

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

LUNCHEON FORUM
WITH
GENERAL ABDEL RAZAK AL-YAHYA
INTERIOR MINISTER OF
THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

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HOSTED BY
MARTIN INDYK

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AMBASSADOR MARTIN INDYK: Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention please. Please go on with your meal. In the Brookings tradition, we will eat while we talk. I'm going to ask General Al-Yahya to start also while I introduce him because he won't probably have a chance to eat after that since he has to leave from here to go to a meeting with the secretary of State at 2:00. So I think we should jump right into it. I thought it would be useful if, after I introduce General Al-Yahya, we would go around and have everybody introduce themselves to him.

General Abdel Razak Al-Yahya is now the Minister of the Interior of the Palestinian Authority. His appointment, I think, was two months ago as part of a response by Chairman Arafat to the demands of the Palestinian people for reform of his government and in particular, General Al-Yahya has been tasked with the formidable challenge of restructuring the Palestinian security services at a time in which the ability to do so is, I would say, severely constrained.

General Al-Yahya graduated in military science from Damascus Military College. He was an officer in the Syrian army during the Six-Day War. In 1969 he became the military advisor to the PLO executive committee, and from 1987 to 1991 he served as a member of the PLO executive committee, which is the supreme policy-making body of the PLO. Military service with the PLO began in 1969. He was the general in charge of the Palestine Liberation Army until 1972. He was chief of staff from 1970 to 1972. At the signing of the Oslo Accords, General Al-Yahya participated in the negotiations, heading the Security Committee in those talks with Israel. It was during that time that I had the honor to negotiate with General Al-Yahya, and I could say just personally that it was a pleasure to do so, that I found him to be a man of great integrity and seriousness.

He was responsible, amongst other things, for negotiating the arrangements for the Gaza seaport and the safe passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 1996 he became chairman of the High Committee on Security, and in 1999 he was named Chairman of the Committee on Security and Borders for the final status negotiations with Israel. That was all before he assumed his current post as minister of the Interior.

Before I ask General Al-Yahya to speak, let's go around and have everybody introduce themselves to you. (introductions made) Thank you very much. General Al-Yahya, I should also tell you that you have an audience behind those doors of press that we could not, unfortunately, fit in here for lunch today, but I know that they're also listening with great interest.

The floor is yours.

GENERAL ABDEL RAZAK AL-YAHYA: Do you want me to speak in English or in Arabic?

AMB. INDYK: English would be fine.

GEN. AL-YAHYA: In English? (Laughter.) Excuse my English. I'll try my best.

Well, thank you very much. Thank you all. I want to start directly about the situation now in the West Bank and the Gaza strip, and how we are trying to get out of the mess, to get out that crisis there.

First of all, the situation is very bad and complex. If it continues to be the same, this may lead to catastrophe: a closure for months, or siege of towns and villages and cities, a continuous siege; reoccupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, nobody can move outside cities or towns or villages; poverty, frustration, killing everyday. So the situation is becoming more and more sophisticated and hard.

Well, we tried to make our assessment and our studies about the situation, and we found that, according to what it is going on the cycle of violence will continue, where using force will never stop violence. We found that there is some kind of atmosphere which was created by reoccupation and by siege. That atmosphere is the best convenient atmosphere for breeding young people to go for suicide bombings. So if you follow what is going on all the time, you see that suicide bombing continues. Until now, and in the future, the Israelis will never succeed in stopping violence according to their way, by force.

I had a meeting before Sunday's with the minister of Defense in Israel, and I told him the same thing. And I told him they should change their policy. They should change their military strategy against terror. They didn't succeed other time, not now, not before, not in the first intifada, not in the second intifada. They didn't succeed and they will never succeed. We say that using force will help in breeding more violence. Violence breeds violence, so we have some new thinking. Well, according to our study, there is our theory how to get rid and how to uproot violence, and I say terror is a form of violence, and I say violence -- to say all forms of violence, not only one form, we need to get rid of violence, to uproot it for good and forever.

Well, we have our way, and now I explain what we think matters and what we are going to do. We say that we should make a change in the atmosphere which was created by reoccupation and by siege. So, to return back to normality, without this we can't move; we can't do anything. If the situation continues like this, as I said at the beginning, well, this will lead to catastrophe.

So we say that if we need the change, we should make the change in the factors that made that -- or that created that atmosphere; the elements that created that atmosphere, to make the change in them. The most important element is occupation and siege, or closure. If we want to go back to normality, they should leave -- I mean, the IDF. They should withdraw from Palestinian territories. In this case, we can reorganize ourselves. We can restructure our facilities, our destroyed facilities and our destroyed security services.

