

**CENTER FOR STRATEGIC
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)**

**PRESS BRIEFING
ON
THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT**

WITH

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H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: Good afternoon and welcome to the Center for Strategic International Studies. Today we are fortunate to have a world-class panel of experts on hand to discuss the current Middle East conflict. Jon Alterman will be here in a second.

We are especially delighted to have with us Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the foremost minds in foreign policy. Dr. Brzezinski was of course President Carter's national security advisor, and he is a counselor and trustee here at CSIS. Jon Alterman is a Middle East program director at CSIS and a former State Department policy planning staff member. Daniel Benjamin, he is a senior fellow at CSIS and former National Security Council director of transnational threats. Dan is also the author of "The Next Attack" and the "Sacred Age of Terror."

Dr. Brzezinski has to leave us today at 2:30, so he'll now say a few opening remarks, and then we can open up our entire panel to take your questions. It's my honor to present Dr. Brzezinski.

DR. ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI: Thanks very much. I am going to brief. I'll just make a few general comments, and then be responsive if I can to any issue that any of you wish to raise.

And let me say that basically what concerns me is that it is not clear to me what exactly the United States is trying to accomplish by not taking a stance in favor of an early ceasefire. I fail to see what U.S. interests are served by that. I have no illusions that any call for an early ceasefire would in fact produce a ceasefire. It will take time to get one. So what is the United States gaining by delaying it, except in a sense clarifying to the region its position less of a protagonist and more of a mediator in the ongoing conflict? I am not sure that this is in the American interest.

Secondly, it's not clear to me what Israel thinks it will gain by delaying a ceasefire. I can well imagine the calculation that one can clear out the Hezbollah South of the Litani River, or even beyond if one wishes, but what then? Unless the Hezbollah agrees to a ceasefire, at some form a protracted conflict will continue. In any case, the prisoners that Israel wishes to have released will not be released. There will have to be some accommodation on that at some point.

So the question is will the removal of the Hezbollah from the South of Lebanon make the Hezbollah more inclined to have a ceasefire, more inclined to engage in negotiations, or perhaps it will simply prefer to engage in protracted conflict, waging asymmetrical warfare against Israel. I'm not quite sure that the calculus is all that clear-cut in favor of the former proposition.

Moreover, a protracted conflict will involve more casualties for both sides, and the casualties for the Israelis are not light given the population of Israel. One can calculate that if Israel has lost their, say, about 30 military personnel so far, that is the equivalent of 1500 for the United States. That is not insubstantial.

Beyond that, there is the problem of the political costs of the continued hostilities. World public opinion is turning against Israel because of the civilian casualties. Now, I can understand that civilian casualties are to some extent unavoidable in any kind of warfare, and they are particularly unavoidable in warfare which is heavily waged also from the air. But it is difficult to justify some of the casualties, particularly in areas which are not close to the combat zone, and that creates political costs and moral dilemmas.

By way of reference, let me simply remind you of the fact that NATO waged a 78-day-long aerial campaign against Serbia, the purpose of which was to force Serbia out of Kosovo by imposing serious costs on Serbia focusing of course on infrastructure, but in the process also producing what is sometimes euphemistically called collateral damage.

NATO admitted up to 30 incidents involving civilian casualties that were unintended. Human Rights Watch conducted a very extensive investigation after the end of the hostilities and discovered that this was an underestimate, that in fact a number of civilian incidents were larger. Human Rights Watch visited 91 sites, cities, towns, and villages that were exposed to NATO bombing, and located at least 42 sites in which there were civilian casualties.

And after 78 days of bombing, approximately 500 casualties were identified. That is roughly five-times higher than the rate of civilian casualties inflicted so far in Lebanon and in Gaza by the ongoing campaign, for the hostilities in Lebanon and Gaza have now lasted two weeks roughly. The Serbian hostilities lasted 11 weeks. This suggests that perhaps some of the casualties were the result of excessive use of force or not closely supervised use of force, and that has political costs.

And after all, unless one is waging a war for total victory to be achieved because existential dilemmas are being confronted, political costs and moral costs are intertwined, and that is something that neither the United States nor Israel, both being democracies, can entirely disregard.

My final point regarding the questionable value of a delay in seeking – not in obtaining, but in seeking a ceasefire pertains to the role of the Arab community, the Arab region. What was striking in the early days after the beginning of the hostilities was the widespread criticism of the Hezbollah, including by Arab governments. And that foreshadowed at that moment perhaps the possibility of some collective stance that would be favorable to a resolution of the problem – not on Lebanon, perhaps also in Gaza – that would be favorable to a more lasting resolution of the problem.

I am afraid that with conflict continuing, the radicalization of the Arab masses is going to become more pervasive, the sympathy for the Hezbollah more extensive, and as a consequence, the prospects for a favorable outcome beyond some sort of ad hoc solution will be reduced. But perhaps I should stop at this.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Great. We will open it up to questions, and if you could identify yourself by tapping your microphone and giving your name and news organization, that would be terrific.

Q: Omar Shimkus (ph), chief of the – (inaudible) – Voice of America.

Dr. Brzezinski, everybody is saying that Hezbollah is fighting a proxy war for Iran and Syria. And the administration is saying – and even these are saying that Syria and Iran should put pressure on Hezbollah in order to negotiate in resolving this conflict now. But at the same time, they are not willing to talk to Syria and Iran. Is that possible without even having a dialogue, even if it is indirect with Syria and Lebanon to have solutions for this crisis?

