

Foundation for Defense of Democracies

**Washington Forum:
A Conversation with Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer**

**Moderator:
Jonathan Schanzer,
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FDD**

**Speaker:
Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer**

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MARK PRUZANSKI: Hi, there. If everyone could take their seats, we're going to start the next segment early. Should I go ahead? OK. All right, I'm going to get going.

Good afternoon, everyone. If everyone can take their seats, please. We're going to start now. My name is Mark Pruzanski, and I'm proud to call myself a longstanding supporter of FDD, and a board member. I have the privilege today of introducing Ambassador Ron Dermer to you. He has been in his current role for less than a year but is by no means new to the foreign policy community, to D.C. or to FDD. He's been a prolific – he's had a prolific career in Israeli politics, and we're honored to have him join us here today.

In the 1990s, Ambassador Dermer began to work for Natan Sharansky as a political adviser and campaign strategist. A decade later, he would co-author with Sharansky "The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror." It was a very powerful book. In fact, it inspired me to redouble my commitment at the time to FDD and the great work that it does.

I wasn't the only one. President Bush at the time told all of his advisers to read the book, and said, quote: If you want to glimpse how I think about foreign policy, read Natan Sharansky's book. He put it on the best-seller list.

The ambassador's next role came when then Finance Minister Netanyahu appointed him to be Israel's economic attache in Washington. When Ambassador Dermer returned to Israel four years later, he became a close adviser to Netanyahu and one of the key figures in the prime minister's office.

He was and remains one of the current prime minister's most trusted confidants, writing and advising on a range of political issues critical to Israel's security. Today Ambassador Dermer helps to strengthen the U.S.-Israel alliance by representing the Jewish state in Washington and around the country, meeting with administration officials, members of Congress, journalists and the public.

Ambassador Dermer also has been a very close friend to FDD over the years. He's always taken time out of his busy schedule to meet with FDD officers and scholars, helping to inform our organization's analysis and strengthen our ideas. The state of Israel is lucky to have Ambassador Dermer as its emissary in Washington and we're lucky to have him with us here today. I look forward to hearing his remarks and then engage in a conversation moderated by Jonathan Schanzer, FDD's vice president for research.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Ambassador Ron Dermer.
(Applause.)

(Off-side conversation.)

JONATHAN SCHANZER: Thank you, Mark, and thank you –

AMBASSADOR RON DERMER: I just want to say one thing first about your announcement. You said that you thanked me for meeting with the FDD officials to inform them. So you got that part wrong. I meet with FDD officials to get informed. (Laughter.) (Applause.)

MR. SCHANZER: Well, thank you. Thank you, Ron. I want to just, A, welcome you to Washington Forum, and we appreciate the opportunity to have a half hour or so to just get some of your thoughts about what's been happening in the Middle East. And again, I want to thank you for everything that you've done. Yes, we like to come to you with ideas, but I – we very much appreciate the frank exchanges that we've had over the years.

And in that spirit, let's get underway. The first thing I want to ask you about is this most recent deal that was announced between the Hamas and the Fatah factions inside the Palestinian Authority. Obviously, there has been a longstanding split between these two factions. In fact, there are two territorial divisions. Right now you've got Hamasistan (ph) and Fatahland (ph). These two factions, I like to say, haven't agreed on the color of hummus for quite some time. (Laughter.)

So why is this deal different, and what does it mean?

AMB. DERMER: Why is the deal different than the other deals that they've tried to do in the past? (Laughter.)

MR. SCHANZER: That's right.

AMB. DERMER: Are you saying that only because we're two weeks after the Passover seder – (inaudible)? (Laughter.)

MR. SCHANZER: A little bit of both.

AMB. DERMER: Well, look. Unity, among the Palestinians for peace, is a good thing and would always be a good thing. But this is not a unity for peace. This is a unity with an organization that's a totally unreformed terror organization. They're committed to Israel's destruction. They perpetrate terror attacks against Israel. They have fired thousands of rockets at our cities. They have dispatched scores of suicide bombers. They call in their charter for the extermination of Jews worldwide.

