

Former Mossad Head: Dialogue, Not War

by Matthew Ogden

Oct. 23—In a sober and statesmanlike appearance, Efraim Halevy took the podium at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. on Oct. 18, at an event titled “Iran, Palestine, & the Arab Spring: The View from Israel,” to issue an impassioned argument for war avoidance in the Middle East.

Halevy, who began his work for Israeli intelligence in 1961, rising to become director of the Mossad from 1998-2002, was a close collaborator of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin before Rabin’s assassination, working with him to negotiate the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Following his tenure as head of the Mossad, he became the chief of the National Security Council. In September of this year, in an interview with the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, Halevy spoke out strongly against a full-scale confrontation with Iran, effectively calling for a Peace of Westphalia approach. Halevy concluded that interview stating, “It’s always worth remembering that the greatest victory in war is the victory that is achieved without firing a shot”—a theme which he repeated during his appearance in Washington last week.

Halevy was introduced first by Jane Harman, director of the Woodrow Wilson Center, and by Aaron David Miller, a scholar at the Wilson Center.

Unprecedented Instability

Halevy began his speech by enumerating three reasons why, as he said, we are living in a time of unprecedented instability, “when individual events, which

cannot be foreseen, can have an enormous effect on the course of history,” setting off conflicts and wars on many fronts which can quickly spin out of control. Those three reasons are: the loss of sovereignty of almost every government in the region, the decline of the secular state, and the development over the past year of the Middle East becoming a zone of international conflict between major global players including the United States and Russia.



Woodrow Wilson Center

Efraim Halevy

Halevy reviewed the way in which virtually every country in the region—Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and even Saudi Arabia—is being forced to fight “for their capability to govern their countries.”

He then discussed the “clear upsurge of religion as a major factor in the governance of countries,” where secularism is in decline, and—he put it mildly—“I don’t think we have found the ways and means of dealing with religion as a political factor in determining international relations.”

Finally, he turned to the way in which the Middle East has now been turned into an arena for potential superpower conflict. “We have also other aspects of the situation which we have to be very clear about. First of all, I’d like to mention the fact that Russia is returning to be a serious actor in the Middle East. For over a decade and more, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia did not play a major role. But this is beginning to change. It began to change after the events in Libya. We’re now witnessing the beginning of a Russian comeback in the Middle East. . . . So, once again, the Middle East is beginning to become, again, a scene of international conflict. And this is something that cannot be ignored and cannot be denied.”

Diplomacy with Iran Is ‘Doable’

After this thorough analysis of elements which have caused the Middle East to become the tinderbox for world war—what Lyndon LaRouche has referred to as

the “New Balkans”—Halevy concluded his opening remarks by discussing his views on Iran, quipping that, if he *didn't* mention Iran, people would say that he is “derelict in his duty as an Israeli.”

He stressed that Iran is finding itself increasingly isolated, standing in defiance against practically the entire world. He stressed that the P5+1 (UN Security Council Permanent Five plus Germany) *includes* Russia and China, and that on the question of preventing Iran from obtaining military nuclear capability, these nations actually agree with the United States. The disagreement is on how to obtain this objective. Halevy said: “The distance between Tehran and Moscow is more or less like the distance between Tehran and Jerusalem. And so there is room here for a very professional effort to get the Iranians off the hook, and thereby get us all off the hook. How to do this, is a major test for international diplomacy. How to bring it about is a major test for the capability of minds and brains here in Washington and elsewhere around the world. I think that it is doable, because in the end the Iranians have shown, on many occasions in the past, that when they realize that it's not in their national interest to continue with the level of confrontation which they have developed over the years, they have found ways and means of backing down....”

“The relations between the Middle East and the entire world have gone through a lot of problems in the last couple centuries, and the peoples of the Middle East have had various types of relationships with the powers from without. Besides their basic interests, economic and geopolitical, there have been three other interests which have been very important for peoples of the Middle East.

