Global Journalist: Middle East: Steps towards peace or PR stunt?

Abstract: This Jan. 17, 2008 episode with Stuart Loory revolves around President Bush's attempts to bring together the Israeli and the Palestinian leaders, Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas. But, as the world scrutinizes the three leaders and their weakened public perceptions, the panel of journalists suspects their peace talks could be part of a PR campaign.

Bios

Stuart Loory was a long-time reporter and editor for the Chicago Sun-Times and CNN. He was the inaugural Lee Hills Chair in Free Press Studies at the Missouri School of Journalism. He died in 2015.

Hisham Abdallah is a Jerusalem based Palestinian journalist who worked as a correspondent for Agence France-Presse.

Dr. Samir al-Taqi is a Syrian cardiothoracic surgeon and an expert on country risk and geo-strategic assessment. He was the director of the Orient Center for International Studies in Damascus, Syria from 2005-2010. Then became the general director of Orient Research Center (ORC). He is also a scholar.

Jay Bushinsky was a veteran war reporter who covered, for decades, the Middle East. He was a correspondent for several media outlets, American and foreign, such as The Jerusalem Post. He died in 2018.

Joel Greenberg is an American journalist whose byline can be found across multiple publications, such as the Washington Post and McClatchy Newspapers. He was based in Jerusalem for the Chicago Tribune and The New York Times.

James Martin is an American freelance writer and a Paul Mellon fellow at Cambridge University.

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Stuart Loory 00:00

Welcome to, welcome to Global Journalist. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism. The Bush administration tried to jump start the Arab Israeli peace negotiations with a summit meeting of Israel and several Arab states in Annapolis, Maryland, two months ago. President Bush, in his just completed six nation tour of the Middle East, made the start of negotiations, of real negotiations, the key point of his visit. He traveled not only to Israel, but also to the West Bank to talk to Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas. He held joint press conferences with Abbas and with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. He has committed himself to try to do something to bring about a peace agreement that could result in a two-state settlement before he leaves office a year from now, the president said some things to try to convince both sides of the need to negotiate. For the first time in seven years, he used the term two-state solution to appease the Arabs, and he also said Israel's occupation of Arab territories must cease. But all of that also meant the United States was not retreating from its strong support of Israel: It was backing the country's long supported existence with militant Arabs, when militant Arabs, I should say, say that Israel has no such right to exist. The response to the visit was not good. Militant Arabs in the Gaza Strip increased the number of rockets fired on Israel. The Israeli Defense Force has responded by raids into Gaza that killed 18 Arabs, most of them known terrorists, but some civilians. While the President was still in the Middle East, someone bombed an American Embassy vehicle north of Beirut in Lebanon, killing four people -- none of them were Americans -- but it was the first targeted attack on Americans in Lebanon since 1990 and that country has been without a government since the president there resigned in November. So, here is yet another American President following Presidents Nixon, Carter and Clinton in trying to fashion a peaceful settlement before he leaves office. Will he have any success? That's an issue we have addressed many times on this program. Let's see if things have changed this week. Our guests are in Ramallah -- on the occupied West Bank -- Hisham Abdallah, correspondent of Agence France-Presse. In Damascus, Syria, Dr. Samir al-Taqi, director of the Orient Center for International Studies. In Savyon, Israel, Jay Bushinsky, correspondent for CBS Radio. In Jerusalem, Joel Greenberg, of the Chicago Tribune. And in Cambridge, England, James Martin, a freelance writer, and Paul Mellon fellow at Cambridge University. Let's start by asking first Hisham Abdallah, and they (sic) Jay Bushinsky for their assessments of how realistic are the hopes for a real negotiation between the two sides after President Bush's trip. Hisham, will you go first?

