

MR. FRIEDMAN: If everybody could take their seats, we will continue. It's a -- let's get everybody to clear out. It's a treat for me to be here this afternoon with Israel's defense minister, Ehud Barak. One of the most --

(Applause)

MR. FRIEDMAN: Not only one of the most seasoned veterans of Israel's cabinet, but certainly one of the real heroes of Israel's armed forces as well.

Ehud, I was thinking before you came that the last time I saw you we sat in your office at the Defense Ministry. I think it was around October 2011. Anything new since then?

(Laughter)

MR. BARAK: Nothing. It's the same. We experience something that did not happen since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and nothing will be the same for the next generation, probably more.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Let's start out with really literally today's news; a new president of Egypt has been sworn in. He's from the Muslim Brotherhood party, now President Mohammed Morsi. My simple question to you is does Israel want the Muslim Brotherhood president of Egypt to succeed or fail?

MR. BARAK: We do not intend to intervene in what happens in Egyptian policy. We respect the decision of the Egyptian people and we expect -- and I think that we see the first signs of it in his first speech. We expect whoever rules Egypt to come to a balance with all forces and to live up to the international commitments of Egypt, be it all other international commitments as well as the peace with Israel. We strongly believe it serves the interests of both sides.

And especially, in brackets, I would say, to keep law and order in Sinai because the security in Sinai can be a source of deterioration.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Tell us actually a little bit about that? I think it's something that people here would be interested in that the Sinai has become a bit of a lawless zone between the Bedouin traffickers there and what not. How much of a security challenge is there for Israel in the Sinai and what nature does it take?

MR. BARAK: It was a challenge even during the Mubarak and Omar Suleiman period because they never kind of perfectly controlled the area, but it deteriorated dramatically in the last year. We see more smuggling of both weapons, drugs, labor from Africa, women from Ukraine, you name it. It's unbelievable.

MR. FRIEDMAN: All comes through the Sinai?

MR. BARAK: Yeah, it comes through the Sinai into Israel. We made the crash program to develop a fence -- more than just a fence, something like you have on your Mexican border. We sometimes think of hiring some of your toughest sheriffs over this border to help us. We are going to complete it within a few months. We hope it will

be successful.

We have several incidents where rockets were shot from Sinai in terrorist attacks that were initiated in the Gaza Strip and worked more comfortably through Sinai. It's a major issue. We hope and believe that the Egyptians can take care of it, and we are watching it very carefully.

But coming back to your question about Egypt, let me tell you it doesn't bode well. The pictures from the Tahrir Square were moving, I believe, to many people and in a way promising for the long range. But there is absence of real ripeness for Jeffersonian democracies in the Arab World. You cannot expect a Vaclav Havel kind of a moral beacon intellectual leading the country. And the opening that was opened by the youngsters in the Tahrir Square were following precedents in history taken over by the more organized power that wanted to come to power, and that's the Muslim Brotherhood.

It will change the landscape. It will resonate or project certain uneasiness into the Arab Peninsula; the Saudis, the Emirates, clearly Jordan. It will change the equation with the Hamas in Gaza. Mubarak as well as Omar Suleiman, despite them, with the new regime they might find a certain kind of brotherhood and different type of relationship. We have to worry.

You know, a person cannot choose his parents, a nation cannot choose its neighbors. You can go into Afghanistan, go into Iraq, and a decade later, decide that now the time had come to pull out of Iraq, pull out of Afghanistan. We are determined to stay there and survive and flourish, and it takes a lot of responsibility and a lot of vigilance.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Back on -- just one more question on Egypt I have, which is, you know, if you think of political Islam today, we have in Iran political Islam in power with oil to buy off a lot of the contradictions. Saudi Arabia has political Islam in power with oil to buy

off the contradictions. Egypt will be the first case of political Islam in the Arab World in power without oil.

MR. BARAK: Yeah.

MR. FRIEDMAN: And that will be pay-per-view. That's going to be an amazing thing to watch. I think it's going to be a real challenge for the Muslim brotherhood, how do you deal with trade, tourism, foreign direct investment. How do you see that from Israel's perspective?

MR. BARAK: First, though it will be a major challenge for them, we highly appreciate Mubarak and the previous regime for the success in holding the 80, 70 -- 80 million, now more than 80 million over the water, you know, over the -- with the --

MR. FRIEDMAN: Right, head above water.