DR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, first of all, I'm not sure that I agree that Hezbollah is fighting a proxy war for Syria and/or for Iran. I think Hezbollah is fighting a war for itself, right or wrong, which the Syrians and the Iranians are indirectly assisting. But I do agree with the thrust of your point, of your argument, namely that if this issue is to be resolved, we have to talk in some fashion, the Syrians and the Israelis (sic), because they are supporters of Hezbollah, and Hezbollah will not be able to sustain a prolonged –

DR. ALTERMAN: Syrians and Iranians.

DR. BRZEZINSKI: I'm sorry?

MR. ALTERMAN: Syrians and the Iranians.

DR. BRZEZINSKI: What did I say?

DR. ALTERMAN: Israelis.

DR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, sorry. Well, that is a big difference. (Laughter.) The Syrians and the Iranians in – Hezbollah cannot sustained a prolonged asymmetrical warfare without some outside assistance. And that raises a further complicating question in all of this: Would Hezbollah had had – would Hezbollah had had the freedom to strike the way it did if the Syrians were still in Lebanon? We view the expulsion of Syria as a great political success just as we view the democratization of the Palestinian political process as a great success. Unfortunately the consequences in one case were clearly undesirable; in the other case, at the very least, they are ambiguous.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Tyler.

Q: To both Dr. Brzezinski and – to both Dr. Brzezinski and Jon, today the Israelis have suffered I think 18 dead in a – 18 soldiers killed in an area that they thought that they had secured. Is it your sense that a shock like this will embolden the Israelis to hit harder or do you think it would have a sobering effect?

And a second question to Dr. Brzezinski, a couple of days ago, you said that you described the U.S. policy in the Middle East as the basic test of America's capacity to exercise its global leadership. A general question: How do you assess that capacity today, say, compared to three years ago in April of '03 after Baghdad fell?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, I think the American capacity to influence events in Israel has been going down steadily over the last several years. We have not been able to define the outcome in Iraq. We have not been a particular success for the promotion of democracy in the fashion that we pursued it, even though the goal is desirable. We have not made much progress in promoting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. And it is not very evident that in recent times, we have been trying to seriously to promote it. And it's very difficult to see much effect over the last two weeks for whatever steps we have been taking or for whatever we have been saying on this subject.

On the issue of casualties, if the 18-dead figure is correct, imagine the impact on American public opinion if news out of Iraq tomorrow was that in the course of the day 900 American soldiers died? I think the impact will be severe. Now, it will be severe, but it will not be the same throughout the country. I think there will be a sense of shock, there will be a sense of anger, there will be a sense of outrage, there will be some desire for revenge, but there will be a lot of people saying where is the stake in this?

And this is why I am frankly baffled; I am genuinely baffled to why the Israeli government thinks that a ceasefire is not in its interests because I don't think they will accomplish a genuinely strategic success by continuing the hostilities. They may achieve some tactical successes, but without either obtaining the original objectives, or being able to stop the Hezbollah for continuing some undeclared warfare of his own choosing, concerning the fact that it is based not only in the Southern Lebanese region, but also north in the Bekaa Valley, in Beirut itself, and about 35 percent of the population of Lebanon is Shi'a, and these people are enjoying more and more sympathy from the others who feel themselves victimized by what is happening.

JON ALTERMAN: On the issue of the impact of the deaths on Israeli public opinion, it plants the seed of doubt, but it plants that seed in pretty infertile soil. Israeli public opinion is 90, 95 percent in favor of the current military operations. There is a sense that this is really a just war, and the Israeli general public is at risk. So it creates the possibility of a change, but I don't think it pivots Israeli public opinion in any way; it doesn't mark the turning point.

I think the issue of American global leadership is a vital one. I must say I was stunned at the outcome of the Rome conference. I don't understand the point of having the Rome conference unless you know it's going to be successful. It seems to me that

what has happened casts in sharp relief how difficult it is for this administration to be a global leader, how difficult it is to set the terms of debate. And on an issue like this, where so much prestige was writing on it, to be unsuccessful in such a public way--to not even be able to salvage it with an expression of common urgency--strikes me as a real setback for American diplomacy.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Phil.

Q: Phil – (inaudible). I have two questions for anybody. One, six years after the U.N. instructed Hezbollah to disarm and get out of the area, it sat by and let nothing happen. And then the inevitable occurred. Hezbollah attacks Israel and Israel responds and Kofi Annan criticizes the Israeli response. Doesn't that show the irrelevance the hypocrisy of the U.N. particularly in this region? And secondly, some people say what this is Israel beginning a World War III. And if that is the case in any sense, isn't it better to fight Hezbollah now than wait till Iran is – has a nuclear weapon?

DR. BRZEZINSKI: I'm willing to respond. (Scattered laughter.)

Well, first of all, as far as you and Security Council resolutions are concerned, if the point of the question is that they should be respected, then they should be respected, all of them. What about Resolution 242, 338? Have they been respected? And who was it that refused to abide by them? It wasn't Hezbollah. So unfortunately there is a rather poor record of respect for the U.N. Security Council resolutions in the Middle East because the parties concerned cannot accommodate, and the parties outside are not prepared to push the peace process seriously, and that is the dilemma.

