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The Middle East— Is A Russian Coalition Coming?

By Gloria Loughry with Walter Pistor. Photos courtesy of Walter Pistor

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BECAUSE OF POSITIVE FEEDBACK from the article in our January issue, Mr. Walter Pistor has been asked to further comment on his recent extraordinary trip to the Middle East. There he visited with dignitaries, foreign ministers, generals, ambassadors, opposition leaders, local experts and U.S. embassy officials. The diversity of opinion has given him a broad perspective. His personal experiences, augmented with his reading research, have enabled him to formulate some opinions not generally heard on TV.

Walter, first remind our readers which countries you visited.

I visited Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and Egypt. The Israelis did not allow our small CNI group to go into Gaza. Gaza was closed to virtually everyone perhaps because air strikes were planned and waiting to be executed. As you know, reporters complained that the Israeli government prohibited them from entering Gaza to cover the January war. Israelis claimed the lock-

out was to protect the reporters. However, some reporters said it was so they couldn't see what the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were doing as reports of civilian casualties came in daily.

How did you begin your discussions with the leaders you met?

I was one of a group of fifteen selected citizen-diplomats led by Ambassador Edward Peck and Counselor Eugene Bird who together had more than fifty years of U.S. Foreign Service experience. They led the discussions which began by inquiring what these foreign leaders hoped for from the new Obama administration. Universally, the Arabs hope for the U.S. to become an honest broker and for the American people to have understanding for their views as well as their quest for Palestinian freedom and personal dignity. The Israelis hope the U.S. will continue to support them with money, sophisticated weapons, veto protection in the U.N. and acceptance for their military actions against the Palestinians.

Please give us an example of how Arabs and Israelis see things differently.

Here is an interesting one. General Michel Aoun in Beirut talked about compensating Palestinian refugees and relocating them in other countries like Australia and the U.S. General Efraim Sneh in Jerusalem suggested illegal Israeli settlers be compensated to leave Palestinian occupied territory and be resettled in Israel. That would cost Americans billions of dollars. Maybe, for the sake of peace, it would be worth it.

What do you think about the new Obama administration and the prospects for peace now?

My impression is that President Obama is judicious and understands the Arab/Muslim psyche much better than President Bush. I like what President Obama has said, and I have liked his actions as they relate to the Middle East. President Obama gave an interview on January 26th for Al-Arabiya, in Dubai, which potentially reached 23 million people in the Persian Gulf region. In my opinion, President Obama said the right things. He emphasized mutual respect which is very

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Hesham Youssef, (left) Chief of the Cabinet of the Secretary General of the League of Arab States, is talking with Walter Pistor (second from left), Barbara Rofkar and Don Liebeck in Cairo. Note the flags of the 22 Arab states in the background.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WALTER PISTOR

important in the Arab-Muslim culture. Many people in the Middle East think President Bush did not show them respect and always sided with Israel. You know feelings and perceptions are important, especially when people feel put upon. So I think President Obama's emphasis on the words "mutual respect" in his interview was very wise. He conveyed empathy which is greatly desired. President Obama talked about the U.S. getting engaged right away in the peace process, and he instructed Senator George Mitchell to go there and listen. I totally agree! That's what I did, and it helped my understanding. President Obama is taking a realistic approach; he recognizes issues in the Middle East are interrelated. However, the core issue is how to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which seems to be the burr under the saddle, greatly aggravating Arabs and Muslims. Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Fadlallah talked about mutual interest, the same as President Obama, when our group listened to him in Beirut. There is no doubt that President Obama has created hope. In my opinion, respectful rapport and dialogue constitute the basis for diplomacy which has a better chance for positive results than bombing.

I commend President Obama for choosing Senator George Mitchell to be the U.S. special envoy to the Middle East. He is a man of integrity, and he has a record of accomplishment. What I view as of first importance is that President Obama publicly "empowered" Senator Mitchell as standing with him. Also, it is noteworthy that George Mitchell is respected by both Israelis and Arabs. I personally am pessimistic about achieving peace after the destruction of Gaza and the hate the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) generated. On the other hand, the right team to give peace a chance is in place, in my opinion.

Are you inferring the hate that Gaza generated could have repercussions?

