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❖ **In Conversation with Dr. Martin Indyk, author of *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Simon & Schuster: 2009)**

Dr. Hart Cohen and Dr. Antonio Castillo interviewers

*Dr. Martin Indyk is the Director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at The Brookings Institution. Born in England and educated in Australia, he migrated to the United States in 1982. In March 1995, former US president appointed Dr. Indyk as ambassador to Israel. He returned to Israel as ambassador in March 2000 to work with Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat on a renewed effort to achieve comprehensive peace. He also served there for the first six months of George W. Bush's presidency. Dr. Indyk is the author of *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East*. The book is a fascinating insider history of Middle Eastern diplomacy during the Clinton administration. In this interview held at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, Dr. Indyk speaks about the process of writing a book that has been able to set the news agenda of journalists writing about the Middle East.*

Cohen: I have the sense of two voices in your book, there maybe more. One voice is your voice – a comprehensive understanding of the diplomatic and political machinations in the Middle East. But then underneath in the book there is – I would say – a softer, less complete and final voice. Not so much the voice of authority. It is the voice of reflection and also the sense of subjective presence coming through the voice. So the question I have is more about the writing of the book. Could you talk a bit about the provenance of the book? How was it written, the influences and did you work closely with an editor?

Indyk: *The first voice that you talk about is my academic or intellectual mind. I've always found the Middle East endlessly fascinating. It is like looking through a kaleidoscope and you just turn a little bit and all the pieces fit in to a different picture that you have got to try and sort out. People say to me: how can you spend 35 years doing nothing else but focusing on the Middle East? But for me it's a universe and everything's there – whether it's the failed States or conflicts and conflict resolution and political and economic development issues and energy and oil. Terrorism and counter-terrorism. Everything is there.*

That's one part of it. I'm always trying to assess and analyze and understand and always being surprised by things that I did not expect to happen. So that's one thing that does come out in the book. I wanted to try and explain how this system works, just why there are so many surprises. Why we never get it right, particularly the American encounter with the Middle East

– which I think coming from Australia gave me a certain perspective, a certain distance from it. I could observe it as well as be part of it. I took extensive notes on all of my conversations, all of the meetings I was in. I did it because I had it in mind to write a book about this experience.

The second voice in the book is a product of circumstance. Once I was young and arrogant. My rise to power inside Washington only reinforced it. It was not just arrogance, but in a sense I thought that this was meant to be. I was driven and it all blew up in my face. I intended to work with Bill Clinton to achieve comprehensive peace by the end of the Clinton Administration. However with the outbreak of the Intifada it was like we'd achieved comprehensive war instead. That was one of the multiple ironies of the Middle East. But for me it was a very personal tragedy. For seven years I was in Washington watching everything we tried to do go up in flames of violence and terrorism, thousands of people killed and I felt a very personal responsibility. It was not what I intended at all. When I left government and on the way out the door of the White House, President George W. Bush told me there's no point in trying to make peace.

Castillo: Let's talk about the book – a non-fiction major work. What makes your book so totally appealing is the use of a simple narrative explaining very complex issues. Definitely it is not a political science book. However it's written by a political scientist who manages to convey a poignant, first account memory of a very crucial period. Your account shows a tremendous sense of humility and honesty.

Indyk: *I was in a position to take a little bit of distance from these events and try to describe what it's like to be in the room of negotiation – what the real dilemmas that these people face, the tough decisions. But for me it was like a personal responsibility to account for what went wrong. I tried to be as honest as I could – given my own involvement and about what went wrong. Some of the book reviews I have read have expressed surprise at the honesty of it. When writing the book I felt that was very important to try and learn the lessons of what for me was an immense tragedy and in terms of writing the book.*

Castillo: Writing the book as a tragedy?

Indyk: *Let's start with this – I had probably the best editor in the business and a contract with Knopf. My editor was Jonathon Segal, a senior editor at Knopf and of whom I don't think there are many left in New York in the publishing business. He would actually do a kind of, line in-line out editing and give you detailed responses. It's very rare these days. I was very fortunate in that regard. But then while I was kind of getting into it, my marriage fell apart.*

I couldn't write effectively for about a year. And then when I got back to it I wrote it too long. I'm not a journalist. I'm an academic by trade and I had a lot of information. I was not just responsible for the peace process issues. Both – when I was in the White House and when I came back to Washington after my first few years in Israel – I was responsible for the whole Middle East in the State Department. So I had a whole lot of stories to tell about the broader strategy, about Iraq, about Iran, about Libya and so on.