By the way, during the Israeli reoccupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, they destroyed all the Palestinian facilities, the PA. They destroyed -- all the facilities of the security services is scattered, the policemen nowhere, destroyed all the centers of security anywhere in towns, villages, everywhere. So we need some time to reorganize and -- to reorganize the security services and to try to make the situation normal gradually, so we can succeed in the long run; not now, but in the long run we can succeed enforcing law and the rule of law.

Our thinking or our approach is established on what we should do to our interior security is an interior Palestinian problem or issue. There is a benefit from the results of our reestablishing and reorganizing our secret services and our success in restoring the rule of law. But we don't accept to do it the same way which was done before. Before, they used to give us names of some persons to be detained, et cetera, et cetera, or to make some security arrangements. That way they didn't succeed at all. Now I find something else. The other factor in our approach, or other element in our approach, is to make contact with the youngsters, with the young people because the groups, or militant groups are using these people in this convenient atmosphere. And at the same time we should make direct talks and direct contacts with these groups, to keep the youngsters away from them and to try to contain them, to let them change their ideology for a new ideology. Maybe this will take time, but we should do something; we should try something.

The problem is that fighting terror is not only to use force and to kill or to destroy and to do so and so and so by force. Fighting terror is to fight the ideology of terror -- the ideology of terror, where through this time or this time they will establish a new ideology. Well, according to the atmosphere there benefiting from that atmosphere. So we need to fight that ideology straightforward by new thinking, by a new contact. So we have now our awareness plan to make contacts with the youngsters, or the people everywhere, to let them feel -- to let them understand what is going on, so not to be recruited by such groups.

At the same time, we have also our arrangements, but parallel -- these arrangements will parallel with this first step or this move. Well, according to our plan, our work plan, we didn't find one element to say that it is the main priority. So we found that all elements have the same priority. So we moved in parallel lines from different points. The first point is a restructuring of the Ministry of Interior. Second point, or second starting point, is to make contact with the youngsters. The third starting point, is to make contact with people anywhere. Fourth point, is the restructuring of the security services, et cetera. So, we have different lines and they are parallel lines. And we are moving on these lines at the same time. We don't have any priority for one line or the other.

And at the same time, we try to make contact with the Israelis to let them help. How to help? To leave the Palestinian territories for good, to withdraw their forces because remaining there will never make the success they need. But on the contrary, it makes the situation worse and worse, and it makes the breeding of violence more and more. So there should be a change in the mentality of those who are leading that

campaign in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. And I said this to the Israelis: they should make a change in their mentality, in their mind, so we can make the change in this situation, in the atmosphere, to start moving towards normality.

The other thing that we need to do is to make a political move at the same time, because without a political move and the economic situation better, all our efforts will maybe – will never succeed as we want. So, also in parallel to this we're starting to make the political move, and also to try to make something for the economy. But I say that it's not that easy. Now, the PA is short of money. We don't have enough money to make rearrangements or to make rebuilding or restructuring, et cetera. We don't have it. And at the same time, we don't have the ability of movement between cities and towns and villages. So, how to go from Ramallah, suppose, to Hebron or to Nablus. There is no way. Well, no policeman can move now in Ramallah in uniform. Impossible. They will arrest him. No one can go to any police station. They will make air raid on that station. They will destroy the station. They will arrest the people there. They will kill; they will injure those people there. So it's impossible to do now anything – I think that I can say, anything complete.

But I say, although it's very difficult now to move, although it's very difficult to convince the Israelis to withdraw, although we have shortage in financial issue, although we have difficulties in economic issue, but I say we are moving on and we are doing our job in the best way we can, and we are going to succeed. The difference is that with the help of the Israelis and with the help of the United States and Europe and the Arab countries, maybe the time will be shorter. And I say here, especially Israel. And I mean by their help, to withdraw from our territories. This is the major step we want the Israelis to do.

And also we want them not to retaliate if something happens during our reorganizing of our security services, or restructuring the Ministry of Interior, or rebuilding police stations, et cetera. If something happens, I mean a suicide bomber – and anyway, we ask them not to retaliate, and at the same time we are trying to convince also those groups, Hamas and Jihad and other groups, not also to retaliate if there is withdrawal from the Palestinian territories. But I don't guarantee – I don't guarantee. There may be – maybe some attack will take place anywhere.

