

THE ISRAEL PROJECT

**CONFERENCE CALL:
ISRAEL-U.K. RELATIONS AND PEACE TALKS**

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**SPEAKER:
RON PROSOR,
ISRAELI AMBASSADOR TO THE U.K.**

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LAURA KAM: Hello and welcome. My name is Laura Kam and I am senior director for European affairs and special projects at The Israel Project. I am so sorry for our technical delay.

On behalf of our entire team, I'm very pleased that such a prominent group of journalists and individuals interested in Israel could join us today to hear from Ambassador Ron Prosor, who is currently the Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom. This briefing with Ambassador Prosor is on the record.

Now, for those of you who don't know, The Israel Project is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to providing journalists accurate information about Israel. The Israel Project is not related to any government or government agency. We have offices in Washington and Jerusalem. Our team of more than 30 experts and former journalists is always ready to help you get the facts you need to cover the Middle East. So please, do not hesitate to contact us if we can help you in any way.

The information on our websites are in 10 languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese and Portuguese. And I'd like to point you toward our factsheet on U.K.-Israel relations, which you can find on TIP's website, www.theisrealproject.org. Go to "quick links," "backgrounders."

Now, without any further ado, I'd like to introduce you to our speaker today. His Excellency Ron Prosor has been the ambassador of Israel to the Court of St. James since November 2007. With over two decades of experience at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Prosor has carved out an international reputation as one of Israel's most distinguished diplomats.

Prior to his mission to London, Mr. Prosor served as director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2004 to 2007, overseeing the work of the foreign ministry through the disengagement from Gaza in 2005. His previous overseas service has included roles in Washington, London and Bonn.

Mr. Prosor was instrumental in establishing diplomatic relations behind the Iron Curtain following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and he is also a member of Israel's delegation to the Wye River plantation talks in 1998.

Mr. Prosor served in Washington between 1998 and 2002 as minister-counselor for political affairs at the Israeli Embassy. Since becoming the ambassador to the U.K., Mr. Prosor has earned plaudits as an articulate and forthright opponent of what he has termed a campaign of delegitimization, demonization and double standards to which Israel is subjected to in the U.K.

Ambassador, before we get to the questions and answers, I'd like to give you an opportunity to make some opening remarks. The telephone line is all yours.

AMBASSADOR RON PROSOR: First of all, thank you very much, Laura. Nothing comes for Laura Kam easy after the technical problems but I'm really privileged and honored to be able to talk to you. And in the next hour, I really look forward to taking all the questions and all aspects of the situation in the Middle East. I'm not sure if a conference call would be

considered direct talks or indirect talks but please really feel free to be as direct as you wish in all your questions towards me.

I want to maybe before we start just say two things because the direct negotiations now between Israel and the Palestinian Authority underway in Washington. It's just yesterday night that Hamas issued a chilling reminder for all of us of what danger Israel faces as we come to the table. Four Israeli civilians were gunned down, leaving seven children orphaned.

And most of the Western observers who urge Israel to talk to Hamas, I think would do well what can talks possibly be negotiated when an organization which described this atrocity just two days – two evenings ago, the victims of which included a pregnant woman, they defined it as a “heroic operation.”

Now, these murders demonstrate the risks that Israel is taking. And I'm not saying that we should not take risks but I want to remind the audience and the listeners that Israel has already removed 60 West Bank road blocks this year alone, easing access and contributing to Palestinian economic growth nearly 8 percent this year.

I think the West Bank is the only bank in the Western Hemisphere with an 8-percent growth. And such measures, designed basically to benefit Palestinian business, were exploited in the devastating effect by Hamas terrorists because those roadblocks that were there, and lifted, create a situation where those terrorists can operate.

But I think Israel and the international community face a choice between a difficult and a painful path of compromise with the Palestinian Authority and maybe the impossible dead end of Hamas' extremism.