So I wrote a long book. It was a good 800 pages and my editor [Segal] said we're not going to publish 800-page book – forget about it. It was just not going to work. So we spent another year cutting it back in half. This was real agony. But it made it a much better book. Segal did a terrific job of cutting it. Actually showing me where it could be cut and then I had to rework it and so on and so it took a long time.

It was a very painful process for me to do that. Then when it was finally done I took it to him. I took him out to an expensive lunch. At that lunch he told me that he'd still publish the book,

but it took a long time and it was out of date.

Everybody's died. I came away from the lunch thinking that after all of that work he put into it, he doesn't want to do it. He said to me if I wanted to take it somewhere else I should feel free to do that. I very fortunately had a connection to Alice Mayhew who's the legendary editor of the Simon Schuster. She does all the political books at Simon Schuster, all Bob Woodward's books for instance. So she read my book. It was a manuscript that didn't need editing. It had been edited by the best in the business.

Cohen: Why do you think Segal decided not to publish after all that work? Did you ever figure out why?

Indyk: *He didn't say. But we remain good friends. If you read the acknowledgments I give him a very fulsome acknowledgment that he deserves. Alice Mayhew barely changed a word. It went straight into production. I was very fortunate in that regard. But I think Jonathan Segal was genuine. He felt that it was a good book but it was going to come out six years after all of the events.*

Cohen: He felt that timing was wrong

Indyk: *I think so.*

Castillo: Do you see your book changing the news agenda of journalists? People like me for example, would you expect that journalist would be using your book to in a way to inform audiences about this complicated process.

Indyk: *It's an interesting question. I've worked a lot with the media for many years. It's an incestuous relationship in Washington. Most of my close friends are journalists. I've always thought it would be cool to be a journalist, never had the chance to do it in my life. But so I'm always interpreting what's happening in the Middle East and Israel whatever to the journalists and I suppose that that's what I do in the book too.*

One thing that I did want to do was write a sequel to what I think is the best book on the Arab and Israeli conflict: it's Tom Freedman's 'From Beirut to Jerusalem'. Tom is a close friend of mine. I really wanted to try and write in Freedman's way. I don't think I succeeded but Tom's book was the more journalistic. Back to your previous question about Jonathan Segal's reluctance to publish the book. He was a New York Times journalist before he became an editor. I think that part of the problem he had with my book was I was not a journalist. I didn't have the sort of facility of a journalist of writing. Segal taught me the economy of words.

Cohen: I'm reading mostly the Australian press right so I recently read Greg Sheridan's (*The Australian* newspaper foreign affairs commentator) comments on the Middle East. Three quarters of his article is based on your book, and he acknowledges it explicitly in the article. But you can read something and know that most of the ideas are coming from you, not from him. John Lyons also writes for News Limited, same thing – he's starting off with your book. His article was on Netanyahu and Obama. But he's writing it from your perspective on Netanyahu and your experience of the past. So you're actually informing what we call in communications, the "media agendas". That is why I find this comment by Segal that it's not a timely book ridiculous. I mean, you're actually setting the journalism agendas. They set the conversations that take place between people and so it's an agenda setting book. It has this influence and this impact directly now as we speak. Did you not anticipate this when you wrote it or is it something you don't think about so much?

Indyk: *I think my audience was not the media. I was trying to reach a broader audience who*

are interested in the Middle East. Because the Middle East has been topic for so long in the United States, I wanted to try to explain to them, not just the complexities of the interactions in that part of the world, but why when Americans embark on this effort to transform this troubled region, that we seem always to fail.

Castillo: You speak of an author as an “innocent observer” of these events

Indyk: *Yes. That’s why I borrowed Mark Twain’s title. This was because it’s exactly what I felt. And of course I’m innocent as well in many ways. But I think it is a quintessentially American style to imagine that because we have been so fortunate, Americans have responsibilities. Providence has shone its face upon us that we have a responsibility to share this good fortune with more troubled regions, the Middle East in particular. It starts with the missionaries going out there and so it begins from a good place, a good motive, but it then goes on to be kind of arrogance that leads us to believe that we have the solution for these ancient problems. And that it’s just a matter of applying American ingenuity, creativity, engineering – whatever – to the situation and that’ll be resolved. Arrogance leads us to be ignorant.*

Castillo: When you look at the news media coverage of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, do you see a visible anti-Israel bias?