But we need to have time. If the Israelis continue to retaliate, this means that their strategy for fighting terror is not that strategy. I pity that strategy because it changed from a strategy of fighting terror to a strategy of a killing for a killing. What I mean is that actions and reactions, well, this is not that strategy. It is the strategy of reaction or the strategy of a killing for a killing, the strategy of revenge. So it is not a strategy of fighting terror. The strategy of fighting terror is something else. It's different than using force and killing and assassinations and so on and so on.

Well, I told also the Israelis about this. I told them not to retaliate, and to leave for good also that policy or strategy of reactions. So I said to them, what is the difference between the strategy of Israel now and the strategy of Hamas or Islamic Jihad? Well,

now, if Israel killed a leader, some important body in Hamas or Islamic Jihadwell, they're certain to revenge and they make their revenge, and they kill civilians. And anyway, at the same time Israel will say, well, we are going to revenge, and so they react. So, it's the strategy of revenge – of reaction all the time. Where is the fight of terror here in this case? Where is that fight? So, all the time they didn't gain anything. They didn't succeed but on the contrary. Now, violence is breeding or is escalating, so there should be a change – there should be a change.

Now what I said about a change. Well, we started the change, I mean on the Palestinian side. And I met some young people in refugee camps, and I lectured them. And I met my contacts with Hamas and other groups, and I began to convince them to change their ideology and to change – and to leave for good armed struggle, if we call it armed struggle, and to become political parties, political groups, and do everything in this case to accept the PLO as other political groups. But they should give the guarantee that they don't go back again to military – or to military attacks or something like that.

So, we need a change. And that's our new strategy, our new policy, and we are trying to convince the Israelis about it. And we have our work plan. I gave them our work plan on this, and they started this, and they discussed this with me, and I hope that they will be convinced and go with us in that direction.

Thank you.

AMB. INDYK: Thank you very much, General Al-Yahya.

We have a few minutes for questioning, and I will ask Barry Schweid to start.

MR. SCHWEID: Thank you. You had a meeting this morning with Dr. Rice. I thought the visit had to do with the administration's request that you democratize; that you reform. From you today, and from Dr. Erikat yesterday, we heard of course the familiar theme that Israel should give up the West Bank and Gaza, but have you been able to tell Dr. Rice any specifics about how the Authority is changing? You think of it as strategy, but in a specific sense, what are you doing – or are you doing anything yet to make it more democratic or reform-minded; more in accord with what the president has asked?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: You know something? Maybe the Palestinians are democratic more than any other, maybe, people in this world. We have different political groups, the PLO, and even in the PLA also, the same thing. But we need some time to get rest to move forward. We don't have that time. We are all the time trying to stop or to make understandings with our neighbors, with the Israelis just to give us the time to rebuild ourselves.

We are moving towards democracy and transparency. And there's a new cabinet; a temporary cabinet for maybe three or four months more, and there will be elections in all aspects. In this case, a new cabinet will be governing the PA territories.

AMB. INDYK: Barbara?

MS. SLAVIN: Have you had any meetings with anyone at CIA, and had there been any indication that George Tenet is going to send someone to the area, as has been suggested, to try to help you reorganize your security services?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: Yes, I'm going to meet Tenet within a couple of days.

MS. SLAVIN: In a couple of days, okay.

AMB. INDYK: Maybe I could just ask General Al-Yahya, in terms of this new approach that you lay out, it presents the Israelis with a dilemma, and I wanted to ask how you could answer their dilemma.

If they pull out of the Palestinian areas that they have reoccupied, the tendency has been that that easing up makes it easier for suicide bombers to come out of those territories and into Israel and blow up innocent civilians. So how do you help them deal with that dilemma? What I heard you say was, well, you go and talk to Hamas and try to convince them, but from everything we hear from Hamas today, it seems that they are not convinced, they're intent on continuing. So, do you have other ways of dealing with this problem other than just talking to Hamas?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: The problem is that we have the same dilemma on our side. Well, I will be frank. Now, what's going on results only in hatred, whether in the Palestinian community or the Israeli community, hatred and feelings of revenge and hostility. Now, every day this is heaping more and more.

Now, the killing of civilians on the Israeli side makes that kind of feelings against Palestinians. The killings of civilians on the Palestinian side by Israelis makes also heaping of these feelings on the Palestinian side. This is a problem. If we want to continue, as politicians always say, that we should go back to the table of negotiations. Well, I say, how to negotiate on that basis of hatred and feelings of revenge which is heaping day after day; how to negotiate? How to make understandings between us; how to do it?

Now, everybody or every party is accusing the other party. We accuse the Israelis; they are accusing us, and time is moving on without any positive result. So this is one of our -- this is one of the elements that we are trying to let the Israelis be convinced that if they continued that policy and that strategy, well, hatred and hostility will continue and feelings of revenge will continue heaping. So they should try to stop and to retreat, to go back again, so this heaping also will decrease.