World War III now? I don't think so. Let's not exaggerate. We are dealing here with a difficult local militia that has a fair amount of popular support in its own territory, and it's gaining increasing support in the region. But it's not a World War III. I don't think that it's going to command much support outside of the Shi'a community at this stage. And if some of the other Sunni Arabs decide to become more engaged, I think that kind of conflict will be very one-sided in the short run.

Now, in the long run there is a seriously problem emerging, namely, is it in the interest of the United States and of Israel, given its location, to engage in activities which do not dampen down the fanaticism and the radicalism, the extremism, but rather intensify it. And I think that is a dilemma that we all face.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Can I just – Dan.

DANIEL BENJAMIN: Hi, Phil, nice to see your face, before I'd only heard your voice.

Two elaborations, shall we say, on what is being said: The first thing is that I don't think any of this reflects on the U.N. I mean, it reflects on us, it reflects on the

international community, and it reflects on American leadership, the fact that no one ever did much after the Syrians withdrew in terms of fulfilling the terms of Resolution 1559.

It was a very difficult problem to disarm the militias, and as we are seeing now in the discussions about who would actually be in a buffer, in an international force that might actually have to do some peace enforcement, there are not a lot of people out there who would want to confront Hezbollah. So that is a big problem. Nonetheless, the international community, and the United States included, dropped the ball on 1559.

The second thing that I would argue, and that I'm agreeing with Zbigniew here, is that not only is this not World War III; I think if anything it is a very confined and limited outbreak of hostilities. Neither the Syrians – both the Syrians and the Israelis have said they have no intention of engaging one another, and I think it's in their interest not to, although if this goes on for a long time, then the chance of this calculation increases of course.

And I don't think anyone wants to take on the Iranians right now. I think actually that this is a self-insulating problem; it's a very serious problem, but I don't see this breaking out. I think if you wanted to talk about a bigger problem with a potential to spread, then perhaps we should talk about Iraq. There the level of order seems to be decreasing by the day.

DR. ALTERMAN: Just very quickly. I think you have unanimity that this isn't World War III partly because none of the states in the region want World War III. Israel's war is with non-governmental organizations, not with states. The states don't want a formal war.

In your question about the Security Council resolutions, you talked about how Hezbollah provoked this war. I think Hezbollah was provocative, but it wasn't provoking a war. Hezbollah had done the exact same thing in the past but never had this outcome before. The outcome this time was a war of choice waged by the government of Israel. It is a choice that Ariel Sharon consistently decided not to make, because he thought that a war against Hezbollah would be a strategic diversion from Israel's true national security needs.

This is a war of choice that Prime Minister Olmert has decided to wage in part because his party was elected on the premise that unilateral withdrawal brings peace, and his country is now fighting to reestablish deterrence in the two places from which it unilaterally withdrew.

At the same time, they lack a strategic paradigm to replace the platform on which they were elected. That makes it harder to end the war, because if you don't have a governing strategy for what you're going to do, if you don't have an overall vision, it's harder to say that your goals have been met. That, it seems to me, is what an American role needs to be: to step in and help supply that lacunae in Israeli strategic thinking right now.

Q: Mark Silva, Chicago Tribune.

You spoke earlier of the early widespread criticism for Hezbollah, and I would like to take you up on your invitation to bring Iraq into this, and how troubling is it that in Iraq, which was supposed to be our beacon for democracy in the Middle East, the leader, now cannot see it fit to condemn Hezbollah for acts of violence that other people have criticized Hezbollah for. How troubling is that in the overall situation, and what does it say, again, about the U.S. position in global diplomacy.

DR. BRZEZINSKI: It's obviously troubling, but it's hardly surprising. It seems to me that they weren't surprised by these reactions. One shows complete misjudgment of what has been happening in the Middle East for the last several years. We're dealing with a very serious wave of radicalization produced in large measure by our unwillingness to address seriously the Israeli-Palestinian peace issue, and then by our decision to wage the war in Iraq under circumstances which somewhat departed from standards of both legitimacy and credibility, if I might put it obliquely.

MR. SCHWARTZ: David?

Q: David Sands from the Washington Times.

Could you address directly what I understand is the Bush administration's main argument for not going through a ceasefire, that these are the birth pangs of a new Middle East – that a ceasefire would short circuit necessary changes that have to be made in the region?

DR. BRZENZINSKI: Well, I frankly don't understand what that phrase "birth pangs" means. (Chuckles.) You know, it cannot suggest distasteful rejoinders, which I will not undertake, but I suppose implicit in it is the notion of some sort of a grand upheaval in the Middle East, out of which then democracy will emerge. I think it's a rather risky proposition given what is involved in the Middle East, given what the global economy depends on from the Middle East, and given the fate of the peoples involved in this sort of slightly abstract formulation, which seems to imply some radical transformation of the sort that occurred, for example, in Europe after World War II. These are hardly very promising implications.

Q: Olmer Savac (ph) with Turkish newspaper – (inaudible).

Dr. Brzezinski, in the last week, the Turkish prime minister called the White House to express a similar interest in pursuing a cross-border operation in Northern Iraq to deal with the PKK insurgents. If this war in the Middle East prolonged, how is this going to impact countries like Turkey in regard to their interest in dealing with their own terrorism issues? Thank you.

