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U.S.-EGYPTIAN PARTNERSHIP: THE WAY FORWARD

WITH H.E. AHMED ABOUL GHEIT

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, ARAB REPUBLIC OF EGYPT

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The Brookings Institution

FEATURED SPEAKER:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

AMB. INDYK: -- and he, through the 1990s, did a wonderful job behind the scenes of helping to manage Egyptian foreign policy at a time when things in the Middle East were moving in a very positive direction towards what we hoped was a comprehensive peace, and Egypt was playing a leading role in that regard. Subsequently, he was appointed as Egypt's Ambassador to the United Nations where Egypt has always played a very influential role, leading both the Arab and African blocs in that forum.

Then for his troubles there, he was appointed by President Mubarak to be Egypt's Foreign Minister. He came into office at a much more difficult time in the Middle East and Egypt with its role and influence in the region has had a critical role to play in the effort to try to deal with the manifest turmoil that is developing there. That is what I hope we will have an opportunity to talk about today.

MIN. GHEIT: At your disposal, any point in time. All I need is a piece of cookie. Yes, I had breakfast at six, and since then I didn't touch anything. Thank you.

AMB. INDYK: You can have seven cookies.

MIN. GHEIT: No, no. I will take only one half.

I see everybody is eating, still eating. Enjoy it, please.

AMB. INDYK: Are we ready?

MIN. GHEIT: Please.

AMB. INDYK: You are very welcome. Thank you for coming back to Brookings, and it is always a pleasure to have you here.

MIN. GHEIT: It is always a pleasure to come to Brookings. The first time I was introduced to Brookings was a publication on the Middle East. It was published around 1975. I saw it and I bought it and I went through. I discovered in 1978 how influential Brookings is because the set-up that was launched in Camp David was based on that study. Isn't it so?

AMB. INDYK: Absolutely right, and for the next President of the United States, we at Brookings and the Council on Foreign Relations will be joining forces to do another study for policy in the Middle East.

MIN. GHEIT: By then, we will have managed to break through.

AMB. INDYK: Speaking of breakthroughs, there is a summit going on today in Saudi Arabia.

MIN. GHEIT: Yes.

AMB. INDYK: The Palestinians are trying to resolve their differences.

MIN. GHEIT: Yes.

AMB. INDYK: In a couple of weeks on February 19th, the Secretary of State has announced that she will be meeting with Abu Mazen and Prime Minister Olmert for the first trilateral discussions in a very long time between the Israelis, the Palestinians and the United States. What is your assessment of these two things? Do you have much hope, first of all, for the Saudi summit?

MIN. GHEIT: There has been lots of intensive work prepared by us to

bring the two parties, Hamas and Fatah, together. The idea is not just to stop the fighting because to stop the fighting should always be an objective. To stop people killing each other is an objective, no doubt about it. But the principal idea is that if we want to launch a peaceful process or to renew the process, then we have to have a Palestinian national movement that is unified or united, hence, the drive to bring the Palestinians together to agree on the least of common denominators between the two organizations or group.

Why is it so? Because the logic is if you have a government of national unity and if you launch yourself in negotiations with the Israelis as it is coming with the visit of the Secretary on the 19th, then you have to have a Palestinian stage ready to contribute and you have to have the proper environment. But imagine we launch ourselves in negotiations and renewing the effort, and then someone decides to obstruct by firing a missile, and the whole process will come to a stall. The important thing is to ensure that we have a committed Palestinian party, government, a president, a president who has a free hand to negotiate. Because of this, I do not agree with such views that are insisting that we do not deal with Hamas.

Why is it so? Because Hamas is a fact of life. They won elections, and they have 30 percent of the Palestinian popular vote, and they are there. If we want a civil war amongst the Palestinians, that will take us nowhere.

Why is it so? I am not a defender or proponent of Hamas, but the important thing is to analyze and to have that very rational approach to what is the interest

of the whole region and the interest of the Palestinians.

So the meeting in Mecca hopefully will build upon whatever that has been done, achieved by us. Mind you, we are working fully in concert with the Saudis, meaning we are exchanging ideas, views. Prior to that meeting, there have been intensive consultations, and we are preparing with them, and I hope that that meeting will be successful. I hope a ceasefire, but not only limited to a ceasefire, hopefully an agreement on a government of a national movement.

AMB. INDYK: Would you expect that this agreement will provide for Hamas' acceptance of the court's conditions?

