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AFTER THE TRUCE: ISRAEL'S SECURITY IN A VOLATILE MIDDLE EAST
AN ADDRESS BY ISAAC HERZOG,
CHAIRMAN OF ISRAEL'S LABOR PARTY AND LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

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Featured Speaker:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WITTES: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Thank you so much for coming. For those of you whom I haven't met, I'm Tamara Wittes. I direct the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. And I'm really delighted to have you with us for what I think is going to be a fascinating engagement with our good friend Buji Herzog.

The war that recently concluded between Israel and Hamas seemed to many and in some ways to me, I was actually in Israel when the conflict began, as the culmination of a long, slow slide downward in Israeli-Palestinian relations that began with the collapse of peace negotiations last spring. And many that I spoke to on both sides of the conflict and here in Washington seemed to feel as though we'd hit a dead end in efforts to address the conflict, in efforts to achieve a two-state solution.

On the Israeli side, domestic politics, if anything, seemed to be moving to the right. On the Palestinian side, the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas just papered over some very deep differences and already tensions seem to be flaring again.

And the war itself, in many ways, just exacerbated these trends. It was heartbreaking, costly, inconclusive, more a symptom of an unresolved conflict than anything else. So the question we face today is whether that war and its inconclusive outcome have altered any of the underlying dynamics that are driving Israeli or Palestinian policies.

Our scholars in the Center for Middle East Policy have been exploring these questions in their research, but today I'm truly delighted to welcome to our podium a friend of the Center and someone who can give us his own firsthand assessment of where Israel might go from here and his own agenda for where it should go from here.

Isaac Herzog, better known as Buji, is a member of Knesset. He is

chairman of Israel's Labor Party and the leader of Israel's parliamentary opposition. He's been a member of Knesset for over 10 years, since 2003. And last year, won a resounding victory in the Labor Party primaries to become the party leader and leader of the opposition in parliament.

Buji is also a major in the military reserves, making him one of the few members of Knesset who's still serving in the IDF on military reserve duty. I guess, Buji, that means you're still a young man.

Buji's been a regular participant in our annual U.S.-Israel dialogue, the Saban Forum that we host each December here in Washington. And we are gearing up and looking forward to another forum in just a few months' time. But in the meantime, I am truly honored to welcome Buji to our podium here at Brookings.

And after he's finished his remarks, we'll sit down for a conversation and then open it up to questions from all of you. Thank you so much for being with us and, Buji, please join me. (Applause)

MR. HERZOG: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much. For all those of you who are intrigued by this "Buji" thing, just let's put it aside. I come from a complicated, interesting family story. For those of you who don't know, my late father was the president Israel, Chaim Herzog. He was born in Ireland. So where does the "Buji" come from? It comes from my mother. Aura was born in Egypt on the banks of the Suez Canal, in Ismailia. My grandfather was the chief engineer of the Suez Canal. And my mother's mother tongue apart from Arabic was French. So when I was born I was not conventionally cute, so something like "boobah" in Hebrew and "juju" in French turned out to be Buji and it clung to me. So in Israel this is my nickname.

The true thing is, though, that my family from Egypt are refugees. And I've said many time we have -- our properties were sequestrated and my grandfather fled

from Egypt in '48. So we understand the complexities of the Middle East.

And I'm very pleased to be here. Thank you, Tamara, wholeheartedly, for inviting me. I want to thank Martin Indyk, who's not here, but he definitely deserves a vote of thanks for his endless efforts to bring peace between us and the Palestinians.

We've gone through a very complicated and difficult summer. And may I say that the Israeli public is still in a kind of post-traumatic state. We were unprepared for another round at this stage. It has evolved into a major conflict. It lasted for much longer than expected. The Israelis have come out of it with somewhat of a sour feeling that it hasn't been completed, it's hanging in the air. Namely, we gave a major military blow to Hamas, but what's next?

And as the Israelis look around and seeing all the tumultuous circumstances of the Middle East, clearly at the onset of this confrontation right now the public has shifted to a more conservative approach. I would say even to a more right-wing approach in terms of its political identification. This is, in my mind, totally provisional. It's logical. It's to be expected. Actually it's the mirror image. You can see the Shikaki poll that was published last week by the Washington Institute depicting the same type of movement towards a more nationalistic type feeling within the Palestinian camp. This is natural. Perhaps I don't like it, but it only makes sense. Israelis felt, well, 5 million Israelis were under sirens and it had a major bearing on the national mood that something ought to change.

And when they were promised time and again by superficial speakers in the political realm that things can be done by conquest, by fully conquering and eradicating Hamas, at the end they found themselves more perplexed as to how to bring about that victory. And in my mind, it had an effect on the immediate feeling of Israelis as to do you really think there is a chance still to make peace with the Palestinians after all

we've gone through? Couple it with the fact that the battlefield was preceded by three weeks of national focus solely on the whereabouts of three young kids who were abducted by Hamas, and you understand that we've gone through a long, drawn-out period of national pain that puts us in a different place.

