make a comprehensive settlement for the entire Middle East if the will for peace is there. Let us try this way. Let us do it, then neither Hamas nor Jihad nor Hezbollah, nobody is going to be a problem.

I'm not arguing one way or another. What I'm saying is that all this focus on condemning that operation or punishing that person or imprisoning 10,000 Palestinians—10,000 Palestinians; 6,000 of them were kidnapped from their homes—are in Israeli jails under the name of terrorism. I know some of these men are our best men. They are

neither terrorists nor do they believe in violence. They just want their country to be liberated from Israeli occupation, a right that all the people in the world have exercised. I'm arguing that there are some people who do not have either the will or the intention to make peace. These people are not in Syria; they are somewhere else.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: (Off-mike.)

Q: Nora al-Bustany (Washington Post) Could you express to us Syria's position, if there is any, on the recent developments in Iran—student demonstrations, the arrests over the last few years? Iran is one of your strategic allies in the region and elements of that regime are also perceived here as encouraging terrorism in the region. What would Syria's position be on regime change in Iran?

DR. SHAABAN: What I can say is that my country enjoyed good relations with Iran for, you know, the last 10 or 15 years, and what I know is that Iran has cooperated with the U.S. very well in Afghanistan and that the Iranians were very surprised when they saw that Iran's name is, you know, listed in the Axis of Evil. All that I can say is that the Iranian government is an elected government by its people and we have good relations with them. I think student demonstrations is a domestic matter that Iran is handling. I don't see—you know, we don't know of any act of terrorism that Iran has committed in the region. Quite the contrary; Iran cooperated very well with the United States in Afghanistan, at least that's what the U.S. officials said, that without Iran it would have been very difficult for the United States to go into Afghanistan. As I said, what's going on inside Iran is up to the Iranian people to handle.

MODERATOR: Okay, right here.

CLAYTON SWISHER: Thank you, Dr. Shaaban.

DR. SHAABAN: Thank you.

MR. SWISHER: My name is Clayton Swisher and I am, among other things, a graduate student at Georgetown University, and I'm researching the topics of the U.S. negotiations at Geneva, at Camp David. And it appears to me that there is a very solid case for Syria, with what happened at Geneva. This is based on my interviews with U.S. negotiators, Israelis and members of your government. In the aftermath of Geneva, some of the statements that we heard from then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak was that the Syrians don't want peace and that he'd exposed the true face of Assad. We all know that these were the same types of remarks that he used after Camp David when describing Yasser Arafat's performance.

What is it then that in your reflection—and I might add I also heard from another U.S. negotiator that Barak's last-minute decision to use the 1923 line versus the June 4th, 1967 line, which of course Assad had always been consistent on that, that was what

would be necessary for a deal. That 1923 line was, in effect, an opening position. So what I'm coming to believe is now that what happened in Geneva was a very big tragedy, that this was not only a miscommunication but it was a tragedy that one party came prepared to sign a deal—and that would be Hafez al-Assad—that was conveyed to him through President Clinton and through Prince Bandar, which, according to a recent New Yorker article—my whole point is, this information is seeping out in the last three years; it's seeping out through interviews, it's seeping out through personal interviews; but why not the communication work from the Syrian government after Geneva? Why didn't they explain how close peace had come and how tragically it was eluded?

DR. SHAABAN: Thank you very much for your question. I really believe, in answer to your "why?"—I really believe that as Syria we have not been doing our job in communicating our views to the world. We really have been under-representing ourselves in many ways. It needs money, it needs energy, it needs planning, it needs resources, and somehow we haven't been devoting enough resources for that job. And as I said, in my last visit to Washington, both Dennis Ross and Madeleine Albright said that they are going to write in their memoirs how forthcoming the Syrians were in order to make a peace agreement, and how for other reasons, his own reason, Prime Minister Barak backed down and didn't allow the committee to meet.

I will relate to you, you know, something as we were working on the subject. Before coming to Shepherdstown on the 3rd of January 2000, Secretary Albright went to Damascus and visited President Assad and said to him, If you really want to make peace, we really want a high-level delegation. If you can send your foreign minister—and, you know, the time is short. Always the time is short; for the last 13 years the time was short and we have no time and the Clinton administration will end soon, and so why don't we do something really serious? And I remember that the argument, you know, the discussion that took place in that room was that we'll be having Ramadan, you know, we were fasting in Ramadan and we will be having Eid Ramadan, which is equivalent to your Christmas, and he said after the Eid, and Secretary Albright said, no, no, peace is more important; we want them now, we want them to go now. And President Assad said, okay, if it is for peace I will really send them. And I remember that we went to Shepherdstown and we were fasting in Shepherdstown and we went to the Secretary's farm on Ramadan, and we were really extremely serious in pursuing peace.