Hisham Abdallah 03:32

Yes. Well, it's evening here, or good afternoon to everybody and good morning to whatever time it is. First of all, I just like to pinpoint in my capacity as a journalist, but not only as a Palestinian, that it's not really fair in standards to say to speak about Israeli Defense Forces and terrorists on the other side. I think we are, we are living in a conflict that has been there now for decades. And it's very important to relate to it, and it's direct connotations to it. This is one thing. The other thing, I believe in, in our, in our core issue here about the Bush visit, we, we understand that Mr. Bush have his vision of the two, the two states, Palestinian state and Israeli state. We know that Israel exists already. So, the vision is actually implied to the Palestinian state. And in his vision that he carried to the area, the region last, last week, we understand that Mr. Bush

made is clear that he was on the side of the Israelis. Of course, we understand the, the, the very important and strong relationship between the Americans from one side and Israel on the other side, but from the core the substance of his visit to the area, which was supposed actually to be mainly promoting having a two-state solution. I think Mr. Bush was indulged more in helping Israel, and that's was understood in his visit to, to the Saudi Arabia, which is the most important, I think, part of the visit in, in in political standards, as at the same time, we take his visit to the to Ramallah, this is the first Palestinian, sorry, the first American President visiting a Palestinian area after President Clinton, and he's speaking about the Palestinian state. This is very, very important. Of course, it took so many years the case (?), for the Americans to say that. But the importance is how to carry that. I believe that Bush thinks that, by the way, just he retreating the slogan over a two-state solution, he und... he understands that the Arab spill, the Saudi Arabia and others, has to come directly and approach the Israelis. And I think he came to this point very clearly when the Saudis rejected him. And I can relate to the quote by the foreign minister, Saudi, Saudi prince Faisal, when he said in his press conference, "There is no more that we can do for the Israelis". And this is take us directly to the Arab Initiative, which was put by the Saudis themselves, that called first for a full withdrawal of the occupation forces -- Israeli occupation forces -- from the, the occupied Arab Palestinian land with the establishment of Palestinian State and an acceptance settlement for the refugees issues...

Stuart Loory 06:30

Okay, Mr...

Hisham Abdallah 06:31

...then after that, then after that, we can go ahead to normalization with the Israelis.

Stuart Loory 06:35

Okay, Mr. Abdallah, let's we, we now have the, the view from Ramallah, let's hear Jay Bushinsky react from the Israeli side.

Jay Bushinsky 06:46

Well, I think that the President operated on the basis of traditional American optimism. And was partly swayed, I think, by the work done in, in advance of his visit by Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. She undoubtedly believes the two-state solution is feasible at this stage, she is impressed by the sincerity of both leaders, that is to say, the President of the Palestinian

Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, who respectively are in favor of this solution. But she also brushed aside the fact that part of the projected Palestinian state is under the control of a movement or, or party or organization, namely Hamas, which is opposed to the two-state solution, and which is in a confrontation with President Abbas. She spoke before his arrival and her previous trips about the likelihood that Hamas somehow will get out of the way. But as one Israeli analyst said in one of the many discussion programs over here, having Hamas in the mix is like having an elephant in the negotiating chamber and what the Hamas has been doing, as you can see, and I'll cut it short right here, has been to activate its missile cruise in the aftermath of the Bush visit, prompting the Israelis to respond with conventional military operations, a very heavy casualty toll on the Palestinian side, a three-day general strike in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in mourning for the casualties. All of this does not argue well for the one year deadline.

Stuart Loory 08:27

Joe Greenberg, you must have covered some of the the Bush story. What do you think? I, I did Bush really think that he had made some progress, or was the, the optimism, just as Jay put it, the, the typical American optimism?

Joel Greenberg 08:57

Yes, well, I, I found, frankly, a disconnect between President Bush's public remarks and the mood on the street, either here in Jerusalem, speaking to Israelis or in Ramallah speaking to Palestinians. I heard very deep skepticism that the deep problems dividing Israelis and Palestinians could be resolved in a year. And even as Bush was saying that he believed that a Peace Treaty would be signed by the time he leaves office, it was hard to find anyone, impossible, in fact, to find anyone who believed that that would happen among the Palestinians and Israelis that I spoke to. So, I think that there's a question here about whether Bush appreciates the extent and the depth of the issues involved, and they have stymied previous attempts. And while you can give the president credit for being optimistic, there's a feeling here that once it comes up against the hard realities, it's going to be a lot harder. And I think that the recent flare up of violence across the Gaza-Israel border is, is a perfect example of that. There's a certain inertia here of conflict and ideas on both sides that it's going to take a very long and arduous effort to overcome, and I think again, that that will be very difficult to do in, in now less than a year.

Stuart Loory 10:14

Yeah, this flare up of conflict, the reports that I have read seem to indicate that this was not Hamas conflict, that Hamas was not firing these rockets, that it, it was other militants in Gaza. Do we have any good information about that, and who's responsible for these firings, Joel?

