

PolicyWatch #1231 : Special Forum Report

Shimon Peres Addresses The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium

Featuring Shimon Peres and [David Makovsky](#)
May 15, 2007

The following are edited extracts from an exclusive on-camera interview with Israeli vice prime minister Shimon Peres, conducted by David Makovsky, director of The Washington Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. The interview was shown to participants at the Institute's Soref Symposium on May 11, 2007.

Q: Can Israel live with an Iranian nuclear bomb?

Peres: If the Iranians continue to do three things simultaneously -- namely, develop nuclear weapons, be a center of terror, and be fanatical in their ambition to run the entire Middle East -- eventually the three will mix and nuclear bombs may fall into the irresponsible hands of terrorists. Then it will be a problem for the rest of the world. The world cannot live with terrorists obtaining nuclear capacity, and sooner or later the world will take action. However, I do not believe that Israel has to be a volunteer or pioneer in that endeavor.

Q: What are the regional consequences for Israel if the United States decides to leave Iraq?

Peres: The war did not start because of Israel, and I am not sure that its aftermath will affect Israel much. It will be more of a problem for the Arab world if Iraq disintegrates and becomes three different entities. That would cause great problems for the Arab world, for Turkey, for Iran, and for Syria. There are many other confrontations in the Middle East that do not have any effect on Israel, such as conflicts in Algeria, Sudan, Somalia, and elsewhere. Not every conflict in the Middle East begins with Israel or relates to Israel. So there is very little that we have to do in the case of Iraq.

Q: Do you think there is potential for war with Syria? Or, alternatively, do you believe it is important to open up a channel of communication and perhaps peace with Damascus in the near term?

Peres: Eventually there must be a channel of communication with the Syrians, but right now there are other burning problems on the agenda. Number one is the future of Lebanon. Will Prime Minister Fouad Siniora remain and hold Lebanon together as a more or less democratic, pluralistic country? Or will Hizballah topple him? Currently, Syria is supporting Hizballah with weapons and money. How can one then talk about peace? Also, the United States has several serious demands concerning Syria's involvement in Iraq. We will not move without the United States -- we have to work together. I believe this is vital for the balance of power and the process of peace.

Q: How would you stop the flow of arms from Syria to Lebanon?

Peres: There is no need to create another UN resolution -- rather, there is a need to implement the existing resolution. There is a strong UN force presence in Lebanon, and it need only go a bit deeper to stop the flow of arms. Hizballah came out of the last war completely defeated, in my judgment -- not in terms of the story of

the war, but in the results. Hassan Nasrallah is so logical about Israel that we do not understand why he is not equally logical about Hizballah. That is, he "praises" Israel for trying to draw a lesson from the war, but he could stand to draw some lessons of his own. What did he achieve with this war besides blood, disappointment, and tragedies? Why did he go to war in the first place?

Q: In your view, what is the role of potential engagement between Israel and the Arab League?

Peres: I believe we have to try and move on three parallel but disconnected tracks at the same time. First is negotiations with the Palestinians. We agreed to the creation of a Palestinian state, to handing over most of the West Bank, and we could have made peace. However, Palestinians are divided between Hamas and Fatah, and Hamas has not allowed Fatah to move. Nevertheless, we have to continue and avoid putting this track on hold.

Second, there is the original Arab-Israeli track. Whether it is the Saudis or the Arab League, we are ready to sit with them. The problem is that the Arab League has to decide unanimously, and many members will not agree to negotiate with us because they do not recognize the state of Israel.

Third, and perhaps most promising of all, is the economic track. Politics is about borders, and it is very difficult to conclude negotiations about borders in the current atmosphere. Economics, however, is about relations. Europe did not change its borders, it changed its relations. As a result, we now have a united Europe, which is totally different from the Europe that existed throughout the previous thousand years.

Q: What is the way forward for Kadima as a party?

Peres: You don't run a government by polls. You read the polls, but they are not the deciding factor. The fact is that the coalition headed by Kadima has a very impressive majority in the parliament, including three or four nonconfidence slots, where I believe the result was 60 against 8. I don't think anybody wants elections, especially given Kadima's majority. Those are the facts that should guide our behavior.

Q: Did you think the Winograd Report was fair to the government?

Peres: This is a nice aspect of Israeli culture. Once we have a war, no matter whether we win or we lose, we have an investigating committee. We like that -- it is not so bad to go over all the events and see where mistakes were made. I don't know of any war that has proceeded without mistakes. War itself is a great mistake, but it's a mistake that produces more mistakes. In any war you investigate, you will inevitably be shocked by the number of mistakes made. War is a competition of mistakes -- those who make the fewest win.

It is also very strange that the government appointed an investigating committee to investigate the government itself, knowing full well that the verdict would not be very complimentary. Perhaps that is part of democracy; I don't believe it is a failure of democracy, in any case. I believe the process is fair -- an example of a free country judging itself.

Q: If you had to give Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice advice regarding the Israeli-Palestinian political horizon, what would you tell her?

Peres: First of all, I very much appreciate her recent visit to the Middle East. It helped maintain hope for peace under disappointing conditions, and that is something. Sometimes maintenance is a form of advancement, a form of progress.

We shouldn't let the Palestinian dialogue stop. We have to keep an attentive ear to what the Saudis and the Arab League are saying. It's not yet an orchestra, but it's new music in the Middle East. Over the past 100 years, we have never heard important Arab leaders like the king of Saudi Arabia say that the time for a strategy of war is over, and the time for a strategy of peace has come.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Hiva Feizi.

Copyright 2007 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy