



Beyond the Headlines Event Featuring **THANASSIS CAMBANIS**

Author of the book

A PRIVILEGE TO DIE:

Inside Hezbollah's Legions and Their Endless War Against Israel

Moderator:

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Warren Hoge:

Good evening. I'm Warren Hoge, IPI's Vice President for External Relations, and I'm happy to welcome you here tonight for this Beyond the Headlines event featuring Thanassis Cambanis, author of the new book, *A Privilege To Die: Inside Hezbollah's Legions and Their Endless War Against Israel*. Just this past week, as you know, Hezbollah showed its muscle by toppling the government of Lebanon. The next day, Thanassis wrote an op-ed page piece in the New York Times that said the action "signaled the final stage in Hezbollah's rise from resistance group to ruling power."

Now the current threat to Lebanese stability stems from sealed indictments filed yesterday by the prosecutor of a United Nations backed tribunal that are expected to name members of Hezbollah as organizers and perpetrators of the 2005 car bomb assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Hassan Nasrallah, the charismatic leader of Hezbollah, has sought to preempt the effect of those indictments by charging that the tribunal has become a tool of the Americans and Israelis. As Thanassis has written, Nasrallah cannot afford the blow to Hezbollah's popular legitimacy that would occur if it is thought to have been behind the Hariri killing. So a week ago today, Hezbollah used its power in the government, 10 of the cabinet's 30 ministerial seats, to bring the government down, at a moment, by the way, when the current Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, the son of the slain leader, was in Washington meeting with President Obama. Even for the volatile and lethal politics of Lebanon, this situation is particularly fraught. Saad Hariri is now faced with either caving into Hezbollah's demand that he disown and cease paying for the carefully conducted international investigation of his own father's killing, or trying to beat the odds and continue in office. Hezbollah has already brought Lebanon to the brink of civil war in 2008,

and in 2006, of course, it fought a war against Israel that convulsed the entire southern half of the country. Thanassis was there for that war as a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, and he took some substantial risks hanging out with Hezbollah fighters under fire in targeted border areas. That's where the book begins, and it would be a good book even if it didn't go beyond that, because Thanassis is an acute observer and a very evocative writer, but he turns his book into a really compelling and meaningful one by combining this vivid personal reporting and its portraits of individual fighters with scholarly accounts of the history and origins and persistence of Islamic militancy.

Despite the destruction caused in 2006, and despite calls on Hezbollah in the UN and elsewhere to disarm, it has, instead, rearmed. It's helped to repopulate the south and build its fighting forces back up in a campaign marketed as "better than before." It is, by all estimates, considerably more powerful now than before that war in 2006. Now much of this is due to heavy financing from Iran, and you will recall that Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, went to one of the resurrected border towns this fall and taunted the Israelis across the frontier. Now most people keen to see peace in the Middle East favor the two-state solution--Israel and Palestine--but Hezbollah is dead set against it, because that would preserve the state of Israel.

I was in Beirut and South Lebanon in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 war touring the area as a *New York Times* reporter covering Secretary-General Kofi Annan as he sought to end the Israeli blockade of the country. The south was virtually deserted at that point, with many villages in the southern suburbs of Beirut that Hezbollah controlled in ruins, and all the roads up to Beirut bombed out and impassable. But pointedly, at almost every entrance to a village or beside rubble from the Beirut high rises that had been flattened by Israeli war planes, or at bends in the road in the rural south, there were banners flapping in the wind showing the fiercely bearded Hassan Nasrallah claiming "divine victory." Thanassis returned to Lebanon this fall, and in October, he wrote a piece in the *New York Times* chronicling the rebuilding of the area and the reinforcement of arms. Citing just one figure from that story, "Where Hezbollah had 13,000 missiles before the war, it now has 40,000," he wrote.

The title of Thanassis' book comes from a Lebanese man who spoke to him while he was reporting the war and said, "It would be a privilege to die for Hassan Nasrallah." I read the book on a flight back from a conference in November in Abu Dhabi co-hosted by IPI and the United Arab Emirates that attracted more than 20 foreign ministers, the entire Palestinian leadership, Tony Blair, in his role as representative of the Quartet, and a number of very well-known specialists, many of whom are potential peacemakers in the region. It was all off the record, but I can tell you that I returned to New York after that with the possibilities of Middle East peace anytime soon looking very, very slim. Some of you know that this evening is the third date we have had for Thanassis' appearance, and I feared this morning there might have to be a fourth one since the dates December 1st and January 12th fell victim to bad weather. So I've had to compose this introduction three times! And with each version, I've had to acknowledge that even in that short time, Hezbollah's power has grown, and the possibility of peace and stability in the Middle East has become even more remote. So on that happy note, Thanassis, welcome, finally, to IPI. The floor is yours.

Thanassis Cambanis: Thank you, Warren. I actually figured after a while that you were just going to wait until there was a war for us to have this, because I've been predicting war next summer for, I think the last two years or three years, so now I'm saying, you

know, Summer 2011. I thought you would just kick the day back to June, and then we would have a capacity crowd. But thank you all for braving the weather and the cancellations to come out tonight and hear us talk about why Hezbollah has become such a powerful staying and dynamic force in the Middle East.

Now when we follow Hezbollah from here, we're usually looking at the leader of the group, who really symbolizes and represents Hezbollah for us, Hassan Nasrallah, the sort of unflappable Pillsbury Doughboy with a beard and a turban who gives hour-long speeches seemingly every other day, and he's been leading Hezbollah since 1992. He has come to be the face of this party for the West and for Israel, and in no way do I want to diminish his importance and his centrality to the ascent and the enduring power of Hezbollah, but when we look at the events of last week, and we see Hassan Nasrallah ordering his ministers to withdraw from the government, toppling the government, and then leisurely waiting a few days to appear on TV and explain why Hezbollah decided to do this, and he just sits there with a little enigmatic smile and gives a lesson, a clinic, and tells a few jokes while he's at it, and he spends an hour telling his audience, which is on the edge of its seat, why Hezbollah has decided to do what it's done, and everyone's waiting, I mean, for days before. What's he going to say? And for days after, what did it mean? My question has always been, how the hell did this guy get to be so important? Why do people care so much what he says?