Two weeks ago, on the way to a Passover seder, an Israeli citizen was gunned down. He was in a car with his pregnant wife and three of his four children, and he was gunned down, and Hamas praised the person who perpetrated that act. That was two weeks ago.

And forget about going back in history. You could. You could go back to what happened three years ago, when that same organization condemned the United States for killing Osama bin Laden, who they call a holy war (sic). That's Hamas.

So if we would have been presented with a situation where Hamas has basically accepted the principles of the international community, they have recognized Israel's right to exist, they

have renounced terrorism, then it's a completely different story. Then you could say that the unity government is good for peace. But that's not what happened. That's why we're opposed to it.

And I want to make one thing very clear. Israel is not going to negotiate with a Palestinian government that is backed by Hamas. It doesn't matter – (applause) – I want to be clear what that means. It doesn't matter if they try to do the front office/back office game, where Hamas is sitting in the back office, and in the front office they put a bunch of technocrats there, who may accept the principles of the international community. They may not be even members of Hamas. If Hamas is in the back office, Israel is not going to be at the negotiating table, period.

Now it is said sometimes that you make peace with enemies. That's a half-truth. You make peace with enemies who want peace with you. And Hamas has not shown that they want peace with us.

And we have been in this process with Abu Mazen for a long time, and one of the demands that we have, not as a precondition to negotiations, but in order so that we can reach a final agreement with President Abbas, is that he's going to have to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, which means the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Some people attack that concept and say, what does it mean? It means everybody's going to be Jewish in this state?

Of course not. That's ridiculous. It's the nation-state of the Jewish people. The Palestinians are asking Israel to recognize their right to a nation-state, a nation-state for Palestinians, and we need mutual recognition. We recognize their right to a nation-state, and they recognize our right. That sends a signal to everyone in Israel that from the point of view of the leadership, the conflict is over.

Now it may take many years for that recognition to filter down into Palestinian society, which is why we need these ironclad security arrangements on the ground.

But the Palestinians have to cross this Rubicon, and it's a Rubicon that has never been crossed for 65 years, going on 66 next week. You can all wish Israel a happy birthday.

But they've never crossed that Rubicon, and what we had happen is Abbas was – President Abbas was not willing to cross that Rubicon to the other side. That's one thing.

It's quite another thing when you don't cross to the other side but you actually go back and you go and you make a pact with an unreformed terror organization. When Israel faces Arab leaders who want peace, we make peace. Whether it's Sadat faced – when Menachem Begin, the former prime minister of Israel, faced Anwar Sadat, or whether the former Prime Minister Rabin faced King Hussein, whenever you have an Arab leader who wants peace, we will make peace. But we need that leadership to take a stand. Sadat went to Jerusalem. He said, no more war, no more bloodshed.

Hamas says, more war, more bloodshed, more terrorism. And just yesterday or today, a few hours ago, somebody sent me something while I was on my way here. I don't know exactly what the statement that Khaled Mashaal from Hamas made, but I just remember that three words in that 10-word statement was "resistance," "rifles" and "jihad."

So they are telling you what they're about. What word do you not understand? Israel is not going to negotiate with a Palestinian government that Hamas is backing.

MR. SCHANZER: OK.

Let me move on to this question of the Iran negotiations. Obviously these have been ongoing since November, when that deal was signed in Geneva. There has been a lot said about the deal. Where do you stand? Where does Israel stand on the current state of play with these negotiations? Do you have optimism that this is going to work out? And if not, what is the problem?

AMB. DERMER: Well, we're very concerned. Israel's very concerned about the deal that seems to be emerging with Iran.

First I have to take you back to understand what was agreed to to begin with. The interim agreement did not freeze Iran's nuclear weapons program. The nuclear weapons program of Iran has – let's call it a three-legged stool. One stool (sic) is the fissile material, another stool (sic) is weaponization, and the third stool (sic) is a delivery system, the ballistic missiles. That's the three- legged stool.

What the interim agreement did was it tried to freeze one leg of that stool, and even that was not frozen, because it allows for research and development.