In fact, during the operation, we saw some unique phenomena which were unprecedented before. There was clear national consensus on the objectives of this battlefield. There was a demand to defend our citizens on the southern border and in the south in general. And there was a really unique feeling that I've never actually sensed so far, which can be epitomized by the fact that when a lonely American-born soldier was killed in battle, 30,000 Israelis went to his funeral. Okay? Now, that's a unique phenomenon that needs to be dissected and analyzed, and to understand that people said we are here to fight. We will not accept terror under any circumstances. This is unacceptable. We are united in this quest.

Now, how do we go from here? Because, after all, I'm the leader of the opposition. I did give full backing to the military operations and to Israel's activity. It wasn't easy for any one of us, but I found myself time and again defending Israel's position, rightly so, because at the end you deal with who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. And I kept on saying throughout that period that had I been prime minister, I would have given a big blow to Hamas and, simultaneously, would have driven to Ramallah, knocked on the doors of the Mukataa and sat down with Abbas and try to make peace with him. This is the equation in my mind. And this doesn't change for a long time. This doesn't change as to the strategy that ought to be taken vis-à-vis the extremists versus the moderates.

And in this respect, I found the national mood understanding that there is kind of a new reality emerging, yet not knowing exactly how to include this in their

considerations, which is, all of a sudden, in front of our eyes, emerged a unique coalition of interests which shares a common denominator which includes four nations who are adjacent to each other, and that meaning Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority. In a way, this ought to be the lynchpin of a coalition that looks around and sees all these extreme elements from the north, from the south, and from the east, and actually should serve as the real long arm of all the forces, for example, who are confronting ISIS. But we'll get to that later.

Anyhow, during the operation itself, it became clearly apparent that there is a common interest of combating terror, of combating extremism, of understanding the dangers in the region, of being supported by the Emiratis and the Saudis and others. And that this interest needs to be served, and how ought it to be served, by the fact that the parties must work together also to deal with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a peaceful manner. And this coalition or this convergence of interests has not yet received what it ought to receive: its centrality in the world arena, especially in light of the upcoming coalition versus ISIS. But moreover, actually the lynchpin of this coalition should be trying to negotiate peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Throughout that period there were other coalitions which emerged, as you know all too well: the Qataris, the Turks with Hamas, the Iranian Coalition, and so forth. And they're all in the region. However, this coalition in terms of these Israeli national attitude towards the region has made a difference. All of a sudden, Israelis have realized that there are partners that we can work with.

And here I think that there is a unique window of opportunity, which, unfortunately, at this present moment I feel is being missed. And that unique opportunity is the following: We've gone out of the conflict with no real strategy as to how to use the outcome of the conflict towards a full-fledged configuration, let's say, of a deal between

the Israelis and the Palestinians, namely Gaza ought to serve as the benchmark, as the starting point of the big arrangement. The small arrangement vis-à-vis Gaza should include, and this is agreed by all, yet not yet implemented, not by Security Council resolution nor by any facts on the ground, and it is the following: Gaza should open its gates to bring back the management -- yes, the management -- the civilian management by the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas.

Abbas is paying 70,000 salaries to people in Gaza out there who are civil servants of the Palestinian Authority, who have been basically without a job except they get a salary. And now is the time, based on even the understandings that he has reached with Hamas, to use this platform in getting him into Gaza. He should get financing from the international community for the rehabilitation of Gaza. The donor conference meeting on 12th of October is out there really as a basis to bring him in. Let him manage the store, lead the process into a way that Hamas becomes much more of a political entity, and slowly towards an objective of demilitarization, and move towards a political process in Palestinian itself towards a full-fledged agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

However, I identify a certain reluctance on both sides. Each one is checking the other's boundaries. Abbas has not shown full-fledged desire to do so. However, he appointed a special committee to negotiate with Hamas. And you've heard his recent comments about being extremely critical of their approach, demanding from them one state, one rifle, et cetera. And Israel, currently led by Benjamin Netanyahu, has not shown any vision as to how they want to go about the next step. And everything is still in that area, in that context, in a standstill.

Now, the role of the opposition, my role, as I see it, is to encourage as much as possible both the Israeli people, as well as the parties concerned, to move, to be

proactive, to use this golden opportunity, to use this incredible coalition which was formed in front of our eyes for much greater things. Here I open a little window and tell you what does it mean to be the leader of the Israeli opposition.

Well, it's not exactly like what you're used to, let's say, in Britain or in Germany because my opposition includes eight parties. And those eight parties is a unique structure of parties which exemplify the Israeli national-political structure. Within my opposition, which I lead, meaning Labor, I have three Arab parties. One of those parties is the Muslim Brotherhood Party. I think perhaps the only legal Muslim Brotherhood Party in the Middle East, definitely in the world. And I think this is something interesting to account for.