And the first step towards that answer is understanding that unlike any leader in the Middle East, he's got legions of followers, in his case, a million or more, who believe everything he says, who are willing to die for him, but also, more important than willing to die for him, are willing to live for him and do what he asks them to. And second of all, this community and the people who hate him and oppose him trust everything he says. When he says, we are not going to stop until, let's say in this case, until Lebanon withdraws its support for the tribunal prosecuting Hariri, we're not going to stop until everyone recognizes that that tribunal is an Israeli and American tool. That sounds rhetorical to us. Everyone involved realizes those are Hezbollah's demands, and they are going to deploy any tool in their arsenal to meet those, to achieve those goals.

So my voyage as a reporter was, from a starting point, and this is a starting point four years ago, or five years ago now, when Hezbollah wasn't nearly as dominant as it is today, but even then, everyone around the region was holding up Hezbollah as a model. I mean, Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and his followers in Iraq were telling me they aspired to be like Hezbollah. Hamas activists in Gaza were telling me the same thing. Muslim Brothers in Jordan, on and on, everyone's saying, we want to copy Hezbollah's approach. So by the time I got to Lebanon, I wanted to know what this approach was, why people thought it was so worth emulating, and really, what was motivating the rank and file inside Hezbollah. So I began, I began my search for the meaning and significance of Hezbollah, not in the speeches of Nasrallah or in the stated policies of the group, but rather in and among the soccer moms and the weekend warriors, the fighters and the troop leaders of Hezbollah's society of Islamic resistance, and for me, that was really the question that would allow me to, one understand them, and two, distinguish them from the much less successful movements that I'd covered all around the region.

I first looked for Hezbollah during the 2006 war, and I sort of hailed a taxi from Damascus, rode down to Beirut, and my game plan was to just get as close to the Israeli border as possible and look for people with beards and cargo pants, and that was really, that was really my entire blueprint. No one in Lebanon wanted to join me in this, because they thought it was a completely suicidal

approach, so I ended up getting my own rental car, lying, saying I wouldn't take it out of Beirut, and I drove down to the border and spent a couple of fruitless days going up to these guys in mosques with beards and cargo pants and saying, hey, are you in Hezbollah, and them sort of saying, we're not interested in talking to reporters, be on your way. But halfway through the war, a brief truce was declared, and we went to the village of Bint Jbeil. Now that's the border town that Warren referred to where Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave his triumphal speech just this past fall, and this is a village that really represents the apotheosis of Hezbollah's successful project with its own community. This is a town where you're hard pressed to find a neutral party, it's been destroyed in every one of the wars between Hezbollah and Lebanon, it's a place where, if you're Lebanese, and you've chosen to stay in Bint Jbeil, you're likely to either be an active member of Hezbollah or a passive but passionate supporter, and the sound had already been, and for Israel, by the way, this town really stuck in their craw, and the head of the army, and some Israelis argue, really screwed up Israel's strategy by focusing too much on trying to take this symbolic town, rather on doing what would be militarily more effective to control the south, but anyway, this town from both sides became this symbol of Hezbollah's persistence, Hezbollah's willingness to see its infrastructure destroyed and keep on coming back to fight again, and at this point, halfway through the war, the village was already more destroyed than anything I'd seen in my life, anything I'd seen in Iraq or in the Balkans, it was apocalyptic. The downtown area was just a sea of rubble with slightly shallower alleys of rubble to mark the streets, and we wandered through, looking for people from Hezbollah, and finally, sort of like a vision, this guy appears from beneath two piles of rubble and strides towards us with dust in his hair, walkie talkie clipped to his belt, cargo pants, and this guy definitely was a Hezbollah fighter, what else would he be doing there, and he walks right up to us, and he opens his mouth, and in perfect English, says, "So, did you get your story?" and proceeds to sit down with us for the better part of an afternoon, really giving us his ground-level view of Hezbollah and why he was dedicating his life to this fight, and this guy was... for a minute he would sound insane, he'd be talking about how the inventor of the Kalashnikov had its own quarter of paradise reserved for him, he would talk about the "digestive jihad," that God not only required you to fight Israel to the death, but also to eat the right kind of divinely-ordained food, he seemed like a fanatic, and then he would sort of flip into this very human mode and start talking about things like how he had shared one of his last packets of food with a stray dog because he was hoping to win God's mercy, or he started talking about his children and his engineering students, he would rail about America, and then he'd say, you know, I really hope you guys can come and join me for dinner after the war, and he was really warm and voluble and enthusiastic, and he was also, in many ways, an insane fanatic.

One of the many things that was interesting about him, his name was Rani Bazzi, was that he had chosen to move back to South Lebanon from Kuwait where he'd lived, he'd grown up in a rich diaspora family, had an engineering degree, he had a good job in the Gulf, and he wanted to join the Islamic resistance at the time against Israel's occupation, this was in the 90s, and he gave up a very nice bourgeois life to come, get married, have kids in occupied south Lebanon, after the Israelis pulled out in 2000, to keep on his work with Hezbollah and the militia, and for him, this was at once a fight to the death, a higher calling, a social life, and a religion. He raised his children, he trained them to fire mortars when they were 7, long before they had any formal training in this, because he viewed this just as something you need to know how to do if you are a patriot, a citizen of Hezbollah society, and he was a guy who was looking forward to martyrdom, but also was investing a lot of charismatic energy in building his own community. To me, from my perspective, that was initially unfathomable. How could someone

be eager to die and also appear to be so constructive, and really, this is the mystery that Hezbollah has resolved for itself, and it's the reason why their society is so dynamic.

Turning away from Rani Bazzi, I'm just going to talk about one more character and then sort of wrap in some bigger themes and then turn this into a conversation, but the other character I met during the war and subsequently spent a lot of the last four years with was a nurse in her 20s named Inaya Haidar. Unlike Rani Bazzi, she was not a member of Hezbollah, but she came from a family that were all die-hard supporters of the party of God, all of them, four sisters, most of them with masters' degrees from AUB, trilingual, working in the hard sciences or in medicine, and again, totally sworn and loyal to Hezbollah's war. When they were kids, they went to summer camp organized by Hezbollah. When they grew up, in high school, when they got A's on their report cards, who organized the awards ceremony, Hezbollah, and later, when I met Inaya as an adult, she was working for a private hospital, nothing to do, again, with this political party, with this militia movement. When the war started, she was in Beirut, she immediately defied her father, hitchhiked south into the war zone, and took up her post for 34 days nonstop at the hospital because she thought that's what would be best for Hezbollah's war. And this was patriotic volunteerism. This was not... no one gave her an order, no one asked her to do this. This is what she saw as necessary as someone who organically viewed themselves as part and parcel of Hezbollah's cause.

