



THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
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VIDEO BRIEFING TRANSCRIPT  
PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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## Video Briefing Transcript: Prospects for Peace in the Middle East

The following video transcript has been edited.

***Q: Why should the U.S. take the lead?***

A: I think in Arab–Israeli peacemaking the United States has and will continue to take a leading role. Largely, because the United States is the only power in the world which the Israelis are willing to have play the role of an interlocutor with the Arab parties. They simply do not have the confidence in the United Nations and less confidence in the Europeans, and so that’s been a reality given the close relationship between the United States and Israel. So we play that role. Also, we do have, despite all our difficulties in the Arab world, very structural and important relationships with the Arab parties – be it Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, the Arab world in general. So we can play that role, and we can lead the international efforts to support peace by the Europeans, Russians, Chinese and the Arab world itself. So the role of the American president is, I would say, it’s critical.

***Q: What can President Bush do after Annapolis?***

A: So President Bush is starting again, very late in his administration — the last year of his administration. I think it is a positive and a good step. There’s a lot of skepticism as to if there is enough time for him to bring anything truly to final settlement. But if he does engage the persona of the American presidency in these negotiations, I think that real progress can be made in two very important areas: one on the ground, in terms of the Israelis living up to their obligations; and the Palestinians living up to their obligations on security. But, for this to succeed, the president is going to have to roll up his sleeves. He and his secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, they’re going to have to be engaged on a real-time sustained basis. This goes beyond just some shuttle diplomacy and trips to the region; they really have to use the influence of the United States in a short period of time to bring the parties together.

***Q: Can you see both sides agreeing?***

A: Yes, I can. I think there have been years of negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians and also, for example, between the Israelis and the Syrians on the northern front. There are very few issues on the Israeli–Lebanese side. I think once there’s progress on Israeli–Syrian negotiation, the Lebanese negotiations will be brought home very quickly. But if you take

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a look at what was achieved during the Clinton administration at the end, they failed to come to a settlement, but they did narrow the issues very strongly on the key areas: for example, a general agreement that the final border has to be based on the 1967 June 4 alliance. When you look at the refugee issue, there's a general agreement — that's very contentious — that Palestinian refugees will largely go to the new state of Palestine, or be resettled in the countries they're in or elsewhere, and be compensated; that the principle of return, if carried out fully, would inundate the state of Israel with so many Palestinians that Israel would lose its status as a democratic Jewish state. So while that is an extremely contentious issue, there is a realization over the years that you have to be a little more practical about this in order to get the two-state solution accomplished. When you look at the issue of Jerusalem, there can be a settlement on Jerusalem. In fact I think Jerusalem is probably easier to negotiate than the Palestinian refugee issue. But there is a general understanding that there will be a Palestinian state and an Israeli state, that each one will claim Jerusalem as its capital, and the eastern sectors of Jerusalem, which is Arab-populated largely, will become the capital state of Palestine, and of course the western section will be the capital state of Israel, and there will be some arrangement on holy places, which are holy to all three monotheistic religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. That there will be certain special arrangements made for the Holy Basin, as they call it. So, in general, I think that as daunting as these final status issues seem to be, a lot of work has been done, and therefore we must get back to the key factor which is political will and courage on the part of the leaders involved, both Arab, Israeli and Western leaders, especially the United States.

### *Q: Will Hamas stand in the way?*

A: This is an incredibly difficult phenomenon to deal with, and as you know, relatively recent in 2006. Hamas won the elections in the Palestinian territories. Then in 2007 they committed this coup in Gaza and took over Gaza militarily, given the differences between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. And therefore the Palestinian political community is severely split. It's split, if you will, ideologically, politically and territorially. Now, I think the only hope is that if President Abu Mazen of the Palestinian Authority can make headway on the peace negotiations and can consolidate his position — there's no doubt in my mind that the Palestinians are going to have to come to some reconciliation amongst themselves. But better that be done when the moderates such as Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority can then reach out to Hamas and

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make the necessary arrangements. But I think that Abu Mazen's hand has to be strengthened before there can be any sort of political incorporation of Hamas into the Palestinian entity.