DR. BRZEZINSKI: You know, one look at the map of the region suffices to realize that there are great many potential additional ethnic and religious conflicts that have not yet been ignited. And this is another reason one should be extremely careful in how one responds to an ongoing crisis, and why one should be very determined to dampen it out, to extinguish it before it spreads. So while the prime minister of Turkey may have been raising an issue of immediate concern to him, the fact that is that there are a great many other issues of that sort just waiting to be ignited, and I don't think it's in the interest of anyone to see any of this spread.

Q: (Off mike) – news service.

The notion that NATO should get engaged has been – (inaudible) – rather unusual sources talking of Poland – (inaudible) – the former revolutionary of 1968 now with respect to – (inaudible) – and by the Green Party, Germany's Green Party, even German pacifists. What do you think of the idea?

DR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, just to make it a little more absurd – (laughter) – let me say that I also favor it. (Laughter.) And I have favored this for a number of years, and I was once attacked very strongly by Krauthammer, the columnist for The Washington Post, who thought it was a crazy idea. Well, I'm now reassured that not only I favor it, in addition to – (inaudible) – and the Greens, but apparently the Israeli government is prepared to consider it seriously. I think it's a step in the right direction; I wish it had been taken earlier, but better late than never.

If we can implant in some fashion after a ceasefire – because we can't do it without a ceasefire – a NATO force in Southern Lebanon – and nobody will come in if there is no ceasefire; nobody is going to go in just to fight Hezbollah. If we can find some formula for a ceasefire, which permits that to take place, sooner or later – and I don't think later is going to be easier than sooner – then we'll have set an important precedent for ensuring in the long run the security of Israel in its relations with its neighbors, and I think we will have advanced the possibility of having a serious settlement that has the character of some reciprocal legitimacy.

One can always have a settlement imposed by force, but if it remains illegitimate, it's going to be contested. So you want to have a stable settlement and it has to be legitimate to some extent for both sides. And if there is a NATO force in Southern Lebanon, another question will arise before long: Why not in Gaza, for example, and then why not in the West Bank? And I personally will say why not? I think in the long run, something along these lines offers a real possibility of creating the kind of reassurance that may make a genuinely fair settlement feasible for both of the parties or all of the parties.

I have to leave after the next one.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Great. Someone over here.

Q: Dr. Brzezinski, Alick (ph) Russell from the Daily Telegraph of London.

The debate that is taking place in Washington about the crisis at the moment is so far removed from the debate that is taking place in London and other European capitals that one is tempted to go back to that old cliché of two different planets, Mars and Venus, or whatever different universes. It really is extraordinarily striking as an outsider here seeing that there is very little criticism of Israel at all.

You have been involved in looking at (an arrangement ?) for a very long time. I wonder if you could say why is it – why is there is so little criticism in America now. That is the question I am constantly being asked to explain to my readers.

DR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, I'm not sure I entirely agree with the proposition that there is little criticism in the United States, except perhaps outside of the House of Representatives. But there is a very special explanation for that. It's two years in office, continuous fundraising and campaigning, and that makes you extremely sensitive to anything that undermines your political prospects.

But look at the American press. Abstracting from the editorials, let's say in The Washington Post, The Washington Post coverage certainly conveys a great deal of sensitivity to human suffering. The New York Times, also I suspect many other papers and magazines do. And I understand – I haven't seen them yet, but I understand that there are public opinion polls now, which are going to come out very shortly, showing a great deal of concern within the American public about the suffering, the level of violence, the desirability of a ceasefire.

So I'm not sure there is such a fundamental difference. Now, on the level of politics, that is different on the level of decision-making. I think the administration has had a rather militant and absolutist notion of how to achieve peace in the Middle East laced with strong overtones of black-and-white morality, and has been holding steadfast to these notions, whereas Europeans are more pragmatic, more sensitive the complexes in the Middle East.

But what is striking to me – and I think Jon put it extremely well about Rome – is that neither side is exercising much effective leadership. It is essentially stalemated, we in part because we don't want to move; the Europeans in part because they want a move, but by us, and that is the problem. So I think that is a dilemma we are locked in. Europe may have different views than we, but essentially it is not prepared to act on them on its own because it can't, and we're not going to abdicate at this stage, at least, our decision-making to the Europeans because we are very whetted to the notions that have put us on this downward slide in the Middle Eastern region as a whole.

I'm sorry I have to leave, but I have two colleagues here that are much better informed than I, know much more about, and will be even freer with their judgments after I have left than while I'm here. (Laughter.) Thank you very much. Thank you.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Thank you, Dr. Brzezinski. Questions. Oh, did you want to present? Did you guys want to say something?

Some more questions? Down here?

Q: Nataly Yan (ph) from – (inaudible).

Could you tell more about a potential international force, like a NATO force? What specifically would it need to do? Would it need to disarm Hezbollah or would it support the Lebanese government in doing that? And what are the biggest obstacles – the biggest challenges that it would face in order to be successful?

DR. ALTERMAN: I happen to think that an international peacekeeping force is not a good idea. I have seen peacekeeping forces work; I have never seen *peacemaking* forces work, and it seems to me that this is essentially a peacemaking force. Even if you have a ceasefire, Hezbollah has not demilitarized. I can't imagine how you would begin to write rules of engagement for when people will be allowed to fire. Our problem doing that I think were magnified after the fall of Baghdad. Do you fire on people who are looting? I mean, that is just a tiny sliver of what we need to arrive at.