Indyk: *I can only talk about the American media. I actually don’t know the Australian media anymore, but no I don’t think so. The European media is probably a different thing all together. I don’t consider the American media anti-Israel in their reporting. I think that there is, amongst supporters of Israel, a feeling that if only Israel would do a better job of explaining itself. Supporters of Israel don’t actually operate on the assumption that the media is biased. They just feel that the media are not getting the facts. There is a sense that if only the Israeli government would do a better job of getting the facts out, then everything would be ok. I’ve never agreed with that. I mean because you know the media is basically covering the story, which is a bad story for both of the parties most of the time. There are plenty of good reasons why this is happening. The Palestinians have managed to find a way to fight an asymmetrical war using terrorism and violence. And then Israel – with this big muscle – responds with force. It has terrible consequences. There is just an expectation somehow Israel is going to behave differently. There is that in the press. You could call it a bias. But it is the way that the story is reported. And the spin won’t be able to change that. When Israel is giving up territory the world is in love with Israel. I remember Ariel Sharon when he evacuated the settlers from Gaza. He received a hero’s welcome at the United Nations – of all places that always vilified and condemned Israel – and suddenly Sharon is the hero there. So it depends on the storyline. Israel is not always going to get good press because it has certain times it has to do with things that are bad stories.*

Castillo: And I guess restricting information is not a good idea

Indyk: *No, it’s never a good move to, especially because in this day and age with hand held cameras and telephones as cameras and Internet, you can’t restrict the information flow. It’s counterproductive. The instant you restrict it you create, I think, an understanding that the pictures are bad. When Israel responds with force, you know that while it’s holding back, this is an exercise in restraint, but when there are thousands of rockets falling on Israeli civilians, then Israel is applauded for its restraint. When it retaliates, then Israel is condemned. So they don’t want to show the pictures.*

Castillo: Especially so in the American press

Indyk: *Israelis have come to the belief that the only court of public opinion that matters is the*

American court. This is because Israel is so dependent on the United States and the United States have been so friendly and supportive of Israel. The Israelis have become habituated to the fact that most of the rest of the world is going to criticize them no matter what they do. But the United States is Israel's special friend, so they care a lot about what Americans think.

Now of course we were involved in this war in Iraq, in which thousands, probably tens of thousands, of civilians were killed by the United States' armed forces. So I think that Israelis felt that this meant that the United States could not criticize them if they targeted Hamas that used civilians as human shields. In the years before Israel developed this system of targeted killing, they developed techniques and munitions that would avoid civilian casualties and they became very sophisticated. This is because they realized that they had to take care and that was because of the media and public opinion.

Cohen: I was going to ask about Haaretz (the most influential daily newspaper in Israel). Initially Haaretz supported the war in the Gaza incursion then changed its mind. Here we have a media situation that can exercise that kind of change and you don't find that in regimes that are authoritarian.

Indyk: Yes, Israel has a very active, aggressive media and I know, I was a victim of it.

Cohen: A robust media

Indyk: Yes, it is a very robust media and very affective in kind of ferreting out the story, particularly when it comes to military action. But they are also Israelis. They've got to go home at night and their kids are in the army and their lives are on the line. Inevitably it affects things.

Haaretz is always on the left. It tends to be more critical of the government than the other newspapers anyway. But I think that there were essential articles. There were articles by pundits. Pundits are very powerful in Israel. They are the columnists. They have a lot of influence on public opinion. They were really shining a light on the decision-making and whether it made sense to go further. I think they did a very good job of covering the decision making process which had gotten so screwed up in the previous Lebanon war. Now that decision makers were very conscious they did not want to want to screw up again.

Cohen: Just to try and wind up maybe with a question about the course of history that I thought was a nice metaphor with all sort of potential comebacks. I was reminded of a Louis Armstrong song starts with "I started out with nothing and I ended up with most of what I started out with". Here you are – you started out at the beginning and ended up without the peace but god what a journey between the two points. So the question that I wanted to try and develop was around this idea of the galloping horse and the jump on the horse of history. And I'm thinking of the "patron-saint of media" Marshall McLuhan and his notion of media – as a kind of rear-view mirror in which history is always being looked at as its passed by. In other words, I think the two options are either you go for a complete break and say everything I've done has not worked. Therefore let's look for the new paradigm that's going to provide the basis for something different or do we still have to work with what's inscribed in the past and work towards the solution out of everything we've learnt.

Indyk: Yes, that's interesting: my working title for this book was 'Lantern of the Stern'.

Cohen: That's the last chapter.

Indyk: Yes it is, but it was this wonderful quote from Col Rich about if we could learn from history, what lessons it would teach and yet we can only understand it like a lantern on the

stern, shining a light on the wake and that's very much what I try to do in the book – shine a light on what we've done and so that we can guide future presidents when they embark on the effort. I never imagined when I finished the book that Obama would become president and commit himself to the task of the Middle East peacemaking. So your question becomes particularly appropriate, should he embark on some new course or should he follow the old course but doing it in a smarter way?

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