Now, after all this effort, not a Syrian has written an article to explain what we did, not a Syrian has written a book to say what we have done. It's our sign of doing things, which is not a very good style really in communicating our views to the world and telling the world what we did, what we think.

Now, before Geneva, President Clinton phoned President Assad at least three times. You remember the deposit that was put in the American pocket when Rabin was there and agreed that the withdrawal will be to the line of June 4, 1967, and to be honest but nothing is agreed upon until everything is agreed upon, right? So President Clinton called President Assad—again, I was the interpreter—and he was saying to him, I am going to India before and I would like you to meet me in Europe, and President Assad

said, I'm in the middle of formulating a government; I can't do it now, blah-blah—anyway. And then they agreed to meet in March in Geneva, but President Assad asked him, what am I going to do in Geneva; what are we going to do? He said to him, your requests are met; you will be very happy. What was the request of President Assad? He announced a thousand times an Israeli withdrawal to the line of June 4, 1967. And he said, the deposit is in my pocket; your requests are met and you will be happy.

I am sure that President Clinton wanted to make peace, wanted to see that peace agreement signed, and he really exerted honorable efforts. Unfortunately, it didn't happen. The fact that we worked so hard, we worked so sincerely as Syria, but then we didn't come out and explain to people what we really did—you know, the media thing is something very new in Syria. We didn't really think. We just think of doing something good. I remember we were—I'm going to tell you the story again. We were in Brussels meeting within Barcelona Process, and Minister Sharaa' gave really such a good statement, and all of the Europeans, everybody in the room felt that really Syria did such a good job and that our case is so lucidly expressed, and we stayed in the room. What did Peres the foreign minister of Israel and the Israelis do? They went to the tent where the media is, and they gave their version, and we came home; everybody knew what the Israelis did but nobody knew what Syria did. And so, what you do inside a closed room doesn't filter into the media if you don't go and explain and tell people and probably ask them to publish that for you.

What I can say is that Syria has been engaged in an extremely constructive course to make peace, to be a constructive partner in the Middle East, but it hasn't been marketing itself to, use the American word, very well in international media and in Western media. It hasn't been explaining itself. As I said, it needs a lot of resources, a lot of money and we probably haven't been thinking that we are able to afford that.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: Warren Strobel.

WARREN STROBEL: Warren Strobel with Knight Ridder Newspapers. Doctor, as you know, one of the other issues that has complicated Syrian-American bilateral relations recently is the issue of the Syrian-Iraqi border, and there are reports that continue to circulate in Washington that individuals are crossing from Syria into Iraq with the expressed intent of attacking Americans—

DR. SHAABAN: What is the crossing?

MR. STROBEL: Crossing from Syria into Iraq with the expressed intent of attacking American soldiers. I was just wondering if you can give us an update on the situation with the border and Syria's attempts to police it. Thanks.

DR. SHAABAN: Thank you. Thanks very much. I would like to take you back to what I've said about, you know, misinformation and mal-information. I remember during the war somebody called me from Beirut and said, they're saying that the wife of

Saddam, Sajida, is in Latakia, and then all these journalists took cars and went to Latakia to the hotel where she was supposed to be, and of course nobody found anyone there. And you remember that they spoke about the scientists in the media who were supposed to have gone to Syria and then all these people who were mentioned were caught in Iraq and they had never been to Syria. So there is a lot of misinformation there, but as for the border, I tell you during the war, you know, it was a very difficult moment I think for everyone in the region.

Allow me to explain just a little bit of what we all felt when we were in the region. When you see press conferences by General Brooks or somebody and you see a map behind them and you see a crossing and you see somebody, you know, pointing to Najaf or Baghdad or Karbala, that being bombarded, and I think, if you allow me, our feelings are very different. The Arab people feeling, the Muslim people feeling are very different when they see this picture from what you see. Plus we don't see just this, you know, dot on the map; we see the places themselves and we see what's happening to them.