It seems inevitable to me that an international force would be perceived as foreign invaders, colonizers, if you will, especially from formerly colonial countries. I mean, I understand the attraction of it because it's something we haven't tried yet. I would be much happier about the experimentation if we had experimented successfully with this idea before. And my fear is that we haven't, and this is something like a hail-Mary pass in the final minutes. I don't think we need to make it, and I don't think we should.

MR. BENJAMIN: I think I'm not quite as skeptical as Jon is, and I think that there is a dimension of this entire crisis that is reminiscent of other calls for help from other regions – well, in one case, the same region of the world -- in 1973 when the Egyptians crossed the canal. And in some ways – not directly analogous but something similar to what happened in the Kargil crisis in that you found one party saying we need international intervention in a way we haven't had before. And so I think there is a certain amount of exhaustion with the situation on the ground and a desire to try something else, so there is a need for some experimentation. It could be that the example of the Balkans – Yugoslavia in particular – over the last decade might provide some instruction, but I agree with Jon completely. This is uncharted territory and extremely hard to see the way forward. I think that we're in one of the situations in which it's very hard to see the way forward and no one can see any other way.

DR. ALTERMAN: And there's no going back.

MR. BENJAMIN: So that's a very important point, because to pick up on what Dr. Brzezinski was saying, from the Israeli perspective in particular, a cease-fire is going back to the status quo ante is unacceptable, so we are in a very deep jam right now.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Howard?

Q: Yeah, well, so I wanted to ask – (inaudible) – so I wanted to ask Jon and then

Dr. Alterman: Dan, the good-looking one.

Q: Dan, so without an international force, what – and in this case, uncharted territory and all that – what would you see as the direction of some settlement or some action for the international community included the U.S. of A?

DR. ALTERMAN: Part of this problem – and Dan put it well – the Israelis are unwilling to return to the status quo ante. The U.S. is unwilling to return to the status quo ante. But that doesn't mean that therefore the world has to come up with some more acceptable solution because two parties are unhappy with it. I mean, at some point, you also have to redefine your war objectives. And it seems to me that where a lot of this work needs to go is for the Israelis to figure out where are they really trying to go. Because I really think that they're spinning.

Ariel Sharon had, it seems to me, decided very firmly that the most important thing was getting the heck out of the West Bank and he wasn't going to be diverted because he said Israel's long-term interests cannot be served by maintaining an occupation. And he used the word "occupation." Israel now has no prospects of leaving the West Bank in the foreseeable future because of a war of choice. I think Israel needs to think strategically where it is really trying to go, and we need to help them think that through. But because they say we won't return to a status quo ante doesn't mean that we then have to supply alternative scenarios until they're happy. I mean, their responsibility is to define where is this going. To my mind, I haven't seen that happening, and I haven't seen it fall into a general strategic framework that represents a secure future for Israel.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Christian.

Q: Yeah, Chris – (inaudible, off mike) – could I pull off of what you just said? Could you then – I know you have conflicts in the administration – but since we have this kind of analysis, why doesn't the administration then come to a different conclusion? If you see that everybody has in mind that you – after Gaza, it's West Bank. You even have a government elected on this agenda. Knowing this, the public probably knew what was to come. And the U.S. administration was pushing for that and supporting this idea. Why is it that your administration is then behaving in the way it behaved in Rome – (inaudible)?

DR. ALTERMAN: My sense from conversations with people is that this administration puts a lot of stock in the idea of moral clarity. I think moral superiority helps you an awful lot in the afterlife, but it doesn't do a lot in the battlefield. They believe that Hezbollah is full of bad people. But mere moral superiority doesn't defeat Hezbollah. And it seems to me that we need to define some other aim, some other way of

getting it. The only aim I see that makes sense, that really deals with Hezbollah is fundamentally a political solution. There's not a military solution to the problem of Hezbollah. You can treat it; but you can't cure it. The only way to cure it is to have Lebanese politics step in, constrain Hezbollah, lead Hezbollah to becoming more of a political party. In part, it already is genuinely representing the interests of Shi'a in Lebanon and providing for Shi'a in Lebanon, providing for a population that has felt not only downtrodden but dispossessed for decades and decades and decades. If we don't have a Lebanese political solution to this, there is no solution to this problem in terms of Israeli security.

What's happening, it seems to me, over time, is that Lebanon is uniting as a country. They're not turning to push out Hezbollah. That was one of the initial aims, that people would unite against Hezbollah. I don't see that happening. I don't see the Lebanese government having things to show for its efforts that strengthen it vis-à-vis Hezbollah. Those are the important things. Fouad Siniora needed to come out of Rome with something in his pocket that he could deliver as a leader of Lebanon. He didn't, and that's a tragedy.

MR BENJAMIN: I wanted to just add a couple of points here. One, I think one avenue that we'll probably see explored more – and there are already hints of this in the papers in the last few days – is whether or not the road to disengaging here runs through Damascus. You know, especially if they find that putting together an international force is very difficult -- highly problematic as many people have pointed out because we haven't been talking to Damascus, and my guess is that Assad will want to show how essential he is to the politics in the region. Getting from here to there will be quite difficult and also problematic.

Under 1559, we engineered the departure of Assad from Lebanese politics or at least the appearance thereof. You know, there are some problems that don't have solutions, and Hezbollah may actually be one of those, insofar as until there is a radical shift in the picture of Lebanese politics and the picture of the Middle East in general, I don't see Hezbollah being disarmed except by force, and that's going to be hugely problematic. Everyone has been talking as Jon has over their evolution into a political party, and they are. But they've managed to become a political force, remain a social welfare organization, and remain a terrorist organization. They're not shrinking their capabilities; they're establishing new ones. And I think this is going to be highly problematic for a long time.