Now what is that cause? Most simply put, I describe it as a two-stroke engine, one stroke constructive, one stroke destructive. The constructive stroke is holistic Islam, an Islamism that tells you how to organize your life, raise your kids, be a good husband or wife, how to pray, how to be devout, how to be a good person, how to be a more prosperous person, all these sort of things that sound like an American megachurch. And the other stroke, the other piston is war without end, perpetual war, and in this case, it's the war against Israel. That's what elevates them from just being a very effective social services network, megachurch, institution that gives people driving direction in their life, and mobilizes them into a society that is always, always running full tilt ahead, waiting for confrontation, ready to stick to their principles even if it means seeing their society destroyed. Now I can get into this more as you're interested or as your questions lead us to it, but to me, that's the starting point to really understanding Hezbollah's mindset and the loyalty of its followers, and it's the beginning of the answer to any news oriented question you might ask. I mean, if you want to ask why they're so, why they're willing to topple the government over this tribunal, the beginning of the answer has to do with their identity as a resistance organization that demands, it requires itself to be in a constant state of war. It requires mobilization against an external enemy, and which cannot, because their ideology is something they actually believe in, they cannot accept certain contradictions or certain challenges to their moral authority that other more political movements could absorb. So, I don't know, I think I'll leave it at that for my comments and go to questions if – I could talk for an hour and a half or two if you like.

Hoge:

I'm sure the audience would stay. Let me just, keep you on the same thing, why, you described why Hezbollah, you say in the book, Hezbollah's the most dynamic force in the Middle East. As you were talking, I was thinking, some of the things you were saying about Hezbollah, could be said about Hamas, a social organization, social benefits, that type of thing, but why is Hezbollah so much better at that than some other groups? Why do you say Hezbollah is the most dynamic force?

Cambanis:

Hezbollah, first of all, truly believes in its religious ideology. They're... the first thing anyone in Hezbollah talks about when they talk to me, or when they talk to their scout troop, is religion. They don't start with what's wrong with Israel or why we hate the Jews or American imperialism, they start with religious, basic religious education and religious values, and it permeates everything, and that's something they started doing at their creation in 1982 and have never stepped away from. So that's the first thing that distinguishes them from a group like Hamas.

Secondly, they really... all of them are wedded to the war against Israel. I mean, many people in Hamas, some people in Hamas are even more committed to fighting than the leadership. A lot of people in Hamas are not. They're pragmatists who have a maximalist political position on Israel, but in practice aren't necessarily interested in fighting. Everyone in Hezbollah is, and they have been taught, through experience, that Hezbollah will lead them effectively on the battlefield when they fight and it will rebuild their lives when it's over, and that completely distinguishes them from any other militant movement I've encountered, and it's what gives such heft to their threats. I mean, when the houses were destroyed in 1993 or 1996 or 2006, Hezbollah was there literally the next day. I mean, this was unreal to me. I'd been in Baghdad for three years, and we were still going on these crazy traffic detours because a bombed bridge was blocking a street from Shock and Awe 2003. In Lebanon, while the bombs were falling, a guy was out there with a bulldozer clearing a path so that the highway, the north-south highway and all the smaller roads could keep functioning, and the day the bombs stopped falling, the surveyors were out, the guys from the jihad for reconstruction, which is one of Hezbollah's very effective institutions, were out there doing a full survey of every damaged building, and they got to work, and they did it. They did this impossible, now the other part of the answer to the question, how come, what's the difference, well the other difference is, Iran's bankrolling. They have, they have unfettered access to Iran's resources and unfettered access to Iran's cash stockpiles, so no one knows the exact amount, but estimates that anywhere from \$1 to 4 billion have been spent in Lebanon since the 2006 war.

Now even Elliott Abrams who did an event with me at the Center for American Progress when this book came out, he was in charge of some important aspects of our policy towards Lebanon in 2006, and he said, yeah, we got housed. We wanted to send American money to Lebanon, and we couldn't figure out how to do it, and the money we did send was a year late, and no one knew it came from us. Meanwhile, Hezbollah is handing out bricks of \$12,000 cash the week after the war ends to every displaced family and saying, this is just a grace payment. Get some furniture, find a temporary house, come back to us later, and we'll talk about the real reconstruction plan, and three years later, there were glass high rises in the middle of South Beirut where Hezbollah's headquarters had been bombed, and more tellingly, all through the South, a network of roads twice as good as the network of roads that existed before the war. Takes me half as long to do my reporting, because I can get to Bint Jbeil or Eita Shab, or Baalbek in half the time, and there are banners everywhere on the side of the road that say, "Thank you to the Iranian Reconstruction Council for rebuilding our country," and that engenders real loyalty, real loyalty, and real dedication, and that society that supports Hezbollah isn't just doing it for the handouts, and that's the big difference.

Hoge:

That's exactly what I wanted you to talk about, because since I was there and saw it myself, I read in your book, or I read the piece you wrote in the *Times* in

October they had rebuilt the south, and the south was destroyed when I was there, right after the war ended, and some in Beirut, I remember we went, actually we went with Kofi Annan, and this was when Fouad Siniora was the prime minister, and Kofi got out of his car in the southern suburb of Beirut which was destroyed, and when I say destroyed, the southern suburbs of Beirut where Hezbollah had its power, I remember, reminded me of Queens Boulevard, it was just a series of high rises, not anything to write home about, it didn't have any kind of architectural merit, but they were solid, substantial, tens of thousands of people live there, and they had just been flattened. I mean, there was nothing but rubble, and to think that has been fully rebuilt now, to look better –

Cambanis:

It's been rebuilt better than it was. I mean, in south Beirut, we've got glass towers where before were these concrete blocks, Bint Jbeil's sook looks like a mall in Dubai. I mean, not a nice mall, like one of the older malls, but it was rebuilt by, I think, the Qatari, the Emir of Qatar, so it's in this sort of, this Gulf's architectural style that doesn't fit at all, but it's gleaming marble arcades with pointed tall arches, and this is where I met Rani Bazzi, I mean, literally in a place that was a wasteland, and it's all, it's all brand spanking new. It looks great. And there are more people living there than used to as well.