The other two legs are not dealt with in this agreement at all. So sometimes it is said that the interim agreement has frozen the program in place – no. It has tried to freeze one part, and you could say it partially froze one leg of a three-legged stool. That's what the interim agreement did. And in exchange, you had this sanctions relief. And the logic behind the deal was essentially the interim agreement, a small step for Iran's program where they diluted some of the higher-enriched uranium – uranium at 20 percent – an in exchange a small relief in sanctions.

And I think where the administration deserves credit – the Obama administration – to work hard to do everything possible to make sure that that relief would be as small as possible. What I've told people in the administration and my other ambassadors have told other members of the P-5 plus one, is that the job is much more difficult today because before enforcing the sanctions, you were going downhill with a tailwind. Now they're going uphill in a headwind because of the international dynamics that have occurred. So the interim agreement, small step back on the program for supposedly a small relief in sanctions.

What are they talking about now? They are talking about essentially an arrangement where you'd see another small step back by Iran. The stuff that's out there, even in the public domain, is six to 12 months. So if you say six to 12 months, if I'm going to go into a store and

the salesman says, well, I'm going to sell it to you between \$5 and \$10. What do you think, you going to pay \$10 or you're going to pay \$5? (Laughter.)

So whatever number's out there, take the lowest number. So let's take six months. What does that mean? You're going to put Iran six months away from having the fissile material to finish that one leg on that three-legged stool, right? You're not going to deal with weaponization, the other leg. You're not going to deal with the missiles. And by the way, the only purpose for ICBM missiles is to have a nuclear payload. Only in cartoons do you put TNT on an ICBM. (Laughter.)

So the fact that Iran is building these missiles is all you need to know. It's not a smoking gun; it's a smoking missile. (Laughter.) And what they want to do, is be able to put United States under a direct threat. Today the United States is not under a direct threat from Iran. But they want to be in a position when they break out in the future to have you under a direct threat.

Not because they're necessarily going to do something right away, but then they think they can create a certain fear where you're deterred. And then they continue on with their designs in the region, to be a hegemon, to the terror – basically, they're a large terrorist state – and to engage in terrorism. So what this deal would do, what looks like is developing, is basically park Iran close to the point they need to break out – a few months away.

They'll go for maybe two months where they are today, and maybe you move them back three, four months from where they are today on the fissile material. And you'll put inspectors in, right? Now, this is regime that has violated, you know, all the Security Council resolutions you can imagine. They cheated in the – (inaudible) – facility that they had, the cheated in – (inaudible).

So just as I said, when they give you these statements the \$5 to \$10 it's five, six to 12 months, is six. Whatever deal you think you have with Iran, that's the longest period of time you're going to have because they are going to deceive – they're going to deceive. So what you're doing is moving back – moving them back by a few months.

Now, what are you giving them in return? You're going to dismantle the sanctions regime in return? Now, it's one thing to be two months or three months away from having the fissile material to get a weapon when you're facing huge sanctions. It's another thing to be a little bit further back with no sanctions and no serious economic pressures on you. And that's what they're discussing now, which is a very big mistake.

And that's why the prime minister of Israel has spoken about this just in the last week. You cannot leave Iran as a threshold nuclear power, because that will bring the world to the threshold of an abyss. And so we're making the case – I'm making the cases here in Washington and my counterparts are making the case around the world – because we are very concerned that Iran would be left as a threshold nuclear power, and that is a great danger for – not only for my country, for all the states in the region and for the peace and security of the world.

MR. SCHANZER: OK, well that actually leads me to my next question. And that is that, look, this deal has obviously been a source of tension between the United States and Israel. Much has been said about tensions that have been building over the last several years, whether over Iran or perhaps any number of other issues that have arisen in the Middle East. Can you just talk for a little bit about the state of U.S.-Israel ties?

AMB. DERMER: The state of our ties are very strong.

