

THE ISRAEL PROJECT

CONFERENCE CALL: SECOND ROUND OF PEACE TALKS

**WELCOME AND MODERATOR:
ALAN ELSNER,
SENIOR COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR,
THE ISRAEL PROJECT**

**SPEAKER:
DAVID MAKOVSKY,
ZIEGLER DISTINGUISHED FELLOW,
DIRECTOR, PROJECT ON THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS,
THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE**

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2010
1:00 P.M.
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

*Transcript by
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

ALAN ELSNER: Well, hello, everybody. Good afternoon. This is Alan Elsner. I'm the senior communications director for the Israel Project. And today we are very pleased and honored to have as our guest David Makovsky to speak about the upcoming second round of direct peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. They will take place tomorrow and on Wednesday at Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt.

Mr. Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Washington Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. He was a lecturer on the Middle East and studied at Johns Hopkins University. Mr. Makovsky is the co-author with Dennis Ross of the 2009 book, "Myths, Illusions and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East" and he has also written many other books and articles.

Before coming to Washington Institute, Mr. Makovsky was an award-winning journalist, a former executive editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, a diplomatic correspondent for Israel's leading daily, *Haaretz*, and former contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report*.

The format of this conference call is that Mr. Makovsky will make a brief introduction and then I will be asking questions which I have received from journalists and other participants over the course of the last couple of days. David, over to you, please.

DAVID MAKOVSKY: Thank you very much, Alan. And it's good to be with you and good to be with you in your new position. And I wish people listening in, Jewish friends, a healthy, happy new year. And Muslim friends, I hope you have a good Eid. I would just say that, you know, these talks from Sharm el-Sheikh, and there will be meetings in Jerusalem this week, on the one hand it comes after, I think, a very successful round in Washington in the sense that it was only the opening round but people were looking for the tone.

I think Prime Minister Netanyahu surprised a lot of people by, you know, emphasizing a sense of partnership with President Abbas, the need to restore compromise and need to share the land. And I think it might be the most successful visit to Washington I can imagine in many years, and I think there are senior people in the administration who agree. President Abbas also, I think, from what I understand from the Palestinian side, having talked to them after this round, also thought that this was a good round of talks.

I think the issue now going forward is where we go from here in September. And if I'm trying to make a scorecard and look at how these talks are going, how do I really gauge them? I think, in practice, while the substance being discussed are the final-status issues, for the most part, I think, September, the key issue of this round, and maybe the next 10 days after this round, is trying to solve this issue of the settlement moratorium that has bedeviled these sides.

If you recall, the backdrop to the moratorium was that the Israelis and the Palestinians agreed – well, really it was the U.S. and Israel that agreed that Israel would halt settlement activity in the West Bank for 10 months. The Palestinians tend to diminish that because they say, well, you're not stopping in East Jerusalem. Well, the fact is, actually, Israel did curtail in East Jerusalem. But I think that what became inconsequential for the Palestinians 10 months ago has become somehow indispensable today and they are insisting that this moratorium be continued.

Netanyahu, you know, said you missed an opportunity here; you should have used it better. And he says the moratorium will not continue. But there have been some nuances on this, and we've seen Netanyahu, yesterday, get the word out after his meeting with Tony Blair and after his meeting with Likud ministers, saying between zero and 100, there are a lot of options. And you know, we want to avoid an all-or-nothing situation and the question is, what is the smart thing to do? So I think Netanyahu's showing some flexibility, but we'll have to see how it turns out.

There are all sorts of ideas out there on how to solve this. My feeling is the United States is waiting for Israel to come up with a proposal because Israel is the one that has to decide what, politically, will work for it domestically. And yet, they'll try to respond to the issues at hand and then they'll take that to President Abbas.

So I think this is going to be the key issue of this month and will dominate these talks. There will be a clear percentage in trying to have this issue resolved before the UN General Assembly kicks off right around – what was it, the 21st, or somewhere around there? – because you can imagine there will be critics of the Israelis and of the Palestinians too, probably, that will look for things to embarrass the parties and especially Israel. And so if this issue could be resolved earlier, it could take some of the air out of those balloons.

But I think if there was a surprise so far in this whole moratorium discussion, it was – although it didn't make that much headlines – it was over the weekend, President Obama weighed in and said, well, it will make sense to continue it if talks are going well. And I think the Israelis were taken by surprise by that because the last few months, there has been good coordination between the U.S. and Israel. And I think there was somewhat of a surprise there.