Joel Greenberg 10:40

Well, the latest round was, was, was clearly a Hamas response, because the Israelis hit the Hamas. They, they killed more than a dozen of their fighters, they killed the son of a Hamas leader who was fighting the Israelis. So, Hamas responded with, with rockets. Hamas in general, though in recent months, has not been directly firing, but other groups have been doing it, Islamic Jihad, for example, or a group called the popular resistance committees, without being stopped by the, by the Hamas government in Gaza. But Hamas directly was not doing it. This incident brought Hamas directly into involvement, and it did take responsibility for the rocket firing, as well as a fatal shooting across the border that killed a volunteer in an Israeli kibbutz. So, this latest confrontation definitely did bring Hamas directly into the fighting.

Stuart Loory 11:33

Dr. Samir al-Taqi, the President, President Bush, during the visit, really said nothing -- I, I don't think -- about the Golan Heights and about the return of, of Golan to Syria. Syria was not really involved in, in these discussions in any way. How did that go down in Damascus?

Samir al-Taqi 12:02

Actually, he mentioned Syria two times. He mentioned Syria about the insurgency in Iraq, in Kuwait, and he mentioned Syria and Iran about the situation in Lebanon while he was yesterday in, in Cairo. I think the fact that Syria was not mentioned -- especially the Golan Heights -- by Mr. Bush had also thrown lots of skepticism about the intentions of the Americans, and especially Mr. Bush during his trip here to, to this region. Mr. Bush is not famous for his success politically in this region. And there is, there are lots of doubts about the fact that the United States was not able also to make the document of Annapolis being adopted by the United Nations. And so that to give it a kind of political commitment where the international community would be trying to give a momentum to that. Meanwhile, Syria is looking forward toward the conference that is due to health to be held in Moscow about the Golan Heights, under the auspices of the United Nation and as a continuity of Annapolis.

Stuart Loory 13:21

James Martin, yeah, you just heard Dr. al-Taqi say that Bush is not famous for success. Has any American really been famous or, or responsible for any great success in the Middle East?

James Martin 13:41

Well, I think that's an extremely contentious question. I remember one summer I once spent in Cairo, Egypt, and people would address me as the American who came from the land of Jimmy Carter. So, I think that, you know, I think that -- to a certain extent -- President Carter, you know, has a positive legacy in the region in certain ways. But I think that, I think that that's what's going on right now, that Bush's trip to the region was, was seen across the Middle East as, as much more of a PR campaign than anything else, and certainly in Lebanon, it was basically ignored. People in Lebanon were much more concerned with what was going on with their presidential crisis, and Bush had very little to say about that.

Jay Bushinsky 14:30

I think you forgot, though, that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger played a very constructive role in nailing down the ceasefire and launching the peace negotiations between Israel and Egypt and his successors, Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, to a lesser extent, but I'm sure our colleague in Damascus will agree that he contributed to the ceasefire between Israel and Syria in 1974.

Stuart Loory 14:53

Okay, Jay, I would ask our colleague to react, but I think we just lost him, I...

Jay Bushinsky 15:00

No, but those names should be mentioned along with President Carter.

Stuart Loory 15:03

Of, of course, and, and as Dr. Martin put it, I was being contentious, probably deliberately so, but there, there, there have been successes in, in the past. No successes, however, that have really led to the to the key settlement that we are all looking for. Joel Greenberg, you heard Hisham Abdallah talk about Saudi Arabia, and the meeting in Saudi Arabia being the key to this six-day trip. What is your reaction to that?

Joel Greenberg 15:47

Well, I think clearly the Americans would like the Saudis -- who are a key player in the Middle East -- to really throw their weight behind renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But the Saudis, like the rest of the Arab world, have adopted a position that basically says that first, before they come forward with any normalization or contact with the Israelis, Israel and the Palestinians are going to have to work out their conflict, and the Israelis will have to make what they see as the necessary territorial withdrawals to enable the establishment of a Palestinian state resolve issues of Jerusalem and refugees. As far as the Arab world is concerned, and the Saudis, this is the key to any kind of normalization or contact, political, diplomatic contact, between them and the Israelis. So, while the Americans would like to line up the Saudis behind this peace process, and the Israelis certainly would like to see signs of normalization of contact from the Saudis in the Arab world, it's just doesn't look like it's going to happen before there's substantial progress on the Israeli Palestinian trek.