And people focus all the time on the policy differences that we have, and there are policy differences. And I just discussed one of those policy differences, and they're real. But people – and there are probably quite a few people in this room who are experts on the U.S.- Israel relationship. My predecessor was a historian of the U.S.- Israel relationship. I just have to play one on TV. (Laughter.)

But if you look at the history, you've had times and periods where there have been serious disputes between the United States and Israel. In 1948, there was a very serious dispute. The United States did not want Israel to declare independence, and Israel did. And we weathered that tension and built a stronger relationship.

In 1967, there was a lot of tension between the United States and Israel. We had received certain promises when we withdrew from the Sinai in 1956, and when Israel came to cash that check that we were given, there was no one there. And they said – the United States administration said at the time – and look, it's understandable. Countries have interests in different parts of the world. Things change all the time. But they said, look, if Israel acts alone – on the eve of the Six-Day War, one of my predecessors was told very clearly if Israel acts alone, it would be alone. Israel decided it had to act. And after it acted, it wasn't alone. Actually, the strategic relationship between the United States and Israel grew stronger.

And then in 1981, when Menachem Begin decided to take pre-emptive action to take out the nuclear facility in Osirak, there was also tension, and there was an arms embargo that was placed on Israel for a few months. But that didn't destroy and undermine the relationship between the United States and Israel because it actually got stronger.

And I remember in 2002 – in 2002 – a lot of people may have forgotten – after the worst wave of terrorism that Israel has ever experienced in our history, including a month where we had, I think, almost 300 civilians were killed, that culminated in a massacre on Passover night in Netanya – you had hundreds of people who were killed. We launched Operation Defensive Shield. And the Bush administration at the time told Israel to withdraw. And when Israel did not withdraw, there was a lot of tension at the time because there were a lot of other things going on, but they said withdraw. When we didn't withdraw, then there was another press conference that was held to define the term "immediately" – immediately, now, without delay. And so there was great tension in the relationship, you could say, at that time, if that's all you focus on. But the relationship was so strategically sound that when we did what we had to do to protect our security, I don't think it undermined the relationship; I think it got stronger.

So what I can tell you, as somebody who's been in the trenches for the last four years, or the weeds, I should say, in this relationship in the prime minister's office, it's very strong. We have great security cooperation. We have great intelligence sharing. We have cooperation in so many different areas that some of them, I can't even mention, but it is so broad and so deep.

And my belief is that the relationship will be much stronger than it is today – much stronger than it is today. Your most important ally – America's most important ally in the 20th century was Great Britain. Your most important ally in the 21st century is going to be the state of Israel, and I'll explain why. (Applause.) It's not a hope. I'll explain why I believe that, because of two areas.

The first is security. Now, you may try to pivot from the Middle East, but the Middle East is not going to pivot from you. (Laughter, scattered applause.) And what does that mean? It means that the security threats facing the United States are going to emanate from the Middle East for a long time to come. And if you look around the Middle East, you have one strong, solid, democratic ally that shares your interests and shares your values. You don't have to choose between them. That's the benefit of the relationship that you have with Israel, where sometimes you got to make these choices.

And we're there. We're there in the region, and we're projecting and supporting your interests and your values in this region. And that security cooperation and that intelligence sharing, and cyber – Israel is a cyber power in the world, and it's going to be a greater cyber power in the future. So the security relationship between the United States and Israel is going to be very important, not only for Israel's security – that's obvious – but for American security for the next few decades.

The second reason is technology. Israel is a global technological power. If an Israeli ambassador would have sat in this chair 30 years ago and would have told you, Israel is going to be a leading technology power in the world, you would have laughed him off the stage. But we are, in many fields, in water, in agriculture, in medicine, in technology – in so many different areas – science – so many different areas, we are a leading technological power.

And I spoke about cyber. Cyber is not only a security threat; it's a huge expanding market. Israel right now accounts for 5 percent of the world's exports, exports in cyber, 5 percent. Now, we are one-tenth of 1 percent of the world's population, which means we are punching 50 times above our weight. So – (inaudible) – say, hey, it's a small country, they have 8 million people. Well, in cyber, we're 400 million people, in cyber exports. In investment, we are 11 percent of investment in the world, 11 percent. So we're punching 110 times above our weight. So we're almost a billion people in terms of our contribution in that field.