Hoge:

The other part of that story, when we went to the southern suburbs, just mobbed by people, Kofi got out of his car, and I remember, and some other reports, thinking, oh my God, and these guys were chanting, they all had Hassan Nasrallah signs, it was a real mob scene, and Kofi Annan's not very tall, he's a small man, the guy got lost in the midst of it, and some of the reporters were chasing, running over rubble, falling down, and I really thought it was going to be an international incident, so what's going to happen, and it didn't. Later that night--let me say something about Kofi Annan, which I'm always grateful for, all reporters are--when you travel with him, and I did on two or three occasions, and you meet a world leader, he will always call the reporters, he'll have five or six reporters with him, and call them up, and he'll say to the leader, or in this case, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, I want you to give them all an interview before we leave, and so they feel obliged. So for that reason, that same night that Kofi had gone out into the very dangerous, what looks to be a very dangerous area of Beirut, we had an interview with Fouad Siniora in the grand Seraglio, the building that Lebanese prime ministers operate out of, and we all said, we were terrified for Kofi. I'm telling you the story, because at that point, this was right after the war. Hezbollah had assured them nothing bad will happen, but bring him to our neighborhood, have him come out and walk around, let the people express their rage, but we'll control it, and I remember thinking back on seeing in the back of those crowds very organized guys who were putting a halt to anybody who looked to be a little bit out of control.

Cambanis:

It's too bad Kofi didn't get you an interview with Nasrallah.

Hoge:

This is true. He saw a... we saw a member of Parliament that night who was from Hezbollah, and we talked to him, but Nasrallah himself was nowhere to be seen, except in all those banners and flags that you saw everywhere around south Lebanon. Thanassis, I want to ask you about right now. I'm going to go to the floor eventually. I just want to ask a few more questions beforehand. I want to ask you about right now. In the book, and I think in what you just said now, you believe that Hezbollah basically is dedicated to endless war. The question I have is, do you think possibly now, and this is trying to reach for the bright side of recent developments, could they possibly now be victimized by their own success in the following way? Hassan Nasrallah now has toppled the government of Lebanon. He will have a say on who becomes the new prime

minister, and by the way, under the national plan, that person must be a Sunni, which is an interesting problem for the Shiite Hezbollah. Could, would Hassan Nasrallah still risk a civil war, now that he has certain responsibility for the state of Lebanon that he has gained in a political way? Could that possibly get in the way of Hezbollah's dedication to endless war?

Cambanis:

Well, I mean, the thing that limits Hezbollah, actually, is their, I mean, they're not a suicidal organization, so they don't want to actually lose their own power, but they don't care if they destroy the Lebanese state, so the... Hassan Nasrallah's not going to lead Hezbollah into something that will make his own followers abandon him, and that's why this tribunal matters so much to him. The idea that Hezbollah convincingly gets linked with murdering a popular Sunni figure would actually alienate Hezbollah's own audience. Now they've already, I think, dealt with their own problem successfully by now by coming up with this counternarrative that Israel killed Hariri and then manufactured this tribunal as a way of pinning it on Israel's enemies, Syria first, and now Hezbollah, and they have this narrative, which, to me, and to you perhaps, will seem laughable, but to their own followers, who I was talking to about this in September and October, totally compelling. They've sewn it up. So if he can keep them, and then it's better for Hezbollah to have a civil war or a war with Israel, they'll do it. Now, I think in general, they'd like to avoid getting their hands dirty, so the period of time I write about in the book from 2006 to 2008, the war ends, and Hezbollah turns around to Lebanon and says, okay, we fought this war, we won, we won by surviving, we want a third of the seats in the government, which gives us the power to make sure you can't take away our weapons. Give it to us, we're happy. And the government said no. We're the elected majority, you're a bunch of hotheads, you dragged us into war, you can't tell us what to do. And Hezbollah basically said, don't make us make you do this. And that's what happened. First Hezbollah, and they were gentle in their intimidation. They took over central Beirut in a paralyzing sit-in, they closed off some of the main roads to the city, they made commerce hard, they shut down the parliament, they made it, they withdrew from the government, that still wasn't enough, eventually what they did was, they sent their less disciplined allies to rampage through Sunni Beirut, destroy a couple of key buildings that belonged to the governing party, and then Hezbollah's fighters marched through afterwards, cleaned up the mess, so to speak, kicked out the rabble, and they sort of said, oh, sorry, these guys got out of hand, we, of course, don't want to have a civil war, we don't want to occupy your part of the city, we're going back to our area now, and we're leaving this in the hands of the Lebanese army, and you can quibble with my narrative a little bit when you bring in what happen with the Druze, but essentially, Hezbollah won hands down, and they killed as few people as they needed to in order to intimidate and push Lebanon into full acquiescence. And they got what they wanted, and they got their bloc of power in the government.

Your bigger question is, what is it that can, what is it that can make Hezbollah go too far, or what is it that Hezbollah will feel like is something it can't do anymore, and that raises to me a very interesting question, which is, what becomes of Hezbollah now that they are in control, dominant, and the strongest party in Lebanon and one of the most influential Islamist parties in the whole Arab world? Well, they can't very well be the underdog scrapping on the margins for the rights of the dispossessed, and at the same time, be the bully strong man who calls all the shots and can topple a government, pick a prime minister, and have their own army. Those are just, those aren't fundamental, those are two completely different roles. They've been playing them both for some time, and essentially, they're pulling a narrative trick on their own followers. They're convincing their followers, and it's kind of like what Israel does with its population. I mean, they're

saying to their followers, we're about to be wiped out, every second, everyone's out to get us, everyone's trying to kill us, so we've got to be ready to fight to the death, and at the same time, they control all the levers of state, and they have the strongest military--this is Hezbollah I'm talking about now--and it's a hard balancing act, it's a hard trick to maintain, and I think now, they're in a jam with this, again, because previously, they could say, we represent everyone in Lebanon, even the Lebanese who don't like us, but when the half of Lebanon that hates Hezbollah gets more and more vocal, it's going to be hard for them to say, well we represent you too, even though you don't want us to, and I think that, I don't think that will be their undoing, but I think that's going to cause some slowdown, their meteoric rise, the thing that could really cause their undoing would be the loss of Syrian or Iranian sponsorship.

Hoge: Two more questions. One of them, Thanassis, is, we know from the UN and from some people close to the investigation that this has been a very professionally done investigation, and particularly in the last year or two, thanks to a Lebanese police officer who was unfortunately assassinated for his efforts, they have gotten cell phone records that pretty convincingly prove it was a conspiracy, it was organized by Hezbollah, they say they can actually say exactly who was where at the moment the Hariri motorcade went by, when it was blown up. My question is, if, and as you know, the indictments were sealed, I suspect the names will come out at some point, you can't keep confidentiality that long --

Cambanis: It's one of the leakiest investigations ever!

Hoge: But in the last two years, it got much better because of this sort of cell phone investigation. My question is, suppose the evidence comes out, and it is really convincing. Will that make any difference?