MIN. GHEIT: If we put it as conditions, then they might respond the way you want them to respond. But if we put it as prerequisites for facilitating the process, there will be a letter, a letter of assignment from the President to the Prime Minister, telling him that these are the parameters that I give you in order to execute the requirements of your job. So the other guy will have to respond, and there it is the language, how he will respond. I hope that the response will be that I will be obligated by whatever directives you give government. That is one aspect.

The second aspect is mainly the Interior Ministry, who will be controlling the Interior Ministry, and I hope we will find a settlement there, that we will find an agreement amongst them.

AMB. INDYK: You expect that Hamas will still have the Prime Ministership?

MIN. GHEIT: Yes. Why not? Yes, in order to ensure quiet, calm, stability, then you have to ensure that Hamas is also in government because the moment someone would fire a missile or do something across the line, they would be accountable, and that is something that should not be missed amongst us all.

AMB. INDYK: You also spent quite a bit of time talking to the Israelis.

MIN. GHEIT: Yes, all the time.

AMB. INDYK: What do you think the Secretary of State, what should she be aiming to achieve in this trilateral meeting?

MIN. GHEIT: The whole thing will not be accomplished in one meeting. You have to expect an American effort that is sustained, that is determined, that knows that there will be obstacles, that is patient, that has vision, understanding and after all, the ideas are there. So imagine she goes and she starts talking and bringing the two parties together and talking, talking the issues, not negotiating but talking the issues. Then both of them are ready because both of them might not be ready right now. You have a Palestinian fragmented national movement, and you have a government in Israel that is passing through what they are passing through. Let us assume that over time, there will be that kind of deep interest to integrate a process.

There, I think most of those people who are really knowledgeable on the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, they know the parameters of the settlement. The parameters are there. Many people, if they are objective, they will say well, these are the parameters and this is the shape of the settlement. Because of this, Egypt

keeps calling for let us agree on the end game, the end game. As we agree on the end game and the parameters of the end game and the full package, a full package that would enable both parties to claim that he has achieved something because if you start piecemeal, working on this aspect and then moving to this aspect and then moving through stages, first stage, second stage, third stage as the roadmap has been calling for, that is a recipe for failure. It is a recipe for failure because anybody can obstruct any of the stages, and if it is obstructed, then the whole thing stops.

But we agree on the end game. We are not necessarily open and not necessarily negotiating as we did earlier in Camp David or in Norway or in wherever. We negotiate in discretion, not we but the parties, and when they reach an agreement, they start working on the implementation and the stages of implementation. There, you might find yourself back to the roadmap but after having agreed on the end game, and you start working on the implementation. You might have to put it to a referendum amongst the two people, and we will see.

AMB. INDYK: So the end game, really what you are talking about is principles.

MIN. GHEIT: No, going beyond the principles. The principles are also well defined but going beyond the principles. What are we to do with the borders? What are we to do with the capital? What are we to do with the water resources? What are we to do with the refugees? What are we to do with

relations amongst the two people? There are lots and lots of issues that have to be tackled and decisively sorted out. That is at least the way we see it because we have tried everything.

I recall myself in Rome, and that is much warmer than this place. Imagine, I arrived Monday evening at 8:00 and it was 10 Centigrade below, and I am coming from 20 Centigrade above.

Anyway, I was in Rome once after 1993, after the Oslo and Camp David agreements, and people were talking about a process but leading towards an objective. We had so many people objecting to the idea of moving in stages, piecemeal, because they said well, you will see that it will be obstructed and anybody can create havoc in that process. I kept saying no, because we know where we are heading and we agree on an objective.

They have been proven right. The piecemeal stage by stage motion didn't take us anywhere. So it is about time to do something, and it has to be done.

Why is it that it has to be done? The Palestinian problem is responsible for at least, and that is my own conviction, at least 50 percent of whatever malaise that we are witnessing and facing in the Middle East and in relations between the West and the World of Islam and the Arab World. Fifty-one percent of that clash and that tension can be just dissipated if we would settle down the Palestinian issue. It can be done because both parties in December, 2000 were ready, were ready, and they were almost on the verge of grabbing a settlement -- and you were there -- if it would have been initialed.

I was in New York at the time, and we were corresponding. You were in Israel, I think. So it can be repeated because no need just to maintain the status quo with all damage that will result.