Difficulty or impossibility. I would argue that, though difficult, we should do everything we can in order to make these negotiations successful. And it's not going to be easy. And for all the listeners, you're probably going to hear both sides coming out, blaming the others. But it's important to focus and try and convey to both the Israeli people – and as the Israeli ambassador, I would say it's also important for the Palestinian leadership to convey to Palestinian people—that in order to achieve piece, you have to make compromises. Your dreams cannot be realized in the fullest sense. And it's important that, that message will be brought to the Palestinian people because without compromises on both sides, we won't be able to move forward.

So I really would like to thank you, Laura, for the invitation today because it allows us to really talk directly with people and try and explain some of the problems that we have in our interesting region. Thank you.

MS. KAM: Well, it's our honor to have you here today. We received many, many questions. There are several hundred people on the line right now. And most of the questions fell into about ten categories. So let's try to get through those categories. And as you begin, what's on most peoples' minds right now is the peace talks beginning tomorrow in Washington.

Can you discuss how the withdrawal and its aftermath from Gaza will inform and affect the upcoming peace talks?

AMB. PROSOR: Yes, I can, and I was fortunate enough to be the director-general of Israel's foreign ministry during the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and was really at the table when the decision – when Prime Minister Sharon made the decision to disengage from Gaza.

And even in hindsight, I think that – and people forget that, that Israel in 2005, the whole issues of settlements and roadblocks and, you know, this is the major hurdle to peace. Ariel Sharon, with his background, decided to change the equation.

And change the equation meant to create the situation where Israel really goes out completely out of Gaza, taking the settlements and settlers. And something that was very, very painful for Israel will be hope in our hearts that this is a situation where the Palestinian Authority would use that in order to begin the nation-building state of Palestine in Gaza.

People forget that Israel not just went completely out of Gaza to call the settlements and settlers out. We also evacuated four settlements in the West Bank to show that there's a political horizon to move forward. And what happened was that after we left Gaza completely – and that included the Philadelphi strip – back to the international-recognized borders of 1967, the Green Line – you can call it whatever you want – the response was turning Gaza into a terrorist hub and having Hamas take over.

By the way, and the way they treated their own brothers and sisters from the Fatah, throwing them out from 12-story buildings, introducing the Islamic penal code in Gaza as we speak today, and basically creating a launching pad against Israel from Gaza. So Israel, in a sense, and the Israeli public – and that's more important for people to understand – the Israeli public especially after Gaza has become very, very skeptical of the whole formula of land for peace. It didn't work in Gaza. And the question that people ask is, look, we're willing to do compromises, we're willing to do even territorial concessions, but we want to make sure because Israel is small in a way that people can't imagine, that we won't have missiles falling on our heads. And the bottom line is that you don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand that if the rockets fall on your head by your neighbors, you can't sit idle and do absolutely nothing.

So I would say that the withdrawal out from Gaza, on the one hand, showed how serious Israel is in really doing tangibles on the ground and willing to do the extra mile in achieving what we see as a possible peace between Israel and the Palestinians. On the other side, it added a lot of, I think, feelings on the Israeli side that this can't be done in a unilateral way and we have to reach an agreement. And the parameters of decisions like that have to be clearly understood with the risks involved. And I think we've all learned from that immensely and we should look for ways in order to move forward and create a structure like we had with Egypt and with Jordan to be able to move forward.

MS. KAM: Ambassador, you were personally involved in peace negotiations at Wye River way back in 1998. Do you think there's any real chance of success in these Obama-sponsored peace talks?

AMB. PROSOR: The answer is absolutely, yes. There is no other alternative. And, you know, we all have a tendency sometimes. It reminds me a bit of those two elderly gentlemen in “The Muppet Show,” Waldorf and Statler, who sit on the balcony and shout it’s a lousy show. Here is the United States of America, the president of the United States of America, who are doing, I think, amazing stuff in trying to bring the two sides together. I was fortunate, as you say, to have seen President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore in action in Wye and also at Camp David. And I know how much effort went into trying to achieve that.

So first and foremost, with all the cynicism and the people having such low expectations, I think we should be very fortunate, say thank you. Sometimes I think it’s a time to say thank you for the president of the United States and the American people who are trying to facilitate and make sure that both sides in one of the most historical conflicts really try and reach something.