Stuart Loory 16:54

Okay, I want to talk more about the future of negotiations, but first I have to tell our listeners, this is Global Journalist, and I'm Stuart Loory. Our guests today are in Cambridge, England, James Martin, a freelance writer and the Paul Mellon Fellow at Cambridge University. In Jerusalem, Joel Greenberg of the Chicago Tribune. In Damascus, Syria, Dr. Samir al-Taqi, director of the Orient Center for International Studies. In Savion, Israel, Jay Bushinsky of CBS Radio. And in Ramallah, Hisham Abdallah of Agence France-Presse. Let's talk a little bit about the immediate future in this peace process. Jay, what, what are the next steps? There have already been a couple of meetings between Ehud Olmert and Mah... Mahmoud Abbas. Are they going to continue?

Jay Bushinsky 17:55

Yes, they will. The two leaders are committed to meet about every two weeks, and they will probably do so through May, when President Bush will be back extensively to join Israel in celebrating its 60th anniversary of independence. However, the President will not only address the Knesset, Israel's parliament, but he undoubtedly will check the progress made in the interim since his departure last week. And I think that both sides -- the Israeli and Palestinian sides -- will want to impress the, the President with some progress made. And the fact that they are now dealing with what's called the core, the core issues of the problem, namely, the status of Jerusalem, the plight of the Palestinian Arab refugees, and the future borders of the projected Palestinian State, a, a, a, a an activity which has resulted in the in the resignation of one of Prime Minister Olmert's key allies from his coalition. He's already paid a price for that, so he's not going to give up on it, he's going to keep going. And therefore, if they make progress, and if

they lean on the likelihood, and I hope that my colleague, Joel Greenberg will agree with me that the consensus in Israel is that peace is the preferable option, and I think that's the consensus in, in the West Bank and probably the Gaza Strip as well outside of Hamas, then, then there is some hope.

James Martin 19:22

I think, if I may jump in -- this is James Martin -- that while that may all be right, I think that any long-term comprehensive peace deal is going to have to take into account as well the question of Hezbollah and Hezbollah's arms. And that Israel will never feel secure as long as there is an armed and angry Hezbollah right on its northern border. And as a result of this political crisis, if Hezbollah is able to gain more power and a greater say in the Lebanese government that does this, I think this bodes very poorly for any real long-term peace settlement.

Hisham Abdallah 19:56

May I jump in?

Stuart Loory 19:57

Please. This is Hisham?

Hisham Abdallah 20:00

Yeah, this is Hisham Abdullah again, from Ramallah. And I really want to make the point on I think it's very important to in this future of the, of the talks, and I just don't want to sound here as the, the pessimistic side of the story, but I think we are speaking here from the ground, and had been covered in this story now I know, I know Joel for the same time he was, at that time with Jerusalem Post you would write. And you know, for more than 20 years, we have been covering the story now, on the ground here. And I believe that, that, you know, if somebody hears us talking about just only Hamas, so when these missiles and Hezbollah are threatening Israel and all that, everybody is understanding that the new situation is a purely security situation for Israel, and this situation will be settled, then everything will be done. Of course, it is so important and we understand the security of the Israelis, and that's why the Palestinians have recognized Israel. And also on the mention of Israel celebrating its 60s and anniversary of independence, one must say or ask that a country that celebrates its independence, it must know its borders. And, and like somebody else said, that if there is a country that is recognized by the UN then it knows its borders. If Israel knows its borders, let's go back to these borders. This is one thing.

The second thing about the future of these talks, I believe that, that these talks will not yield anything if they will continue as is from the, the standard point of the American side and from the Israelis. And here I want to relate to very near experience on the side, either when we started the, the Oslo process after Madrid and after that, and the Camp David and the tava talks and all that. What is happening all the time is that all these settlements, all these proposals, are really actually avoiding approaching the real ingredients of the conflict. And you mentioned Hamas, and, and the original Hamas, like somebody says here, or, or sherzwala, or anybody else you know, we have to understand that Hamas only came to bears. It was only created 20 years after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. We understand that satihan, all the other Palestinian Renaissance movement only were created after Israel was there and capturing Palestinian and Arab land. So, why not? Why not in any (unintelligible), in any of all these approaches, political approaches, why not go to the direct problem and solve it? There is an occupation, or isn't? The Israelis are refusing to, to recognize that they are occupiers, because recognition of being an occupier entails so many responsibilities that the Israelis are not willing to take and pay the price for, and at the same time, it is also unfortunate that United States is a superpower, the, the sponsor of the, of the peace process, for now, more than 20 years, are still applying the same tricks. What is happening right now?