And I think frankly if you want to – I mean, I agree with Jon's assessment of the moral outlook of the administration, but I think if you want to take it a bit further, you would also see that the administration sees it that way too and doesn't see any way of dispatching Hezbollah short of military action.

Q: And isn't it trying to do that using Israel as a proxy right now? Isn't that the justification for the bombing?

MR. BENJAMIN: Well, proxy suggests that maybe there is a limited interest on the Israeli part. Obviously, the Israelis have a big interest of their own, whether it's an alliance or whatever you want to call the relationship, you know, I think that's where the preponderance of common ground is right now, that this is the way to deal with Hezbollah. And I guess the question that this all raises is can enough damage be done to Hezbollah to actually alter the political and the military balance in the region? And that is the big question mark; everyone's got an opinion on air warfare, on Israel's having boots on the ground in Lebanon. I just think there's a big question mark there. Israelis certainly were quite confident at the beginning of this that they could do it. I don't know exactly what they would say right now.

DR. ALTERMAN: But just to pick up on that, the important issue of weakening Hezbollah – Hezbollah can only be weakened in reference to other players and parties in Lebanese politics. You can weaken Hezbollah in absolute terms and not do anything, because what matters is Hezbollah in relation to other players in Lebanese politics. And as I've looked at Lebanese politics over the last two weeks, I haven't seen Hezbollah being weakened with relation to those other players. I've seen unification in Lebanese politics. I've seen food drives. I've seen blood drives. I've seen relief efforts. I've seen anger. I've seen Lebanese coming together around Hezbollah, not because they love Hezbollah, but because they feel they're being attacked as Lebanese, that their sovereignty is impugned. The way out of this has to be that the prime minister or some Lebanese political figure is able to solve this, and solving it is going to be dragging the United States to being more active than the U.S. has been so far. And in the best chance to do that, that didn't happen today.

Q: Yeah, Mark – (audio break, tape change) – administration whose primary goal is to root out terrorism, engaged in terrorism, I wonder whether you think that this upheaval is – (inaudible, background noise) – how much of this upheaval in the last couple weeks can help to advance that or whether or not the handling or mishandling in the last couple weeks has made it that much more difficult to accomplish what it said it was going to accomplish?

MR. BENJAMIN: Well, there are optics and there are realities, right? Hezbollah – and by extension, Iran – is one set of problems. Al-Qaeda is another problem and, you know, Salafi jihad is another problem. And Iraq is another problem still. And while the so-called green light in Lebanon will help the president, I think, with his base in terms of seeming uncompromising in the face of terror, I don't think this advances that strange phrase the global war on terror itself necessarily, except in so far as Hezbollah is degraded as a terrorist force. In other words, I don't see this moving us greatly downfield in terms of the war on terror. I actually also thought Bernard Haykel's piece in today's Times was quite interesting that this will probably get a lot of Sunni jihadists very spun up, so there's just a lot of holes in the dike right now and each one of them is threatening in its own way.

DR. ALTERMAN: Let me just add, when I've spoken to radicals in the Middle East, which I must say I did at a safer time, I'm amazed at how little they understand

about American psychology. I'm also amazed at how little we understand about their psychology. And ultimately, a lot of this is psychological. We're trying to understand their thought patterns and they're trying to understand ours. And just as the United States people did not rise up against the government after September 11th for pursuing unjust policies in the Middle East, which some people said they thought would happen, I don't see our actions in the Middle East drying up support for terrorism. To the contrary, I see what we're doing creating a sense that the U.S. is utterly indifferent to both the issues of justice and human suffering. And when you come to issues of leadership, moral or otherwise, it seems to me that we're not moving forward.

Q: (Inaudible) – with a proven supremacy of the Israeli Air Force and – (inaudible) – aren't we away from a smarter solution by dealing with roots not the symptoms of the disease? Meaning, if Hezbollah is basing its operations upon occupation of Sheva (sp) and for the – (inaudible) – Hamas and other organizations just doing that as resistance to a continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, how about if the United States would do a smarter plan to have these – (inaudible) – returned with security guarantees and get over with instead of sending smart bombs, we have a smart plan?

DR. ALTERMAN: I think implicit in your question is a judgment that Hezbollah actually is serious about the justification that Israel still occupies Lebanese land because Israel is in Sheba Farms. It's certainly not what the international community thinks. It seems to me it's an excuse, not a justification. I'm sure Hezbollah will find another excuse, because Hezbollah as an institution needs to be at war with Israel under its current form. That's not to say that there's not a deal to be struck with Hezbollah, but the idea that giving Sheba farms to Hezbollah solves Hezbollah's hostility to Israel is, I think, fantasy. Instead, it sends a message that, "See, our resistance won back land again. Shouldn't we keep resisting? Shouldn't everybody resist?" I think you can go down the international mediation route, which is where the Rome discussions were suggesting. I'm persuaded international arbitration means Hezbollah gets shut down just as they got shut down when the UN drew the line. It would be lovely if a resolution to the dispute over the Sheba Farms would really solve the problem, except it doesn't.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Time for a couple more.

