

**THE UNITED STATES
AND A
CHANGING MIDDLE EAST**



SUMMARY OF A ROUNDTABLE
(Including Policy Recommendations)

**HELD IN
NEW YORK CITY**

April 3, 2012

Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the NCAFP identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include:

- preserving and strengthening national security;
- supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;
- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
- advancing human rights;
- encouraging realistic arms control agreements;
- curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;
- promoting an open and global economy.

An important part of the activity of the NCAFP is Track I½ and Track II diplomacy. Such closed-door and off-the-record endeavors provide unique opportunities for senior U.S. and foreign officials, think-tank experts, and scholars to engage in discussions designed to defuse conflict, build confidence, and resolve problems.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.



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Dear Reader,

Tumult in much of the Arab world and the dangerous policies pursued by Shiia Iran continue to be the order of the day, and no one can augur when and how it all will end. Because stability in this vital region is critical for U.S. national security interests and for many of our friends and allies around the globe, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) convened, on April 3, 2012, an all-day roundtable conference on “The United States and a Changing Middle East.”

A question raised time and again in the course of the informative presentations and spirited discussions was: Given the role the United States has played in precipitating the so-called Arab Spring, why is the United States materially absent from helping to shape the future in a direction that would accord with our national security interests?

The answer was not ambiguous. Poor assessment of what a lengthy military presence on (and in a) land whose people consider it holy and who have been conditioned to hate Americans and “Crusaders” is the root cause of our sorry predicament. This is not to say that some positive results have not been achieved, including the killing of Osama bin Laden, the weakening of al Qaeda, and the widespread demand for elections in much of the broader Middle East (which need not necessarily imply a liberal democratic outcome). One lesson learned and applied about U.S. boots on the ground in the generally unfriendly broader Middle East was not to commit the same folly in Libya.

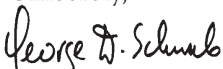
In shaping policies, one speaker aptly noted that objectives must always be “clearly defined” and not be “propelled by moral and ethical considerations.” Although moral and ethical ideals “are extremely important,” they “by themselves cannot be a fundamental basis for the projection of American power in a situation.” In short, according to the speaker, the “strange alliance between liberal and neo-conservative interventionists that would have us on the march in many parts of the world” is a prescription for failure.

The NCAFP thanks the speakers and conference participants for their provocative presentations and remarks—which sparked instant and continuous debate.

For providing support for the roundtable, the NCAFP is especially grateful to Mutual of America, Kenneth J. Bialkin, Esq., the Eugenie Fromer Endowment, Mr. Leonard M. Harlan, Mrs. Sheila Johnson Robbins, Ms. Nina Rosenwald, and the George D. Schwab Family Fund.

NCAFP policy recommendations appear at the end of the conference summary, which is followed by a list of presenters and participants.

Sincerely,



George D. Schwab

FOLLOWING WELCOMING AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY NCAFP President George Schwab, the first speaker set the stage for the morning session by providing an overview of the status of the Arab Spring, the direction it may be heading, and the role that the United States is playing. The presenter made amply clear at the outset that the outcome in the countries directly affected by the upheaval cannot be known beforehand. The most one can do is speculate and, hopefully, knowledgeably so.

What is clear to the speaker is that “the model of the Arab state that has developed in the past 50–60 years no longer works.” This is a “space built around an army—relics, in many cases, of the colonial era and, in many cases, it simply” has outlived its usefulness. Although generalizing should be, for the most part, avoided, the speaker, nevertheless, proceeded to note that Iraq may perhaps constitute a model worthy of emulating. A consensus appears to have emerged in the region that change of government must not be brought about by coup d’états, revolution, terrorism, and so on, but “through elections and polls.” Another model that is being looked at is Turkey—because it works. The government now in power, which was once a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, is effective. In its quest for electoral victory in Turkey, the AK party dropped its Islamic identity and slogans, presenting itself (and its candidates) as a “conservative traditionalist party.” Once successful in several elections, in winning a majority in parliament, and occupying the seat of power, the party began “to try to implement a little bit of their Islamic agenda.” Proponents of a military-based state—mainly Islamist groups and parties who for years have suffered greatly, including executions, imprisonment, exile—appear inclined to follow the Turkish model and the Iraqi model.