The second thing that they -- all the time they say that they want security for their people. I ask, did they succeed in achieving security? Well, before a week's time there

was more than one attack across the Green Line -- more than one attack. Although there is a closure there is a reoccupation et cetera, et cetera.

If they give us the chance to reorganize ourselves this will help more. What I want to say is that we want to go to the table of negotiations with good intentions, with good feelings, the minimum of good feelings, and to try something anew. That is what we need now. That is a change we need now.

MR. INDYK: Okay, I have a list here: David Makovsky, Said Arikat, Mohammad Wahby, Hisham Melham and Robin Wright.

AMB. Makovsky: General Al-Yahya, you mentioned the idea of fighting the ideology of terror, and I was wondering if you could expand on this a little bit and talk about maybe the possibility of a public campaign by Palestinians towards the Palestinian people about this idea of, you know, glorifying mass murder and killing and setting back the Palestinian economy and Palestinian aspirations.

GEN. AL-YAHYA: I didn't understand the question.

AMB. INDYK: The question was, what about a public campaign to convince the wider Palestinian public of the counter-productiveness of suicide bombings?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: Well, I said now that we have an awareness plan. The awareness plan is in fact that campaign you asked about now. Well, in that plan we are trying to make that awareness between students and schools and universities, workers, people everywhere, in camps, to go there to make lectures, to make -- to speak to them, to try to let them understand what's going on, what is good with the bad, and how to help the PA for moving on for peace.

I think now that I made my meeting, and I spoke to people in the camps and so on, and I'm going to other camps. I spoke to people in Gaza, and I'm trying to go also to other camps in the West Bank, but it is not that easy. If I want to go to any place, I need a permit, and this permit maybe take me days, maybe more than that. If I had a permit I can't go alone -- all alone. I need to be accompanied by an Israeli military car. It is not that easy, and I don't think that the Palestinians in camps will accept me in that form. So it is not easy.

So, now, also we are trying to use media at the same time, or look at media. You know, we have different stations in the West Bank and Gaza. We want to use that media, and newspapers, magazines, anything we want to do for the campaign to succeed. And that's what we call our awareness plan. And this awareness plan was established by the help of -- by the Ministry of Culture.

AMB. INDYK: Thank you. Because time is short -- I don't want you to be late for your meeting with the secretary of State -- maybe what I'll do, General Al-Yahya, is

ask the four people on the list to ask their questions. Then I'll kind of summarize for you the questions and you can answer them all together.

MR. ARIKAT: General Al-Yahya, I assume that you briefed Dr. Rice this morning on the progress of the reforms in the PA. I wondered if you discussed other things with her such as any changes in the administration's attitude towards pressuring Sharon to withdraw. Was there any discontent in the National Security Council about Secretary Rumsfeld's statement that there is no occupation or are you likely to discuss this with Secretary Powell?

AMB. INDYK: Mohammed?

MR. WAHBY: What is the truth about the Gaza First option now? We have been having torrents of news, conflicted news, actually from satellite television. And how does this fit in your vision which you have just related to us?

MR. MELHAM: I wondered if you would tell us a little bit about the meeting with Dr. Rice. The Americans are saying that the deadlock in the security talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians should not be seen as totally collapsed. Where do you go from here?

MS. WRIGHT: I have two questions. Firstly, Jordan and Egypt have offered training for a new Palestinian security force. What is the status of that? And secondly, as the Palestinian cabinet talks among itself, how popular is – or how much credence is given to the idea of a prime minister as a new political figure to perhaps break the impasse over political reform?

AMB. INDYK: Okay, here's how I would summarize the questions.

First of all is, please tell us something that I can print – (laughter) – in particular, whether you got any response to this argument that the Israelis – (audio break) – to do your work.

Secondly, Gaza First, and the Israeli defense minister's proposal to deal with this step by step, starting with Gaza.

Thirdly, what do you want from the Jordanian and Egyptians in the security area?

And fourthly, what about this effort to try to get Yasser Arafat to appoint a prime minister and give the prime minister authority as a chief executive officer?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: The first question –

AMB. INDYK: The first question is, really, do you get any sense that the United States is willing to press the Israelis to withdraw?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: (Speaks in Arabic.) I don't know whether the United States is going to convince the Israelis or to make that pressure on them to make them comply with this new approach, or new plan. I hope that -- I hope that.

Of course, maybe we can -- maybe there will be some losses during this, but in the long run we will succeed in establishing the basis we need for fighting terror, for fighting violence in general.