Apart from the issue of the moratorium itself, there is the issue of, well, what role does the U.S. have in the talks? I think my understanding – I don't think it's been put forward this way explicitly in the press, but my understanding is that the United States understands that the Israelis and the Palestinians want to deal with each other directly, but would like a read-out of those talks at the end. Because sometimes each side goes back and there's a kind of Rashomon principle that each side gives its interpretation of what went on and they don't tend to be identical.

And so when the U.S. tries to find out after each round what happened, it can sometimes get different versions or different, I'd say, points of emphasis. So they're having a joint read-out with the secretary of state after these talks. It's a way to ensure that there is one read-out and the U.S. hears directly from the parties. So there is that piece about the U.S. role.

And I think it's clear that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is going to be more of a player. She's been kind of AWOL the last two years, I think, because she focuses on something that the White House wants to drive. But I think for the most part, the president – I heard this in Ramallah from the Palestinians in July, who said that President Obama called President Abbas and said he wants Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to play a bigger role. So that's another dimension.

Now, in terms of the actual substance of the talks, even though I don't think they're going to be prominent in this month because people are going to try to sort out the moratorium issue, in terms of the substance, I think you'll see the Israeli emphasis is trying to have an understanding on security, and believe that once you've understood security, you can't really talk about territorial withdrawal. I think the Palestinians basically accept that, although they say territory first. But I think those two issues will go together.

Then the issues are, you know, Jerusalem, the refugees. Both of them are narrative issues of this conflict, which cut to the self-definition of the parties. Here, I think you really have to prepare the societal landscapes for compromise, and we haven't seen it. And Prime Minister Netanyahu talks about the Palestinians accepting Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, too.

President Abbas spoke at a dinner that I was at and he spoke publicly at that dinner. And he invited me to have lunch with him in Ramallah when I was out there in August. And that was a lot of Israelis and Palestinians, half and half, and what was clear was that, you know, he knows that this is – he's talked historically; the Jews historically were on the land. And I think at this point from him, but I think from people around him, they know they're going to have to give on this but they don't want to give it prematurely without getting anything in return because they think the Israelis want it so badly. So it might be more incremental. We shall see. Either it is or it isn't.

But a lot of these issues – the reason why people want to focus on the border is something I have written about a year-and-a-quarter ago in *The Wall Street Journal*. The belief is that, I think, the advantage of doing it that way – this is my last point and then I'll open it up – but I think the advantage of focusing on security and borders is, you know, whenever it's all or nothing in the Middle East, it tends to be nothing.

And when it comes to the borders, I tend to think there's an advantage in it for all sides. For the Israeli side, their settlers have been living in limbo for 40 years. There are now 300,000 of them, and that doesn't include the East Jerusalemites who Israel does not call settlers, but others do. But if you took just the West Bank settlers, that is 300,000.

About 240,000 of the 300,000 – if you want to look at where demography meets geography – 240,000 of them live in – it's known as the settlement blocs or clusters, largely adjacent to the pre-'67 boundary. And that's less than 4.5 percent of the land. And that often gets lost, but that suggests that there is some room here for compromise. And Abbas has talked about land swaps for those areas. He hasn't agreed to all those areas, but I think the principles are acceptable to him. And I think for Israel, Israel could say, well, finally.

These people have been human bargaining chips for 40 years, these settlers. They've been living in a kind of legal limbo. If you have a demarcated border, you have resolved their status and they will not be “occupied West Bank,” to use the terminology of many. They'll just be Israel and they can build skyscrapers or whatever they want.

For the United States – or, for the Palestinians, I think the advantage is, you know, they could say with the land swaps, they got what Anwar Sadat got in Egypt in the '70s, and they got all the land that they – you know – the land – (inaudible) – to 100 percent. And for the United States, it would be done with the settlement issue of after 40 years of having this issue hanging out there and 40-plus years. So it would tangibly change things.

And for Israel in particular, it's often said, well, Israel gives something tangible in terms of land, but only gets something intangible in terms of promises for peace. It would be more of a land-for-land situation that would bring clarity to an area that has been very murky. And like I said, these people have been living in legal limbo. So I think there's something in it for everybody, but we'll have to see.