A question that eludes an answer at the moment is the attitude of the armed forces and security organizations. In Egypt and Syria, for example, they are a law unto themselves, “a state within a state.” They “have their own ports to import things, their own airports to bring people in..., they have their own industries, their own hospitals, their own schools for their children, their own supermarkets where they have real products and goods that the ordinary citizen would not have.” Will they be prepared to give all or part of it away? The presenter noted that the military elite, which was once trained in the Soviet Union but is now under the influence of NATO, may no longer think that the “military is something completely outside the law and outside the system.”

The presenter then proceeded to praise the critical role that the United States has played in sparking the so-called Arab Spring by supporting the work of NGOs and by helping civil society groups. Incomprehensible to the speaker, however, is that once the U.S. endeavor began to work, once it began to bear fruit, the Americans withdrew as actors. Perhaps “this is what the United States wants.” But it is as if “the U.S. has become irrelevant.”

“No War Without Egypt”

The next speaker focused on the United States, Israel, and the new Egypt. Outlining briefly “where have we been,” “where we are,” and “where we are going,” the presenter characterized the years from 1948 to 1973 as the cold war period in which Egypt heavily tilted toward the Soviet Union and waged numerous wars against Israel. The Egyptian-Soviet alliance dissolved as a result of the Yom Kippur War. The year 1973 marked a turning point because Egypt “got under the American umbrella and became dependent on American hardware and aid.” This has been “the crowning achievement of the United States in the Middle East for the last 40 years,” the presenter stated. No interstate wars have been waged between Israel and its Arab neighbors since 1973. Egypt’s change of direction also began the process that culminated in “Sadat’s historic trip to Jerusalem in 1977 and the peace treaty that followed in 1979.” Arabs have a saying, “there is no war without Egypt.” The peace dividend brought about by the 1979 treaty has given Israel and Egypt great material benefits, especially in the economic field.

The presenter went on to say that the United States is in a bind and does not now know which way to turn. “We got what we wanted in Tahrir Square, but what should the United States do now?” Were we to cease supporting Mubarak and the army, would this spell the end of peace between Egypt and Israel? In this suddenly changed and strange world, the speaker observed, the United States finds itself at odds not only with Israel, but also with the Palestinians, the Jordanians, and the Saudis. They now focus more on the Iranian and Syrian questions—with all that that involves concerning Iranian nuclear weapons and hegemonic ambitions and the maintenance of a stable military in Egypt as a counterweight to Iran.

In the past, the U.S. interest in the region was, according to the presenter, that “no hegemon dominate the region, that the flow of oil not be impeded, and that Egypt, Israel, and Arabs have a chance to make peace.” Now, however, “the United States has to define her interests very narrowly. What are the things we can support, what are the things we can’t support, and act accordingly.” Especially relevant in this context is the question: What will “the populism mean in the Middle East if there emerges Arab nationalism, Islamism, fundamentalism?”

Role of Religion

In the question-and-answer period that followed, the first question was on the role that religion plays in the so-called Arab Spring in general, and in the Arab-Israel conflict, and in the Sunni/Shiia divide.

A presenter noted that the so-called Arab Spring was not started by Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, watched “for two weeks before deciding whether to support the upheaval or not.” Addressing the Arab-Israel conflict as well as the issue of religion in general, the other presenter observed that politics in the Middle East is largely “identity-

based” in contrast to the United States where it is “performance-based,” that is, “Obama improves the economy, Obama gets reelected, Obama doesn’t improve the economy, Obama is done.”

In the case of Israel, the speaker observed, the very religious elements identify themselves as beyond citizens—the ultra-Orthodox will vote for those parties that support their particular school system. The Sunni/Shiia divide is clear-cut—as in the instance of the hatred between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is exacerbated by oil. Were Shiia Iran to go the nuclear weapons route, probably Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and, perhaps, Jordan would follow suit. Non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas would continue to invoke divine right in their endeavor to gain power by force.