Cambanis: For whom?

Hoge: For Hezbollah.

Cambanis: I think for Hezbollah's followers, no earthly evidence will, you know, the dastardly Israelis and their henchman can do anything. They've been blamed for shark attacks in the Red Sea recently. So I don't think there's any material evidence that would come out and make people like Inaya Haidar's sister, who actually, she's one of the characters in the book who's a real diehard Hezbollah, she didn't mind the book, even though it makes her look like a fanatic. She won't communicate with me anymore because of what I've said about the tribunal, because I've said it's obvious, Hezbollah's links to the trigger pullers are obvious, and to her, that crossed the Rubicon, I said something that's unforgivable in accepting this false narrative that Hezbollah did it, and I think she's a typical representative of the mindset of people who have been listening to Hezbollah's counternarrative. So there, Hezbollah got what it wanted from that. It got buy-in to their view. Now to the soft supporters of Hezbollah and the people throughout the Arab world who view them as a paragon of an alternative view, an alternative approach, instead of accommodation to Israel and the West, there's this bloc, this axis of resistance, I think to that public, and to the public in Lebanon that is, the Christians who support Hezbollah, the Jews, the people outside of the Shia community who have allied with Hezbollah. I think to them, this is potentially a death blow, and that's another reason why Hezbollah wants to stop this at all costs. If a trial, if an indictment gets released that, by the way, more convincingly than these cell phone records, something much more than that is needed, but if something that is convincing, that shows people in Hezbollah put the bomb together, and they did it with the knowledge of Hezbollah leaders and with the

knowledge of Syrian leaders, that will, I think, force a lot of Hezbollah's outside supporters away from them, and that will leave them naked and exposed, and that'll be good for those of us who want to see an equilibrium in Lebanon that sort of disempowers Hezbollah from its, sort of being the center of gravity, but I think it's possible they weather it. I think it's also possible that Aoun, the Christian leader who backs Hezbollah, decides he gets a better political deal out of backing Hezbollah on this, and he'll take any tribunal indictment and any subsequent trial and say, it's made up, why should we believe it, and ignore it.

Hoge: Final question. Let's think ahead, the weeks or months it will take to form a new government. Let's imagine they find a Sunni as the new prime minister who has enough of a resistance background that Hezbollah will accept it. You have a new Lebanese government in which Hezbollah has enormous power. It strikes me this would be unacceptable to Israel, Israel would have to do something about it. From the Hezbollah point of view, do they want to provoke an attack by Israel, or would they rather avoid that?

Cambanis: I think, Hezbollah's top choice is a war with Israel, they can blame on Israel at the best time for Hezbollah. As a decent second best, they'll take any war with Israel, especially one that they can blame on Israel. So if they can engineer a situation where it looks like Israel was the aggressor, or where Hezbollah did something small and Israel overreacted, that's ideal for Hezbollah, and especially as these indictments are coming. Personally, I think the biggest likely trigger for a war is a destabilizing indictment. If the indictment contains weak information, if the entire indictment is based on cell phone records, I think Hezbollah can weather it. If the indictment is based on compelling eyewitness testimony or drone footage, if there's more to it, if there's incontrovertible evidence that Nasrallah can't spin away in a speech, then he needs a war. He needs a war with Israel in which, at the end of it, he can say, maybe we killed Nasrallah, maybe not, but hey, look what happened over here! We got attacked, and we stood up for you, and I do think that's what they're planning for. I think that's what they're planning for, and in the worst case scenario for Hezbollah, they just have to outright provoke a war, and that's bad in a number of ways, that's just bad, and it's bad for the world. It's bad for Hezbollah in that then they're going to have to, they're going to have to find some way to present this as an act of defense and not of aggression, but they win. If there's a war, they win, and that's the thing that Americans and Israelis often don't understand. The Israeli military can go in and kill every single Hezbollah fighter and destroy every single rocket in Lebanon, and unless Israel decides to occupy all of Lebanon for the foreseeable future after that, they'll go back to Israel, and Hezbollah will still be there as the dominant force with more sympathy than ever before, and just like after the last war, took them a few months to get back their arsenal, and a few years to have a stronger military guerilla capacity than they had before, so the technical stuff, easily replaceable, and the legitimacy they get for fighting and surviving is priceless. That sounds like a MasterCard ad.

Hoge: And the Iranians will fund it, of course.

Cambanis: Yeah. It's a cheap deal for the Iranians.

Hoge: William. Wait for the microphone. I'm going to ask you to stand up, if you will, because then you can be heard in the back, and please identify yourself.

William Verdone: Thank you. William Verdone. In keeping with the thread of Iran, they essentially subsidize Hezbollah. They are going through a wrenching economic upheaval. What will happen if those subsidies begin to evaporate? Or is that, will that never

happen? And there is someone else backstage waiting to give additional monies? Thank you.

Cambanis:

That's a great question. I don't think it's likely to happen anytime soon. I mean, when Khatami was in power, the support for Hezbollah was a little less enthusiastic than it was before, but the funding stayed consistent. When Ahmadinejad took over, funding went up. When it appeared that he was going to lose the election in 2009 and I was in Lebanon, and I was talking to Hezbollah leaders, and they said, we've already talked to all the front runner candidates, they've all pledged to maintain the levels of support, so short of some really complete regime change in Iran, I find it unlikely that they'll cut their support for Hezbollah, and frankly, I mean, they do a lot more wasteful things in Iran that are hurting their bottom line than the few hundred million or at best billions that they send over to Lebanon. They're an oil state. They've got a lot of cash, and this is a key part of their foreign power projection. It's a very cost effective investment for them. Compare it to, they give trinkets to Hamas, and they get a ton of leverage out of that, and they give a few hundred million dollars in operating budget to Hezbollah, and they get huge amounts of influence out of that. So why would they give that up? Now, it's a good question, though, if they did, what happens, and I think absent Iran's funds and weapons, Hezbollah remains very important, very influential, nowhere near as important to Israel and the West as it is today, because the main reason why we care is because of their ability to wage effective guerilla war. If they don't have those deep pockets, and the weapons that come with it, they just can't, Hezbollah just can't project the military power they project today, and therefore, we're going to care a lot less. They'll still be one of the biggest players, they might even remain the biggest player politically in Lebanese politics, but if they can't make war against Israel, how much do we care? And the same goes if Syria makes a real deal with Israel and cuts off the channel they give Hezbollah, Hezbollah again becomes immeasurably weakened, because even if Iran still is backing Hezbollah, they can't fly stuff into Damascus and just drive it in. I mean, that's one of the main differences too between Gaza and Lebanon. Lebanon has access to the open market. Hamas and Gaza do not, so even if they have a willing sponsor, they can't just drive in materiel.