Do I think it’s hard? Absolutely, I think it’s hard. But I feel that on the Palestinian side that they have also learned. And I think have learned in the sense that the real danger that they see that inside, the Palestinian society was in essence – and I won’t go long into that – was in essence, a secular society since its establishment as the National Freedom Movement in 1964. That society is turning to be radical, extremist and fundamentalistic. And they, they themselves, I don’t think want to live under Hamas’ regime. So this is a huge wakeup call on the Palestinians’ side.

And when everyone talks about, does time run for Israel or against Israel, people generally think – tend to forget that time runs also against the more pragmatic parts of the Palestinian society because if they don’t wake up and do things, the extremists and the radicals are going to take over, and then it’s going to be nearly impossible to move forward.

MS. KAM: What about the policy regarding Jerusalem? Today, Defence Minister Barak said in an Haaretz interview, that Israel was willing to give up Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem and have a special regime controlling the Holy Basin. Can you comment on that?

AMB. PROSOR: I won’t comment on Barak’s things but I, you know, being the Ambassador to the Court of St. James, this is like asking, what is the British government’s policy on London?

And I would say that, you know, Jerusalem is the – is not just the capital of the state of Israel. It’s the heart of the Jewish people. And it’s not just what King David wrote in Psalms, that, if I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand drop off. This is the embodiment of our national inspirations. And Jerusalem has never been the capital of any other nation. And from my point of view, Jerusalem should and will be the eternal capital of the state of Israel.

We all know what happened in Camp David and the different solutions on the table, but I feel that we’ve not reached that stage yet. But definitely, everything is on the table but it’s important to remind ourselves because we tend to forget that, that this is our capital, this is our capital. This is the capital of the Jewish people from time (in memorial ?). And that’s what I

want to say about that because this is not a real estate deal. This is Jerusalem. And there's only one city like Jerusalem in the world.

MS. KAM: Thank you, Ambassador. I'm going to go back to the question of Gaza for a moment. There seems to be conflicting narratives about what is happening in Gaza today. We hear complaints of shortages and lack of freedoms, while at the same time, we see new shopping malls being built and surfing has become a craze. What is the real situation there and what is the Israeli government doing to improve things further?

AMB. PROSOR: When I think that, you know, on both sides, saying, I don't think there's a humanitarian crisis in Gaza; I know that there's not. But on the other side, I don't think that, you know, Gaza is flourishing like Singapore. I can tell you that the updated policy of the Israeli government with Gaza not just allows goods to come in but has basically changed the parameters in saying, we're saying that there's a list of things that cannot go in, which usually are cement and other elements or steel that they would use to build rockets and missiles against Israel.

But construction materials are also allowed into Gaza to P.A.-authorized projects implemented and monitored by the international community. So there's a list of pumping stations. In Tell es-Sultan, you know, 150 units were built by the U.N. In Khan Yunis, there are USAID projects: 900 greenhouses were approved and built.

So I think if one would have to look and talk about Gaza, from my point of view, the important thing to emphasize is the following: that Gaza is projected in the world as a – you know, this is a prison and Israel encircles Gaza. The truth of the matter is that maybe two-thirds will be controlled through Israeli checkpoints and passages but one-third is completely open to Egypt. People forget that.

Through the Rafah Crossings, so if the so-called concerned brothers and sisters in the Arab world, if they wanted to cast things into Gaza, they would have no problem doing that through Egypt. They can bring anything they want into Gaza.

The reason Gaza is in a situation like that is because Gaza is a launching pad for missiles against Israel, for terrorist activities against Israel by an organization that – you know, I just want to remind someone what this organization basically says—It advocates not just the destruction of the state of Israel, not recognizing the state of Israel. It says, and I quote here, that “there is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by jihad. The initiatives, proposals and international conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility.” Now, end of quote on this.

This is what they really talk about. They praised the attack last evening and this is what we have to deal with. And if there are not going to be missiles shot against Israel, no terrorist activities, believe me, there's not going to be a closure on Gaza. On the contrary.