Another leading Middle East expert agreed that not all conflicts in the region are driven by religion. In the Arab-Israel conflict, all wars that began after 1948 were “led by secular nonreligious leaders. Neither Nasser nor Saddam Hussein was very religious, Hafez al-Assad was not even a Muslim, and Yasser Arafat was not religious.” In short, the attempts to destroy Israel were driven by leaders who were inspired by the political left and by nationalism.

The issue of religion in contrast to secular trends sparked a discussion on political trends among Muslims in the Middle East. A presenter noted that three trends are discernible in the Muslim Brotherhood complex: “One is moderate both in domestic and foreign policy; another segment consists mostly of exiles headquartered in London who are wealthy businessmen for whom religion is a hobby” and are “more radical and militant than the Egyptian people in Egypt who are suffering the consequences of what is happening.” The third group is “seduced by the Turkish model which is creating under Erdogan an Islamic society in a secular state.”

The Salafis consist of two wings: “One has a very tough Islamic program, while the other wants to cooperate with the Muslim Brotherhood in creating a broader Islamic coalition. They speak nicely about democracy and consider Islam merely an identity: We all are Muslims . . . but that does not mean that whatever we do is Islamic-related” in the instance of science and economics, for example. According to this Middle East expert, “Islamists are more interested in gaining a share of power and, where possible, dominating the political scene.” The enemies of the United States and Israel are not necessarily Islamists. As noted above, the enemies of the two “so far have been leftist movements and Arab nationalist movements.”

In the face of “Americans running away” and the widespread perception in the Middle East that “Western civilization is in decline,” a debate is taking place within all Islamic movements about “whether there is a historic opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood in its various permutations to virtually take over all of the Arab countries in a bid for world leadership.”

In this debate, the issue of the right of Israel to exist and whether or not to lob missiles into Israel is merely a question of tactics.

Regional Power Struggles and Interests

Power struggles in the region and great power interests in the Middle East were the focus of the first luncheon speaker. Echoing previous presenters that Turkey, Egypt—even if not now—and Iran are the three regional rivals. The five permanent members of the Security Council are the primary global players in the region. When it comes to the upheaval in Syria, the interplay between and among the eight (nine counting Syria) is significant, as are the UN and the Arab League.

At this moment, the name of the game, according to the presenter, is the Kofi Annan plan that he presented to President Assad of Syria in the name of the UN and the Arab League. It stipulates that the Assad government must cease hostilities, end the use of heavy weapons in population centers, pull back military troops from population centers, as well as ensure the freedom of movement for journalists and the right of people to demonstrate peacefully. The rebels are to reciprocate the cessation of hostilities on the part of the Assad government. The hope was that the plan could at least serve as an initial road map on how to begin a transition from a one-party state to a multi-party state.

However well-meaning this plan, the presenter appeared pessimistic about its viability. Assad did not appear to be in a mood to compromise on the one-party state, and the existing regime was unacceptable to the opposition. And, both sides enjoy material support from outside players. Whereas Assad had the regional support of only one country, Shiia Iran, the opposition was supported by Sunni Saudi Arabia and the other five Sunni Gulf Cooperation Council states. In other words, the Sunni support of the opposition was not only for reasons of religion but, above all, to check the hegemonic ambition of Iran because Syria is considered to be the “linchpin [on how] to break the backbone of Iran without having to do so militarily,” according to the presenter.

Bearing in mind the numerous Islamic republics within and around Russia and in view of Russia’s troubles in the North Caucasus, Russia is fearful of Islamists, who appear to be active in Syria, coming to power. The Russians appear perplexed by the encouragement the opposition receives. The question the Russians ask is: Why does the United States favor Islamists coming to power in Syria?

Much of the discussion that followed centered on the policies followed by the United States. Can the U.S. policy of not getting materially involved in Syria be ascribed to war fatigue, to the state of the U.S. economy, or perhaps to a combination of the two? Would the interests of the United States not be served by materially supporting the opposition as this would further

weaken Syria's link with Iran?