AMB. INDYK: Let us talk about the other 50 or 49 percent for a minute. First of all, Iraq, you have watched, and your president has warned America.

MIN. GHEIT: I am on the record, right? Very nice.

AMB. INDYK: How do you view it from Cairo, what is happening in Iraq, and how do you view the chances for success for the new American surge strategy?

MIN. GHEIT: I view a very difficult, difficult situation, a situation that we in Egypt read accurately much, much well in advance. We knew what was to happen and what was to come. That is one.

AMB. INDYK: And you warned against it.

MIN. GHEIT: In our own way, between friends. We have a saying in Egypt: (*Arabic*), a true friend tells you the truth. Now we are all of us in the midst of a very difficult situation because it is not a situation that is limited to Iraq. It is a situation that threatens to go beyond Iraq. It is not the image of the great power only, but it is the existence of Iraq as a state, a unified state and its people.

What is the problem right now in Iraq? The problem is as follows: You have sectarian fighting. You have fighting against foreign forces on the ground. You have neighbors that might be intervening or might be very sensitive to their

interests in relation to the future of Iraq. Each of the words I am choosing is my own way of expressing that the neighbors, some of them are not interfering but they are so uneasy that they might have to be intervening.

What has to be done? The Administration is coming forward with this package, and our response to the package, and we did this and we stated this even when the Secretary came to Luxor. We told her and we said publicly if the objective of increasing the force to 165,000, aiming at dismantling those who are responsible for the sectarian killing in Baghdad, then we endorse and we support. Mind you, on the 10th of April, 2003, when Baghdad was occupied, the American force that was on Iraqi soil was almost 171,000 people. So for that force to have gone down to 140,000 and then increase to 165,000, these are the requirements of the situation, the demands on the troops. If the objective is to dismantle the militias that are creating havoc on the Iraqi scene, then we support it.

If the objective and the result of that plan, we will see an opening of the political process allowing amendments to the constitution, helping all those who boycotted the process to come back and to start working within the political, then we endorse that objective, meaning I do not understand why we have to put aside Sunnis. Someone might respond by telling me but they put themselves aside. My response is okay, they did it, but mind you, they are creating havoc. So we have to lure them into the process, and we have to encourage them to come on board. Changing or amending the constitution is something that is very, very important.

Then the army, we have an Iraqi Army. At a certain point in time in 1988,

it was a million strong. That army, strangely, was disbanded -- disbanded. Thank you. Go home. Of course, they didn't go home. They went and they each carried his rifle and went down to wherever, and they are fighting. So the army has to be re-established. I am not saying the old army of Iraq, but I am saying all those Iraqi nationals or nationalists that are eager to serve their country, they have the right to contribute to the reemergence of the Iraqi Army.

Then the de-Baathification, it has to come to an end. I do not understand that people do not understand the dynamics in societies. When you have a Baath Party in Iraq or you have a Communist Party in the Soviet Union or in Bulgaria or in Romania or any of such countries, citizens are always encouraged to go with the party because they will at least be ensured bread, butter, some rice and some sugar and a job. To penalize a whole nation because they were members of a party, that is something that has to be reconsidered, the de-Baathification.

Then the issue of neighbors, some of the neighbors, they think that now it is the time to spread influence and to replicate in Iraq a model after us, and I will not go beyond.

AMB. INDYK: After you?

MIN. GHEIT: Not after us, after them.

AMB. INDYK: They want to create their model, you are saying, in Iraq.

MIN. GHEIT: Yes. So those neighbors have to be convinced or told that let us keep the unity of Iraq and do not play games with Iraq. If that is the objective of the plan, then I endorse.

I do not endorse a plan. I endorse results. This is an important sort of difference between a plan and results. What we are eager to see is an Iraq that is united, that is not sectarian fighting, that is in peace with itself.

If I would manage to send a message to the resistance or the Sunni fighters, that listen, the United States does not intend to overstay, that the United States has a timeline even if it is a very kind of fluid timeline. If we see such and such and such and such emerging, then we will phase our withdrawal in a manner to ensure stability for you and for your country, then he who is fighting today and firing today might reflect: Why am I to fight and why am I to fire? It is better now to join the political process and to stop fighting.

It is not only a military operation or a military plan that is needed. It is a range of measures, steps, all of them executed in or implemented in a concerted action to bringer us nearer to the objective because if we fail, and I say we -- we meaning the region, the Arab World, neighboring states, the West, the Coalition and the United States -- if we fail, then it will be a disaster for everybody.