MR. BARAK: It's demanding. You have to provide -- to produce a million new jobs every year, a million new mouths to feed probably every year and you don't have the oil. The sources of foreign currency for Egypt were \$11

billion from tourism, \$5.5 billion from the Canal and the next item is the \$2 billion from the United States. It needs a certain approach. And I believe that when the new president sits in his place, his -- he was educated here. He got a PhD from an American university.

MR. FRIEDMAN: USC.

MR. BARAK: He understands the world and he will have to make decisions that are not sometimes typical Muslim Brotherhood decisions.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Ehud, as we sit here today Syria is unraveling. There are reports I was just reading coming over here that two top Syrian generals have been abducted by the opposition. How do you see the situation there developing and are you rooting for Assad to stay or to go?

MR. BARAK: I believe that it's not -- once again, it's beyond our influence or judgment. I believe that he is doomed. He can never resume legitimacy within his own people. He slaughtered his own people en-masse.

The rebels now are more and more daring. A senior pilot defected with his jet to Jordan. Units are coming out of the armed services. It's not yet over. He can still survive for probably a month or two, probably a quarter. I cannot -- do not dare anymore to make predictions because a year ago I predicted he cannot stand for more than two weeks, and he stood.

But I am confident that he will be out of power. It will be a major blow to the Iranians and to Hezbollah. These are the only guys who are helping him physically now. The Arab League made extremely courageous steps by publicly condemning him and probably they are helping with some physical support the rebels. The rebels attacked military installations, TV stations and they control quite significant parts of Syria.

MR. FRIEDMAN: How do you think the vacuum there will be filled and by whom?

MR. BARAK: The longer it stretches, the more chaotic the morning after will be. The blood that had

been spilled will shadow any effort to come to normalcy once again. We strongly believe that once he is out the interests of the Syrian people, the region, probably the world is that Syria will be kept together and that somehow the bodies, the organs that are now functioning will function. I don't think that the world has to repeat the mistakes that had been done in Iraq by dismantling the Ba'ath Party, by dismantling the armed forces, dismantling the intelligence, Mukhabarat, and so on.

And I think that in the Syrian case the three major players should be Russia, because they invested over two generations a huge amount of political capital as well as financial resource -- even prestige in the Assad family. They should have a role if we want it to end quickly. There is a need for American leadership from wherever you choose to lead, but certainly American leadership. It needs NATO and Turkey, especially Turkey. The Turks were the owners of the whole region for 400 years. They are still highly respected in Syria. And

they will be very careful when a determined Turkish demand will be faced by them, even if it happens underneath the table.

MR. FRIEDMAN: How has Hezbollah been affected or do you think will be affected by the downfall of the Assad regime?

MR. BARAK: We are watching very carefully the possibility that when actually Assad will collapse in the very days before and afterwards, Hezbollah will try to grab some extremely advanced surface-to-air missile systems, ground-to-ground missiles of long range and heavy warheads and probably some chemical --

MR. FRIEDMAN: Interesting.

MR. BARAK: -- warfare means. We are watching it very carefully. As of now, it is not -- we are not yet do. But the Hezbollah will be weakened dramatically and it can even destabilize Lebanon, because the Hezbollah will -- some of the power role, influence in Lebanon stems out from the backing they got from Damascus and the open

channels of logistic support and political support. It would be a different -- it's a great opportunity for the other Lebanese, the ones that you interviewed on -- I first met this guy as a small sized Jewish young reporter for the *New York Times* with a Beirut like moustache, much darker than this one, in Beirut. I was heading our intelligence community and reading all the materials and knowing the Lebanese, and I was shocked by the clarity of observation and penetrating power of a young guy from Minnesota, and that's Tom Friedman.

(Applause)

MR. FRIEDMAN: Well, thank you. Thank you. So that actually sets up my next question, you know, because I came to Beirut in April 1982 for the *New York Times*, and shortly thereafter I heard a rumor that in the Syrian town of Hama a massacre had happened. It was all just a rumor. This was pre-cell phones. And I went to Damascus shortly after they opened the road from Damascus to Hama, and I hired a cab, and just went to Hama on my own, walked

around, saw the city literally flattened. What a contrast that is to today. How do you follow events in Syria?