AMB. INDYK: Gaza First?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: Gaza First, well, our response was negative and positive at the same time. (Scattered laughter.) Negative because we can't accept Gaza alone without leaving the West Bank, without any withdrawal from the major cities there or towns. In this case there would be no balance. So we need the balance between Gaza and between the West Bank. If we accepted the Gaza alone, or the Gaza First plan, this will maybe -- will make the impression of the old plan of that, you Palestinians establish your state at first in Gaza.

So we need to make the balance between Gaza and the West Bank. And we propose that they should withdraw from Ramallah because Ramallah now is considered as the capital of Palestine, and it is the most important, now, city in the West Bank. The Israelis rejected this, and they said the rejection was for security reasons, but I think and I am convinced that the rejection was for political reasons. They accepted to withdraw from either Hebron or from Bethlehem or from Jericho, and we said to them, we'll try Bethlehem. Well, yesterday, in the meeting of local commanders, now they said that they don't want to withdraw from Bethlehem, they only want to withdraw from Gaza. They went again from where we started, so everything now is stopped again -- came to an end.

AMB. INDYK: Jordan and Egypt's help on the security level?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: Well, we want from Jordan and Egypt, as we want from the States the same thing, to help us in training and restructuring and backing us -- well, when they meet the Israelis, to let them understand our new thinking, our new approach; to help us also to convince the Israelis of this new approach. And this I think will help us in our new approach.

AMB. INDYK: But, Robin's last question was about the prime minister. Do you think that --

GEN. AL-YAHYA: Well, if it is a political question I can't answer it. Ask me about security I can answer it, but political questions -- (chuckles). I've thought very hard about this. (Laughter.) Ask somebody else. You know, I never answer the political questions, never. Not because I don't know; no, I know. (Laughter.) I know the answer, but, no, I don't want to get involved in such questions. I am ready to answer any question in security; any question you want, both frankly and clearly.

AMB. INDYK: Is it a quick one?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Very quick. It sounds as if what you are proposing is a hearts-and-minds campaign to try to change the ideas of young people, to change the attraction of violence. I don't hear you saying anything concrete about how you are going to restructure the security forces. And I assume that that's what Israel wants to hear from you; I assume that's what the administration wants to hear from you in your meetings today. What are you telling them concretely about how you are restructuring the security forces?

GEN. AL-YAHYA: I'll answer first your first comment because I need to explain that. You know, we are trying to make a new state of mind. Maybe this will be as difficult a question or difficult issue, but I guarantee that if the Israelis began their withdrawal, many things will change fast. What is now thought to be difficult, or look to be difficult, will be very easy, or easier if they started their withdrawal. But while the situation is stagnant – well, everyone will say, well, this will take time, or look at General Al-Yahya, what he is now thinking, he is putting plans, long-term plans.

No. Everything is going in parallel lines, as I said. Your question about what we are doing and how we are now reorganizing or restructuring our security practices, do you think that it is easy to do that? I said at the beginning that policemen now in Ramallah, in Hebron, everywhere, they are scattered. You see no policemen at all -- no policemen, no security men at all you can see. They can't move because the occupation is there all the time. They can't carry their arms. If anybody carry arms, even if he is in uniform, he will be killed or he will be detained or be arrested. It's impossible, but we are doing our best. We are trying to make studies on restructuring.

And maybe – well, behind the curtain we are doing something, behind the curtain, slowly but gradually. But I think we are succeeding, not in all the areas and all the cities, but in some cities now we are succeeding and we are doing our best. And I said that we are going to succeed. Maybe this will take more time. If the Israelis withdrew from our territories, this would be great, but if they didn't withdraw or they delayed their withdrawal or postponed it, this will take us more time. But we are trying our best to reorganize our security forces.

I myself, I began in the police force. Now I'm making now the change in the headquarters of the police force. I made the change in the high-ranking officers in the first level, and I make also changes in the second level of the high-ranking officers, and I'm going to do other changes in the near time.

Well, in the preventive security, we are trying to make integration between the security – the preventative security in the Gaza Strip and the preventative security branch in the West Bank. This will take time. Doing that, I am making some sort of coordination, and during that coordination we are making the integration. That's how we are doing our restructuring and reorganizing the security practices.

AMB. INDYK: General Al-Yahya, thank you very much, and I think I can speak on behalf of everybody here in wishing you Godspeed with your task, and hope that you will succeed.

Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

GEN. AL-YAHYA: Thank you all, and I say again, excuse my English.
(Laughter.) Maybe next time I will do better than that.

(END)