Why is it so? Because imagine -- imagine the sectarian conflict would continue and imagine certain people on this or that sectarian divide would decide to join the fight. Some guy from Sudan says this is a situation that is unbearable, and I go. Then there would be a fight all over the country. That fight will attract neighbors.

Imagine Kirkuk goes the wrong way or someone would hasten a decision on Kirkuk and this is a major area of instability. It is not sectarian. It is different

nations. Then the sky is the limit for the results of such conflict developing.

Imagine those who are saying well, we withdraw. America and the Coalition leave the state. Thank you very much. We broke it and it is not to be fixed, so we leave.

You leave and you leave a region that is, and you started by saying a region in turmoil, a region that is suffering from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a broken Iraqi state and country, neighbors that are thinking that it is our opportunity now to take advantage and the spread of certain conflict from Lebanon on the Mediterranean to the Gulf water on the other side of the Peninsula. We have even to be careful when we say we leave.

AMB. INDYK: You and I were at a dinner, I guess it was last summer, at which another senior Arab official said in very strong words that it is unacceptable that Iran should try to be the arbiter of Arab interests. Are you concerned about what appears to be Iranian attempt to achieve some hegemonic role in the Arab World?

MIN. GHEIT: My concern is not that hegemonic. Why is it so? Because there are also major powers in this region. Egypt is a major player. Turkey is. Saudi Arabia is. It is not easy for someone your size to manipulate you. This is not the issue.

The issue as I see it, I think, is the nuclear file of Iran. We are hopeful that it is a peaceful nuclear project because if it is not, time will tell. But we trust what the Iranians are saying up to this moment. They keep saying it is a peaceful

nuclear Iranian project, then be it, but we have to verify.

There, I say that the fabric of the NPT, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, is in danger, and the West assumes a major responsibility in this. Do not come to address me and to tell me about a possible nuclear Iran when you know that Jeremy is sitting there, my friend, and people are claiming that they have a nuclear military capability.

Why did you leave them all this time to the point that others maybe might be trying to do it? Don't look me in the eye. I am being very frank. We should have addressed the nuclear issue very, very early, and again we procrastinated. We played around, and here it is, the results. That is what we have to focus on.

AMB. INDYK: For 30 years, though, you --

MIN. GHEIT: Mind you, we are not a country that is eager to go nuclear, and we do not want to go nuclear. Why is it so?

Why is it so? I can claim to have read books and books on military nuclear capabilities and whatever literature that was published in both the United States and the Soviet Union over the period between, say, 1960 with the flexible response until the demise of the Soviet Union. When you have a nuclear bomb, it doesn't mean a thing because it will never be used for defense. If you do not intend to go to war, then it is not even deterrence. It is just (*Arabic*).

SPEAKER: (off mike)

AMB. INDYK: A scarecrow?

MIN. GHEIT: Yes. So why would you put so much resources and money

and having missiles and building silos and covering for your missiles and screening them and having an anti-missile defense, and then ultimately you will say well, we scrap them and we will go from the following generation?

Denuclearize.

AMB. INDYK: Let us go to the audience. Are you ready for that?

MIN. GHEIT: Please.

AMB. INDYK: Please wait for the microphone.

MIN. GHEIT: We have, I think, 40 minutes to go.

AMB. INDYK: Good.

MIN. GHEIT: I have a trick, mind you. I have a trick, yes. When I do not want to be subject to difficult questions, the moment I receive an easy question, I extend my answer to cover half an hour.

AMB. INDYK: Here comes an easy question. Tamara?

TAMARA WITTES: Well, then I think it is my obligation to begin with a hard one. Tamara Wittes with the Saban Center, and thank you so much for joining us today.

I want to ask you about an issue that we haven't raised yet, and that is the issue of political reform and the relationship between reform and the growing voices of radicalism in the region.

MIN. GHEIT: Growing voices?

TAMARA WITTES: Of radicalism within the region, these challenges that we are facing together and the challenges that you face at home. I guess I would

put forward the argument that confronting these forces that are advocating violent resistance requires that you fight fire with fire, that you give people a positive vision for their future.

President Mubarak has put forward a list of constitutional amendments that are now being debated in Parliament, among them are amendments designed to strengthen the political party system. But just last month in Cairo, there were over a dozen political parties that were denied their permits to organize. So I am wondering if you can address not simply the specific issue of political parties but how you see the struggle for reform and democracy within Egypt as related to the broader battle on behalf of moderation in the region? Thank you.