I have a Communist Party, a Jewish Arab Party which has been functioning most impressively for decades, and I have an Arab Party who is on the verge of a major national debate as to is it on the fringes of one would way legitimacy. It's a party which is a secular party. Some of its leaders have been at once vociferous supporters of Assad, now against him. And their former leader and founder is now in asylum in Qatar. A good place to be in asylum, as you know all too well. (Laughter) And I have to ultra-Orthodox parties who are important players in the Israeli political scene. And I have Meretz to our left. So this is an interesting combination. And actually, it's an exemplification of the multicultural essence of Israeli society which needs to accustom for all. All of these parties, some of them say very extreme things, and this is part of the unique spirit of free speech as was laid down by the Israeli Supreme Court and, therefore, there's a lot of music of different variance in my opposition.

However, first and foremost, what is a common denominator of such an opposition is social-economic issues. And I will deal with it later because that's going to be a big item on the Israeli political agenda soon. And secondly, you can hear from all

these parties also the different voices reflected upon what needs to be done and ought to be done.

Well, in any case, I've managed to unify my opposition in the demand of trying to move for peace, trying to break the stalemate. And if you look carefully, following the collapse, really following the sad collapse of the Kerry Initiatives back in the spring, following that we have seen a direct upsurge in terror, especially in the West Bank and thereafter in Gaza, which the peak was the conflict which have seen in the summer in Gaza and its surroundings.

Now, another interesting political comment to explain to you is that all the villages, the kibbutzim, the unique Jewish villages on the border with Gaza, were all founded by my movement or left of my movement. They were the pillars of the peace camp in Israel and they were bombarded in the most vicious and cruel manner throughout the 50 days. And they lost citizens and their houses were demolished and their story hasn't been told enough. And the tragedies that many, many of these people are at the forefront of all of the peace demonstrations that you can imagine in Israel.

So that means that the Israeli public is perplexed and says to himself, wait, before you talk to me about peace, let's understand what does it mean as it comes to security. When you speak about peace, which means sharing, splitting, dividing the land, moving, we want to understand how it won't hamper and affect the long-term security of Israel.

I was talking to Abbas over the weekend. I was the first Israeli leader to talk to Abbas and it happened in the last few days. I had a very interesting talk with him, and Abbas has taken a two-thrust, double-thrust approach. On the one hand, challenging Hamas. On the other hand, saying I want to break the stalemate, I'm challenging Israel or the international community. I want a timetable. I want to determine

my borders first.

And I was telling Abbas that apart from the fact that unilateral steps are adverse, the real issue is that you have to combine borders with security. And I don't object at all to the notion that we should sit down and negotiate on borders and security first because security has to be the underlying basis for any agreement. Because whichever way you look at the strategy and the geography of the situation, you realize that we need to give an answer to all the peoples of the region, but especially we, the Israeli leadership, to our people how to make sure that the Gaza scenario doesn't recur from the West Bank.

Well, I'm trying to explain to the people of Israel, and it's not always easy, where the data shows that the Israeli public, especially after the operation, clearly says, yes, Abbas is a partner, go and talk to him. By a big majority they are cautious about the viability of an outcome that will give them adequate security. And, therefore, I am leading the peace camp.

When I'm challenged by right-wing parties and leaders, such as Bennett, who say simply from the stomach, if we do peace with Abbas, we will get missiles in the center of the country. And that's easy to say. It's easy to say. And it falls straight into the ears of Israelis. And I'm coming with a cerebral answer that says, look, if you don't want the West Bank to become Gaza, move, initiate, be proactive, come forward with a plan. Negotiate for as long as it takes, but negotiate. And I'm calling for all parties concerned, including, of course, President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu, to move again and not to give up because we have to give hope to the peoples of the region and we have to give hope to Palestinians and Israelis alike, who have suffered a lot, with a lot of human tragedies in the last summer.

I've just come out from a meeting in the White House with Chief of Staff

Denis McDonough and Deputy National Security Advisor Tony Blinken. As you know all too well, the administration, the President is going to give a major statement on ISIS. And I think the fact that the President is leading an international coalition against ISIS/ISIL is a very, very substantial and important development. It is important because it shows that the United States is willing to lead a battle which is important for world order, for the world peace, and for the values that we all believe in, and I definitely commend them for doing so. And I think this coalition could also serve as a benchmark for important things later on because it all of a sudden puts things in a better perspective.

And, therefore, I was also pleased to hear from them, of course, that the United States' position in regards to building this coalition will not in any way compromise on the process of negotiations with Iran, which is something important, as well, to world peace and world order and, of course, something very important to Israelis, as well.

But what I want to say in conclusion is that I hope that this coalition will also later on serve as kind of a backing based on the Arab Peace Initiative, which is such an important document, to push both sides -- the Israelis and Palestinians -- to try yet again another process which can move forward and give hope to both peoples.

I will end my comments here. I thank you wholeheartedly and I will open the floor for questions as Tamara will instruct. Thank you very, very much. (Applause)

MS. WITTES: Well, I want to thank you, Buji, for that great overview and also for a little bit of a readout, although I suspect you didn't give us all the details of your meetings at the White House. Maybe that's a good place for us to begin our conversation.

You've talked about common interests, common challenges in the region, but one of the other things that emerged this summer was a lot of discussion about tensions in the U.S.-Israeli relationship. It seems as though there are some Israeli

politicians who see a percentage in domestic political terms in bashing the United States in certain circumstances. And there have been some suggestions that maybe Israel's diversifying its foreign policy, its international relations. It's building relationships with Russia and with China. Maybe the United States is not as important as it used to be. So I'd like to get your thoughts on that.