I'm not here to say it's going to be easy at all, but you have to just know, I'm coming out with a study on maps, where do demography meet geography? And I think it does in the West Bank, so I think this is something that I'm more optimistic on.

But on the issue of Jerusalem and refugees, can they make a peace within a year? I have my questions, given that, you know, they have not prepared the groundwork on these issues, like Jerusalem and refugees. So you know, it is an ambitious approach.

Ironically, I think that approach was something that basically has been favored by all sides. No side wants to say it's only negotiating on some of the issues. And it's more popular to say you're doing the whole package, so if there's any pain, it's offset by gain in the package. But of course, that's based on your package that you want, so we'll see if, indeed, a full package can be done with in a year. No one's ever gone broke being a pessimist about the Middle East.

So you know, we have to be careful of grand achievements in a short time, although the year – that plan was actually something that was endorsed by Prime Minister Netanyahu when he spoke at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York in July. So anyway, here we are. And why don't I stop here and open it up?

MR. ELSNER: Thank you, David. We have lots of questions about the settlement freeze. I am going to try and meld some together. Laura Rozen of POLITICO wants your thoughts on the kind of announcement that Netanyahu might make. If he said they won't be building outside certain of the blocs, can he be implicit or does Abbas need something public he can use to sell it to his people?

MR. MAKOVSKY: It's a good question. I think, look, you know, I tried to see where we could turn lemons into lemonade, or to borrow Rahm Emanuel's phrase about how do you turn a crisis into an opportunity. My own personal view to solve this issue is to try to get a reaffirmation of concepts that have not really been accepted across the board explicitly and make them explicit.

In other words, while Olmert and Abbas and Bush, you know, spoke about blocs, this isn't something Abbas has talked about, really. He has said blocs – he has said swaps, but he doesn't explicitly say, I'm going to have to accept some settlement blocs. And Netanyahu has

not really used the vernacular of “land swaps” either. That’s been used more by the Kadima side of the spectrum.

It’s assumed by everyone that it is a building block. And when Netanyahu says we need creative solutions to old problems, I think he’s referring to land swaps but he hasn’t said it. Again, land swaps means land within the ’67 borders that’s basically vacant and that could offset any Israeli settlements that would be annexed into Israel.

Now, clearly, I think, in my personal view the only way it’s going to work – blocs for swaps, so to speak – is on a 1-to-1 basis. I don’t see Netanyahu endorsing that concept yet, but I think just even endorsing ideas that, you know, are out there that he has not accepted yet would be useful. If he says Israel’s going to have to do the land swaps as part of a solution, I think that would be very important. And I think if Netanyahu and I think if Abbas and Obama would also speak more explicitly about blocs.

If you look at the Hillary Clinton formula of last fall, it’s vaguely called – something called subsequent developments is the phrase – you know, subsequent developments since the 1967 war. I think each side has got to kind of come out of the closet on this issue. That’s the conceptual plane.

Then there’s the practical plane. And here, I think, you know, you need something where you say if Israel’s going to build in the blocs that it’s only in – it’s upward and not outward. It’s in built-up areas that are not extended. And with Google Earth and all sorts of ways, you have today the technology – you could demarcate this in a way that you know that there’s no geographical expansion of the territories. To me, a combination of the conceptual and the practical could be useful in looking for a solution.

MR. ELSNER: James Kitfield, on the same subject, of the National Journal, wants to know if you think that the attempts could actually break down because of this issue of the settlement freeze. And that would contribute to a sort of negative spiral of pessimism and frustration that makes the whole idea of a negotiated two-state solution less and less likely. To what extent is Abbas serious about his threat of just walking away from the talks?

MR. MAKOVSKY: Very good question, too, of James. I would say it’s a paradoxical situation, Alan, because on one hand, we know that President Obama has told President Abbas that, you know, if you opt out of the talks, there’s nothing we in the United States can do to help you. And I don’t know if it’s been reported in the press, but this is – I think – I have reason to believe he’s said this. But on the other hand, if he does walk out, he may feel he’s got a lot of support from the Arab world and the Europeans. And so he might lose Obama, even though he’ll get cheers from everybody else.

So this is an issue where you could argue on the merits, like, Abbas should have used this period much better. You know, how could something that he called inconsequential, essentially, 10 months ago, suddenly become indispensable? And why didn’t he use that 10 months? Why did he – why do we waste all this time? And I think those are fair questions to ask President Abbas.