Q: The administration's position is – (laughter) – is pretty clear at the moment -- just let the Israelis go on with their attack. But do we at some stage say, we'll think that the administration will think it's time to try and rein the Israelis in. What do they do then? What does Bush do then? Does he then try and step in and say -- and take the lead and sort of America's take -- be involved all the time and play a prominent role in the region? Or does he keep having a hands-off approach?

DR. ALTERMAN: Can I get –

Q: I mean, you'll appreciate the perception in Europe and also in America is that this (is being ?) done from the one power that has an influence over Israel.

DR. ALTERMAN: To answer your question, you have to tell me when it's going to happen and whether there's a precipitating incident and what that incident is. It strikes me that those are the key issues you have to resolve. Are we three weeks into this? Is it next week when Secretary Rice comes back from Southeast Asia? I think that's increasingly unlikely. When does this happen and is there a catastrophic event, a huge loss of civilian life? All those things are going to shape how the U.S. intervenes. At this point, the administration is very sympathetic with Israeli goals, and is very reluctant to second-guess the Israelis on what they define their needs to be. That's not a blank check, but it's a check. And I can imagine any number of scenarios, but that's just speculating.

Q: So you don't think there is some plan in the mind of the president that okay, one more week – that it's much vaguer than that? Let's see how it goes.

DR. ALTERMAN: As you know, there were stories leaking out over the weekend that part of the Rice message to Olmert was "You've got about another week." What I saw in Rome, to my mind, calls that scenario in doubt, because it doesn't create forward movement that you can then build on and then wind things down in a week. Instead, it leaves everything open-ended. It leaves us drifting farther and farther away from the rest of the world, and closer and closer to Israel. And at some point, you have to turn the rudder. And I thought that would happen today. I was wrong, it seems. And I'm not sure when we're planning on turning that rudder.

MR. BENJAMIN: I think Jon is right in that one scenario under which this would happen is you know a replay of Kana, which would be –

DR. ALTERMAN: Remind everybody what Kana is, because they've forgotten.

MR. BENJAMIN: When the Israelis shelled a UN post where a lot of refugees had –

DR. ALTERMAN: Taken shelter.

MR. BENJAMIN: Taken shelter. I think that there is another one. I don't think – sometimes you shouldn't mistake ineptitude for intentionality, and Rome may have just blown up because they hadn't teed it up well. That happens, especially with what might be called short-course diplomacy, and especially in a situation like this. So it could still be that the administration believes that it's going to wind this down in one or two weeks. We just don't know. And there have been, I think, things like meetings with the Saudis suggest that this is an administration that doesn't want to show that it's oblivious to opinion in the Arab world. So I think we're a little bit in the dark as to where it's all going to play out. I would like to just add one or two things, since I'm on record elsewhere and did not agree with Zbig so I just want to say, I think that one of the things you have to understand is in the administration's mind – is that Iran does play a much bigger role in all of this than Dr. Brzezinski believes. And I'm speaking from the perspective of someone who has looked at Hezbollah in the counter-terrorism framework

for some years. I think it's that they believe that it is quite unlikely that this happened independent of Iranian direction. I think that our Iran policy is in tatters, and that they felt that they too had to draw a line much the way that the Israelis did over Hezbollah's provocation. This is where they're drawing the line over Iranian provocation. And so I do think that that is a very big part of it that shouldn't be left out of the picture.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Dan, can I ask you just to – I'd like to throw in a question.
Rich Armitage –

MR. BENJAMIN: I don't know, Andrew, if that's allowed.

DR. ALTERMAN: Get in line, buddy.

MR. SCHWARTZ: I thought I was running this, but, well, anyway, probably not. Dan, Hezbollah has been called the A-Team of terror. Are they indeed the A-Team of terror?

MR. BENJAMIN: Well, why don't we just say that they're the A team in the American League as opposed to the A team in the National League. They're the A-Team on the Shia side. Senator Graham, for example, used to say that they were a bigger threat than al-Qaeda. We're talking – actually, it's even unfair to put them in two leagues in the same sport, because they're doing two very different things. Hezbollah is undoubtedly the premier state-sponsored terrorist group in the world today. They have extraordinary technical capability. They truly have global reach. But they do not pursue catastrophic terror. Al-Qaeda, which is somewhat degraded from what it was on 9/11, but it's been compensated for by the rise of self-starters, still pursues catastrophic terror, and doesn't have lots of diplomatic facilities around the world to draw on for support. So they're very different, but they are very, very capable. And no one should underestimate the threat they pose, and in particular the Israelis are going to be facing a heightened threat abroad from Hezbollah. And depending on how things unfold in the next few weeks, the United States could too. My own feeling is that absent a U.S. strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, Hezbollah will not be given a green light to attack the United States. But, you know, it's not like all of us have very good prediction records these days.

MR. SCHWARTZ: What, in your estimation, is the likelihood of a mega attack in Israel like some of those that have been foiled in recent years?

MR. BENJAMIN: I think that inside – a suicide attack is always possible. If you mean by a mega attack the kind of conspiracy that was underway years ago to bring down the largest building in the country, the Azrieli Tower, I think that's unlikely. But, you know, one of the interesting things is how relatively quiet the West Bank has been in this period, but that's also a reflection of what's going on in Hamas. Gaza, you know, this is a very complicated situation right now. And my guess is that Hamas is angry enough that its thunder has been stolen, and it's not prepared to make the picture even messier.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Do you want to opine on that?