### ***Q: Can we promote democracy successfully?***

A: Well this is a huge issue: the promotion of democracy in the Muslim world and the Muslim countries. I think we have to stop being naïve about how we approach democracy promotion in the Arab world and the Muslim world. First of all, Islam is the predominate religion of the region. Secondly there are very important Islamist organizations, leaders and parties in the Muslim world. If you're going to promote democracy, you have to expect that Islamist parties are going to come to power in one way or another. Perhaps not in all cases, but they are going to have a political role. There are secular parties in the Muslim world. There are religious parties. The important thing is to, I believe, the realistic way to promote democracy especially in the Muslim world, is not to concentrate on elections per se — elections are one factor in democracy. For example, there are electoral autocracies in the Middle East. You have elections where dictators are elected by 90 percent of the vote, plus. Is that democracy? What we should be promoting are the building blocks of democracy in the Middle East, in the broader Middle East, and building up the institutions of democracy. That means, the rule of law, judiciary systems that are independent, political parties, civil society, NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) — in other words, the rule of law, the adoption of the principle of the alternation of power, which means that if you're elected in this round, and your party and you lose during the next election, you step aside peacefully. All of these principles of democracy have to be inculcated. Not from scratch, but they have to be built up, and I think the United States would be much better served in its long-term process of building institutions that can promote broader political participation than by trying to parachute in an American model of democracy into the sands of Arabia. It's simply not going to take.

### ***Q: Why engage Syria and Iran?***

A: I am a proponent of engagement with our adversaries. I think that's really one of the most important things diplomacy is about — is really negotiating with your adversaries and your enemies. That's really one of the highest tasks of diplomacy. I think the United States especially has nothing to lose by talking, unless we feel so insecure about ourselves that we think talking is

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a concession. Talking becomes a concession only if you're willing to give up things upfront, and I don't think any American administration, Democratic or Republican, is that naïve. A lot of people refer to President Ronald Reagan, who had very strong convictions about communism and the Soviet Union, and he branded the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." Yet during his two terms, the Reagan administrations negotiated continually with the Soviet Union, especially on arms control issues. So, I think that's a good model to follow. You engage, you test the waters, you determine if there is common ground between the two countries' positions and interests; and if there is, you try to build on them, and if there isn't, at least you've tried before you have to go to other options. So to me, there's absolutely a very real interest for the United States to engage with countries like Syria and Iran.

### ***Q: What would we want Syria to do?***

A: Well, Syria has a major interest, for example, in regaining the Golan Heights, which it lost to Israel in the 1967 War. That is a real incentive for them to engage with us because they realize our position vis-à-vis Israel, and ever since I've been involved in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations, the Syrians always wanted us in the room or just outside the room in terms of Israeli-Syrian negotiations. Therefore, I believe they realize that if progress is made in Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, Syria will then become recognized as a constructive player in the Middle East by the United States, the Europeans and other powers in the international community. It can regain its regional role, but in the context of Arab-Israeli peace. It would have to really forego a strong hand in Lebanon and stop interfering in Lebanese internal political affairs. It would have to stop its support of Hezbollah, and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. These are things that would be part of it, but given my experience and even recent talks with the Syrians, I am convinced that the largest stake they have is enough of an inducement for them to engage seriously in Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

### ***Q: Would Israel make a deal with Syria?***

A: In all my discussions with Israeli officials and military personnel on high and at different levels, they are very interested in an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement. Because that would truly stabilize Israel's northern front. It would stabilize Israel's problems with Hezbollah in Lebanon. It would cut off Syrian support for groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. And under

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those conditions, Israel would be more secure. And when I say “more secure,” Israel will not be giving up its military superiority in the region, but it would have eliminated one of the most important military Arab powers on its borders as an enemy. So, yes, the Israelis are very, very interested in Israeli–Syrian peacemaking.

### ***Q: What would we want from Iran?***

A: Iran is probably more problematic in terms of engagement, because of the nature of the regime — the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Ayatollah Khomeini. They took hostage our diplomats those 444 days. It left a real bad mark in American public opinion, as it should, and Iran has supported terrorist organizations including Hezbollah and Hamas and others throughout the world. Iran proselytizes a very extremist view on major political issues, including Israel and Arab–Israeli peace. Iran has threatened its neighbors, especially in the Gulf. So Iran is more problematic. Having said that, Iran is a regional power. It’s Persia. It has a very rich history. It’s there. It has one of the larger populations in the region. It has oil. It has gas. It has a serious military force. Therefore, Iran can be a real major problem, or an attempt can be made to make it a more constructive player in the region. On that basis, I think the common ground we have, especially with the nuclear issue, is the question mark of Iran’s nuclear weapons intentions to engage. I think every effort has to be made to stem the possibility that Iran becomes a nuclear weapons power, because that will cause a cascading effect in the region, whereby countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia and Turkey and others will start thinking about their own nuclear weapons potential. So I think an effort should be made to engage Iran without illusions, put all the issues we have on the table, but put them on the table in a comprehensive whole.