And also, on this side, we've seen some recent polls suggesting that among younger Americans and on the left end of the American political spectrum, perhaps a weakening --

MR. HERZOG: What's with that door?

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Perhaps a weakening of support for Israel which has traditionally been very strong across the American public. So your thoughts on where the U.S. and Israel are in their bilateral relationship.

MR. HERZOG: Okay, look, I've been following a U.S.-Israel relationship since early childhood. I come from a family, I was thinking about it, that my family connections to U.S. presidents starts with FDR and I can go in my family lineage of connections and contacts with the White House and American administrations. So, I have it with me.

And I can say that, to make it clear, there cannot be and there will not be any change within Israeli foreign policy, whether we're in the opposition or in the coalition, as to the centrality and the uniqueness of the relationship between Israel and the United States, the unique, intimate shared sets of values, as well as the strategic importance of the United States for Israel. I want to say openly and wholeheartedly, and I said it at the White House, that we are grateful, indeed, for the support of the United States throughout the last few months as we were sitting in shelters. And I was sitting in the same shelter that I sat as a boy during the 1967 war, which actually mind-boggled me, the fact that we

are sitting again in shelters.

But you could see the Iron Dome missiles kind of blowing up those rockets. You just see it. You see it from the street. You see it from where you are. It's very impressive. You have to say thanks for the U.S. support in this and so many other things.

Yes, it was regrettable that there are voices in Israel who are ungrateful and who are obnoxious in the way they say things, but, you know, politicians say whatever the heck they want. You have it anywhere. You even have it in the United States sometimes. (Laughter) So, therefore, you can't take every comment of anyone seriously. At the end, the center -- I can argue with Netanyahu as much as I do and I also know how to talk to Netanyahu a lot. At the end, there is a clear understanding by most of the Israeli political map of the unique relationship between Israel and the United States, and it's unequivocal.

Yes, commercially and otherwise, it's only fair, like any other nation, that we will build strong relations with nations, such as Russia, China, India, and the like. The greatness about Israel is that economically we are a switchyard for the Far East and we are a switchyard to India and we are a switchyard to Europe and the United States. This is a set of economic agreements which gives Israel a unique positioning and this is something that has been built for decades and it only serves the mutual interests of economies and the unique advantages that Israel has in the economic field.

Yes, there is a strong right-wing political force in Israel that fears that the United States is trying to push us towards an agreement with the Palestinians, and, therefore, every time there's pressure they immediately respond with counter-pressure. So what's new? You simply -- many people here would not know that there has been incidents of this nature in the past, as well. It was only Henry Kissinger in the '70s who

said that Israeli foreign policy is not foreign, it's only domestic. And it's absolutely true, it's all politics, and we know what politics is all about, definitely, when we're sitting in Washington. (Laughter)

Now, with respect to the younger generation, yes, I definitely sense a weakening of allegiance. And this is part of our duty as a nation and as a leadership to portray the unique values of Israel as a full-fledged democracy with full values of human rights. It is not always easy. Let's put things in context.

Some of the discussion that I read about in the United States about Israeli politics or Israeli public -- changes in the public structure are so superficial that they look only on, you know, whether it's black or white, namely negative or plus. There's no gray area. So let's understand, Israel is an ever-changing society. It's multifaceted, multicultural, where every group wants to take its place at the helm. Each one has his or her dream. And it's only okay that under such notion there will be change. This doesn't mean that tomorrow we become a religious autocratic state.

We are in the midst of an inner conflict amongst each and every group of our society, and there is not homogenous group in our society. There is intense, immense, simmering from within of each group. So from the outside, when you look around and you see this, that, and the others say, oy, God, this is going to change dramatically; when you study in depth and you talk to these communities, and I can give you dozens of examples, the picture is different. And the same would be with the youngsters, the Jewish youngsters abroad and the same in the United States, as well. We have to work with them and to expose the uniqueness of Israel, as we ought to do, and, also, behave correctly.

MS. WITTES: So you're describing the diversity of Israeli society and Israeli politics, and you've talked about what diverse opposition you lead.

MR. HERZOG: Exactly.

MS. WITTES: But that does present some challenges for you as opposition leader.

MR. HERZOG: Absolutely. Look, there is a story, there is a major story in Israel regarding a member of the Knesset. Her name is Hanin Zoabi. She's a Muslim, a lady from Nazareth. She takes extreme positions, okay? She said that a few days after the abduction this was not done by terrorists. Now, clearly, the national mood is at times already tired from listening to this type of rhetoric and wants to shun it out. You know, I have people in my constituency who say why don't you kick Zoabi out of the Knesset? As if it's something you can automatically do. And it is our duty to protect all voices in the Knesset or in public life so long as they are legal, so long as they are not violating the law. And this is a challenge for a nation. People don't understand that under the duress of the battleground we have to deal with many problems of relationships in our society between voices who are kind of out of the camp, definitely when one says that the kidnapers are not terrorists, which is outrageous. So we deal with it.