And if you will look around as partner for America, for technology in the next few decades – and we are in a century of knowledge a century where economic growth is about your ability to create conceptual products; that's how leading economies – first-world economies with high per capita GDPs, that's how they're going to sustain growth over time. Who are your partners in the world? Here you have Silicon Valley. Outside of America, you have the state of

Israel. And for these two reasons, security and technology, mark my words, Israel will be the most important ally for the United States in the 21st century. (Applause.)

MR. SCHANZER: OK, I have to ask the question. There was a flap this week, as you're no doubt aware, where the secretary of state warned that Israel was in a danger of becoming an apartheid state. Can you respond to that?

AMB. DERMER: Well, I think the secretary responded to it very well. And I think his – I think his response – you know, certainly the government of Israel accepts that, and we appreciate very much everything that the secretary has done to try to advance the peace in the region. I personally have spent dozens of hours with him, and that's nothing compared to what the prime minister of Israel has spent. I think he speaks more to the secretary than he does to his wife. They were constantly talking over the last eight months, really getting into the weeds of these issues, and we very much appreciate that. And I think that it's a mistake to look at one word that may have been misspoken and taken out of context and to say that that's the be all and end all. This is a man who had a 30-year career of support for Israel in the Senate, and I can tell you personally I believe he has a deep commitment to Israel's security and its future.

Now, about the word itself, which he has made clear that he doesn't believe Israel is an apartheid state, it's outrageous. It's outrageous, and I'll explain to you why. Look, Israeli Arabs are the freest Arabs in the Middle East. That is not spin. That is a fact. We have Israeli Arabs in our Knesset. We have Israeli Arabs as judges. In fact, an Israeli Arab judged sentenced a former president of Israel to jail. It was an Israeli Arab judge who pronounced the sentence. We have Israeli Arabs in all walks of life. I think the valedictorian of our leading technological university was an Israeli Arab. You have Israeli Arabs in the army, even though it has a lot of complications, but Israeli Arabs are in the – are in the army as well and in every field of Israeli life.

So people say, yeah, that's true about Israel – a lot of people, by the way, around the world do not understand that Israel has Arab citizens. I encounter that all the time. A million and a half citizens of Israel are Arabs, are Israeli Arabs. So they say, well, that's true about Israel, but what about what happens in the West Bank, in Judea and Samaria? What about that? Well, they don't have a right to vote. Well, they do vote. And if you're going to come with a question of why Palestinians who live in the West Bank are not voting, don't ask an Israeli ambassador that question, ask the Palestinian president that question because he's in the ninth year of his fourth-year term – of his four-year term. They vote. They have autonomy in these areas.

But we want an arrangement where they have more than autonomy. We want a solution of two states for two peoples where – and – but we're concerned that if we simply walk out of territories and give them to the Palestinians, we're not going to get a state that's going to end the conflict with Israel; we're going to get a state that's going to continue the conflict with Israel. And what we need to do is, frankly, stand on certain basic principles in any peace agreement that there would be mutual recognition, as I said before, and real security arrangements on the ground to protect Israel. And that's what we want to do.

And we've now been dealt a big setback with this alliance between Fatah and Hamas. We hope that he will tear up this pact with Hamas and come back to the negotiating table.

If he doesn't do that, then I suppose there will be some thinking in Israel about what the next step is, because Israelis are not people, I can tell you, who stand in place. They don't stand in place. And they want to move forward. They want – if they can't get a complete solution to the problem, they want to get closer to a solution.

So we'll have to think about, given the realities that we face, given the history that we've had with different moves that we've made – the Gaza disengagement being the most obvious one, but other things that Israel's done – that's all going to be part of the equation. And the prime minister and the government of Israel's going to have to think long and hard about what's the best road ahead.

