

BUILDING BRIDGES: LISTENING AND OUTREACH

INTERVIEW WITH SENATOR JOSEPH I. LIEBERMAN (D-CT)

MEI: Looking back on Operation Desert Storm and the Madrid peace initiative, from your perspective, how have U.S. military and diplomatic strategies been linked in the Middle East?

Lieberman: The U.S. has had a number of reasons why it's interested in stability in the Middle East. One clearly is economic, which is the flow of oil from the Gulf countries to the U.S. and to the West generally. The second is so that small conflicts in the region do not become larger. And then the third is to support the more Western-oriented democracies—the more moderate countries, whether they are democratic or not.

This has changed since the end of the Cold War, obviously, when the Soviet Union had client states and we had allies that we were close to as well, so that some of the demands militarily are different. But we saw in Operation Desert Storm—the Gulf War—that an aggressive move by one of the countries hostile to the U.S., namely Iraq,

was taken to be serious enough to our vital interests that we sent a half-million people over there. That was a definitive moment for the region and for us. Fortunately things changed quickly over there. But it led to a changed reality which also led to Madrid and in part to the peace process that followed, because of the extent to which we as the superpower showed that we were interested in stability in the region.

Clearly the peace process is in the U.S. interest because it redefines the conflict in the region, from Israel against almost every Arab country to the moderate Arabs and Israel against the radical—or fanatical—Arab countries. And that's a much more stable and winning side of the U.S. to be on. But we continue to need the presence of military strength there; some of the greatest threats to our security continue to come either directly or indirectly from countries in the Middle East like Iraq and Iran, and therefore we'll continue our presence.



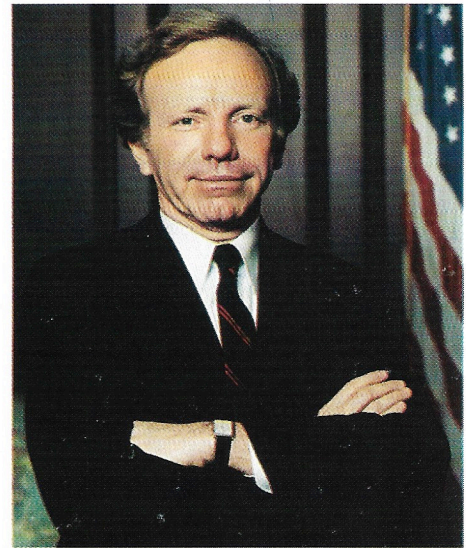
"My favorite is everybody's favorite...King Hussein."

MEI: Which Middle East leaders have you personally met with, and which ones have made the greatest impression on you, either positive or negative?

Lieberman: I've met, of course, in Israel with everybody, and I've met with Arafat, King Hussein, Mubarak, with the royal family in Saudi Arabia and the leadership in Kuwait. I've not been to Syria, though I've met with all the Syrians over here [including] the ambassador.

There are strong leaders all around,

and there are leaders who are strong at different times and not so strong at other times. Mubarak has tremendous potential, if he'll use it, for the peace process—sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn't—so he can either be a very positive or a very negative force. Probably my favorite is everybody's favorite, which is King Hussein. And even he departed from the right side during the lead-up to the Gulf War, presumably because of his fear for his country's own security with Iraq on



Senator Joseph I. Lieberman (D-CT)

the move. Israel has had a host of effective and impressive leaders.

MEI: Let me ask you a related question. Which of the Middle East leaders might you say is the most secure, and the most able to aid in advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East?

Lieberman: That's a fascinating question, because most of the leaders there are insecure in one way or another. Those in Israel, who are elected in a democracy, are secure depending on how they're doing with the people at a given time—so at different times, Netanyahu actually might be the most or least secure. There are others, like Assad, who has no democracy, and therefore he would seem probably the most secure and therefore the most able to be of support to the United States, but of course he doesn't choose to use his power for that. Part of it may be, at some level he's actually insecure—he's

feeling insecure, or at least he appreciates the limits of his own power. The Saudis have enormous economic power, but they hesitate to convert it too strongly and purely into political power in the region, because of their own concern about the stability of their regime within the country.