Yes, Americans have to think about how the discord there relates to us as individuals here. For example, Prince Turki al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's former chief of intelligence and ambassador to the U.S. and U.K., warned Americans on January 23, 2009, in a straight-forward letter published in London's *Financial Times*. I strongly recommend everyone read, "Saudi Arabia's patience is running out." Prince Turki indicated the U.S. can either change course radically on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or forfeit the United States' special relationship with Saudi Arabia. He also made it clear the U.S. risks losing its leadership role in the Middle East. In my judgment, this "Saudi warning" should be read by every American. Prince Turki al-Faisal is considered to be a measured moderate and very close to King Abdullah and Prince Saud. He is to be taken seriously! If you want to see how upset he is over the Gaza tragedy, consider his words: "America is not innocent in this calamity. Not only has the Bush administration left a sickening legacy in the region, but has also, through an arrogant attitude about the butchery in Gaza, contributed to the slaughter of innocents." Remember, this strong phraseology is not coming from a radical. Prince Turki has a degree from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. He is a world-class ambassador. It would be consequential for

every American if the Saudis moved away from the U.S. sphere of influence into a more congenial relationship with the Iranians and Russians!

I personally heard Prince Turki-al Faisal speak three times about a Saudi plan to remove Saddam Hussein which wouldn't have cost Americans a dime, but President Bush did not respond to it. When I look at the staggering costs pertaining to Iraq since 2003, I think President Bush was more idealistic than pragmatic.

President Obama indicated it may take years to work out a peace agreement. Since you were just there talking with key people in five Middle East countries, do you have a time estimate?

I think President Obama was wise not to create an unrealistic expectation like President Bush did by imagining there would be a "two-state solution" by the end of his second term when the facts on the ground, like the increase in illegal settlements on Palestinian land, denied the reality of a "viable" Palestinian state. In late January we heard, and saw on TV, dignitaries speak at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Amr Moussa, Secretary General of the League of Arab States, delivered a heated challenge to Israeli President Shimon Peres to respond to the Arab Initiative. Secretary General Moussa strongly stated that if there weren't any results by the end of 2009, other alternatives would be considered. Here is a time limit as well as another definite warning. In Cairo, I spoke with Hesham Youssef, Chief of the Cabinet of the Secretary General of the League of Arab States. He is probably the number two man for this 22 Arab-states coalition. I got the impression, in a friendly way, that the lack of a genuine peace process, the lack of Israeli cooperation and Israeli meanness toward Palestinians would not be tolerated indefinitely.

How do you define 'meanness'?

You just saw what the IDF did to the people of Gaza. You heard the Israelis say, "Israel does not intentionally kill civilians." But the world knows many civilians in Gaza were killed. The Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, laid into President Shimon Peres at the Davos Forum for Israeli killings. Apparently



David Pistor is reporting on Hamas at the Egyptian Foreign Ministry in Cairo. PHOTO COURTESY OF WALTER PISTOR



Read about Israel's illegal wall on the Internet. The wall confiscates Palestinian land and restricts Palestinian movement, farming and commerce. PHOTO COURTESY OF WALTER PISTOR

he doesn't accept Israeli excuses and justifications. It looks like the recent brutality in Gaza has turned Turkey and Norway against Israel. Also it has motivated the High Court of Spain to start a war-crimes investigation into a former Israeli defense minister and six of his military officials for Israeli killings in Gaza in 2002. Cardinal Martino, President of the Council for Justice and Peace at the Vatican, rebuked Israel over the conditions in Gaza saying they "went against human dignity." Dr. Mustafa Barghouti talked on TV about the Palestinian doctors who were killed in Gaza. He also asked why 351 factories were destroyed by the IDF. Crippling the economy is viewed as collective punishment where all suffer. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church has spoken against Israel's human-rights violations. South African unions voted not to load or unload any Israeli ships. The list of those finding fault with Israeli tactics keeps growing. When the world votes against Israel, and only the U.S. comes to her defense, it is a sign our perceptions are out of balance. There is no doubt that the powerful IDF won a tactical victory over poorly equipped Hamas, but the more serious question is: Was this a strategic blunder for Israel's long-term interests? Wasn't the key Israeli politician, Ehud Olmert, the one who orchestrated this disaster? Wasn't he recently condemned for corruption? Why would anyone want to put faith in his judgment? Even President Shimon Peres said, "There was no siege against Gaza." There certainly was a blockade of food, medicine, fuel, etc. according to the U.N. Denial is an amazing refusal to acknowledge a painful reality!