So, you know, I commented very strongly against it, but I also said there are things that we will not -- we should prevent. There will be no limitation of free speech in Israel. We will fight for it and this is what you expect from your leadership. And at times it is not so popular and at times there's a young generation who says what are you talking about? We can't stand it. And these are challenges that very few nations face.

And I'm telling you that despite the fact that people tried to illuminate the tension between Jew and Arab in Israel, the silent majority showed that Jew and Arab live together in Israel much better than people understand despite the most difficult, painful circumstances of what they've seen in Gaza or in Israel.

I'll tell you a personal story. I went to see many, many wounded people

in this war, unfortunately, and bereaved families. And some of the bereaved families within their grief told me make sure that all this noise about Jewish-Arab relationship is over. We must defend -- I'm going in a hospital and an officer, badly wounded, he says do me a favor. I don't care about anything. Could you just make sure that they stop bashing, you know, the Arab community? And that shows you that there are voices and forces that are there to be ready.

And when I go to a hospital and the family of this kid tells us you know who saved our life? This Professor Muhammad Eid saved my son's life. It shows you that life is more than what is portrayed from the outside and, therefore, the picture is much greater than that.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. I think that, if I remember right, just as the war was ending, you said when this is over, we should have new elections.

MR. HERZOG: That's true. That's what opposition leaders usually say.

MS. WITTES: Yeah. (Laughter) And they do their best to choose their moments well. And you had some very clear words today about the role that you see yourself playing as leader of the opposition, pushing this government to move forward toward negotiations with Mahmoud Abbas. Are you focused right now on pushing this government and perhaps even joining this government if it does the right thing or are you focused on replacing this government? And what would it take, what would Bibi have to do, to bring you and the Labor Party into the government?

MR. HERZOG: Oh, I'm saying it frankly, our role is to replace the government and that's what we do. And, you know, I've given support to the government when needed in a responsible manner and I've also said time and again, endlessly, and that's why it is about -- you know, there's a time that I don't have to repeat myself, that should Netanyahu make a leap, a bold leap ahead for peace, he definitely will be aided

by us. We didn't hide it. We said it all the time, but I don't see it happening.

The way I read it right now is because of the provisional tilt of some of the constituents more to the right. I think Netanyahu is looking at his base and, so far, his behavioral notes so far have been to go back to his base, which doesn't give me much hope, I must say, and bothers me a lot. And I'm trying to convince the Israeli public that there is hope and there is an alternative.

Now, that's not easy. We are a multi-party system. Because we are a multi-party system, it will be determined by voting to parties who form a coalition. And I definitely believe that in the future when there are elections, following the elections I will be able to form the right coalition. For this I hope to have a centrist block of parties that may be able to go together or run together and offer an alternative. But, of course, it all depends on the next political period.

And here is the comment on the budget --

MS. WITTES: All right, but before you go to the budget --

MR. HERZOG: -- because it has a bearing on where we are going to.

MS. WITTES: Okay. But you'd like to have a unified ticket running in the elections, is that what you just said?

MR. HERZOG: I would like to have a block of parties running together, namely Livni's party, Mofaz' party. I'm doubtful whether Lapid's party will join, but they ought to, but I don't think they will. I think there should be a strong political force that goes together and presents the nation a centrist alternative to the right wing alternative that it sees right now and an alternative that's serious enough to protect the defense and security interests of Israel as definitely as an underlying interest and being proactive on peace and promoting social justice. And that's where we are going to the next phase.

As there is an economic slowdown in Israel, by all indicators we are

going into the budget term, which starts mid-September until the end of December, I don't know how this coalition will be able to craft the right formula for this budget as the defense requirements are huge and as there was a deficit already in the onset. And that may lead to an electoral process or a breakup or a reshuffle or something. The coalition can also stay intact and pass the budget somehow, but it won't be able to be glued together much longer.

MS. WITTES: The time is coming.

MR. HERZOG: I think so that we're talking about sometime in 2015 a movement towards elections.

MS. WITTES: Okay. You raise the economy and, of course, Israel's largest trading partner is Europe. And we've seen in the European Union and in individual European countries some tentative moves in the direction of restricting trade, labeling products that come from Israeli settlements, and so on. We've also seen in Europe over the course of this long, hot summer some disturbing upswings in both anti-Israel sentiment and anti-Semitism.

Your grandfather was the chief rabbi of Ireland and your father, who was president of Israel, was born in Belfast. Just recently, I understand, the plaque on your family's house in Belfast had to be removed --

MR. HERZOG: That's true.

MS. WITTES: -- because it had been defaced.

MR. HERZOG: My father's memorial plaque was removed because there were demonstrations against the plaque. Yes, they looked for something to demonstrate against, that's true.

MS. WITTES: So I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about how that feels given your --

MR. HERZOG: No, but it's an example.

MS. WITTES: Yeah.