MR. FRIEDMAN: We are disturbed on two levels. One is what really happened and I described it. I think that there is a huge difference that stems out exactly from the level of connectedness of the world right now. Assad Junior cannot repeat what his father did because -- for his father he first massacred them and then he took several weeks -- probably several months before the world became acquainted with it. Now it's on real time on the screens all around the world.

But there is a lesson that many in Israel noted to me. They say, "Look, even when the whole world informed in real time about terrible events that are totally unacceptable and that we are determined to prevent from happening rhetorically, and in terms of our real genuine beliefs, it doesn't mean that enough political will and enough unity among nations will be found in order to follow this strong belief by actions."

And Israelis, who happen to live in this tough neighborhood when there is no mercy for the weak, no second opportunity for those who cannot defend themselves, turned a little bit more open-eyed with this observation, that, even when events went that far in Syria, no one really moved to do something about it.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Let's skip to, you know, I know what's been a huge question for you, Iran. So for starters, give us, to the extent that you can, your strategic assessment of Iran's nuclear capabilities right now, where does the threat stand from Israel's point of view?

MR. BARAK: I believe that, first of all, we have to think of what it means to have Iran nuclear, and my judgment probably is somewhat similar to what General Musharraf cannot say is that if nothing will be done about it within several years Iran will turn nuclear. Probably somewhat similar way that the way that Pakistan turned nuclear in spite of Reagan administration reservations,

and North Korea turned nuclear in spite of Clinton and the rest of the world reservation.

So I believe that we have to think, first of all, what it means. A nuclear military Iran is the end of any conceivable anti-proliferation regime, because the Saudi's will turn nuclear within weeks, the Turks will turn nuclear within several years, and probably even new Egypt would find no way to avoid turning into a military nuclear power. And I don't mention the vision of Professor Allison Graham from Harvard, who said that we have to start to countdown towards weapon grade material in the hands of terrorist groups a decade down the stream, a nightmare that if ever material -- that we are already behind the wave to prepare ourselves for this.

Now it's not just the end of anti-proliferation it's the end of any controllable sponsors of terror, because they sponsor terror among Baluchi tribes in Afghanistan, among certain groups in Iraq and among -- with cooperating with Lashkar-e-Taiba with India, with the

Houthis in Yemen, with the bandits in Somali, you name it, all around the world. And it's not going to be better but worse.

Now they will strengthen their proxies. If -- now we are facing Hezbollah militia that has members of parliament, enough ministers to put a veto on any decision of the Lebanese government. But still they have independent foreign policy and they acquired some 50,000 or 60,000 rockets and missiles that covers all Israel, thousands of them can reach Tel Aviv. We think that this is crazy. It's not a simple challenge to deal with it when the time comes or if the time comes now, but try to think what it will mean to do with it when you prepare for it or when they challenge us. Iran -- a nuclear Iran will say an attack on the Hezbollah in Lebanon is attack on us.

So I propose to all those -- not to mention the leaders of the Gulf states, they are terrified. I have no other word. Terrified by the possibility that Iran will turn nuclear when America leaves Iraq and prepares to

leave Afghanistan. That's terrible for them. It doesn't mean that they applaud if anyone who will do something about it, but they are terrified. And clearly, the Iranians will intimidate neighbors. In fact, they are starting to do it already now.

So I think -- I am reading almost any think-thank publication on this issue coming from this continent. I tell you, honestly, I strongly believe that however complicated dealing with Iran now is -- and it's complicated and can carry certain unintended consequences -- it will be much more complicated, much more dangerous, much more costly in terms of human life and financial resources if we start to realize the consequences or the meaning of it only after they will turn nuclear.

Now to the direct question you have -- you know, we have now no difference in the intelligence. Several years ago the NIE raised some questions, now everyone understands after the recent Amano IAEA in Vienna report, everyone understands. The Iranians are determined to turn

into military nuclear power, number one.

Number two, that Khomeini had not yet ordered his people to start to build a weapon or an explodable device. The reason is most probably the fact that he thinks that he is penetrated in terms of intelligence and that we and the rest of the world will know about it. And probably if he does it right now, he will end up having to face a certain probably operation led by America or by Israel or by something other combination.