Bishop John Bryson Chane preached a sermon on October 5, 2008, in St. Columba's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. about the horrible conditions in Gaza last September. I suggest you read his sermon on the Internet. Here is an example from "Troubling Times in the Holy Land." "Our Episcopal Hospital in Gaza is short of medicines because of Israeli prohibitions, and the hospital can only operate on electricity for eight hours a day because of shortages." In that same sermon he said, "All of us agreed that without solving this conflict, the Middle East would forever be a seething caldron of war and discontent and would also be a breeding ground for the growing forces of indiscriminant global terrorism."

Don't you think Israel wants peace as President Peres says?

Yes, but that's not everything the Israeli politicians want. The evidence is clear that they want peace on their terms with a total focus on their security and their control. They have demonstrated they want Arab land by their continued settlements in the West

Bank. They also want continued unequivocal American Congressional support which they have enjoyed for years because of pro-Israeli lobbies such as AIPAC, Jewish legislators, Christian evangelicals hoping for Armageddon and neo-conservatives in government and advisory positions.

Are you differentiating between politicians and other Israelis?

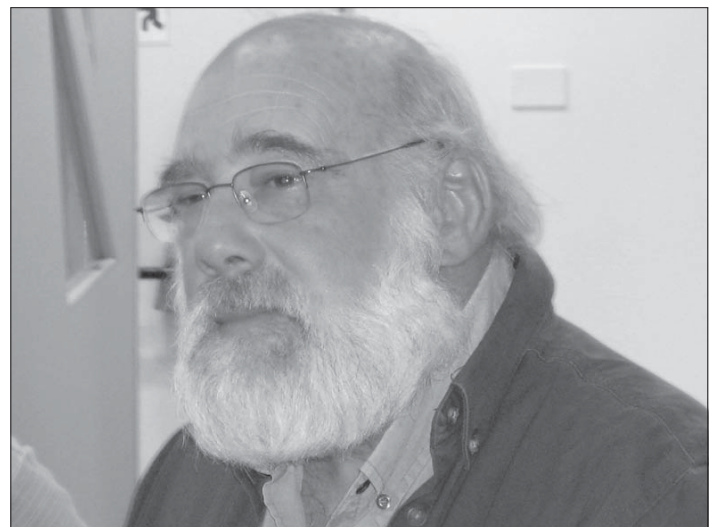
Yes. I talked with some very fair-minded Israeli Jews like Dr. Jeff Halper who is Director of The Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions. He used to teach at Ben-Gurion University. I first met Jeff in Portland some years ago. Dr. Halper wrote: "Why the Palestinians Refused Barak's 'Generous Offer.'" In it,

he explained Israel's "Matrix of Control." Another impressive Israeli personality I visited with was Akiva Eldar. He is the chief political columnist and former U.S. Bureau Chief for Haaretz, Israel's oldest newspaper founded in 1918 and published in English and Hebrew. In 2007, Akiva won the Eliav-Sartawi award for Middle Eastern journalism, awarded by Search for Common Ground, an international conflict transformation organization. He shared the award with a Jordanian journalist. Yehuda Shaul is a former Israeli soldier who is now passionately trying to protect Palestinian shepherds. There is such a mix, one can't say all Israelis are bad or all Hamas are bad, in my opinion. It is also true, not all Christians are good.

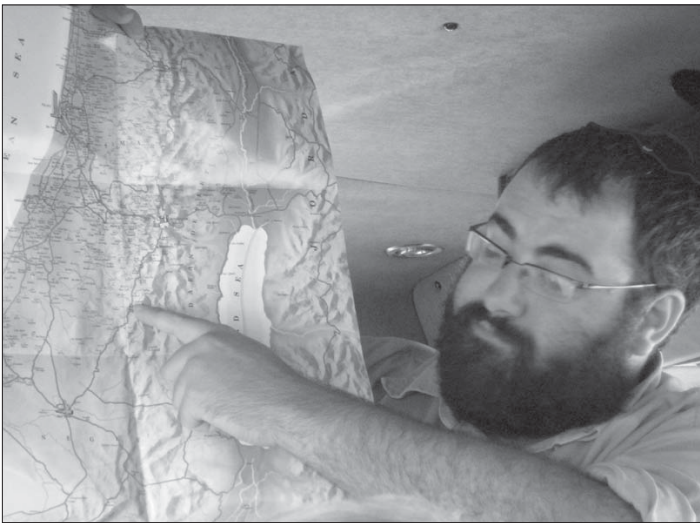
Don't you think Israelis have a right to defend Israel?