MR. HERZOG: It's an example of the problem in the European street. I don't think it's necessarily the major view, the primate view in European politics. On the contrary, I speak to many European politicians -- look, I mean, I'm leading a social democratic party. The social democratic parties of Europe and the rest of the world are combined together in kind of an alignment, so we talk a lot. And social democratic parties are usually more left-leaning and we had a lot of arguments amongst us.

The problem stems from two major sources of friction. One is the Muslim community of Europe, which has become extremely violent and vociferous. And you know what? The ISIS situation puts a focus on part of what happens in those communities, not all. I think actually that ISIS is making an unfair judgment of Islam and the Muslim communities. But in Europe, with some of the madrasas and the lessons of 9-11, we know that there are extreme forces of Islam in Europe that are kind of immediately hitting the street.

Oh, and may I add that in my mind part of Hamas' strategy was repeatedly the same strategy of exposing civilians to a lot of pain in order to flare up the moods all over the world. And this was big-time this summer in Europe. So the same happened in Belfast. There were demonstrations by pro Palestinians and extreme left-wing groups. That's the other: extreme left-wing groups who aligned together in a very dangerous development.

Now, we have to answer that. And the way to answer that above all of the things, of moral, you know, clarity that we have and justification in defending our people and the right of self-defense is also to be proactive in initiating a process whereby we show that we want to give hope for both sides. It requires, also, Abbas, but I definitely

believe there's an opportunity.

And with respect to the issue of banning or boycotting Israeli goods from the West Bank, I think that's a very, very negative step that doesn't serve anything.

Number one, because it will create a huge unemployment in the Palestinian territories of workers who work in very decent labor standards, collective agreements and contracts within those industries, and bring back home a nice salary and, ah, the middle class of Palestinian. And secondly, it only will kind of -- if you ask me frankly, it will only strengthen those right wing political forces who are anyway building this siege theory and preyed on the innate fields of Israel who have been besieged. I don't think it helps. I think it hurts. And the way in my mind to do it is clearly by explaining to the Israelis in a friendly and open manner you've got to move to peace and we understand your security concerns. But boycotting products won't help.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. I'm going to open it up for questions from the audience at this point. We've got a couple microphones I see. And we'll start here in the front with Barbara Slavin. It's coming up on your other side there.

And as always, ground rules are please identify yourself and please ask a single question. Thank you.

MS. SLAVIN: That's a lot to ask of me.

MS. WITTES: I know.

MS. SLAVIN: I am Barbara Slavin. I'm a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and I write for the website Al-Monitor.

MR. HERZOG: That's a good website.

MS. SLAVIN; Thank you.

MR. HERZOG: A very good website. I recommend all the Middle Eastern experts to enjoy that website.

MS. WITTES: There you go, you have your endorsement, Barbara.

(Laughter)

MR. HERZOG: It wasn't planned.

MS. SLAVIN: And I appreciate it. I would assume you were not pleased by the announcement of the confiscation of the thousand acres of land (inaudible), but my question -- here (inaudible) -- is about Iran. (inaudible) U.N. General Assembly, Bibi Netanyahu's going to be coming. How big an issue is Iran now really given everything else that's going on? You barely mentioned it today.

MR. HERZOG: I actually mentioned it as a key issue in the White House.

MS. SLAVIN: (inaudible) Gary Samore, who you may know, a former administration official, told me the other day that he thinks Israel would be happy if the interim Iran agreement was simply extended again because it kind of keeps Iran from 20 percent, puts of the issue, and is basically advantageous to Israel.

MR. HERZOG: Iran is a huge issue. We are all pragmatic people, so we understand that when you see the Genghis Khans coming from the East, beheading human beings in front of world opinion, that there are also immediate priorities to deal with. That's why I was pleased by the fact that one threat does not derogate from the other in the eyes of the administration, then that's the way it should be.

There are tough negotiations going on. We support those negotiations. We are bothered by some of the reports of the National Atomic Agency in Vienna that the Iranians are not exactly comprehending to all of the rules of the game.

And I don't know whether Israel wants an extension or not. There is actually a dialogue this week here in Washington that's being led by the professional teams of both sides. As I gather, the leadership of this process will be probably led by

the new foreign secretary of the European Union, Mrs. Mogherini. I guess she'll need some time to get into this instead of Cathy Ashton. We'll wait and see.

But nobody thinks it's an item that's off the table. Forget it. This is a very big item and that's why we express worry, to make sure, okay, you want to cooperate in a major front against ISIS, that's absolutely right. But please, bear in mind, that the Iranian nuclear program is a standalone issue that ought to be dealt with, and I believe that's the attitude of the P5+1.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Let's go over here.

MS. SACHS: Thank you. I'm Natan Sachs. I'm a fellow here at Brookings. Knesset Member Herzog, you underestimate or you presented the shift in Israeli polling as something that's temporary, but there does seem to be a deeper problem with the brand of left in Israel. The idea of left has lost popularity for over a decade now. And I wonder how you see your role as the leader of the left in changing that. Is it simply by creating a centrist block, as you suggested, or does there need to be something deeper about a change in messaging? Some people have suggested that perhaps the two-state solution or the simple answer of we go back to Abu Mazen would be insufficient for voters. How do you see your vision of what left should be?