MIN. GHEIT: Thank you. That is a most interesting question because you connect the internal development in Egypt in relation to the region and the world.

Let me tell you that we are witnessing in Egypt nowadays, and I am not saying this because I am the Foreign Minister of Egypt. Trust me and believe me, I say this with all the conviction that we are changing and we are moving forward. You have to understand that the stable democracy will have to appear on any country's stage when the environment is ripe, when you have a large portion of the population educated, when you have a vibrant middle class with all the strengths of the middle class, when you have the per capita income of a society enabling a citizen to contribute and to talk and to have power.

In Egypt, we have possibly today, possibly between 450 to 500 newspapers and magazines, 450 to 500. We have 13 parties. We have an opposition, 100

members of Parliament or if not 105, 107, yes. 88 of them, they have the chance, they are Muslim Brothers with all the consequences of the ideology of a Muslim Brother. You have a government that is liberalizing internally. The Egyptian economy is moving forward with a stock exchange that is making wonders and a political process that has been opened and we are continuing opening up of the process. Unless you do it right with your own pace, you might face a situation where it won't work as desired.

How to do it? This is the wisdom of Egypt. I do not speak about one person. I say the wisdom of Egypt, whereas the objective is this, so we move, and we assess, and we weigh, and we measure, and then we decide to go for it, one stage after the other, moderation, the region and the world.

The Middle East is passing through one of the most difficult stages of its history. Why is it so? Because forces of fundamentalism, of extremism are there and they think that they are winning. They think. They are not. But if you listen to the message that is coming from that channel, Bin Laden and others, they will tell you we are defeating them, defeating them as you and us. They are not winning, and they are not defeating us. They think they are. So the important thing is we do not give them on a silver platter, our societies.

As we develop internally and do it right, spread education, have whatever that is good in the Western system to be applied in our societies from everything that is applicable, we have also to be careful not to create dynamics that would help the extremists. The invasion of Iraq helped the extremists. The lack of a

settlement for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict helps the extremists. Bombing a village in Afghanistan helps the extremists. Going on an attack that results in the killing of 15 children helps the extremists. The idea is to deny the extremists that stage. There, a formula between the West and the worlds of Arabs-Muslims has to be found because it contributes. That kind of tension and clash, it contributes to helping the extremists.

It is not that their societies are not capable of offering them the needed services or the needed whatever that is because if you ask the terrorist or the fundamentalist or the extremist, he will respond by telling you, you are bad because you are subject to the will of the West, and I hate the West -- not me but him -- and I detest the West.

Globalization and how globalization is affecting our lives and our region and how can we manage to grasp and grab modernity but in a manner not to harm our societies. That very fine thin line of allowing the internet and allowing the satellites and mind you, both are uncensored in my country, but at the same time educating your population that if you do not want to switch to that channel, don't. But I will not ban the channel. I will leave it for everybody to see, and you have the choice. It is a matter of development, and it needs time, but we are on the right track, I think.

AMB. INDYK: Glenn?

MIN. GHEIT: I didn't mean to extend.

GLENN KESSLER: Glenn Kessler with the *Washington Post*.

MIN. GHEIT: I met you in Cairo several times.

GLENN KESSLER: Yes, and we were in Luxor too.

MIN. GHEIT: Right.

GLENN KESSLER: The Secretary of State has begun in recent months to divide the region between what she calls mainstream forces and extremist forces. In mainstream, she talks about Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Gulf States, and the extremist forces are Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria. Do you agree with that division? Do you think it is a practical way to look at it?

MIN. GHEIT: Mind you, you have members of Parliament elected by the people for Hamas. You have members of Parliament in the Lebanese Parliament elected by the Lebanese for Hezbollah. You have a country like Syria that has been party to the Coalition in 1991. The Middle East is the Middle East. You have different trends, and you have different interests.

My interest today would compel me or lead me to do or to take that course of caution. Tomorrow, I might not. That does not change me from a moderate to an extremist or an extremist to moderate.

However, there are two kinds of trends, a trend that wants to negotiate and build bridges and give and take and a trend maybe that says well, we have been subject to injustice and we defend ourselves by going to the offensive. It is characterizations, and it is interpretations, but every society in the region is passing through most difficult times, most difficult times. When you said that, I have been appointed myself, in a time of turmoil, I tend to agree.