So he basically thinks the following. We waited for thousand years to start nuclear ambitions. We are into it for some 20 years, so let's wait another 4 quarters or 4 years. But make sure that before we make this critical step that might ignite a response, we first of all have to be redundant enough, to have enough centrifuges, enough sites well protected dug into sides of hills, with enough kind of plans to produce new centrifuges and enough lowly enriched uranium to suffice for half a dozen weapons.

And it's clear to me that he is heading towards what we call zone of immunity, where Israel, and later on even the United States of America would not be capable of making any surgical attack to destroy this capability. Only then he will consider when to start the operation itself.

Now, of course America has different capabilities than Israel. America has not just the kind of scalpel surgical capability, but also a chisel with ten pounds hammer kind of a surgical operations capability. So you are much more capable, so you can stretch it over a longer time. But that creates a built-in difference in the way we in Israel and you are looking at this issue. We sincerely believe that if nothing else works -- and both sanction and diplomacy are much more severe and sincere than in the past. But if this doesn't work -- and we don't have all the time in the world -- we'll have to contemplate what to do.

And because we now share the rhetoric, all of us are saying a nuclear military Iran is unacceptable, we are all determined to prevent it from turning nuclear. And we all say that no option except for containment should be removed off the table. I think that now comes the time where we strongly believe that sanctions should be dramatically ratcheted up and the process of negotiations dramatically accelerated in a way that the moment of truth or point of culmination will arrive, where still both of us, the United States of America -- that can still drag it for another several quarters or probably several years -- and Israel will both be capable of passing a judgment. Because I believe that the higher layers of leadership here fully understands that we are looking at the issue of Iran slightly different from the way it is perceived here, and I fully trust the president to see it as an extremely serious challenge.

I have noticed that American fighting forces are preparing themselves in a much more systematic manner for

any conceivable contingency. So it's not about lack of sincerity, but a decision has to be done at a certain point. And we strongly believe that when it comes to crucial issues related to the future and security of the state of Israel, we cannot afford delegating the decision even into the hands of our most trusted and trustworthy allies, which are you.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Thank you.

(Applause)

MR. FRIEDMAN: Ehud, you raised the question of President Obama, and we are in a political season here. There are certain divisions within the American Jewish community about the President. Is Barak Obama a friend of Israel?

MR. BARAK: Yeah, clearly so. I believe that the administration is fully --

(Applause)

MR. BARAK: You know, I can judge it from the point of view of defense, the defense of Israel is supported in a way and it's ---

MR. FRIEDMAN: By President Obama?

MR. BARAK: By the administration headed by President Obama, as well as by the Congress. But I should add to it that that was the pattern in the past from president and Congresses with this majority or the other kind of majority all along the years. We feel that we enjoy a bipartisan support in this country that stems out from a much deeper currencies independent of the President. But to tell the truth, this President and this administration supports Israel in a very forthcoming way.

(Applause)

MR. FRIEDMAN: Ehud, a couple of questions. The Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations have been really stuck under this government. The Palestinians are insisting on a settlement freeze or have been before negotiations resume. What would be so bad about freezing

settlements in order to get negotiations started? As you say, you know, there are now 500,000 settlers --

(Applause)

MR. FRIEDMAN: This --

MR. BARAK: It's true that there is no major breakthrough until now. We now have for several weeks a new government, unprecedented in (inaudible), covering some 80 percent of the Knesset, and we hope that it will create a new opportunity to try to move forward with the Palestinians. But let me tell you, under this government what really happened. First of all, the Palestinians under Abu Mazen refused once and again to get into the room with no --- without any precondition and start putting core issues on the table and start to negotiate them.

Partially, it's their -- I believe that most of the responsibility is on their shoulders, some of the responsibility on the Europeans, and probably some on you and us, because the very idea that not a single brick

should be put on a building in the settlements was drawn by Abu Mazen from Europeans and Americans. And he just quoted -- as he put to me, he said, "They pushed me to the top. I cannot afford being less Palestinian than the American president or the French president or the German chancellor or the Russian president."

And then they took the latter and asked me to come down. Now I could tell you, honestly, I believe that no one went further in order to strike a deal with the Palestinians than myself as the prime minister some 12 years ago together with Clinton.

MR. FRIEDMAN: I would agree with that.