The puzzling U.S. attitude of not materially supporting the opposition can perhaps be explained, according to one participant, as follows: In view of the continuing decline of Iran's fortunes in the region, would it not serve U.S. interests to fully support the Annan plan in the hopes that a transition to a multi-party system without Assad will succeed? Such an outcome would be preferable to an Islamist victory. Subscribing to this view, one participant argued that this would nullify the Russian perception that the United States is promoting an Islamist victory. A presenter invoked the "not now" syndrome according to which the United States would do nothing as long as it could postpone acting until after the election.

Demography and The Third Arab Way

The second luncheon speaker's theme was on the "United States and the Third Arab Way." The speaker began by noting that the Arab Spring is a misnomer. In analyzing the overall picture, what can be seen is that "many Arab upheavals" have distinct patterns and must be looked at "one by one in terms of their history, their geography, their location, their composition, their population, their resources. And, then you can begin to see some groupings or subgroups." Although different patterns are playing out in different areas, "many upheavals are driven by demography."

One category consists of Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. These are "countries that have by now gotten rid of the old guys and may be getting new old guys but they are definitely not going to be as they were before." The second category consists largely of Gulf countries "with enough money to buy off the opposition and they have done this very successfully." Although Saudi Arabia has "used some force in the eastern province but mostly it has been a question of more salaries, and a little hint of political change," including elections in which women may one day be permitted to vote. Dramatic but quiet changes have taken place in Oman where people demonstrated in the streets "demanding change but holding the Sultan's picture up." In short, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Morocco, Jordan, and the UAE—all monarchies—"have weathered the upheavals so far." Libya belongs to the third category. It has tried to resist change but failed. Syria is in a so-called in between moment according to the speaker—who did not rule out the possibility of the Assad regime surviving. Sunni-ruled Bahrain constitutes the last category. This minority government, with the material support of Saudi Arabia and the connivance of the United States and others, crushed the Shia majority for demanding legitimate representation.

Following these remarks, the presenter asked: Where are we at the end of 16 months since Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire? Answer: The initial hopes and expectations of the Arab Spring have pretty much been dashed except for Tunisia.

Although it is difficult to foresee where all this will end, the speaker expressed great concern about the situation in Egypt. The country is on the “brink of an economic disaster” and, unless this is turned around, Egypt could go the way of Pakistan—with major implications for the entire region. Hence, the presenter asked, “Is there a third way between military rule and the past and the Muslim Brotherhood and the future that we all seem to be seeing in so many of these countries?”

According to the speaker, “anyone who does not acknowledge the need to separate church and state or mosque in this day and age, who wants to create a God-given form of government is going to be trouble.” Speaking of a Muslim Brotherhood candidate for the presidency in Egypt, Khalil al Shater, the speaker noted that Shater believes that the only way “to deal with the Jewish state is jihad.” Shater blasts the United States “for preventing the Islamic nation in its entirety from eliminating the usurper Zionist state.” Compared with the Salafist candidate, Shater is characterized as a moderate. Thus, to avoid extremes, the speaker suggested a third option or third way, the techno-revolutionaries, the twitteratis—those who “mobilized masses on the streets.” These techno-revolutionaries are the “alternative to the Brotherhood and an Islamist framework. So we better work with them and understand their strengths and their weaknesses.”

Commenting on President Obama’s policy toward the Middle East, the speaker noted that he has been dragged kicking and screaming into a kind of Bush-like policy where we now support freedom, democracy, human rights, progress, and happiness for all. But that was not Obama’s policy initially. He started with an engagement with our enemy’s policy that went nowhere. Now, maybe he is just accepting reality and trying to work with the Brotherhood. “I think the administration is scrambling. I think despite the fact that they had all of these veteran advisers from previous administrations, none of them saw this coming either and they don’t know what to do. And they are playing it by ear and, I agree with [a conclusion] of the previous presenter, playing for time.”