At the same time, he will feel – you know, once there’s pictures of bulldozers on al-Jazeera, which will probably do whatever it can to torpedo these talks anyway because I don’t see any interest in them to be wanting peace between Arabs and Israelis, that could put him in a corner. And so it could be if there’s a settlement push that he will feel that his hand has been pressed in a way that he has to move, but he will alienate the president of the United States.

And I don’t think this is – a break is not going to be good for anyone. Like I said, he’ll get the applause. Netanyahu even told the Likud ministers yesterday that continual – failure continually will be seen as a test of Israel’s seriousness towards peace. So Netanyahu wants to avoid that. So I guess my bottom line is, nobody wants to walk away from these talks because this would alienate the president, alienate the United States and give very little hope to their peoples.

That’s why I believe – you know, it’s the Middle East and it’ll go down to the wire by the end of September. And it could be what Arabs call a shuk, a market, or Israelis call a shuk, but I think that it’ll be messy but they’ll figure something out because I think the consequences of not figuring something out will lead to consequences that will be deleterious to both sides and will be a black eye for each side. And that’s why I’m hopeful that something is worked out this month.

And I think that’s the question of the month. More than the substance of the final-status issues that they talk about, it’s how they handle this issue. And this will be, kind of, the first test for Hillary Clinton in her new role, to see how she brokers any understandings this month.

You know, I think it would be beneficial for the Israelis to have it done earlier rather than later because of the UN General Assembly coming up. And they would like this issue dealt with earlier. But it’s the Middle East and there’s sometimes brinkmanship and this thing could go down to the wire.

MR. ELSNER: Thank you, David. Switching subjects slightly, we have a question from Andrea Stone of AOL News. And she would like to know about how the refugee issue might figure in the discussions given that column by Danny Ayalon recently in which he declared that he, too, is a refugee. His family was forced out of Algeria, and that they – like many thousands of Jews who were forced to leave Arab countries when Israel was created – they, too, deserve some kind of settlement or compensation. How do you think this might figure?

MR. MAKOVSKY: The refugee issue is very, very complex, as Andrea suggested, citing Danny Ayalon. But that’s why I don’t think it’s right because there’s been no spadework that has been done on this issue that would suggest that it’s teed up – sorry for mixing my metaphors – for the principals. There is no plan for them to talk about right now. They need to basically condition the societal landscapes in their societies, on both of them, which is that the Palestinian refugees who want to return would be returning to a Palestinian state. That’s one of the reasons why we’re going through this whole peace process is to build a two-state solution. Or there are other options like compensation.

I think it's – sorry to say, but the Israelis would be crazy to, you know, bring in all these Arab refugees. It would really destroy the character of their country. But no one wants any refugee to live in squalor. And I think that's a crucial point that is often lost when people say, you know, the refugees don't come back.

The issue is, how many countries can they come back to, not whether they should stay where they are. And nobody wants anybody to leave in squalor. Or if there's compensation, maybe we can – you know, they could stay where they are. But no one wants them to live in squalor and I think that is often lost in the process.

But I don't think it's teed up. I mean, I had a story from Abu Mazen, which I repeated in the public forum – I have no problem repeating it here – of him going with his son to Safed, an Israeli town – called in Hebrew, “Tzfat” – in Northern Israel. And he was born there and it's also the town of the Israeli Kabbalists that, you know, study the Kabbalah.

And he showed his son where he grew up and his son said to him, so dad, let's, like, go knock on the door of these people. He said, look, this isn't polite. You'll get people very angry if you do that. I don't want to get anyone upset. I just wanted you to see the house where we lived. But we don't live here anymore. It's not our home. The West Bank is our home; let's go home. It's a powerful story which I wish he would tell in Arabic, but I think that it's just an example of things that have to be said to people.

And personally – this is my own personal view on Jerusalem – Israel has to condition its public that Israel's going to have to make a compromise in Jerusalem. I think that's the implicit tradeoff, is between Jerusalem and refugees.

Like I said, these are the two narrative issues of this conflict that cut to the self-definition of the parties. And until they have kind of conditioned the landscape, I don't think that it's ripe for discussion, frankly. So I'd like to see things much more in a position that they're in shape for a basis of discussions, so they can say, oh, well, here's a plan. Right now we're not there yet.