“One has been to try and preserve their way of life, and their way of life was not the Western democratic system. It was not having parliaments who are elected the way they are elected here.... So, it's a question of culture, basic culture, and we have not found the ways and means of how to engage in an intercultural dialogue. I'd like to recall, a few years ago, there were efforts by the United States to bring democracy to the Middle East, by a Republican administration by the way, of the previous President. And it didn't work! Because it *does* not work in that part of the world in that way. And therefore, it's not a question of how to bring democracy to the Middle East. It's a question of how to liaise with a system which is a *different* system, for better or for worse.

“Number two, there is the basic problem in the Middle East, for the Arab nations, and especially the Iranian nation, of dignity. They feel deeply, that they do not enjoy dignity. I do not know how to describe what is dignity, I cannot give you a recipe of what are the components of dignity, but dignity has figured very high on the list of elements which are troubling countries in the Middle East....”

“And that is the third thing: atmosphere. There is in the Middle East currently an atmosphere of despondency. People don't believe that anything good can come of what is happening—nothing good can come of what's happening in Syria, nothing good can come of even what's happening in Egypt. Ultimately, there are no easy solutions, there are no solutions whatsoever in reasonable distance from today.

“How do you feed 80 million mouths in Egypt? Nobody really knows how to do it; how to feed 80 million mouths in [Iran]? Nobody really knows how to do it. And very often when you know not how to do things, you prefer not to deal with them and you hope that they will go away or something will happen to remove them.”

Before opening up for questions, Halevy stressed that the reason he began his opening remarks as he had, was that rather than getting into the mechanics of every single issue, he wished to put things in perspective. “One of the things we have lacked in recent years,” he said, “has been perspective. We have dealt with problems as they came along. But we have to now, I think, raise the level of the way we look at things, because we are going to have to live with this situation for quite some time to come.”

‘We Have To Talk To Them’

Halevy took several questions, some of which addressed the Iran issue. He reiterated his previous statements that Iran's achieving a nuclear capacity does *not* constitute an existential threat to the state of Israel. The solution lies in dialogue: “We have to talk to them. We have to dialogue with them. And I am a great believer in dialogue—talking to people.... You have to dialogue. You have to talk to people! You have to speak to their minds, speak to their thoughts, speak to their feelings, and so forth, and not just hammer them on the head.”

The final question came from a reporter for Fox News, who asked what his estimation was of the current relationship between the present U.S. administra-

tion and Israel; and whether there would be support for a unilateral strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. He was very brief on the first question, but then took up the question of a possible strike on Iran.

"I'm on record as saying that I think a strike not only should be a last resort, but that we should realize what would be the possible results of a strike. There's also a morning after. Not only in terms of how far this strike will achieve the desired aim. Let's imagine, for argument's purposes, that we will strike and we will obliterate the entire Iranian capability, okay? What does this mean the morning after? That suddenly the Sun will shine and everybody will be happy, and the Iranians will say, 'Well, we got the message; now we're going to go sit in peace and drink Iranian tea together'? No, I don't think so. So I believe a strike is the last resort.

"Now, the greatest achievement in any war—as an ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu said—is a war which is won without firing one shot. And I think our aim should be to win the war without firing a shot."

Halevy concluded the event with a reference to the miracle of strategy and diplomacy which President John F. Kennedy achieved during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the 50th anniversary of which was being observed as he spoke. He stated:

"I don't believe ultimately that, whatever is going to happen in the end, it will be a clear-cut decision which will emerge. It will be a blurred situation for a little while. Just as after the Cuban Missile Crisis—and I've been reading about this in recent weeks: The exact contours of what actually was agreed to resolve the crisis only emerged after some time. Key elements of this story have only just begun to emerge in the past 30 or 40 years. And I would settle for all kinds of arrangements in which the ultimate *denouement*, the ultimate solution, was a solution which was reached, but will only emerge after some time.

"There are ways of doing this. If you did it with the Cuban Missile Crisis, maybe you could do it here as well. I'm not saying you can; I'm saying it should be tried. I think there are many things which are not being tried yet. That is my contention. I believe that in the months to come, this has to be tried, and has to be tried with an immense, immense investment of good will, for trying and getting the solution. I think it has to be done. And it has to be done by people who are solution-oriented, and not war-oriented."