DR. ALTERMAN: Just the fact that one way to see what's going on is Hezbollah's saw the Hamas kidnapping of a soldier, a tactic that Hezbollah had pioneered and said, "We'll show you how it's done. We'll see your soldier and raise you a soldier." There is a sense that the Hamas people have that this is taken everybody's eyes off Hamas, everybody's eyes off Palestine, that they've been supplanted, which is not what they're trying to do.

MR. BENJAMIN: And I wouldn't rule out the possibility, although it'd be more remote, that the Iranians gave the green light to Hamas to do the original kidnapping. The relationship is getting closer and closer.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Another question over here?

Q: (Inaudible) – Speaking about scenarios, how do you see the immediate scenario after Rome? Do you see that now that the – (inaudible) – are occupied – (inaudible) -- South Lebanon? And I think the Americans got what they needed in Rome. You said they didn't show like leadership, but this is exactly (Israel's role ?) to do.

DR. ALTERMAN: My sense is that where the U.S. was hoping to go and where Israel was hoping to go would be that they would get agreement in principle for international force, and therefore Israel would not be permanently occupying Lebanon. They would be occupying Lebanon only until the international force came. This would have given Israel an exit strategy, which is very important given Israel's previous experience in south Lebanon. I don't think that ball got moved forward very much.. I think this is going to be a growing problem in Israel. If you don't have a broad strategic framework for what you're trying to do, then how do you define that you've accomplished your war aims? That's big-think stuff. And they're trying to do it while they're fighting a war.

Q: Nothing political or diplomatic?

DR. ALTERMAN: What political or diplomatic? In terms of goals?

Q: (Inaudible.) With the United States goals.

DR. ALTERMAN: You had the major players there, and you couldn't get them to agree. You can have more meetings, but it causes everybody to go back to the drawing board, not to resume meetings in New York with increased vigor.

Q: (Inaudible.)

DR. ALTERMAN: As I said, if you have all the players there, and you can't make it work there in a special meeting, I don't know why that gives you forward momentum to have more meetings.

MR. SCHWARTZ: We have time for just a couple more. Omar?

Q: I personally believe that there was much more planning and coordination between the Iranians, the Syrians, Hamas, and Hezbollah. But today, I read the statement and they think they were going to divert national attention from the Iranians and the Syrians and the problems that they were having with the international community and the United States and – (inaudible) – but they misjudged the reaction, and also that it would be on such a large scale. And today actually, also was very interesting to me to read a statement by one of the leaders of Hamas stating that we never imagined that the Israelis would react the way they did in such a comprehensive manner. We thought that they would hit some of our bases, kidnap some of our leaders, and then we would have negotiations.

DR. ALTERMAN: This was Nasrallah, yeah?

Q: Today.

DR. ALTERMAN: Nasrallah said yesterday on Jazeera.

Q: I saw something today. I don't remember their name now, but the statement that today must be – (inaudible) – and he is one of the leaders of Hamas. And this is exactly what he said. I don't know what you think of that.

DR. ALTERMAN: On the Hezbollah front, Hezbollah had kidnapped or attempted to kidnap a large number of Israeli soldiers in the past. Some of us read something in recent days, of eleven attempts to kidnap Israeli soldiers. And they had never gotten this reaction. I think part of it is that you have a new prime minister without a long security resume, a defense minister without a long security resume, a new government, and they have to show their toughness. One way to look at it was that the army had been champing at the bit to go after Hezbollah, and Sharon kept saying, "No, we're not going to fight that war." And when you have a new leadership without a lot of defense credibility, and the army says, "We're going," they didn't have the strength as civilian leadership to stand up against the army. That's one set of explanations I've heard the Israelis make. I think it does have something to do with the fact that this is a new Israeli government, which wanted to prove its toughness, felt the need to prove its toughness, and a basic miscalculation by both Hamas and Hezbollah as to where it would go.

You know, the other part of this is that I think Hamas was feeling increasingly backed into a corner, that clear Israeli policy – and in many ways, U.S. policy – was continuing to constrict and constrain Hamas and trying to promote the collapse of the Hamas government. And I think that shaped where they thought their long-term endgame could go. Hezbollah had no similar urgency—this was all opportunism on Hezbollah's part. I don't see any signs that it was predictable what the Israelis would do.

MR. BENJAMIN: I would just add to that I do think that everyone was surprised by the Israeli reaction, although from an Israeli perspective, it makes a lot of sense. Given the political program of the government, as Jon pointed out, and given the sense that two unilateral withdrawals had yielded no benefits, and the growing feeling that it's a mistake to leave anywhere without a quid pro quo. One shouldn't forget the domestic Lebanese perspective, and that is that Hezbollah probably thought that it needed to reestablish it's bona fides as a resistance organization in the face of a growing sense that Hezbollah was a problem in the domestic politics because it wouldn't disarm. I think there was a push back there. So I do think that there was a – you know, an over-determination of reasons why this would be a valuable thing to do from Hezbollah's perspective.

DR. ALTERMAN: Hezbollah was talking about how it was going to be a priority to free their prisoners. The way Hezbollah frees prisoners is it takes Israeli hostage and trades. I mean, they were talking quite openly about it.

MR. BENJAMIN: Yeah, they called it “the year of freeing the prisoners.”

MR. SCHWARTZ: Thank you all so much for coming and thanks to Jon, and Dan, and Dr. Brzezinski for such a terrific briefing. Thanks again.

(END)