MR. ELSNER: Thank you, David. A couple of questions from Florida: Shani McManus of the *Florida Jewish Journal* wants to know how the peace talks are being viewed in Israel. Are Israelis optimistic about the outcome?

MR. MAKOVSKY: You know, I don't live in Israel. I live in Washington. All I can do is look at polling data. You get these very interesting polls, like 70 percent of Israelis believe in a two-state solution, yet only 30 percent believe it will happen.

And I think what it – and the Palestinians also say they're for a two-state solution, but they don't believe the Israelis want it. So there's a certain symmetry here, where the publics believe that, therefore, the problem is the other side isn't for it. And for me, that's where leadership comes in. And we need more synchronizing of political messaging on what good the other is doing because the publics don't know what the other side is doing.

The Israeli media, I mean, they are very – there are a couple reporters who cover it in the West Bank, but they don't often focus on the fact that there's been a lot of excellent security cooperation between the U.S. and between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, or that the Palestinian economy's been growing at a 10 or 11-percent clip, or that the Palestinians have really purged the mosques of imams who call for suicide bombings. And I could go on. The public in Israel doesn't always hear that.

And the public of the Palestinians don't always hear the good things the Israelis have done, like reduce the number of large, manned checkpoints from 42 to 14, that have facilitated economic growth and things like that. So I think you have this asymmetry – anomaly is the better word – that each side believes they want a two-state solution, but they don't believe the other side wants it. And that's happened because the leaders don't want to talk about the good the other side has done because they feel it creates pressure upon them to reciprocate.

And we need more synchronized messaging to close this gap between people who profess a two-state solution, but are yet cynical that it will happen. And they're probably cynical also because, in the past, there have been a lot of big speeches about peace. And the Palestinians believe, okay, we've got speeches, but we're still where we are. And the Israelis believe, well, we've given a lot and the Palestinians have not reciprocated.

So each side is maybe justified in its skepticism and cynicism, but only, I think, a new approach of the leaders could close the gap between those who say they want a two-state solution, which is 70 percent, and those who believe the other side wants it. That gap has to be closed.

MR. ELSNER: Thank you. And on a related subject, Lyn Payne of the *Heritage Florida Jewish News* would like to know about the issue of incitement: How serious of an issue is this, in the view of the Israeli government and people? Have the Palestinians made any changes in the last few years in their textbooks and media, schoolbooks, teaching materials and the like to moderate their view of Israel and Jews as presented to their schoolchildren and to the public?

MR. MAKOVSKY: A very fair question. I think this issue of incitement is very important. It needs to be addressed because I think Arab people look at these issues as a barometer of people's future intentions. And they find a lot of the other issues too technical and murky, and this they feel is very clear-cut. You know, what's in the textbooks?

And I think it's right that American Jewish groups have pressed this issue on incitement. At the same time, I don't know if we're – when we look at the issue of incitement, we as the U.S. government, if we've come up with metrics to really assess, how do you look at this. And I think this is a very fair question. I think there's been improvement on some metrics and not on other metrics.

In other words, the metrics saying, you know, removing imams from the mosques that call for suicide bombing. My understanding is they have removed a lot of imams and I think that's important. They now even have talking points for sermons, to make sure that what you see – in different parts of the Arab world, I should add – to make sure that people, you know, don't

use sermons to agitate. They even try, now, to license teachers in the mosques and librarians in the mosque, so that the mosque is not used as a haven for Hamas.

Another area where I think the metric has shown an improvement is the screening of schoolteachers. My understanding from the Palestinian security services, which I confirmed with Israeli officials, is that they have screened out about 1100 of the 28,000 West Bank schoolteachers who they think were agitating for Hamas. Now, you could say all these are good things, but they're all within the PA's self-interest because they're at war with Hamas.

Well, why are they at war with Hamas? Because they have conceptual differences. So you know, I think that these are important.

A third metric: My understanding from the religious minister is that they are trying to get hold of the curriculum that the imams are taught in the four shariah colleges in the West Bank. And these have also been used to kind of weed people out and really, kind of, to put in Hamas imams. So they feel they have to focus on the shariah, on the curriculum for the imams.

Now, others say, no, they haven't done this in full yet; no, it hasn't happened yet. But I think there is – my understanding, also from the Israeli side, is that these guys are sincere and they want this change. But the schoolbooks, we don't see the change yet. And we don't see the change yet in terms of naming, you know, squares or summer camps for the killers of yesteryear. And you could say, well, that's only symbolic, come on.