MR. BARAK: Later on Ehud Olmert did it with Abu Mazen. For some reason we could not do it. And unlike the urban legends, we didn't tell Arafat take it or leave it. We didn't try to dictate. We just put an offer on the table that covered metaphorically probably 90 plus percent of his wishes and told him we want you to recognize this as a starting point for negotiation. He

rejected it bluntly and deliberately turned to terror. Something similar without the violence happened with Olmert, but we helped them to -- I don't want even to go into the details. We don't want to embarrass Salam Fayyad or others by portraying all the support we tried to give to them.

And they did a mileage. They built institutions of a state in embryo. They built security forces and a chain of enforcing law, which is much better than the past. But having said that, I can tell you that when I was prime minister and we were negotiation very close, we built four times the pace that this government is building. When Olmert was in negotiation with the same Abu Mazen, we built -- I was minister of defense at the time -- twice the pace of this.

So this government is not building. It's just a legend. It's not building -- we are building in Jerusalem. We are building with what -- within what we call settlement blocks, always the next row of building

close to the older one. And if after 45 years of being in control of this West Bank, Judea and Samaria as we call it, all together, all the Jewish settlement with all the 350,000 people doesn't cover even 2 percent of the area. It means that that's not the reason for blocking the agreement. It's more complicated.

(Applause)

MR. BARAK: I want you to draw a conclusion from what I have described. The very idea that because Israel is so kind of refusing or kind of rejecting any initiative that's the reason why everything is getting complicated is not true. It's just not just true. We are more open than we appear to be.

And the second -- probably a second lesson that we can draw from this whole picture. When you look at Egypt and Syria and what happens in Iraq and Iran and so on, to genuinely believe that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians -- the source of all this is incongruent with reality. Even if Israel had for two

generations a peace agreement with the Palestinians or the Six Day War had never happened because the Arabs would not try to defeat Israel --

MR. FRIEDMAN: The Arab awakening --

MR. BARAK: -- the Muslim Brotherhood will come to power at the right moment and the people would come and step against the autocrats. So we have to be more modest. Israel is part of the region and we will remain there forever. We are the strongest country. But we are not the reason, the causal chain of anything which is complicated in the Middle East.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Last quick question, Ehud, which is that, you now, if you sit in Washington, where I live, you can see the prime minister of Israel still get a standing ovation in Congress. But if you go to --

MR. BARAK: He's an articulated orator.

MR. FRIEDMAN: But you can -- if you go to the University of Wisconsin or Berkeley or Harvard or Nebraska, a visit by the prime minister of Israel today is

a controversial thing. It would produce a lot of protest. Do you worry that Israel's standing not only with Americans, but with young American Jews is being eroded and what do you think can be done about it?

MR. BARAK: I am worried. A generation ago I was a graduate student at Stanford. At the time, in every leading university, every second grade college there was a cell of Israelis and Jews who were fighting for the Israeli cause. And nowadays I visited my alma mater and I traveled in some universities, it's different. A group of former Israelis together with Palestinians and sometimes some Jews are demonstrating. You don't need Bibi for this. They demonstrate against me. A very powerful decision as I've seen what they had done. (Inaudible).

So we are in a struggle. We shouldn't wink. You know, it's a part of the picture. We have to invest more in pushing our cause, and we have to bear in mind that we are living in a complicated world. The world expects Israel, because we control the Judea and Samaria,

not the Arabs. The world expects us to be the source of initiative to change reality.

And it's clear to me I -- unfortunately, I cannot tell you that I have a majority in Israel but I'm part of those who believes strongly that we are not doing a favor to the Palestinians by trying to solve the issue for them. It's for both of us and that the future of Israel is threatened by the deadlock, namely between the Jordan River -- ours, not the one in Utah -- between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. There live 11 million people or probably 12 million; 5 million Palestinians, 7 million Israelis.

If there is only one political entity called Israel reigning over this area, it will become inevitably -- and that's the key word -- inevitably either non-Jewish or non-democratic, because if this block of millions of Palestinians with nation aspirations can vote for the Knesset, it's a bi-national state, (inaudible) probably will be with the majority of Palestinians in a generation.

If they cannot vote, it is not the Jewish democracy we were dreaming about.

So basically, the real threat for the Zionist project is abandoning the two-state solution. And that's why we are trying to help our people to look further into the horizon and see the realities that are evolving and take action in order to avoid them.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Ladies and gentlemen, Ehud Barak. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

* * * * *