So the same way that, lately, we have taken down the – there were snipers shooting at a neighborhood in Jerusalem called Gilo. We have taken down the wall built in Gilo because there are no snipers. No missiles – there won't be a closure.

MS. KAM: Okay, closer to your home right now: How are U.K.-Israel relations under the new coalition government?

AMB. PROSOR: Well, I think that if you look at the U.K.-Israel relations, if you look at the governmental side, it's like from when the United States on both sides of the aisle. If you look at Margaret Thatcher and then afterwards at John Major and then Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and I think David Cameron, they all have been staunch supporters and friends of the state of Israel. And with a new government, I don't think this would change. There's an amazing cooperation between both countries.

Under the radar screen, we encounter a few – a lot of problems on the public domain, which is different from the governmental side, I think – the government of the United Kingdom. By the way, if I may say so, I think it's very true also to other countries in Europe – Germany, Italy, France. I would say that the governments are much more aware of the challenges that the state of Israel and the people of Israel have to encounter in our neighborhood, which doesn't always consist of Benelux countries.

And it's a bit different with the public domain, in the media, the NGO level. I feel that there's a – more and more at the university level, there's a lot of criticisms towards Israel and, sometimes, it goes way beyond the call of duty because it fails to understand the internal debates taking place in Israel and the fact that Israel is a vibrant democracy, maybe a Jewish democracy, which is too vibrant for me sometimes.

MS. KAM: We're going to get further into this whole issue of delegitimization and demonization. But first, can you comment on efforts to change the United Kingdom's interpretation of universal jurisdiction? Will Israeli leaders be able to visit the U.K. soon without fear of getting arrested?

AMB. PROSOR: I hope so. First, there was a very clear message by the Conservative government in stating that they are changing – or, on the way to change the law. And I want maybe to use two or three minutes to explain what it is.

Universal jurisdiction doesn't pertain only to Israel. First of all, it started as something which was amazing, which Israel always participated in. And that is to bring to trial war criminals who committed war crimes. So in essence, the law is a positive law.

What has happened is that has been abused completely by Palestinian Solidarity Campaign by political groups who are using this law to abuse the sense of the law. And what they have created is a situation where, today, any person in the United Kingdom can go over to a magistrate court and present an A-4 form and say that Joe or Jack are war criminals. Now, usually, a magistrate or a judge would not have the ability to check the dates or the things that are being told with that one-pager. And the arrest warrant would be given and both sides would have to appear in court. Now, this is a situation which has a direct bearing not just on Israel but it has a direct bearing on British officers both in Iraq and in Afghanistan; American officers, soldiers, politicians. But Israel is an easier target.

So we have been in a situation where Tzipi Livni, the head of Israel's opposition, someone tried to arrest her, thought she was in the United Kingdom. Luckily enough, she wasn't. But it shows you the absurdity of a – you know, here's the leader, a woman, the leader of the opposition in Israel. Usually the countries around us – how would I say it diplomatically? She would probably be arrested going out of those countries at the airport and not reaching London.

This government has decided to move forward, parliament would resume next month. And hopefully until the end of the year, the change would be made, and the whole changes that either the attorney general or the director of public prosecution would be the one that all issues pertaining universal jurisdiction would go up to him and he will then make a decision.

MS. KAM: Can you elaborate more, Ambassador, on U.K. efforts, efforts within the United Kingdom to delegitimize Israel through boycotts and the like? What is the state of boycott activity in academia and on the streets, in supermarkets and stores?

AMB. PROSOR: Well, this is a sad story because let's start with academia. If you think about it, an academic boycott is an oxymoron by definition. It's a place where there should be an open and free flow of ideas. You boycott and people on the academic side are basically presenting Israel in a way which is beyond the pale.

The Soviet Union is gone. Apartheid in South Africa is gone. And Israel is a wonderful punching bag. And the delegitimization is done in a very sophisticated way. It's not easy to call delegitimization because it's a – very few times can you really catch someone with a real problem on factual issues. It's the way you present or you don't present a certain issue.