Ann Phillips:

Thank you. My name is Ann Phillips, I'm on the board of IPI. First of all, I'm so glad you made it this time! As Warren, I looked out the window, I thought, oh my God, he's going to be in Chicago again tonight! So I'm delighted you're here, welcome, and that is, it's been a fascinating presentation. I want to elaborate a little bit or extend a little bit the question that Warren posed. As we all know, it's no secret that the Sunni world regards the Shia with distaste, dislike, contempt, they do not like the Shia. They look down on Shia. Except this is an iconic group that is viewed as a heroic resistance group against Israel, so they kind of overlook the fact that it's Shia. There are those that take the view that if they are indicted, their image in the Sunni world will be very, very badly tarnished, and if they take military action against their own government, then they'll just be viewed as another Shia militia and lose this iconic, heroic image as this resistance group, and I'd like you to comment on that. You have, to some degree.

Cambanis:

First of all, as long as they're fighting Israel, they'll largely be forgiven for anything. So part of any view of this is, you can't overlook how important that is in the Arab world. So if every five years there's a war between Israel and Hezbollah, that will go a large way towards absolving Hezbollah of any of its sins. Now, not all of them, and your question's a great one. Personally, and this goes far beyond the ambit of what paltry expertise I have in anything, but I would suggest that the Sunni world has been in almost paralyzed stasis for 60 years,

and the last big idea in the Sunni world was Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab Nationalism, which I think was a fundamentally bankrupt idea, and it failed. And so today, so since then, the only innovation we've seen in the Islamic, Arab-Islamic world, has largely been from the Shia community: the Iranian revolution, say what you will about it, very creative and innovative, and it was the apotheosis of a long maturation of Shia identity mobilization and Shia revolutionary theology, and it birthed a whole new wave of intellectual ferment.

Phillips: And hated by the Sunni world in the neighborhood.

Cambanis: Yes and no. And so we have that as one of the few sources of innovation, followed by Hezbollah, the redeemer of Arab dignity, right, the one entity that stood up to Israel and won. They ended the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, and they did it through *velayat-e faqih*, the ideology of the Iranian revolution. That was their starting point. So even as the sort of ossified Sunni Arab world looks down their noses at the Shia, well, the Shia have taken over Iraq, they've taken over Lebanon, they've organized a potent and effective guerilla army, they have updated their theology now in ways that I think are problematic and distasteful and militant and destructive. Don't take what I'm saying as an endorsement of the ideas and the practices here. I'm just saying how they fit in to what's happening in the Arab and Islamic world.

Hoge: By the way, thanks to America, they also run Iraq now.

Cambanis: Yeah.

Phillips: We empowered the Shia.

Cambanis: Yeah, so we paved the way to a real fantastic Shia revolution in the region, and sorry, just to finish your... because it's a really great question, does, at what point does Hezbollah become just another corrupt, violent militia, and I think that will only happen, one, if some dynamic alternative, that there's no sign of today emerges for people to hang their hope on, or two, when it stops fighting Israel. Until then, I don't think, just to argue with my own point a little bit, I think there are a lot of Sunni Arabs in the Arab world who look with disgust at Saudi Arabia and its corrupt rulers, and they look with disgust at Rafik Hariri as a corrupt plutocratic billionaire pawn of the Saudis who is basically getting his family rich while running Lebanon as a private family property. So they might not grieve too much about his assassination, and they might not mind too much if Hezbollah killed him. I don't know. That's a hypothesis to consider.

Phillips: He did rebuild Lebanon. Rafik Hariri.

Cambanis: He did rebuild parts of Lebanon. Absolutely.

Hoge: John Hirsch, and then Saúl.

John Hirsch: Thank you very much. First of all, were there any contacts between any western governments and Hezbollah, and secondly, do you have any recommendations for US foreign policy in the Middle East? In other words, is this just a matter of, is this just a matter of standing by and waiting for the next war and financing the rebuilding of Lebanon and whatever further military aid goes to Israel, just one endless cycle of wars, in other words, or is there any useful possible initiative that you can think of that could involve dialogue with Hezbollah, rather than saying we won't talk to them? Maybe you could clarify that, but could you comment on American foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon and Israel in this context?

Cambanis:

How much time do I have? First of all, are there contacts between the West and Hezbollah? Lots of contacts. Hezbollah was never terror-listed by most European countries, so France never cut off diplomatic relations with Hezbollah, Germany, I believe, never cut off relations, England did briefly for three years under pressure from the Bush administration, restored them, and now is sort of having some awkward relations with Hezbollah, but by and large, Hezbollah has remained a movement that has had ongoing conversations with Western diplomats. As we see, that doesn't necessarily make a difference to policy. I'm a big supporter of the view that dialogue helps, it gives us better intelligence, it gives us better policy analysis, it gives us a better sense of what our options are, it doesn't change or constrain the behavior of actors like Hezbollah or Hamas or the Mahdi army, so if you do have diplomatic relations with them, or if you have the kinds of relations we have now where spooks meet with them or track 2 people, it just gives information. That's it, and if we had an ambassador who could meet with Hezbollah today, it wouldn't have changed a single outcome of what happened in Lebanon last week, or the last couple of years. Now in, more generally speaking, US policy in the Middle East, I mean, that's a long and deep conversation about a series of ill-conceived disasters that are often worsened by the fact that we don't allow ourselves a realistic view of what's already happened or what's happening or who the people we're talking to are, but one simple recommendation would be survey Israel and the Arab world and do the effective equivalent of downgrading your portfolio, what do you call it when you, mark to market? So let's just mark to market the whole Middle East and just say, okay, Israel's our best ally, they barely listen to us. The rest of our allies in the region never listen to us, and when they do, they have no power, and none of their people like them, so let's just sort of systematically go through and see where we stand, how eroded our influence is, how bankrupt and morally ineffective our allies are, and then that would allow us to, at least as a starting point, to say, okay, we shouldn't expect to have much influence, or if we want to have more influence over this problem or that problem, we'd better start cultivating a better ally or a better proxy or even opposing this former ally here or there, and I think, you know, the Arab world is not... I don't expect radical revolutionary change, but we're all, I think, aware of what happened in Tunisia last week, which is very exciting and significant. There already have been attempts elsewhere to copy that popular uprising, and things can change. They can change quickly. And I'm not sure the US is in a good position to capitalize on upheaval, and I'm not sure the US has the right amount of contacts with opposition groups or activists or Islamists that would be necessary for it to project influence in a time of dynamic upheaval.