Stuart Loory 22:56

Yeah, a...

Hisham Abdallah 22:57

I'm, I'm finishing. I'm finishing. What is happening right now both with Bush vision, he's saying that Palestinians should negotiate, and then after that, we'll see that we will come a Palestinian State. So negotiation. At the same time with the Blair and the Quartet, they are doing a checklist for Palestinians to see if the Palestinians are worth of a state. Then we will give them one, if they fit in security, if they fit economically, if they fit according to the democratic and human rights standards, then they will give them. By this way, I think we are doing the same thing, and we are not going anywhere.

Stuart Loory 23:31

Okay, if I can ask James Martin, you just heard Jay talk about the political problems that Ehud Olmert is having with the resignation of Avigdor Lieberman and we, we know that Hamas and Fatah, led by Mahmoud Abbas, also create political problems for a Abbas. What can we say about the weakness of the two leaders and how I, this is going to impact on the negotiations?

James Martin 24:15

Well, I think that we may have to look at a weakness of a third leader, in this case, I think that Mr. Bush's low popularity, not only in the region, but also his relative unpopularity right now in the United States, bodes poorly as well for any future peace negotiations. I think that Mr. Bush's name is so unpopular in the region that even working towards peace -- which is certainly desired by most -- the very fact that it has become associated with him is, is, is troubling and will and, and bodes very poorly.

Stuart Loory 24:51

Well the, the implication of what you say you earlier, you said that the Bush trip to the Middle East was mostly a, a PR proposition is the implication.

James Martin 25:06

No, I, I, I don't think that, I, I'm not saying necessarily that it was a PR proposition on their part. I think that it was widely seen as one, however.

Stuart Loory 25:13

Okay, but is what's happening now with the negotiations a PR matter for Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas? Not only PR in their, in their own areas, but also in their relationship to the rest of the world? Jay, what do you think?

Jay Bushinsky 25:36

Yes, to a certain extent, I, I think it is. Don't forget that Prime Minister Olmert is sitting on, on tender hooks right now, waiting for the Winograd Commission to come out with this report on the way in which the last war in Lebanon was conducted a year and a half ago. And to avert the consequences of the criticism that, that is expected, heavy criticism, he is promoting a peace process and, and that is a form of public relations. So, I think that he'll, he'll, he will try to keep the Israeli consensus in favor of peacemaking working in his favor as well, and therefore you're right in assuming that there is a certain PR element in what he's doing.

Stuart Loory 26:20

And Hisham Abdallah, what about Mahmoud Abbas?

Hisham Abdallah 26:23

Well, I think you know, I just want to say, of course, Mahmoud Abbas has been weakened by when everybody, when everybody allowed Hamas to do what it has done, or that. And we have to understand that during the years when the cash, money, millions of dollars flowing, and weapons flowing, Israel, who is has the most important and sophisticated intelligence in the area did not say anything on that. Now they are saying something about that. I believe that here we are again with this PR strong, weak leader situation. Again, I want to remind everybody that in taba, in taba, when, when Arafat and Barak were, were discussing the last era of the Camp David, of the Camp David, of the Camp David negotiation when they moved to taba after that...

Stuart Loory 27:05

Mr. Abdallah, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I do have to cut you off. We are out of time. Mr. Abdallah, maybe one of these days I will finish a program on this subject and say, finally, peace is at hand. But as we heard today, this is still not the time. Our guests today have been Jay Bushinsky of CBS Radio in Savyon, Israel. Hisham Abdallah of Agence France-Presse in Ramallah on the occupied West Bank. In Jerusalem, Joel Greenberg of the Chicago Tribune. In Damascus, Dr Samir al-Taqi, director of the Orient Center for International Studies. And in Cambridge, England, James Martin, the Paul Mellon fellow at Cambridge University. Our director is Pat Akers, and our producers, Kathryn Wolf (ph) and Heather Pernah (ph). For all, I'm Stuart Loory. Global Journalist will be back next week.