And I think Tony Blair said last week in a speech he gave, he said that the attitudes towards Israel sometimes gives him a feeling that some people wear Nelson's one-eye patch when they lift the telescope of scrutiny to the Israel case.

And we have a lot of examples. I can give you an example of a recent decision of the Methodist Church to boycott Israel, which is nothing short of disgraceful. And it's done in a way where – you know, that – I'm trying to put things in context and to say that – not that we are angels or we do everything right, but the way we are presented and perceived by people who know better goes way on beyond the call of duty. And why should I talk, myself? You know, Robert Bernstein, who was the founder of Human Rights Watch, he himself said that Human Rights Watch, the original mission was to pry open closed societies and advocate basic freedoms and support dissenters. And it's said that he said – not me – that recently, it has been “issuing reports on the Israeli-Arab conflict that are helping those who wish to turn Israel into a pariah state.”

And I feel that this doesn't do any justice to Israel, to Israel's democracy. I feel that I – it's like Chinese torture. It's drop, drop, drop every day; the media, the NGO level, the university level. And we run sometimes the risk of, we say here in the United Kingdom, death by a thousand cuts.

And I feel that we can be very, very proud both as Israelis and as Jews of what we are doing. We are on the forefront of encountering phenomena that Western democracies have yet to encounter. Not saying that we always find the right way but we try and calibrate, on the one hand, on trying to defend our citizens, and on the other hand, not to go overboard in our reaction.

Do we always get it right? Probably not. Do we do as much as we can to minimize the mistakes? Yes. Are the challenges bigger and bigger? Yes. Suicide bombings are not easy to stop. We feel that we are on the forefront of trying to stop those extreme phenomena and, instead of getting a big hug from many people, we always have people point fingers at us on a situation with is very, very hard. But I'm very, very concerned about that. And this is something that I feel is one of the biggest missions that I have here as an ambassador to really present Israel with all its flaws but as the only democracy in our region.

MS. KAM: Ambassador, this is a call primarily for journalists. But there were a number of people who wanted you to address what is perceived to be an anti-Israel bias in the media in the U.K. Can you speak to that?

AMB. PROSOR: Look, I can speak to that, but I'd like to do it in a way that – maybe to put this in the following context:

I feel that what happens in Israel and what the Israeli public undergoes is something that has to be part of the equation when you talk about Israel. What do I mean by that? I mean by that, that when you present things to the public who don't know the connections – and we know that it's on media time, and it's all instant responses – the effect of what is written and what is shown on both TV and newspapers is enormous. And I feel very, very clearly that this is not transmitted always in a balanced manner. And I have many examples that I can give.

But the important thing for me is for people to understand that in Israel, you can always find someone who would give you an opinion about something. And usually, you can find anyone who would say anything you want. You have a civil society, a debate inside a civic society in Israel, where on the other side, there's nothing there.

Journalists feel very comfortable going over to Israel. I think when they come over, everyone runs around and asks him if they would like a latte with skim milk or without skim milk. And you can always find a wonderful candidate to prove a thesis that he wants to project, and say very easily, look, it's not me who said that; it's someone else; it's an Israeli. It's an Israeli. It's a Jew. It's easy work to present something like that. What I'm saying is that this should be also part of the understanding that you can't just take things out of context. And I'm talking about the United Kingdom and having served in Washington. It's something that is very, very hard for Americans and British citizens to understand.

Let's take British citizens. They know that there's a government and there's a shadow government. And they have this – something which is a really unprecedented idea that the minister of transportation deals with transportation. And the minister of agriculture deals with agriculture.

In Israel, the minister of transportation deals with everything but transportation. And sometimes, the voices coming out of Israel can be used and abused in a way that Israel's message is very, very hard to convey. And if you think about the United States, it's obvious that there's one president. He's the quarterback. There's a secretary of state, there's a secretary of defense. All secretaries to the president of the United States.

I know that all the listeners here know very well that in Israel, the defense minister comes from one party, the foreign minister from another party and the prime minister from another party. And I know it's only rare but they think on certain issues in different way.