MR. SCHANZER: I want to ask you one more quick question and then we'll take questions from the audience. And that is about the Arab Spring. And I actually just want to drill down on one country in particular. I'm thinking about Egypt right now. Obviously, there's been a lot going on in the news. We've had a lot of change in leadership and just a lot of confusion about where things are going.

But one thing that I've noted is that the Camp David Accords appear to be solid, but even more importantly, it appears that the Egyptian government is doing even more to counter Hamas than perhaps the Israelis ever did. Can you comment on the security cooperation, and perhaps a little bit as well about your concerns regarding the Sinai jihadi problem, which we know has been something that has been growing in recent months?

AMB. DERMER: Well, OK, I will do that, but first let me just – you mentioned the Arab Spring. And because this is FDD, defending democracy, I'd like to maybe spend a minute defending the idea of democracy, which has been thrown overboard in the last few years. I remember one of the first times I had an opportunity to meet with the people of FDD was when I wrote a book with Natan Sharansky. By the way, they're his ideas, not mine. I just translated them from gulagian Russian – (laughter) – to American English. But they're his ideas about how free societies work and how what we called fear societies work.

I'll tell you, I made one mistake with that book, a very big mistake, is that I agreed to allow the publisher to change the title. The title of that book was supposed to be called "The Case for Freedom," not "The Case for Democracy." And what we were told at the time by the publisher was that freedom has been politicized as a word – as a word; it's just too charged; democracy is above it. The problem is, democracy to most people means an election. Freedom, people understand.

And the big mistake that I think not just the United States but around the world they would make is abandoning the idea that this region can move to a future that is freer. I think this is a big mistake. The fact that it has not happened in one news cycle or one election cycle doesn't mean much.

This is the greatest democracy in the history of the world, but understand that for a century, there was slavery in this country. It took 200 years to get civil rights. It took 150 years for women to have a right to vote in the United States of America. It doesn't happen overnight. And after the French Revolution, 15 years later Napoleon was a dictator in Paris.

So the fact that people say, look at the Arab Spring and look at these all ridiculous ideas that there's going to be democracy and freedom among the Arabs, the culture is inimical to it, they can't make the transition – it's a little bit absurd in historical terms. You're not going to build a Jeffersonian democracy overnight. And just as it was a mistake at the beginning of the Arab Spring for everyone to rush and say that the Google kids are going to take over the region, without understanding the realities, it's a big mistake right now to abandon the idea that this region can move towards a much freer and democratic future.

I believe that the Arab peoples can make that transition. I believe it as much today as I did 10 years ago, when we wrote the book. And if they did it in 20 years or 40 years, it would be faster than that transition had happened in many other places around the world.

Now, you have a lot of difficult choices you have to make as you're trying to manage this process. And I would just say, in thinking about the choices, first of all, a long-term policy that pushes for greater freedom, greater civil society, to not focus all the time on elections – elections in a society that's not free can be the worst – can bring the worst elements to power, and then you'll be stuck with a one man, one vote, one time problem. That's not going to advance democracy.

First, know who your partners are in the Arab world. Know who are your partners. There are democrats, there are liberals in the Arab world. They are your partners for the future. That's the first thing.

And the second thing is, in making judgments – that's true in a sort of perfect, analytical world where we'll all be in a classroom. In the real world, you've got to deal with the real government, and I think one thing to understand is, there are gradations of evil. I think Immanuel Kant wrote this book, and the quote stuck with me – "Metaphysics of Morals," I think it was. I know today everyone can check it and see if I'm right.

But he said, you have to understand that there are gradations of evil. There's a difference between a merchant who sells poison and a gravedigger who sells poison. The merchant wants your money, and the gravedigger wants you dead. It's different. And there may be very, very difficult choices that you have to make. Keep your eye on, what are your worst enemies?

And in here, I would re-read an essay that was written by a great champion of democracy from 35 years ago, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who wrote "Dictatorships and Double Standards." Go re-read it. Now, everything she said I don't agree with, but the general thrust of it is, if you have to choose between a totalitarian regime and an authoritarian regime, choose the authoritarian regime, because there is a chance that this will move towards democracy. And many of the examples that she wrote about made that transition and was borne out by history, looking at this over the long term.