AMB. INDYK: Bruce?

BRUCE RIEDEL: Mr. Foreign Minister, I would like to come back to Iraq.

The war in Iraq has produced the most violent and intense struggle between Sunnis and Shi'as that we have seen in the modern history of the Middle East. It is spreading outside of Iraq. People talk about it in Lebanon and other places in the Gulf. Your predecessor, Amr Moussa, is quoted today as saying that we are on the edge of the gates of hell and that if it gets worse, we will be in hell. Can you tell me how you and Egypt see the Sunni-Shi'a fire burning and what should be done to put it out?

MIN. GHEIT: We in Egypt for decades, if not for centuries, didn't know this phenomenon of Sunni and Shi'a. When the invasion took place in Iraq and there were these writings on Sunni and Shi'a, I felt that was very strange because in the modern history of the Arab World, people do not look at themselves as Sunni or Shi'a. But sadly, the seed has been created or planted, sadly, because it was there but it was dormant.

I think still that the day can be saved. Why is it so? Because the Iraqi is an Iraqi, and most of Iraqis are Arabs whether they are Shi'a or Sunni. I do not believe that you have a Shi'a population in Iraq that has different ethnic features or different ethnic character or characteristics, no. They are Arabs, and they speak Arabic, and they behave Arab, and they are Muslims. For anybody to emphasize that he is a Sunni and he is a Shi'a should not be the case.

I have to say that the authors of the Baath Party's philosophy were Shi'as,

and the majority of the higher echelons of the Baath Party in Iraq were Shi'as, and the soldiers of the Iraqi Army who fought against Iran for eight years were mainly Shi'as. It is a phenomenon today that threatens all of us, and we have to nip it in the bud. We have to stop it. How to do it?

How to do it? How to do it is as I indicated. You open up the political process. You confront the militias because the militias will destroy Iraq. Whatever that America was trying to do as we would establish a democracy on the lines of Japan as if Japan was in the political and economic stage of development of Iraq today. Of course not, and that was a wrong characterization and wrong reading of Japan, Germany and Iraq, and any child in an Egyptian school would have said so. Yes. But the result is a broken country.

That broken country has to be corrected, and you have to encourage them to confront the problem, and it can be done. Mind you, not everything is lost. It can be done because if we despair, then it will be divided into regions, and the regions will be in fratricidal, continuous, perpetual war until eternity, and that is not for the good of all of us.

AMB. INDYK: Barbara?

MIN. GHEIT: I know you.

AMB. INDYK: I think you know everybody here.

MIN. GHEIT: I think I know lots of people, yes.

BARBARA SLAVIN: Barbara Slavin from USA Today. I apologize. The weather was much nicer in Luxor than it is here.

I wanted to ask you, if you could, to be a little more specific about what you expect from Condoleezza Rice's next trip to the region. As you point out, the parameters of a settlement have been known very well for a very long time. A lot of work has been done. Do you expect to see a list of issues and options, something concrete coming out of this?

Also, if you could talk just a little bit more about the Iranian situation. The U.S. has taken a number of steps in recent weeks; given itself a license to kill Iranians in Iraq, arrested people, sent an additional carrier to the Gulf. Are you concerned that we might be facing not just a Shi'a-Sunni split but a wider war in which the United States would go to war against yet another Muslim country? Thank you.

MIN. GHEIT: Thank you. I tell you I will be seeing the Secretary at 3:00 today. Then I will be seeing the National Security advisor at 5:00. Then I will be seeing the Secretary again at 6:15. So, yes.

AMB. INDYK: Are you coordinating between the White House and the State Department?

MIN. GHEIT: I was told, you are invited to come at 3:00, then you go at 5:00, then you come back at 6:15 until 7:30. I said, I oblige. Okay, I am your guest.

In all honesty, I have to see and to engage in the discussion prior to answering that question. I don't know. I do not have an answer. I have an understanding. The parameter for how I would feel that this is the way to go

forward, but we will listen to her. I detect deep commitment on her part, and I detect eagerness and desire to do something, she and her deputy or her coming future deputy.

BARBARA SLAVIN: And on Iran?