What I'm saying is that I'm conveying something that for every Israeli is part of his usual life. He understands that. He knows how to read between the lines. It's very easy for someone from the outside to use one of those things, especially things that are said by a position by – by anyone in Israel, and convey Israel in a way that doesn't really reflect the real Israel.

So I know it was a long answer because it's not an easy – it's not black and white, and it's sophisticated. And I feel genuinely that although we are not, like I said, free of mistakes, which we – I readily agree that we do many, we receive, I think, too much of a hammering. And we need people to hug us much more because at the end of the day, we have shown when we have partners on the other side. Like President Anwar Sadat from Egypt, by the way, Menachem Begin, then head of the right-wing government by the Likud comes to Israel in 77. In 1980, we have a full peace agreement with Egypt. Full territorial concessions to the last centimeter in Taba. Late King Hussein in Jordan, the same thing. Leaders who are really, clearly leading the people. And when they came, you saw the Israeli people with stretched hands, willing to make peace.

And we need that today in Washington on the other side. We need to follow in the footsteps of President Sadat and King Hussein who signed peace treaties which stand to this day. And I think that Israel showed in the treaties with Egypt and Jordan that we are willing to compromise and withdraw from land when we're faced with a sincere partner. And I think that's – I don't think I am completely confident if that's the case with Israel today.

MS. KAM: A very heartfelt and thoughtful answer. I'm going to ask you now about a completely different subject and this will be our last question because we started late, and I know that your time is extremely limited. So can you please comment on U.K.-Israel economic relations? And then if you want to give some closing remarks, that would be great.

AMB. PROSOR: Yes, Israel-U.K. economic relations are very, very good. You know, the numbers increased both in exports and imports this year. And I feel that at the end of the day the economic relations between both countries in addition to the cultural relations bring to bear something which is very important because it allows people on the economic side of it, technological side or the scientific side to really understand what Israel is all about, what Israel does in medicine and high-tech, something which many people don't know. And I think it shows Israel in a completely different light.

And I talk to businessmen, British businessmen, by the way, from Wales, Scotland, from London coming back from Israel, they are amazed. They come back, you know, talking to Israeli businessmen and scientists. And it warms my heart to hear them talk about Israel and Israel's technological cutting-edge experiences in nearly all fields. And this is something that, again, is part and parcel of Israel, of Israel's society, of taking everything and looking at – from all other sides.

And because we are on the verge of the new year, Rosh Hashanah, also the issues of what is part and parcel of Jewish belief. And that is tikkun olam. You know, what Israel does on the medical side, on water irrigation in the remotest places of South America and Africa, in the former Soviet Union – which goes way and beyond Israel as a small country with 7 million people who are one of the seven countries having satellite up in space and cutting-edge technology. So it allows, I think, a better understanding of what Israel is all about and why, for us, peace is not just something that we need but that is paramount in the way we think and the way we can prosper in the future.

And as we approach the Jewish new year, I think in the name of all of us, I just hope and pray that this will be a year of peace and progress, not just in Israel but across the region. And we need a lot of praying, divine intervention. But you know that part of our tradition and religion is that if we don't do things ourselves, things won't happen.

So I wish all of you and all the listeners a good new year from our calendar. And to you, Laura, personally, thank you very, very much for organizing this and giving me the opportunity to really talk and express that. And really your tireless work, which I know is not easy, I think makes a real difference. And I want to thank you.

MS. KAM: Thank you, thank you, Ambassador. Well, thank you. Shana Tova to you. For our listeners who are so interested in Israel, just to let you know that in 15 minutes from now, President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu will be giving statements in Washington. So I'm going to let you get to that. So let me just say thank you so much to you, Ambassador Prozor, for taking time to join us. And thanks to all of our guests who participated in today's briefing.

For more up-to-date information about Israel and the challenges she faces, please sure to visit www.theisraelproject.org. And as always, if there is anything The Israel Project can do to help you get the facts and sources you need to cover Israel, please don't hesitate to contact us. Shana Tova, happy New Year. Thank you very much.

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