### ***Q: Can we get Iran to negotiate?***

A: My own belief is that we will never get Iran to really deal with the nuclear issues seriously unless we have a comprehensive set of issues on the table. The Iranians feel that the United States’ main policy is regime change in Tehran. They have this deep-seated perception that that is U.S. policy. If that’s the case, they’re never going to negotiate with us seriously. So, we also have to put our cards on the table in order to have, if possible, a constructive dialogue. Now after prolonged — when I say prolonged, maybe a year or two — negotiations of this nature, nothing comes out and we see that there are real differences that cannot be narrowed, then at least we

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know where we stand. And again, one can look at other options. But to me it would be irresponsible to take the worst case scenarios — for example, military action against Iran as a operating principle of American policy that's up front — before having gone through this due diligence, and we may be surprised by what we find. Iran's population is very interesting to analyze. Only a little over 52, 53 percent is Persian. They have a large population of Kurds, of Arabs, of other ethnic confessional groups. They have a very weak economy, despite their oil wealth. They have to import gasoline and refined petroleum products. There's inflation. There's high unemployment, and there's a burgeoning youthful population. So, Iran is not a superpower. It has its weaknesses that again, I think, would enhance the prospects of engaging with the country to see what the possibilities are to bring it into the larger community.

### *Q: Can we reunite Iraq?*

A: I think we can. I'm not a proponent of the breakup of Iraq. Even though it was in many ways artificially created by the British after World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. But, you know, the British drew a lot of lines in the sand throughout the Middle East, and you can trace a lot of our problems today to the artificial divisions made by the French and British colonials. Iraq was one of those, and I think that despite all the difficulties that we've seen in Iraq, there is still the idea of an Iraqi nation. But I think it would be held together in a form of federalism in which power and authority is delegated to the provinces or whatever regions that are carved out. I think it would be a mistake to carve out regions on a sectarian basis. I think regions should be carved out on an administrative, geographical basis. There will be more Shiites in one administrative region, more Kurds in another, more Sunnis, Shiites mixed in others. But I do believe in a federalist solution to Iraq, but not on a sectarian basis. If we can get to that point, security issues are largely resolved, as is central decision making on oil and how the revenues should be really shared throughout the country, provincial elections and political reconciliation between the Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, those major sectarian groups. Those are big ifs, but I think that can be done in a federalist structure. But it would be a terrible, terrible development in my eyes if Iraq disintegrated into three sectarian zones, Kurdish, Shiite, Sunni, wherever you draw the lines, because that would be very destabilizing for the Middle East as a whole. And one example, the Kurds — if Iraq disintegrated, the Kurdish populations in Iran, in Turkey, in Syria would have an



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incentive to join that Kurdish entity, and that would cause incredible territorial security issues for key countries in the region.

### *Q: What should U.S. policy be?*

A: In terms of U.S. strategy toward the broader Middle East, I think it is really important for whoever the next president of the United States is, the next administrations that come, to realize that this struggle within the world of Islam is their struggle between the forces of extremism and radicalism and the forces of moderation, between the forces of modernity and a very orthodox view of tradition. And this is their struggle. It is theirs to decide. But given our influence in the world, we can help influence that struggle, but we cannot decide it. That's very important. So we should not be that interventionist, but we should do what we can to help the forces of moderation marginalize the radicals and the extremists in the Muslim world. And that means using all the tools of diplomacy and policy that we can — from resolving conflicts such as the Arab–Israeli conflict that the extremists exploit for their own political ends; resolving Kashmir, which is a hot spot, a crisis center between India and Pakistan, Hindus and Muslims; by building up the institutions of democracy, but helping them build the building blocks, not to try to impose an American model of democracy on them, but rather by very intelligent economic aide programs that help create jobs, which is essential to marginalize the radicals and to have a cultural understanding of the region. We have to educate ourselves. Our diplomats have to be better educated. Our intelligence officials, our military people. We have to learn languages in this country, the languages of the region, so we can communicate with these peoples. There's a host of things that we can do as long as we're intelligent enough to realize that this is a long-term generational process.