Hoge:

It was interesting that Hillary Clinton made a really interesting speech the day before Ben Ali in Tunisia was thrown out. She was in Doha, and it was really the first time that an American Secretary of State said to our Arab allies, countries we support, you've got to start taking care of the demands of your people, you've got to get rid of unemployment, you've got to get rid of corruption, or else this kind of uprising will happen, and then bingo, the next day, I don't think it's enough, unfortunately, to put us on the right side of that argument, because we have, we as Americans have supported all those governments that are now going to have problems with their population.

Thanassis, I want to read something. I was smirking a little bit as you were answering the question about US policy. In the book, Thanassis writes, "A trio of US diplomats briefed me on aid, military cooperation, and politics. I hoped they were lying to me, because their assessments were so out of kilter with reality." Is

that still your view of the American assessment of what was happening in Lebanon?

Cambanis: Well...

Hoge: I mean, you wrote it.

Cambanis: You know, yeah, yeah, it was definitely my view then, and since successors have taken over, I honestly have not spent too much time soliciting the views of the US diplomats there, because for better or for worse, I don't think they know anything about what's going on, and the things I want to report about, but they know a lot about US policy, and when I focus on that, that's a different story, but I do think, I think, we have a diplomatic corps in Lebanon that's operating on security rules devised in the 80s after the barracks bombing. They can't go anywhere without bodyguards, they go around in bulletproof cars with 2-car teams and bodyguards. They don't see anything. They don't talk to people. They can't. They can't go into Shia Lebanon. I drive myself, by myself, in a car to the border. I speak halting Arabic, and I can drive to Bint Jbeil by myself, go through checkpoints, and go and meet with Hezbollah militants in the border. I can go around the Dalia, and if I get lost, I can just pull over my car, roll down the window, and some stranger will hop in the car and guide me to where I want to go. US diplomats, meanwhile, are meeting people in 4-star hotels, and largely, they meet people who like America and tell them what they want to hear, and I think that's part of why we're often disastrously clueless about where Lebanon's going.

Hoge: I've got some more questions. I want to add one thing to that line of questioning, which is a question I don't know the answer to. Have the Israelis had any luck in penetrating Hezbollah? Mossad is pretty good at that sort of thing.

Cambanis: The Israeli guy just left. I was going to ask him, from the mission. I think they have. I mean, several Israeli initiatives have been exposed in the last two years and were not denied by Israel, so my favorite of these was one where a car dealer in Nabatieh was putting tracking devices in cars that he was selling to Hezbollah officials that Israel could track in real time, but they've unmasked several informant networks, spy networks, cameras, surveillance cameras, and you can imagine if this is the stuff that the Lebanese have uncovered, there's a whole lot more that they haven't, and what my reporting suggested after the war is that Israel felt like it had really let its human-intelligence gathering in Lebanon lapse after the withdrawal in 2000, and so after the war, they really invested a lot of energy into reactivating it.

Now Hezbollah also has a lot of spying that it does inside Israel, which what you never hear talked about much, and they're both pretty effective. I mean, you can see how things play out in times of war, they, both sides have really good targeting data.

At the beginning of the war in 2006, Israel destroyed every single long-range missile that Hezbollah had in one day. You can't do that through satellite imagery. Meanwhile, Hezbollah did pretty well with its rocket firing. Again, you can't get that just from Google Earth. So they've penetrated each other, I think, pretty well.

Hoge: I want to go to Saúl here, and we'll take a couple of questions at once, and then this lady here in the second row, we'll ask them both, and we'll answer them at the same time.

Saúl Weisleder: Thank you. Saúl Weisleder from the mission of Costa Rica to the UN. From your research, do you feel comfortable to say that you are able to say that Hezbollah has a vision beyond Lebanon, and let's say its immediacy for the rest of the world? Because there are sectors, let's say, or streams in the Islamic world that may have a vision beyond their own wealth, so I would like to know if, do you feel comfortable saying that they have a vision, and if so, what would be that vision?

Hoge: And then we'll take, over here, Marvin.

Naomi Weinberger: Thank you. Naomi Weinberger from Columbia University. I'd like to challenge two of your premises, looking at the historical arc of Hezbollah's trajectory in Lebanese politics. It seems to me that it was not a foregone conclusion that organizing resistance against Israel across the border was going to be that important for Hezbollah in terms of its popularity or its agenda. I mean, the two key agenda items were dealing with the deprived status of the Shia community within the Lebanese political system and providing better social services to that community, and certainly resisting Israel while its forces were in the country, but when Israel withdrew in May of 2000, the Israelis certainly were calculating that Hezbollah would turn to a domestic agenda and that it would be a very powerful actor if it did so. It didn't need to do so, and I understand that there was some debate within Hezbollah about whether to go in that direction, and perhaps Iran waiting and moved them more, and also it had a lot to do with what was going on in Palestinian politics in terms of how those calculations were made.

So that's one issue, and the other issue is this idea that they gain popularity by provoking conflict with Israel. It seems to me, even within the Shia community, there have been voices that were quite critical of provoking war with Israel in 2006 and would still be, let alone in the border Lebanese politic, and I think Hezbollah could gain points by playing the game differently, and so there is a counterargument, I think.

Cambanis: Would you mention what Shia voices those were?

Weinberger: I think some senior clerics, but I'd have to go look up the names.

Cambanis: Okay.

Hoge: Let's start with the vision.

Cambanis: Yeah, okay, so the vision of Hezbollah, I mean, they are resolutely Lebanese nationalists in their ambit and orientation, so they even carefully do not want to control parts of Lebanon that aren't Shia, so they will ally with other movements, but they do not want to be, they don't want to be governing a Christian area or a Sunni area, even if it's populated by their supporters, so they have, I think, very carefully restrained their sort of territorial aims, so when it comes to their ideology, they do not want, they don't even want, they say, we are not going to fight the Palestinians' war for them, so if the Palestinians aren't rising up in Palestine, we're not going to invade Israel to liberate their territory for them, so practically speaking, I think their aims are fairly limited, modest. Ideologically, though, they want to spread very actively the torch of resistance, the idea of resistant society, and to a lesser extent, I mean, they've tamped this down.