King Hussein, oddly, has a kind of strength. As you know, he's much beloved within Jordan. So maybe in the end, putting together the combination

that was very patriotic, had enormous gratitude to the country, and that's my first obligation. My first responsibility is to be of service to this country. And I feel that internally, but it is also a matter of Constitution and law; I've taken an oath to uphold the interests of the United States.

There are a couple of reasons—I hope—why nobody has raised questions of dual loyalty: One is, they've judged my personal behavior in office

interested in foreign policy, and I've taken an increasingly active role in discussions and debates in Congress on these questions, I do a lot of listening and outreach to all sorts of people who have concerns about different elements of our foreign policy, or points of view, or expertise. And it's true in regard to the Middle East as well. I have very regular, ongoing communication with pro-Israel groups here—both Jewish and non-Jewish—and with the Jewish community generally, which is natural and understandable.

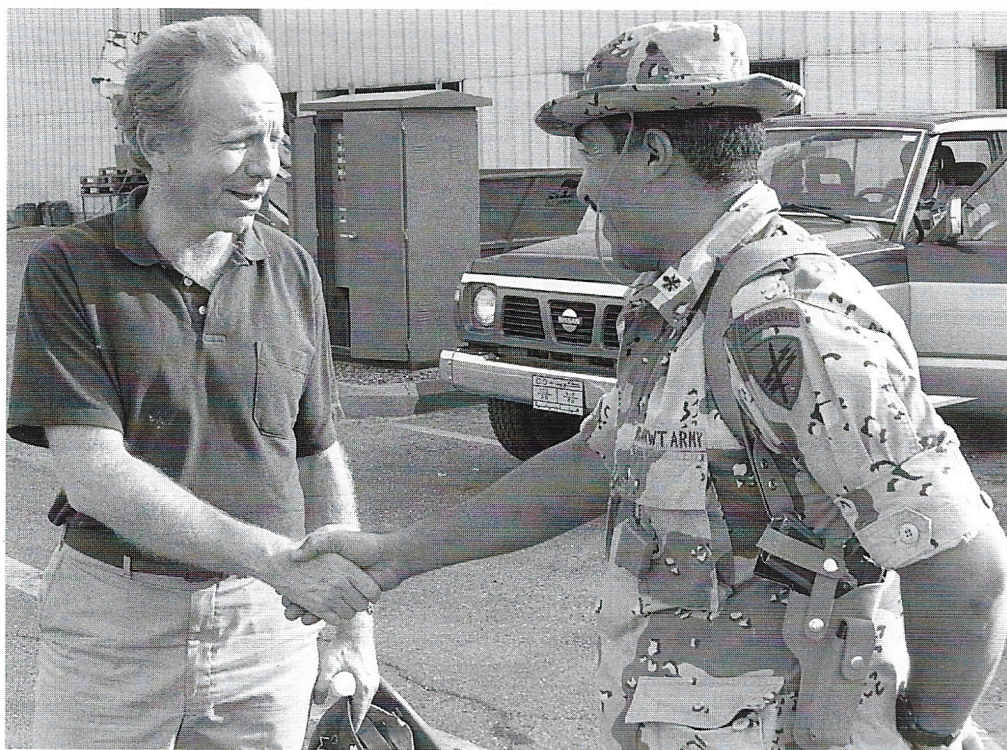
The communication with the Arab advocacy groups is less frequent, but it's there. And I've tried to be very welcoming to the various Arab-American groups, in terms of whenever they call and ask to see me or—whenever they hold events here—to go and meet with them. There aren't any organized Arab-American groups in Connecticut, they're more national, and I've had fairly good contact with them—good in the sense of being open and beneficial—for me, certainly.

MEI: Have you been in a position to bridge differences between both communities?

Lieberman: I have tried somewhat. I got to know [Arab American Institute Executive Director] Jim Zogby after we debated each other on [CNN's] "Crossfire" one night—and we continue to talk. In 1992, during the Presidential campaign, he called me and said that the Arab-American groups were feeling shut out of the Clinton campaign. A lot of them were Democrats and a lot of them wanted to support Clinton. He asked if I could help, and I did. I called the campaign, since they've got as much right to be heard and be involved in the campaign—particularly since they want to be supportive—so I contacted them in that way. But that's a little beyond the Arab-Jewish relationship.