MR. HERZOG: Well, first of all, I don't exactly know what it means "left," because the way I portray at least the block that I want to lead is a centrist block. There are left-wing parties on our left, that is very clear. Meretz is on our left. Meretz objected to the war, and we definitely supported the fact that we fight to defend our people. Labor has always been a centrist party.

Now, there is a weariness and suspicion as to what it means, what does the peace camp I'll portray it, what can a peace camp offer that will not bring, again, bloodshed? In fact, the circumstances have not helped us. Whenever we pulled out

unilaterally, we got terror. And, therefore, we have to make sure and explain to the Israelis that we come from a position whereby security is the most important element, but Israel's national security calls for an agreement with the Palestinians.

Secondly, you know, I think more and more Israelis have come out of this battlefield saying to themselves, on the one hand, I don't know if you can do a deal with anybody. On the other hand, this cannot go on. We don't want to repeat it every two or three years. It's obscure. It doesn't make sense. There has to be a different venue and part of it is building trust with our neighbors. I am convinced that I can build trust with our neighbors.

And I think that one of the problems that we've got is that our leaders, together with the Arabs, don't have any trust amongst them. And now there is an opportunity to use this convergence of interests to build trusts and see how we can move from here. And rather than the blame game, try to build -- do something with it and not take steps that are adverse to such a process.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. We'll go to the center here. Is that Maury?

MR. AMATATE: Yeah. Maury Amatate. Ascribing to Abbas the best of intentions and moderation, do you think any Arab leader will give Israel its minimum security requirements and still be able to survive politically?

MR. HERZOG: When it comes to security, yes. I don't know if you can give the other things on the core issues, but that needs to be discussed. Okay?

But security, yes. In fact, there is actually a common interest. I said to Abbas, you know, our security is also the Palestinian State security. There are common grounds to serve together against a coup d'état from Hamas or al Qaeda or ISIS or whatever, all the rogue forces in the region. We have much more of a common denominator in this than many others, and we talk to the Palestinians because, as you

know, we coordinate with them. And as you know, there was common efforts to find the abductors of the kids. And all in all, yes, but it also requires both sides to understand it. And the situation on the ground breeds tension, unfortunately, breeds tension that is not necessary.

MS. WITTES: Okay. Why don't we take a couple of questions from the back. It's hard for me to see amongst the many folks back there, but I see a young man in a jacket and blue shirt. Yeah. Okay. Then when you're finished, if you can just pass the microphone forward to the young lady on the aisle a couple rows ahead of you. Okay?

MR. BONNER: Sure. Hi. Michael Bonner. You mentioned an Israeli coalition against ISIS. Would you foresee those actions as more of logistics intelligence or of maybe direct military strikes in Syria and Iraq?

MS. WITTES: And before you answer that, why don't we take the second question?

MS. HAIKAL: Hi. Tala Haikal, American Task Force on Palestinian. Could you comment --

MR. HERZOG: You send like three emails a day, Tala. (Laughter) Can you lower the volume a bit? (Laughter)

MS. HAIKAL: Could you comment on Israel's decision to appropriate 1,000 acres of land in the West Bank?

MS. WITTES: Okay. So Barbara, you got your second question. There you go. So Israel's role in the struggle against ISIS and the issue of land appropriation in the Gush.

MR. HERZOG: What I meant was that when you look at this convergence of interests you understand that these are moderate nations that together

see non-nation organizations trying to derail the stability of the region. You see Hezbollah in the north and you see Hamas in the south and you see ISIS in east. So you realize that these nations together can share information, can support each other.

Clearly, I see the Jordanian interests in this respect as vital. As vital. They are the frontier. The Saudis are at the frontier. The Kurds are the frontier. We all need to work together, all these nations. I would love to have Israel as part of the coalition. I think it would be immense and (inaudible). And I'm really sorry that we are not there at the groundbreaking of that coalition, although, naturally, we have our capabilities. Not in direct activity, not what you thought, but in indirect activity.

As you know or you may have followed, there are -- some of these elements are right on our border in the Golan. And when you look at it you see -- from the army posts of Israel, you see Syrian military and right near it al Qaeda, and you'll see jihadists and you name it, like the Wild West. And, therefore, naturally, we are an interested party and, naturally, we need to help as much as we can, in all ways and means. I'm sure we will work with the United States in this respect.

Now, with respect to the land appropriation, let me explain the following. Of course, we criticize it, as well as other members of our parties that are in the coalition, such as Livni's party and the Peace Party. But why did it not create a bigger wave of criticism in Israel?

First because legally and technically it's not yet any step towards settlement construction. It's kind of a declaration that you invite people to object. And it's kind of government high commissioners' land in Gvaot and it's in Gush Etzion. It's like the Etzion Bloc, which is in the center of the Israeli consensus of any swap of land in the future. So that's why it kind of went amidst all sorts of other issues on the news. It was less of an uproar in Israel.