But a lot of this peace process is symbolism. And Israel is going to be taking risks and it has every right to know that the peace it is getting is every bit as tangible as the land it is yielding. So this is a key issue. Now, some people say, well, has anyone checked the Israeli schoolbooks? Do they call for a two-state solution?

Well, some of them have, and I think the Israelis would argue that they have no problem of saying a Palestinian state for the Palestinian people. Would Palestinians say the Israeli state for – the nation-state of the Jewish people, but with equal rights for all citizens? Like I said, some of these issues are going to take time, but I do believe that, you know, we can't just judge these things by its destination. We have to judge them by the journey.

And I – with Abbas and Fayyad, we have two people that have stuck their necks out believing in a two-state solution. You know, they are vilified by Hamas for their moderation. And frankly, the alternative to them is just greater radicalization. And therefore it's easy to be dismissive and say, well, they're not at 100 percent yet. But I think in the security cooperation and in other forums I talk to on the Israeli side, they believe there's a real change.

I mean, in the old Arafat days, people used to say there's a revolving door. You know, Arafat would arrest someone and then when no one was looking, in the middle of the night, he'd let him go. They called it the revolving door for the Palestinian prisons. Nobody says that anymore. And it's not by accident because the people who are arrested stay arrested. And I think in the '90s, you know, you had a different attitude toward violence.

Arafat would say he condemned a terrorist attack, and then he would wink and not – and give money to continue the attacks. I don't think anyone believes Abbas is doing that. I mean, they trashed his office; they threw Fatah people out the windows in Gaza, the rooftops, in 2007. I don't see them exactly – I see them as bitter rivals.

So the test for Abbas is not the test of Arafat, of the double game, but rather, is the security cooperation with Israel strong? And what would be the plans to ensure that even without Israel there, that they will be a strong? And that is the real issue, not the double game. But I think it's all connected. When we're talking about metrics on incitement, it's to take stock of some of the under-the-radar cooperation that goes on. And I would say it's been almost a virtual alliance between Israel and the Palestinian Authority against Hamas during these last three years.

MR. ELSNER: Okay, David. In view of the time, we want to finish this at about quarter to. But a couple more questions that we can hopefully get through rather quickly. So I have one from Yoav Sivan, an Israeli journalist, who wants you to analyze the intentions of Benjamin Netanyahu. Are they different this time than in previous rounds? If so, how and why do you believe this? And, you know, I'd just please ask you to expedite so we can get through a couple more questions in the time we have.

MR. MAKOVSKY: Well, no one knows, you know, can assess all his motivations, but I will say the following about Netanyahu. You know, it does seem to me that we have a Netanyahu 2.0 compared to what we had the first time around in the '90s. In the '90s he played much more to his base. This Netanyahu likes the idea that he can get 70-percent approval and is more at the center of the Israeli spectrum.

He could have used even the Hamas attacks against the settlers during the first round in Washington to really, you know, lambaste the Palestinians or walk out. He didn't do it. And I think he and Barak, Ehud Barak, see themselves as strategists. And the difference between a strategist and an ideologue is you look at the region around you and you try to look at the dynamics and say, okay, where did things go and how, as Israeli leaders, can the two of us make a difference and change the trajectory of certain trends, to the extent that they can.

And I do – you know, and I was just over there for six weeks. I met with a bunch of people close to Netanyahu and I felt that he saw a strategic regional situation where the seeds of radicalization are clear. You have Egyptian succession. You have Saudi succession. I mean, we believe Mubarak has pancreatic cancer and, you know, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is 86 years old. And if you don't shore up the moderates, you will see greater radicalization.

So I think to the extent Netanyahu is keen, I think he sees these trends. I think domestically, he understands the demographics. And you know, there's a debate on some of the demographics, but I think he – you know, he would say the Jews won't still be a majority after date X or date Y, but even if you have 48 percent or 49 percent of the people who are not Jewish, you're not going to have Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people that way.

So I tend to think he sees these demographic trends. He sees a changing Middle East. And I think, you know, when he says to Abbas, you're a partner – which is an important phrase

for a Likud prime minister where they used to say no partner; there is no partner on the Palestinian side.

And when you say share the land, historic compromise, these are positions that are normally associated with people like Rabin and the Labor Party. I just think that you don't say those things flippantly. And I do think that, you know, there is a change. Whether that change is going to be sufficient enough, given a lot of the opposition, is to be seen, but let's just say Netanyahu didn't talk that way in the '90s.