MIN. GHEIT: Yes, I will tell you on Iran. We caution against the use of force because the use of force will lead to a very bad situation. The use of force will not achieve the political objective. Iraq is in most difficult times and a most difficult situation. Iran is three times as large with three times in population size. Discussions, firmness, assurances, building trust, encouraging accommodation, without losing sight of the interest, and the interest is a Middle East free of all weapons of mass destruction. All parties in the Middle East will have to adhere to the NPT. None is excluded --none -- and a process of working together.

But if we go for a war, then the results are not assured and we will find ourselves adding to the current problems. Don't forget that we have also two other problems that are tormenting our part of the world but not necessarily the Middle East. You have Sudan which is a country that is passing through most difficult times and lately Somalia with all the difficulties of Somalia. So better not to add a new problem.

AMB. INDYK: Let us take a couple from the regional press. Mr. Barazi?

TAMMAN BARAZI: Tamman Barazi, *Alwatan Alarabi Magazine*.

Mr. Foreign Minister, you said, you mentioned that there are major powers in Iraq, major players, and you mentioned Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Apparently, President Assad disagrees with you. He was on ABC, saying we are a major player in Iraq.

MIN. GHEIT: Syria is important, of course. Syria is most important. Why is it so? Because it is in the center of the Arab world.

TAMMAN BARAZI: Yes, but apparently, it is playing a spoiler. But my question to you is: Given that the --

MIN. GHEIT: I am talking about size of countries and nations. When you have Egypt, almost 80 million people; when you have Turkey, 75 million people; when you have Iran, 75 million people; these are the units that I am talking about.

TAMMAN BARAZI: Anyway, since you led negotiations between many Arab countries, I mean you facilitated most of the negotiations between Israel and Arab countries, are you aware of a second track between Syria and Israel?

Secondly, what do you think of their efforts, Hezbollah and Nasrallah, to sabotage the international court or the special court, the U.N. special court? Do you have a position on that?

MIN. GHEIT: The second track, we read about it in the press. The Swiss, the Turks, the Israelis, the Syrians, some American-Syrian gentleman supervised the whole thing. Well, that is a good thing that you prepare for the possibility of launching talks and negotiations. The Syrians are making offers to Israel. I think such offers should be explored seriously because they might entail the possibility of a breakthrough, and if that breakthrough takes place, then at least we are softening, and we are dismantling, and we are diffusing an issue that is troubling

the region, the Israeli-Syrian relationship with all its difficulties. If we would manage to diffuse it, that is good for the region. That is on the track two.

On the tribunal, yes, we in Egypt, we support the establishment of the tribunal. We expect the tribunal to be established. We would welcome the Lebanese Parliament agreeing. Hopefully, over time, we will see the tribunal emerging. But accompanied with that, we would hope also to see the report of Judge Bremertz because in the absence of the report, then there should be a tribunal. The tribunal will deal with the report. So let us wait until we see the report and we still have ample time to respond to the report and to the needs of the tribunal.

TAMMAN BARAZI: What about Syria? I asked about Syria.

MIN. GHEIT: Yes, and I ignore it. Not necessarily when you ask, I have to respond.

AMB. INDYK: He didn't mean he was ignoring Syria. He meant he was ignoring the question.

MIN. GHEIT: Listen, I have been in diplomacy for the last 42 years. I have, I think, enough how-to.

AMB. INDYK: Try this one.

AMAL MUDALLALI: Mr. Minister, I am Amal Mudallali. I work for Mr. Saad Hariri, and we have met many times with Mr. Rafik Hariri.

MIN. GHEIT: I met you?

AMAL MUDALLALI: Yes.

MIN. GHEIT: Many times?

AMAL MUDALLALI: Yes, in meetings.

MIN. GHEIT: And how didn't I recognize this?

AMAL MUDALLALI: Last in New York at the U.N.

I just wanted to clarify something you just said. When you say we have to wait for Bremertz's report, do you mean that you don't want the court to be established after the report?

MIN. GHEIT: No, no, no, but the issue is if people are procrastinating and playing games, well, time will press it on them when we see the report because the report will say, well, such and such and such has happened and such people are possibly implicated. Then the tribunal will have to deal with that report. It is not a race between the report and the tribunal, and it is not the chicken or the egg. They will come, both of them, in due time. What is needed to stabilize the institution right now, not to have that kind of tension inside Lebanon that might turn into an ugly situation.

AMAL MUDALLALI: Just one more clarification, there is some talk that the Parliament can't meet to approve the tribunal because the speaker refuses to convene the Parliament despite the fact that the majority -- 70 members of Parliament is a majority -- wants a meeting and there is no meeting. If the Parliament cannot meet and the Security Council deliberates the issue and they want to impose it under Chapter 7, what do you think of that?