What happened during the war that Muslim people felt extremely emotional and are extremely angry at what was going on. And it is true that Arabs and Muslims—not only Syrians and not only from the Syrian border, also from Jordanian border as well— young men were crossing the borders and going there, although I will remind you of his speech that our foreign minister gave to parliament on the 4th of April, and he said, please just try to advise everybody to not allow anybody to go. Nobody went from the points that Syria controlled. There are four points on the border that Syria controlled, but we have 500 kilometers border with Iraq, and the government tried its best to prevent these people from going: A, because they were misused, B, because they were being killed without serving any purpose, C, because it was not the government policy to allow people to go to Iraq. And when Syria failed to do that, the borders were closed completely on the 5th of April, four days before the fall of Baghdad, or before the military action had been concluded.

So what I can say to you is that it was not the policy of the Syrian government to allow people to go, but with Islamic fatwas being issued everywhere that young Muslims should go for jihad in Iraq, with all these young people feeling so angry and so emotional about what was going on, I think Syria was not able to control young men who were trying to go. And they were not, as I said, only Syrian; they were Moroccan, they were Lebanese, they were Indian, they were Pakistanis, they were from all over the world. But Syria closed the border and informed the American ambassador in Damascus on the afternoon of the 4th or 5th of April, I'm not sure, but I know that I was there when he was told that we haven't been able to control the border, and we closed the border and— actually, we even used the bus incident when a Syrian bus was shelled by an American rocket to try to frighten people and say that your children will only be killed so please everyone to control their children and not to allow them to go. What I'm saying is that it was totally beyond the Syrian government's control, and President Assad made a joke with the Secretary of State. He said to him, "Now, you control the border, so try not to allow anybody in."

MODERATOR: Said Arikat.

SAID ARIKAT: I have a follow-up and a question. The follow-up is to Ambassador Ginsberg's question about the Palestinian terrorist offices in Damascus. And there were press reports that the Syrian government ordered the plaques from those offices to be removed, but the offices are still there.

Could you update us on what's happening with regard to those offices in Damascus? And the question has to do with Syrian—with the Syrian government's support for Hezbollah, which has turned the Israeli-Lebanese border into one of the most dangerous spots on earth. And I know that Hezbollah and Syria say that this is to liberate the Lebanese territories. But as you know, the United Nations said that Lebanese territories – that Israel withdrew already from all the Lebanese territories, even though the United Nations did not declare the final border. But, still, it said that Israel withdrew from all the Lebanese territories.

So how can you explain the fact that Syria still supports Hezbollah, which is causing so much danger in the south Lebanese border?

MS. SHAABAN: The United Nations didn't say that the Blue Line is the Lebanese border. The United Nations still hasn't defined the Lebanese border.

We differ on Hezbollah, of course, and your assessment of Hezbollah is very different from mine. Hezbollah has been a resistance party whose sole objective is to end the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territories, some of the territories is still occupied, and Hezbollah is a resistance party against occupation, a right that all people in the world have exercised.

What President Assad said to Secretary Powell is that these organizations in Damascus, we have 500,000 Palestinians, you know. So they do need people to look after them, hospitals, schools, civil services, everything. But what he said is that the only thing these organizations do is the media activity. And these organizations, even prior to the visit, came to official people in Syria and said, "We see the pressure on Syria, and we decided to halt all our activities." And that's what happened.

I go back to the same point. You know, really handling the issues in this way, or adopting this approach is only to score points. It's not to solve problems. If problems need to be solved, if the will is there to solve problems, then really we have to approach things differently. I know that hundreds of children, hundreds of women, hundreds of innocent people have been killed under the pretext of self-defense. I think there's a huge tragedy there, and there's a huge confusion there.

You know, you talk to me about organizations in Syria, and you think that there is—I don't know. I don't know what is there. They are poor people who have been uprooted from their homes. Many of them still have the keys to their home. And they

are refugees. There are 500,000 refugees. And everybody knows that nobody can do, I mean, an operation in Israel or in the occupied territory if they were not on the ground. That's even if they are allowed to do it, and they're not. Nobody is.

So what I can say is that all this has to be addressed as part of a real settlement, as part of a comprehensive settlement. And the different approach that goes into one detail after another has two objectives: to humiliate the other party and to make the one who occupies territory look as if he is right, to give a good image to occupation and settlement. And that should not happen.