When they began, actually, doctrinally wanted an Islamic state. Their open letter released in '85 said that. They walked away from that. They gave that up, and they said the time is not right in Lebanon, it wouldn't really work in Lebanon, so

we remove that from our platform, and I think there's a debate within Hezbollah, I think there's a part of Hezbollah that really believes in *velayat-e faqih* the rule of the jurisprudent, the foundation of Khomeini's revolution in Iran, and I think there's a substantial current within Hezbollah that does not, that sort of accepts this as part of their relationship with Iran that doesn't really buy into this idea, and that's why, I mean, this gets very granular, but that's why a lot of people in Hezbollah follow the religious teachings of Fadlallah, who was not their official religious leader, and who did not espouse the doctrine of rule of the jurisprudent. So what they want is this axis of resistance, they want Islamist, in majority Muslim countries, they want Islamist rule, and they say, and they've shown that they will cooperate with groups like Hamas and others who ask the Mahdi army, other Iraqi groups, and if a Sunni, if the Muslim Brotherhood or some offshoot wanted training or help from Hezbollah, I think they would be amenable to that, so it's a sort of loose confederacy of Islamists, Islamic resistance, and I think they purposely define it loosely enough that they, there's room for Christians in the Islamic resistance, as long as you support the political aims of the party, so I'm not sure how well that answers your question, but that's as well as I can do.

Naomi, those are two good questions. The first one, I think is a great question. I think, I understood that your question is, that it was not, Hezbollah was not predestined to maintain itself as a resistance organization, especially after the Israeli occupation ended in 2000, and I think that's absolutely true, and I mean, there's several turning points in Hezbollah's political development. A few key ones: 1992, when the party decided to enter politics, the maximalist wing said that's the beginning of the end, a slippery slope. If we field candidates for Parliament and enter politics, we lose our resistance pedigree. This is a disaster, and in fact, a politician quit the party over this, and there was a fair amount of infighting. Nasrallah managed to solve that problem. He managed to play the game the way he has to this day, delivering services through politics while always saying that our political work is in the service of the resistance. It's always secondary to our identity as the resistance, and in fact, the MPs are called the loyalty to the resistance bloc in order to make it clear always that that's, politics is subservient to resistance.

Now when Israel withdrew in 2000, there were lots of people in Lebanon, and presumably lots of Shia as well, who said great, war's over, this is what we wanted. We wanted Israel out, they're gone, let's get on with our lives, and for five years, Hezbollah was juggling the political role, the social services role, with the militant role, and they were under pressure to disarm from the Lebanese state, from Rafik Hariri, right before he was blown up, he was starting to voice the idea that we don't need to have this state within a state in this freewheeling guerilla militia.

But they made a choice, and it could have been a miscalculation, they made a choice to continue attacking Israel, they made a choice to continue the strategy of seeking Israeli hostages to trade for Lebanese hostages, they had several failed attempts to capture Israeli soldiers. Eventually they had a successful one in 2006, and it sparked this war, and certainly by the end of the war, the current within Hezbollah that had resistance and fighting trumping politics and social services won out, and you can hear that in the speeches of Nasrallah, and you can see it in the party's activities, and you can see it in the fact that almost all the senior officials now come from the military, have been fighters.

So previously, on the Shura council, there was a mix of people whose backgrounds were civilians with Hezbollah fighters, now they're all people who have been fighters, so I think that sort of puts to rest, for the time being, this

debate that's largely academic about Lebanonization. Sorry, the US State Department likes this debate as well, the Lebanonization of Hezbollah, can it become a normal political party. I think resolutely, it cannot become a regular political party because its fundamental identity is fighting.

Your second question, I simply don't buy the idea that there were any loud Shia voices critical of Hezbollah after the war. There was a man, a discredited minor cleric in Sour, who went on TV and criticized Hezbollah, and then he was stripped of his post, and he represented no one, and I did a lot of time, I spent a lot of time reporting this out as a news reporter, both for *The Globe*, and later for *The New York Times*, looking for the Shia dissidents, and they simply aren't to be found. That doesn't mean that there aren't any Shiites who don't support Hezbollah, or who ideologically don't buy into Hezbollah's war without end, but they have no meaningful political constituency and leadership to make them part of the political process.

Hoge: Time for a couple more. Joe Lauria here, and was there another hand raised? If not, Joe, yours is the last question.

Joe Lauria: Back to the question of Israel possibly penetrating Lebanon. Last year, the Lebanese authorities arrested about 100 people that they said were spying for Israel inside telecommunications network, and there's a guy on trial in Egypt now who's supposedly going to Lebanon and Syria to recruit for the inside telecommunications. Now that tends, seems to fit into the narrative that you say that Hezbollah has created that Israel was behind this, so they may have been able to falsify these phone records. What do you make of that, and is that why you think there needs to be more evidence than just the phone records to try to do away with the questions that may be raised about that?

Cambanis: I mean, yeah, that's part of why phone records are insufficient, because Israel has penetrated the telecommunications sector of Lebanon, and everyone in Lebanon knows that, but more importantly, think about a mob trial here. If the entire case is the ironclad but circumstantial evidence of phone records and surveillance cameras that show people coming in and out of warehouses, a jury's not going to be swayed.

They're going to be swayed by the recorded testimony or the courtroom testimony of the guy saying, "I want you to go and kill Mikey," and that's... trials are narratives. Phone records might suffice to convict, in absentia, some guy in a trial in The Hague, it's not going to get public opinion to believe in Hezbollah's guilt or serious guilt, and second of all, I don't mean to suggest that there aren't really serious problems with the tribunal itself. The tribunal itself leaked an initial document in 2005, I think, late 2005 that fingered all kinds of Syrian officials based on the testimony of witnesses who later were proved to be completely not believable. Later now, five years later, we're hearing about all these Hezbollah guys. Now sounds reasonable to me, the stuff we've heard leaked about the Hezbollah operatives, but it's also reasonable to say, huh, five years ago, when the Bush administration was really concerned about Syria, the tribunal leaked this damning document about how Bashar Assad and his henchmen ordered the murder of Rafik Hariri. Now, five years after that, when Syria's doing okay in America's eyes, but Hezbollah's a big problem, we have all these phone records that are fingering Hezbollah. Now I would surmise that all these accusations sound credible. Syria and Hezbollah and maybe the Israelis too. I don't know. Maybe they all did it! It's certainly not impossible, but you can see why, from a Middle Eastern perspective, this does not seem very credible, and it's taken six years? Come on.

Hoge:

Speaking of credibility, you can believe everything that Thanassis has said tonight, because his mother is in the audience. Thanassis, thanks very much. There are books for sale outside. The bar stays open.