Yes, but there is guilt on both sides. We all know Israelis blamed Hamas for firing missiles from Gaza, but there were other groups which did it, too, like Islamic Jihad. Israelis claimed Hamas were terrorists because civilians were "targeted." But remember their

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Dr. Jeff Halper has been a peace and human rights activist for more than three decades. He immigrated to Israel from the U.S. after attending rabbinical school. Dr. Halper said the IDF has destroyed more than 18,000 Palestinian homes since 1967. He has authored helpful books and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. PHOTO COURTESY OF WALTER PISTOR



Former Israeli soldier, Yehud Shaul, is explaining illegal Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land in the West Bank.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WALTER PISTOR

rockets do not have guidance systems. I am against the use of Palestinian rockets and Israeli missiles. I am against starving people which the Israelis did by closing the entry crossings so U.N. food and medicine could not be delivered into Gaza. Prince Turki al-Faisal said President Obama will condemn the rockets, but he should also “condemn the Israeli actions that led to this conflict, from settlement building in the West Bank to the blockade of Gaza and the targeted killings and arbitrary arrests of Palestinians.”

Why don't Americans understand the broader picture you are describing?

Our media doesn't present the same details that the rest of the world gets. That is a major reason for the disparity in perceptions. Some Americans may think or say, “They have been fighting for thousands of years there, and I can't do anything about it.” That is not an accurate thought. The Romans destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70, and Roman Emperor Hadrian drove out the Jews in A.D. 135 and dispersed them throughout the empire in the great Jewish Diaspora. Some Jews came back in the late 1800s. The majority came back in the 1940s. If they weren't there for 1700 years, how could they have been fighting there?

Dr. Rashid Khalidi, a professor at Columbia University and a leading expert on Palestine, who I have met, wrote an interesting Op-Ed which was published in *The New York Times* on January 8, 2009. You should read, “What You Don't Know About Gaza.” Dr. Khalidi explained that most of the people living in Gaza are not there by choice. They belong to families that came from towns and villages outside Gaza like Ashkelon and Beersheba. He wrote, “They were driven to Gaza by the Israeli Army in 1948.” In that Op-Ed, Dr. Khalidi confirmed what other experts have said: “The cease-fire broke down when Israeli forces launched major air and ground attacks in early November; six Hamas operatives were reported killed.” President Carter also wrote that the cease-fire was broken on November 4th when Israelis bombed inside of Gaza. I also read that in the *Jerusalem Post*. How many Americans do you know who think Hamas broke the cease-fire? Too many don't concern themselves with searching for the truth because it takes time. They are understandably focused on their personal concerns, so they don't spend the time to crosscheck what is reported on TV. However, Arabs and Muslims have their own

perspectives which result in an international incongruity. We need to realize that what they think is also important. If in five years the Palestine-Israel problem is not solved in a fair way, I predict the U.S. and Israel will be facing a hostile coalition which could result in a catastrophe for both countries. It is not wise to close our eyes and minds to probable negative consequences.

What negative consequences and risks do you see?

I see a growing Russian influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Operation Enduring Freedom (the U.S. contribution to the War in Afghanistan) had another setback in February with the announced closure of Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan which will receive \$2 billion in loans and \$150 million in financial aid from Russia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Russia dominates, has been urging the closure of the base since 2005 when Uzbekistan closed our K-2 base. This second loss of an important base will increase the logistical costs of operations in Afghanistan as well as reduce our capabilities. The millions of dollars spent renovating these bases also have been lost. We know Russia is helping Iran with nuclear technology and that centrifuges are now running. Iran wants Russia to provide the S-300 surface-to-air missile system to protect its nuclear facilities at Bushehr and Natanz. This very effective air defense system can simultaneously track 100 targets and shoot down missiles and aircraft 75 miles away at high and low altitudes. The Israelis want us to attack Iran as we did Iraq. This is less probable now with the change of U.S. administrations, but the Israelis still are evaluating a preemptive strike on Iran by themselves, perhaps hoping the U.S. would then support Israel. This concept has historical precedent. In 1973, in preparation for the Yom Kippur War, the Soviet Union supplied arms to Syria and Egypt, and the U.S. re-supplied Israel. If I were a strategic planner for Israel with the assignment of determining the best time to strike, I would choose before the S-300 systems were installed in order to reduce losses. I would also recommend using cruise missiles launched from Israel's German-made Dolphin Class submarines as well as UAVs (*Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, such as a Predator Drone, which provides surveillance but also carries air-to-ground rockets.* —Editor) in order to minimize pilots being killed or captured. The Iranians could use up their missiles on a massive influx of drones before F-15s and F-16s came in. Any strike on Iran would likely cause the price of oil to spike up dramatically which would have a negative effect on the American economy. Russia and China have blocked harsher U.S. proposed sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council. Israeli politicians perceive Iran to be an existential threat to Israel, so this risk is not to be underestimated.