MR. ELSNER: David, this will be the last question. We've covered Palestinian opinion; we've covered Israeli opinion. Now let's have a question on U.S. opinion. In about an hour, we at the Israel Project are going to releasing a poll showing a jump in support for Israel. And that, by a 6-to-1 margin, Americans think Israel is more committed to peace than the Palestinians. Two questions: Why do you think this is and, secondly, what kind of role does this kind of opinion play on the calculations of the Obama administration?

MR. MAKOVSKY: Good question. Look, I think since 9/11, you've seen a jump in support for Israel in the Gallup polls. And I'm not a pollster, but it seems that since 9/11, people are just – you know, they see Israel as part of the world that is not on the side of radicals who want to overthrow the existing order. And Israel's role in the Western world has kind of been reaffirmed.

The fly in the ointment in this is that in a lot of the cultural elite of American society, however, you are seeing other trends. I've visited, now, 41 campuses, and here, a lot of the critics of Israel want to impose a South Africa paradigm on Israel and to portray it in that light. And that, certainly, is a source of concern. I think that Israel's trying to say no; it wants to give away the land. It just doesn't want to get blown up. It's a way of really confounding those critics.

But I wouldn't minimize their importance, as being part of the cultural elite of American society, even though the numbers are not on their side. So I think the numbers are important. They're important, also, for any politician. They don't just come from the Jewish community. They come from across the United States and I think that's really important.

And every president since, God knows, since Truman has talked about shared values between the U.S. and Israel. And the United States always allies itself with those with its shared values and shared interests. And I think with the U.S.-Israel relationship you do have both, and I think that's an important point.

Some would say, with President Obama, that he has changed his tactics. Until March, he believed the best way to get towards a two-state solution was to really emphasize policy differences with the Israeli government. I think since March, his approach has been the opposite, which is to try to coordinate with Israel, work things out behind the scenes. To the extent you have differences, air them privately. And you really see a change in the U.S.-Israel relationship in the last several months in a key sense.

I know you want to close, so I'll make this very brief. I would urge your listeners that on July 6, when Netanyahu came out of his meeting with Obama, he said, well, he's a man of peace and he's willing to take risks for peace. No, you could deride this and say, oh, Obama's facing midterms; there's a lot of shaky Democrats out there. But he has never vouched for Netanyahu's sincerity before as a peacemaker.

And I tend to believe, and from what I hear, Netanyahu did confide in this president and share with him more of where he wants to go on this two-state solution in specifics. What the specifics were I don't know. We can only guess. But I think that, you know, you could say this is driven by politics. I mean, it's driven by public opinion. And I think all those are important, but if there wasn't more of a policy harmony I don't think we'd hear this.

I do believe that at the end of the day, this president is utterly programmatic. And he's not like George W. Bush, who said about Putin, "I looked into his eyes. I saw his soul." He's more like, what is the objective? What's the strategy to get to the objective? That's the way you bond with this president, and I think there is so substitute for that sort of policy synchronization.

And I think the Obama relationship with Netanyahu, which began in such a strained fashion, has actually improved in the last several months. I think that is the only way that these people are going to be able to make Israel take risks for peace, I mean, if there's confidence in the United States.

Moreover, we didn't even discuss this on this call – maybe for another call – is the whole issue of Iran, which is going to require a lot of coordination between these two leaders. You'd have to be an air-traffic controller to keep up with all the Americans and Israelis going back and forth to discuss the Iranian issue. But you have Israel –

(Cross talk.)

MR. ELSNER: – the call. And on that note, I do want to thank David very much, David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, for his time and for his expertise. Just a couple of points: Sometime this afternoon, we will be posting our latest poll on our Web site and sending out a press release, hopefully, within a couple of hours. So I'd draw your attention to that.

We will be having conference calls next week precisely on the Iran issue, in advance of the UN General Assembly, which begins, I believe, on the 23rd of September. We will be tweeting from Sharm el-Sheikh, where we have our representatives, real-time. So if you want to keep up with real-time news on the peace negotiations as they develop, we're tweeting at Israel Project and encourage everyone to follow that.

And with those words, I wish everybody a happy new year and a very comfortable fast to those of us who are Jewish. Thank you very much and good-bye.

(END)