Interestingly, however, in the polls, you would expect that it would be heavily criticized. But for me, the positive point was that there was an equal criticism -- there was an equal approach by the Israeli public. The same percentage objected to it as supported it, which is interesting in a nation which is, at this stage, kind of more to the right. So it showed me that the Israelis understood, many of them, that it may have been adverse to the interests of Israel.

MS. WITTES: Did you discuss it with Abu Mazen when you spoke to him?

MR. HERZOG: No, I didn't. We didn't discuss it. No, because we had to talk on many other issues and we didn't delve into that. I know it bothered him, but I leave it aside because Abu Mazen says actually this issue, this step serves Abu Mazen's request for demarcation. He says demarcate the border and then you'll know where you can build and where not. This is like his line trying to present his case.

MS. WITTES: Show us the map.

MR. HERZOG: Right.

MS. WITTES: Show us the map. Okay. I think we have time for maybe two more questions.

MR. HERZOG: Last two questions.

MS. WITTES: Okay. Lisa up front here and then we'll take this gentleman on the aisle. And we'll take those two in a row and then come back.

MS. EISEN: Thank you. Thank you for your remarks and for being here with us. I'm Lisa Eisen from the Schusterman Foundation. And you referred to the socioeconomic issues and to a simmering within and to the need to address social justice, and I'm wondering to what extent you think these issues can actually be addressed in the aftermath of the war and the foreign policy political crises. And what

role will you play in addressing those issues? Thank you.

MR. HERZOG: By the way, I'll answer that because that's --

MS. WITTES: Okay.

MR. HERZOG: First of all, I know the Schusterman Foundation activity in Israel and it's been groundbreaking and most impressive. I served as minister of welfare and social services for four years, and I revolutionized social services and your foundation was one of our partners. And that's a big issue. The social-economic issue is big. And in the aftermath of the war this thing is going back big time. There will be even more. I said post-traumatic. There will be more vibes in this respect than people understand.

There is growing pressure economically. There is a psychological burden on many of the citizens in the south. There is a demand to give a safety net to human beings in the country, new immigrants, poor people, old age, et cetera. It is going to be a huge issue and I definitely intend as the leader of the opposition to put it as a major agenda item. And we're actually leading in the Knesset now a very big battle on some of these issues related to housing and to the allocation of funding and to fairness in the allocation of funding and so forth and so on.

MS. WITTES: There was also a lot of complaining during the course of the war that military budgets were cut because of the pressures that the government's been facing and that's one reason why they didn't have an answer to the tunnels before the war.

MR. HERZOG: That will be a big debate. And you know what? At the end we always have to find the right balance between security and civil needs. They're actually intertwined. And the strength of a nation is judged not only by the budget of the military, although clearly, in light of the war, there will be more need for certain projects to

be taken care of.

MS. WITTES: Okay, last question right here.

MR. SIEGEL: Good afternoon. Max Siegel here, local student.

Question for Knesset Member Herzog, recently we've seen Prime Minister Netanyahu seek more ties with nations such as Russia, India, and China. And I know that you touched upon this earlier in your speech. Especially in the face of sanctions facing Russia, for example, Minister Lieberman had made a statement that it would be wise to pursue closer trade ties, closer cultural ties with countries of the BRICS coalition. And there was even talks of Israel beginning negotiations to join the Eurasian Customs Union, as an example.

MR. HERZOG: I don't think it's true.

MR. SIEGEL: Well --

MR. HERZOG: Okay, so what is the question?

MR. SIEGEL: What would be the Labor Party and the greater opposition's stance on this issue?

MR. HERZOG: Look, it's not an issue in Israeli public discourse, you should know that. It hasn't emerged as a big issue. Nobody really feels its an issue. You have to understand that there are over a million Israelis who came from former Soviet Union. They are a very important element in society, in politics, in media, in many, many things. So they were themselves divided on the Ukraine issue, each one from where he came or where she came from.

This issue which you mentioned is not even known to Israelis. It's not true that Israel is looking towards I don't know what. Commercial ties? Yes, legitimate. Why not? On the contrary, I think it's outstanding. I think it's part of what the nation has to do, is to find new export markets and share together. Moscow is four hours flight from

us and Bombay is seven hours flight from us. Okay. But that doesn't change the strategic situation of Israel's partnership with the United States and with other nations.

And I think that one needs to understand that the inner Israeli political system entails voices, multigenerational voices of differing positions about the whole conflict. It's interesting. There are the old guard who came as immigrants. Most of them are veterans of World War II, who march on the 9th of May in huge rallies all over the country -- none of you are really aware of it -- with all their medals and their history, and it's kind of a source of pride. I don't have to tell you how this is a big issue.

And then there is the second generation who is the one who are carrying the economic building, who are feeding their parents and their children, who started really from scratch, and who are multilingual. And then there is the young generation which is totally Israeli. So how could you judge and say whether it affects one position or the other or none at all.

MS. WITTES: Thank you, Buji. I think you've given us a lot to think about.

MR. HERZOG: Thank you very much.

MS. WITTES: And I think that the next months are going to be very interesting ones for you and very interesting for us to watch. We look forward to having you back.

MR. HERZOG: Thanks a lot.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. (Applause)

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