MODERATOR: John McLaughlin in the back.

JOHN MCLAUGHLIN: Dr. Shaaban, today in the House of Commons, Tony Blair said that Syria should stop developing weapons of mass destruction. I'd like you to speak to that.

Secondly, some years ago—I think it was in '99 —Itamar Rabinovitch, and the years before that for some time, was active in representing Israel with your government, and great progress was made on a resolution of prevailing differences. Is that—is anything like that being pursued today? And secondly, if not, would not that kind of catalyst, if movement were made, do a lot to trigger a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli settlement?

MS. SHAABAN: Thank you.

As for the issue of mass destruction weapons, Syria, as a member in the Security Council, has submitted a draft resolution to make the entire Middle East free of all mass destruction weapons. And the answer of the United States was that this is not the time; you know, the timing is not good. We are still in a state of war with Israel, and Israel possesses all kinds of mass destruction weapons. We signed, though, the NPT. And, you know, we are suggesting now again, if the will is there, to make the entire Middle East a zone free of all mass destruction weapons. All the countries in the Middle East, including Iran and Turkey, agree to that, except Israel. Israel is the only country who doesn't agree to make the entire Middle East free of mass destruction weapons.

So I think that is the solution, to make the entire Middle East a zone free of mass destruction weapons. And Syria would be very active, very constructive, very ready to pursue that choice. All Arab countries are ready to pursue that choice. So, again, if the United States has the will, you know, to help that, to support that, nobody would be happier than Syria.

Now as for the Rabinovitch issue, Rabinovitch I think was heading his delegation at one point, the Israeli delegation when they were negotiating with Syria a peaceful settlement. I don't know what you mean: is there anything now? I mean, there're no negotiations now. Or do you mean just doing something different?

MR. MCLAUGHLIN: Is anything going on?

MS. SHAABAN: Now? No. No. There's nothing going on. No. You know, what we want is the resumption of negotiations on all tracks, which we believe would help everyone, the Palestinians, the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Israelis, everyone. You know, when we went to Madrid, Syria tried to have one group, that all Arab parties would be one track, and we would all negotiate together so that we reach a comprehensive settlement together, you know. And we stayed there for two days trying to do that, just to make it one track instead of all these separate tracks, and put all the issues on the table and discuss all these issues. But we were not able to do that.

MODERATOR: Dr. Shaaban has graciously agreed to take one more question, and Guy Dinmore has that one.

GUY DINMORE: Guy Dinmore, Financial Times. Ms. Shaaban, I happened to be on Mr. Powell's plane when he went to Damascus a few weeks ago. And I was quite struck by one statement from a State Department official. He said "We're not coming bringing any carrots." And this followed the reports that the oil pipeline from Iraq to Syria had been cut off by American troops. And clearly the U.S. were in quite sort of a robust mood.

Do you think you could elaborate on what kind of pressures the U.S. is now bringing to bear on Syria in practical terms, or is it really rhetoric? How is Syria feeling under pressure now?

Thank you.

MS. SHAABAN: You know, for people who are living all the time under different pressures, it's probably very hard to make them feel the pressure. I think the visit of the Secretary to Damascus was a good visit. They discussed all issues. The Secretary laid down his vision, as it were, or the American vision of the region. And President Assad also responded by laying down, the vision of Syria of the region.

Yes, the pipeline was cut by the Americans, and, you know, we had trade, private sector trade relations between Syria and Iraq, and all that has stopped. But you know, I would like to remind you that our borders were closed for years with Iraq, and we were able to survive. So I don't think that is going to be a factor that would make Syria do what it doesn't want to do. But Syria is engaged in a dialogue with the United States. I wouldn't call it pressure. I would call it a constructive and good dialogue with the American administration and with the State Department. We are in constant touch talking about all the issues. Each one of us is trying to explain their perspective of how things should be handled.

The thing is that we really believe that we do have a lot of common interests. We do have a lot of common ground in the region. As I said, if the image or the vision that

the United States wants to have a secure and peaceful and prosperous Middle East, it goes without saying that this is exactly what Syria would like to see.

So we are engaged in a dialogue. We don't feel, you know, the relations reached a point of pressure—or not pressure, but we feel there's a very constructive, intensive and good dialogue going on.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, would you all join me in thanking Dr. Shaaban for a very extensive...

MS. SHAABAN: Thank you.

(Applause and end of event.)