So you should understand something about the current government in Egypt. First of all, they share your interests. They are cracking down on terrorism in Sinai. They are confronting Hamas in a very big way. Now, I'm not going to get into all the other internal issues that exist in Egypt, and I, for one, as somebody who was born and raised in this country and who believe in the idea of democracy appreciate that America's role is different than other great powers in terms of its stand for democracy. You cannot turn your back on those people who are fighting for freedom. But understand who your partners are in that country. Make sure that they're the real democrats, not those who are just playing to be democrats in order to get power and to reverse any hope.

And I think an overall policy that pushes things in the right direction but that recognizes that you have an ally there that shares your interests is very important. And one last point. The aid that was given to Egypt was given in the context of a peace agreement that they had with Israel. And the most important thing for me – not as an author of a book about democracy, but as the ambassador representing the state of Israel is to protect and preserve that peace agreement.

And in any calculation that the decision-makers have here in making that decision understand that that aid was given in the context of the peace agreement, and Egypt has kept the peace with Israel through many, many turbulent times over the last 35 years, and this government is keeping the peace agreement with Israel. (Applause.)

MR. SCHANZER: OK. Thank you very much. We're going to – we're going to take questions. I see – Dr. Bob, if you'd like to ask the first one.

Q: Hi, Bob Shillman from Rancho Santa Fe, California. If Israel had its say on American foreign policy in Syria, what would Israel tell America to do in Syria?

AMB. DERMER: You know, I'm not that seasoned a diplomat. (Laughter) But I know – I know a question I'm not supposed to answer when I hear it. (Applause.) Look, let me – I will not do a complete dodge of your question. I will do a partial dodge of your question. (Laughter.) I will just say one thing.

If somebody had asked me a year ago – if I was sitting here at your conference last year, and you say that we are going to remove 80- something percent of the chemical weapons in Syria, I would have said, where do I sign, OK? So it might be that they change – I think it was Bismarck who said, don't want sausagemaking in legislation and might see – you know, going to war with Syria may be the third thing you want to add there. But the outcome in Syria to remove these chemical weapons, which were the – really, the nightmare scenario was that Syria was going to collapse, these chemical weapons were going to find their way into very, very nasty hands.

Q: Worse hands?

AMB. DERMER: Well, I don't know about worse, but, you know, a lot – I mean, it's one thing when you've got one problem that you're dealing with. It's another thing all of a sudden – 10, 12, 15 people have these – and don't forget, you've got a lot of people running in there who

are coming from Europe, and they could go home, and they could, you know, perpetrate a lot of terror acts over there – a lot of jihadis who have rushed into Syria.

So that was kind of the ultimate scenario, and I think, if we have a little perspective on it, there might be consequences for this or that move that happened. But overall, the bottom line is, a lot of the most dangerous things that are in Syria are no longer there.

MR. SCHANZER: We'll actually only have time apparently for one more, so actually if you want to just take the –

AMB. DERMER: Well, then make it an easy one. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHANZER: Sorry.

Q: Thank you, Ambassador, for being here. Israel probably has more native Russian speakers than any country outside of the Russian near abroad right now. And you of course have an intimate, close relationship with Natan Sharansky. So given what's been happening in Ukraine, which is probably not on the agenda of what you were thinking you might speak about today, what – the actions that Putin – who visited Israel relatively recently – have shifted the expectations of what sort of the global standard for how you set borders in the West. So what is your position? What do you think the position of the majority of the Israeli Russian speakers are regarding the takeover of parts of Ukraine? Thank you.

AMB. DERMER: So I've got two questions and they're both on foreign policy issues that are kind of, you know, outside – it's interesting.

Look, our big concern in Israel for what's happening in Ukraine is also to protect the Jewish community that's there and to make sure that they don't have a tax against them. You had a mayor who was shot. You had different flyers that were put out. It's not clear who did it. And we have – there are 200,000 Ukrainian Jews, and in the past those Jews were threatened anytime that you had a war. I mean, Israel is a Jewish state. It's unique. It's the one and only Jewish state in the world, but there is a long history of attacks against Jews there.

