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Pod Cast Transcript

I guess I'll begin by saying that even though I'm an academic I actually have a little bit of involvement with peace making because I was an advisor to the Palestinian delegation during the Palestinian- Israeli negotiations which started in Madrid and continued in Washington for almost two years, from the fall of 1991 to the summer of 1993. And behind the scenes, we didn't know it at the time, the negotiations were secretly taking place that lead to the September 1993 agreement, so-called Oslo Accords.

After thinking about these things and being a little bit involved in them, the first thing I would say is that I think it's important that this administration not make the many many mistakes that were made by administrations in the past. One of the things that I don't think we have to worry about so much is the subordination of Arab- Israeli peace to other considerations, and in my latest book, Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East, one of the things that I try and show is that the United States and the Soviet Union both tried to subordinate Middle East peace making to their rivalry with one another and I think that in the sort of mini cold war that the United States has been waging against Iran under the Bush Administration, many things

have been subordinated to that rivalry including, I would argue, Arab-Israeli peace and Palestinian- Israeli peace.

So the first thing that I hope we will avoid in the next administration is the idea that this is just a tool to achieve American objectives in the region, that Arab-Israeli peace is not important in and of itself. I think it actually is important. The national interest of the United States is very much bound up with this because we tend to be blamed for what happens. We're seen as the dominant power in the region, which we are. We're seen as the closest and main and special ally with Israel, which we are. We're seen as having special relationships with countries like Egypt and Jordan, which we do have, and especially also with Saudi Arabia. So outcomes are ascribed to the United States, even where, as is sometimes the case, it doesn't necessarily have to do with us. So I think it's really within our national interest to resolve this and I don't think there are many things that are more important for the American national image.

Having said that I think there are a lot of lessons learned from the past and mistakes that have been made that should be taken on board. The first is, you can't just make Palestinian-Israeli peace in isolation. If you're going to do that, you have to really do it as part of what only two American presidents, I think, really realized was necessary. The first was President George Herbert Walker Bush when he and Secretary Baker

organized the Madrid Conference. The one before that was President Carter with Secretary Vance when they tried initially to launch a comprehensive settlement, and then Begin went off and did a separate peace. I don't think that's possible. I don't think you can have a Palestinian- Israeli settlement without bringing the Syrians and Lebanese and others into this thing. And I don't think you can have a Syrian – Israeli peace without bringing the Palestinians and others into this.

Things have gotten too mixed up in the Middle East. Things have gotten too interconnected. So what was true in the 70's and was even more true in the 90's is now absolutely incontrovertibly. You have to have the comprehensive settlement. You have to solve all of these problems. It doesn't mean you solve them together at the same time. You may do them on separate tracks, as the Bush-Baker approach in 1991 would have had it. But you have to understand that the solution has to be comprehensive, and that means it has to have some kind of international buy-in.

The United States is still the greatest power in world history and the dominant power in the Middle East and all that, but that does not mean that we can cavalierly ignore other powers, or that we don't actually need their input. We need their input on this issue perhaps more than any other, both because it lends credibility to the outcome, and because

frankly we don't know everything. Sometimes other people have interesting and important things to say. You might not like what the Europeans say, or what Iran says, or what the Russians say, or what the Chinese or the Indians or whoever it may be, but I really think the international buy-in is important, difficult though it may be.

A couple other quick lessons, just to finish this lessons part of what I want to say. Another lesson is that the result should not depend on the fact of power. If the fact of power were to be able to determine an outcome, Israel would have been able to impose a settlement multiple times in the past twenty or thirty years. But that doesn't work, because it's not just power that determines outcomes, but also because such a settlement is not lasting. The things that Israel imposed in the Oslo Accords broke down to Israel's detriment and the Palestinians, because they weren't based on justice and they weren't based on equality. They did not involve the resolution of core issues.

One of the most painful lessons of the 1990's for me at least, was the approach that the United States and Israel insisted on, which was of interim solutions and sort of trying to pair it with confidence building, and so on, which enabled the bulldozer like progress of the expansion of settlements and the establishment of a matrix of control over the territories to continue, while the core issues were just not addressed. So I

think that interim solutions are not dealing with the core issues of the conflict, which is what we unfortunately were committed to for most of the 1990s. And all the time everybody was thinking the peace process was under way and a two-state solution would emerge.

In fact it lead to a situation where I think the two-state solution is very much in danger, where I think that the facts on the ground have now dissolved and you could argue, that it's going to be so much harder today in 2009, to do things that probably would have been relatively easy to do in 1991.

In 1991 there were about 200,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Today there are half a million. In 1991 there was almost complete freedom of movement for Palestinians. There was a very small segment of Palestinians who for security reasons were not allowed to move around. But everybody else could go almost anywhere. They could go into Jerusalem, they could go from the West Bank to Gaza or from Gaza to the West Bank, they could go to Israel, they could go to the Golan Heights. They could go pretty much anywhere they wanted. Today, there is only a very small, very tiny proportion of Palestinians allowed any freedom of movement at all. People who have the V.I.P. passes, people who are P.A. functionaries who are basically doing what Israel wants are allowed a certain degree of freedom. And the

overwhelming majority of Palestinians have fantastically restricted conditions imposed on their movement.