Ex-CIA station chief Haviland Smith recently warned that Israel's recent 22-day long attack on the trapped people of Gaza is viewed by most Arabs/Muslims as “a genocidal atrocity.” He thinks, “The result is that the Gaza events are radicalizing the Arab/Muslim world, bringing daily increasing support to Hamas and radical Islam.” He said, “The real issue is the highly destabilizing effect that the Israeli invasion is having on the Middle East.” He believes Gaza is causing us to lose the battle for moderates. He went on to say: “That puts in grave doubt the continued existence of the ‘moderate’ Arab regimes that we call our allies.” I agree with Haviland Smith's assessment. We both think that unless a fair solution is found for the Palestinians, there is serious concern for Israel, America and our Arab friends and allies. Either another war or a coalition of former moderate Arab states with Iran and Russia, would be serious enough for me to call it a catastrophe for Israel and the U.S. In effect, no solution in Palestine constitutes a present and growing danger.

Hasn't most of the trouble come from the Arabs?

I'll let you judge, but consider these facts. Professor Rosa Brooks, a regular columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center wrote an article entitled, "Lessons in Stupidity from the Middle East." I read it in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on January 9, 2009. Professor Brooks cited a recent statistical analysis by three academics at MIT, Harvard and Tel Aviv University who found that an "overwhelming majority of lulls in violence since 2000 ended when Israelis killed Palestinians." The analysis revealed Israelis initiated the violence 79% of the time and even 96% of the time when the pause was longer than a week. When have we heard or read those figures in the typical U.S. media?

How do you think interested Americans can be better informed?

For me, watching Fox News is very inadequate. They sometimes interview biased "experts" who have a pro-Israeli agenda. If you want to read some sophisticated, objective opinion, read what Dr. Christopher Preble has to say. He is Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. Marina Ottaway, a senior associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has authored nine books and is Director of the Middle East Program. Chris and Marina are true experts whom I have visited with in Washington, D.C. Both have my respect as knowledgeable scholars and writers.

Walter, do you have any closing suggestions?

Yes—put forth the effort to become accurately informed by reading the writings of truth-seeking people. Read President Carter's books. I believe he knows more about the Middle East than all the other living U.S. Presidents combined. Talk to Presbyterian ministers; they typically are open-minded people who have visited with Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land. Learn about Sabeel, an ecumenical Christian organization working for peace,

justice and reconciliation. Communicate with your congressional representative and senators about your feelings and what you think is best for America. I personally don't think a war with Iran would be a good idea, and I have expressed that to Congressman Brian Baird who has a realistic understanding of the dynamics of the Middle East. I applaud Congressman Baird for taking the initiative to better understand the suffering of Gazans by visiting Gaza on February 19, 2009. Senator John Kerry and Representative Keith Ellison also were in Gaza. The presence of three U.S. officials signals more open-mindedness. Talk about it with your friends. We don't want to look back five years from now, when it may be too late, and wish we had made a positive contribution to furthering peace and understanding in 2009.

May I add something? Here are some applicable words of wisdom. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Peace can not be achieved through violence; it can only be obtained through understanding." Proverbs 16:7 states: "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him." Deuteronomy 5:21 states the Tenth Commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (The January 10th–16th issue of *The Economist* published a good article about "The hundred years' war." It stated, "But even though the Israel of 1967 discussed how much of the West Bank it was ready to trade for peace, the Likud governments of the late 1970s and 1980s wanted it all. For Israel fell in love with the territories it had occupied.")

Matthew 22:36-40 states: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it; love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."