MIN. GHEIT: I think this is a course but not necessarily to materialize

because there might not be a sympathetic P5 reaction to that idea.

When you said Parliament doesn't meet and the key and this and that, I was reminded by an Egyptian joke. Someone from the south of Egypt and they are the Saida (ph), they are known to be very simple and kind people. He ran to his friend and he told him: Listen, they stole the box. They stole the box -- the box that contained his wealth -- but I have the key.

AMB. INDYK: Okay, please.

MOHAMED ELMENSHAWY: Mohamed Elmenshawy, Editor in Chief of *Taqrir Washington*.

MIN. GHEIT: We have 10 minutes. I have to be rushing at 2:00, please.

MOHAMED ELMENSHAWY: Mohamed Elmenshawy from *Taqrir Washington*.

MIN. GHEIT: From?

MOHAMED ELMENSHAWY: *Taqrir Washington*.

MIN. GHEIT: *Taqrir Washington* -- that is Arabic or English?

MOHAMED ELMENSHAWY: Arabic, from here.

The Egyptian Government seems to have okay relations with the executive branch in the United States. On the contrary, it has very difficult relations with Congress. What is your assessment of the new Democratic elected Congress, especially Congressman Lantos who is the head of the Foreign Relations Committee?

MIN. GHEIT: My very dear friend, it is obvious that you were not in my

company yesterday and today.

MOHAMED ELMENSHAWY: I was not, no.

MIN. GHEIT: There were pleasant encounters across the board everywhere in Congress, thank you, and I say it on the record.

AMB. INDYK: George?

GEORGE HISHMEH: George Hishmeh from *Gulf News* and *Jordan Times*.

MIN. GHEIT: I know you too.

GEORGE HISHMEH: Yes, and I know you too.

You mentioned that in the Palestinian-Israeli upcoming negotiations, the objective is to work out a settlement or agreement on the final results?

MIN. GHEIT: That is our -- our -- perception how to proceed.

GEORGE HISHMEH: Yes. Have you discussed this with the Israelis and are they in agreement?

MIN. GHEIT: We discussed it with the Israelis, with the Palestinians, with the Americans, with the Europeans, with the Russians, and we feel encouraged.

GEORGE HISHMEH: Okay.

MIN. GHEIT: Well, I answered.

AMB. INDYK: All the way down in the back, please.

MOHAMMED EL-FETTOUHI: Mohammed el-Fettouhi, *Nile News*, Egypt television.

When you talk about the parameters of the final status agreement between

Israel and the Palestinians, are you talking about a formal agreement, are you talking about concept, and how do you reach that? Are you talking a conference like the Madrid Conference or secret meetings? How do you reach this concept?

On the other side, just to follow up on another question, do you believe in this concept of the Shi'a Crescent in the Middle East?

MIN. GHEIT: To answer the latter part of the question, the Shi'a Crescent, I keep wondering. A crescent is a crescent. Where it starts and where it ends, I do not understand the characterization.

AMB. INDYK: It starts in Iran and ends in Lebanon, for example.

MIN. GHEIT: Starts in Iran and ends in Lebanon, and it passes through Jordan and Syria, but these are Sunni nations. The idea doesn't fly. That is one. It doesn't fly. It flies if you have large communities in certain areas that would make the circle or the crescent complete. It doesn't.

The first part of the question, our idea is that you enter into negotiations in discretion, not public, and despite whatever that takes place between the parties, publicly, even fighting, we continue in discretion. When we reach a full understanding on an agreement, written, we finalize the agreement. An international conference at a certain point in time within the stage of implementation will have to be convened in order to endorse, in order to ensure the financing that would allow the Palestinian state to emerge and to fly side by side by Israel. These are ideas that, as we proceed, hopefully we will proceed. Then we will reach that point.

AMB. INDYK: Just a last point, it is a small point, but where does the Arab League Initiative fit into that process?

MIN. GHEIT: You mean the land for peace?

AMB. INDYK: The resolution.

MIN. GHEIT: As we make progress, I am sure that the Arab World will show the dividends of its behavior with the Israelis by showing that kind of commitment to peace.

AMB. INDYK: Ahmed, thank you very much for giving us so much time.

MIN. GHEIT: Thank you very much.

(Applause)

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