All of these changes are now seen as absolutely vital to the well being of Israelis and so it's not just the settlements, it's this nature of control, that Jeff Halper and Amira Haas called the matrix of control, that has developed over the past twenty years, that would have to be dismantled. And so it's not just the security matrix that has to be dismantled, it's the Israeli government these two decades, things that nobody dreamed were necessary in 1991 and 1992 are now seen as vital to the security of every kindergartener and every woman, man and child in Israel.

The last thing that has to be dismantled is this network of interest that is bound up in the maintenance of this network of control. The occupation settlement, the industrial complex, the network of companies that an Israeli website called Who Profits put together by women against the occupation shows ranges from hundreds of companies, high-tech companies, that keep the data bases on which Israel manages the four million Palestinians all of whom are monitored on a daily basis, to the telephone data bases, to the security companies who monitor the tack points, to the companies who build the settler-only roads, so on and so forth. All of this is going to have to be dismantled, and these things

didn't exist in 1991. None of them existed. There were 200,000 settlers but it was in a different context.

The last thing that I would say is that the Obama Administration is going to have to understand that it will have to make enormously major shifts on the ground in Israel and Palestine if a two-state solution is to be salvaged. Now I'm somewhat dubious as to whether it's going to be possible. Many many people have said that the moment for a two-state solution has past. I'm not sure that that is true. But if the moment hasn't past, there's not much time left. And that means not just tinkering at the margins with so-called illegal settlements. There has to be a paradigm shift by the administration to completely halt this bulldozer that's been running for forty-one and a half years, and throw it into reverse. The building has to stop, there has to be dismantling, the roads have to be pulled up, the walls have to be removed and put somewhere else.

And all of that is not very easy, and I'm not sure where the physical will be going to come from, but if they are going to talk about a two-state solution people aren't going to see it as anything more than the meaningless pieties that nobody believes and that are just a cover up for the continuation of the status quo which is a one-state solution. Which is a one-state solution of the worst sort, which is a continuation of the status quo of today where there's only one state between Israel and the

Mediterranean, which is the Israeli state, with differential statuses for the various Palestinians under its control—where some are citizens with some rights but discriminated against, some are like Jerusalemites who have a great deal of freedom of movement but can't vote and so on, and some, most, are people who have no rights at all in the West Bank and God help them, the million and a half people in the Gaza strip. That status quo is not to be continued indefinitely into the future and that is sort of a perverse one-state solution.

Enormously wrenching, difficult changes in the whole paradigm are going to have to take place. And how we do that I don't know. I don't know we do it in terms of Congress which is living in a parallel universe of its own, how we do that in terms of the media which has never questioned any of this stuff, and how we do it in terms of the political balance in this country where you have, I mean if I were to say this to an ordinary audience, a lot of people would say hey that makes sense, but then you call upon the leadership of the American Jewish Community. You call upon the major institutions there, and they're lead by people who are way to the right of their constituents and who have institutional power, and for whom all of these ideas are asinine and pretty much believe everything I've said is asinine.

They're going to have to come up against some pretty serious, pretty grim realities if they're going to deal with those conventional realities. Frankly, I think that if you don't challenge all of them, you're going to end up with something that's not going to work. I don't think that forcing the Palestinians into a solution which suits Israel and suits American political realities as they are currently configured is going to be a lasting solution.

We want something that people will see as just and as equitable, on which there's buy in, and that means you have to bring the whole of the Palestinian National movement into it, both the Fatah wing that's already committed to this idea but also the Hamas wing which has said that it would support a coalition government that would negotiate with Israel but that a referendum would then have to vote on the results. Even I'm not clear that all of the Hamas leadership supports that solution today. But you have to bring them in that direction, because if you don't have all Palestinians aboard, or most of them, then you don't have a deal.

Right now Palestinian politics is deeply divided partly as a function of dysfunctional ties in Palestinian politics, and partly a function of external powers like the United States and Iran and Israel, notably, doing all they can to split the Palestinians in the service of their own objectives. I think it should be an objective of the Obama Administration to help the

Palestinians to get their act together and then to encourage them with both incentives and disincentives to get involved in the process, at the end of which the Palestinians could have a reasonable prospect of self-determination and justice. And that's the key thing. You got to get them on board with both incentives and disincentives, but not through a process where they feel they've been shafted. It's not the case that there are two victims in this conflict.

You can see Israel is the result of the victimization of the Jewish people, but Israelis have not been victims in Palestine. It's the Palestinians who have been the victims. And that has to some how permeate the way in which the United States and all of us approach this. If we come at this with the idea- oh all of us have suffered and it's really terrible, we're not going to get anywhere because that's not true. Yes, historically over millennia, over hundreds of years Israel has suffered, but who suffered where is quite important, and what the outcomes are is quite important, and what people can see is quite important.

So it's a tall order for the Obama Administration. I'm really not sure that this President, given his other concerns, the economy and more, is going to be able to do *all* of these things. Whether he is willing to do them, he may not be able to do them. But I think these are things we should be pushing for. Because if we don't reverse the current dynamic, then I am

as convinced as I can be that the status quo is what we're going to live with, and that's an unstable, unjust and untenable status quo. It will break down. It will break down in a way that nobody will like. It will cause mainly suffering to the Palestinians but will also cause enormous amounts of suffering to Israel, and it will be seen as something supported by the United States. If we don't change it, we'll be seen as the ones who are responsible for it, whether that's fair or not fair.

So from the point of view of the American national interest, or from the point of the interest in peace in the Middle East, or if you're concerned with Israel and that interest, I would say that this is something that really really has to be changed.