You know, my mother was born in pre-state Israel in 1936. She used to tell me that the boogeyman at the time that her mother would use for convincing her to go to bed or something at four or five years old – this was before Hitler – was Khmelnytsky, who had killed 300,000 Jews in the 17th century in Ukraine. So there's a long history of attacks in that area and our major concern is to make sure that that community is protected.

Beyond that I can only just tell you we've got a lot on our plate in Israel and we don't want to weigh in on all these other issues that are around the world. You know, there's a lot of benefits to being a superpower. One benefit of being a small country is that you can really stick to your own issues and not focus on all the – on all the world's problems.

MR. SCHANZER: I've been told actually that we have time for one more, so I want to take somebody perhaps from this side of the room. I'm not sure if we have anybody with a mic

running around, but perhaps, sir, if you'd like to ask a question here up front if we've got a – if we've got a mic.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, I'm David – (inaudible) – from Miami. (Applause.) I'm a resident of Miami for the last 60 years.

AMB. DERMER: Did you vote –

Q: I know everybody in your family.

AMB. DERMER: Did you vote –

Q: – everybody in your family.

AMB. DERMER: Did you vote for my brother? (Laughter.)

Q: Sure, you betcha.

AMB. DERMER: Did you vote for my father?

Q: You betcha. (Laughter.) And I want – I want everyone to know that you're a blessing in our community –

AMB. DERMER: Thank you.

Q: – and you're the pride and joy of our community.

AMB. DERMER: Thank you.

Q: But most of all you're our blessing to our people. Thank you for being here. (Applause.)

AMB. DERMER: Thank you. Thank you.

MR. SCHANZER: OK, that was a tough question, yeah. (Laughter.) That was a tough question.

Q: I have no question. I just wanted to make a statement.

AMB. DERMER: Thank you. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHANZER: OK. Yeah, we'll take – we'll take one more.

AMB. DERMER: We can't end on that? (Laughter.)

MR. SCHANZER: Sorry. Sorry.

(Cross talk.)

Q: Yes, I'd like to – my name is Jack Berger (sp) from Chicago. I'd like to quote something. It says: The prime minister is leading Israel to Auschwitz borders. Only fools and liars would now deny that the policy of the prime minister is leading to the establishment of a PLO state in Judea-Samaria. The creation of a neighboring PLO state will inexorably lead to an emboldening of the Arabs on the eastern front, stretching from Tehran to Israel's coastal plain. Do you know who wrote this? Bibi Netanyahu in 1995. He was talking about Rabin.

What has changed that now the Israeli government is talking about the Auschwitz borders? And what has changed in Bibi's mind that he wrote something about what would – Rabin was doing and now all of a sudden all of these things aren't going to happen?

AMB. DERMER: You know, I didn't get the memo that Israel's policy is to go back to the Auschwitz border. So I'm Israel's ambassador; I'm not aware that that's the policy of my government. (Applause.) And, look, the prime minister of Israel is charged with leading a country with a unique past and with unique security challenges.

And I cannot tell you how much confidence I have in his ability to navigate Israel through some very, very choppy seas.

He will not make an agreement with the Palestinians that will endanger the security of Israel. He will never make an agreement with the Palestinians that would endanger the security of Israel. He doesn't – he wants a solution with the Palestinians. He's willing to work for a solution. He's willing to make compromises with the Palestinians for a solution, but he's not going to gamble with the security of Israel.

And all I can tell you, as somebody who's been in the closest of forums with the prime minister – and I've been with him for 14 years. I know everything that you just said, and I sleep very, very soundly at night knowing that Prime Minister Netanyahu is leading the state of Israel. (Applause.)

MR. SCHANZER: We're going to have to leave it at that. We've got another panel coming right up after this. So I want to thank you very much, Ambassador Dermer. (Applause.)

AMB. DERMER: Thank you. Thank you.

MR. SCHANZER: Thank you.

AMB. DERMER: Thank you very much.

(END)