I have worked with different groups, like Builders for Peace, when it was existing. At various times when Arab leaders have come here, I've tried to be

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Desert Storm: "A definitive moment for the region and for us."

of popularity at home with an inclination to be of help to the West—if you were giving points for each side—maybe Hussein comes out number one.

MEI: A great many non-Jewish Senators are supportive of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship, but as an Orthodox Jewish Senator, are you ever subject to accusations of "dual loyalty"?

Lieberman: To answer the literal question—has anybody accused me of that—it has happened very rarely, I can hardly remember, maybe one or two times. And when I say "accused," I mean in a letter or somebody standing up at a public forum. I was born in this country, I was born into a family

and seen the different positions I've taken, which are independent and in America's interests. The second is that—for the most part—I think that from whatever level of religious observance I have or don't have, most of the public still sees the U.S. and Israel as having common interests and not conflicting interests. So the question of dual loyalty, in the most fundamental programmatic sense, does not come in up.

MEI: What is your relationship with American Jewish and Arab-American Middle East advocacy groups?

Lieberman: Because I'm on the Armed Services Committee and I'm in-

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involved with the Arab-American community in receptions and the like. I've taken some abuse for it, but I've had contact with the American Muslim Council—which is not totally Arab but primarily Arab. I've tried to be constructive in all those ways, bringing together both branches of Abraham's family. You catch the reference...

MEI: Yes. I assume that includes Senator Abraham?

Lieberman: Right, absolutely—that's what I say when I work with him. He's Lebanese and we have a very good friendship. We've done some things together on the Middle East. Actually, he calls me periodically, to help him on matters where I have cosponsored legislation related to Lebanon and the Lebanese-American community. I'm happy to work with him, and he's been helpful on some things related to Israel as well.

MEI: Senator, let me return to the big picture. When you consider the future of the Middle East, do you feel the region is heading in the right direction?

Lieberman: You're asking me this on Friday, September 12, 1997 [the day Secretary of State Albright departed from Israel], which is not a day of enormous hope for the Middle East peace process, and so I worry about it. There have been various times when I have been pessimistic since the Declaration of Principles was signed by Rabin and Arafat on September 13—actually, tomorrow is the fourth anniversary. I've been troubled about how the next steps were going to be taken in the peace process. But I always had a feeling that somehow there would be a way. I'm genuinely concerned today that this could stop—I don't mean it could break back into open conflict, although that could happen, with another Intifada—but I'm concerned about where we are now. We watch the terrorism go on and the Israelis—the Israeli government, certainly—feeling that the security that the Palestinians were supposed to offer in return for land has not really occurred.

It's a real tragedy, and I hope that the

leaders can find a way for both sides to reflect what I take to be the will of the majority of Israelis and Palestinians, which is to move forward with the peace process. Clearly, the pressure and the spotlight has to appropriately be on Chairman Arafat, to take unambiguous and aggressive action against the terrorists and those who are spawning terrorism. So I'm worried right now that this is not heading in the right direction, even though I have felt that historical forces were moving it there. And we'll see, it will be a challenge.

MEI: Would you say that you're more or less optimistic when turning to the Syrian and Lebanese tracks, or the issue of Gulf security, or general issues like democratization and human rights?

Lieberman: They all relate, and if the peace process is on track between the Israelis and the Palestinians, there may be a slightly better chance that something will happen with Israel and Syria and Lebanon, and that democratization will go forward. Democratization will move slowly in most of the non-democratic Arab countries now, because of the threat it represents to the individuals in power and the fear that democratization will be linked to Islamic extremism.

It is possible that the stalemate, the breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian track may create an opportunity for some surprising progress in the Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese track. There's no question that there is a lot of movement in Israel about Lebanon and about whether Israel should be there, and about the risks to Israeli personnel that are involved.

I also talked to colleagues in the Senate who went to Lebanon during August [1997]. And they were impressed by the Lebanese leadership there, which seems to them to be nationalistic but not *anti-Israel*, and wants basically to get the Israelis and the Syrians out of there. So who knows, there may be some opportunities there. I hope so. And that in turn, if it happened, would perhaps put some more pressure back on the Palestinians and Arafat to deliver the security which was a precondition to the resumption of the peace process.