The discussion that followed began with questions about the twitterati. Relating a recent experience in Mecca, one of the speakers said: “I was in Mecca recently and the holy shrine is surrounded by Internet cafes full of boys and girls who are constantly playing on the Internet. It is really 200 meters from the shrine. So I asked several of them, ‘Do you ever go to the shrine?’ Not at all. They are not interested. That’s a different place. Though every year 10–12 million people come to visit the shrine, these young people have not set foot there. It doesn’t interest them.” This speaker continued by noting that “the whole place . . . has become like a school of politics” where everything is being discussed. The trigger in the view of this presenter was the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, which was followed by the uprising in Lebanon in 2005 in which “people power” threw out the militarily much stronger Syrian army, and a Druze leader of Lebanon observing “Oh, we saw

the Iraqis queuing to vote, and we said why shouldn't we?"

Another presenter asked the speaker of this session how is it possible to argue for the separation of state and religion in Muslim countries and not demand the same for Israel? The short answer was "Rabbis don't rule." Another presenter noted that Israel is a state for Jews and not a Jewish state, the same holds true for Egypt being a state where Muslims can live. "State is not the same as nation, and country is not the same as society."

The Middle East in U.S. Foreign Policy

The last speaker focused on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, introducing the topic by first briefly outlining what formed the American character and mind-set—neither of which are in parallel with that of the peoples of the Middle East. Why we view the world "the way we want it to be" rather than "see the world the way it is" can be traced to our almost limitless resources, physical size, and geography: "We have no predatory neighbors to our north and our south, and to our east and west we have fish." The speaker then added to this list the uniqueness of our political system, which was "founded on the basis of an idea, the idea being that the individual counts. This has led Americans to believe, and often wrongly so, that problems created by men and women can be solved by men and women."

In relation to the conduct of our foreign policy in the Middle East, the speaker asked: Do we have a strategy? Do we have a consensus to sustain the strategy? Are the goals clear? Are they clearly defined or are they propelled by moral or ethical considerations? Are they driven by moral or ethical considerations, which in and of themselves are extremely important but by themselves cannot be a fundamental basis for the projection of American power in a situation. Alluding to FDR, the speaker noted that "only one American president in the 20th century had it right, because objectives were clear," the U.S. victory in World War II was final, "and Americans were left with tremendous influence in the wake of this military conflict." Toward the end of that century, President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker also projected power wisely in Iraq. Their vision was clear, that is, "free from ideological considerations and politics."

In the view of the speaker, "the most compelling ideology is success, not nationalism, not communism, not democracy. Success generates power. Failure generates the opposite. We have not been succeeding in matters of war making or matters of peace making for the last 16 years because of our failure to think things through clearly." On the operational level, President Obama did score some successes, including the killing of Osama bin Laden and the weakening of al Qaeda, the United States not owning Libya, and, though our policy toward Iran is still a work in progress, the objective is clear.

The speaker went on to endorse President Obama's approach—to "buy

time,” even though the president appears to be “fundamentally convinced that neither sanctions nor political isolation nor cyber attacks will impede and retard the Iranian nuclear program. . . . So his logic is to raise the costs in any way he can short of war . . . but drifting toward war.” By adopting this course, Obama, according to the presenter, has gone beyond containing Iran, which has been the policy for the past 20 years, in favor of a policy of preventing Iran from building nuclear weapons. As Iran has not yet developed the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, the responsibility of taking out the country’s nuclear weapons facilities will fall on the shoulders of the United States—which has the military capability to be successful—rather than Israel, whose military capacity is more limited. Barring fundamental changes, the presenter believes that war may come but “not between now and the year’s end.”

As for the broader Middle East, the presenter noted that the United States “is now coming off the two longest wars in American history where victory is defined not by can we win but when can we leave.” This has, in part, engendered the perception that the United States is, perhaps, in a relative decline. The speaker was, however, emphatic that the United States is certainly “not in decline in absolute terms.” In the context of the Middle East in turmoil, and in view of U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the future, the United States is certainly going to operate differently in the region.

Israel & Palestine—Four Core Issues

Turning to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the speaker does not believe that a solution is in sight. The “four core issues that drive the conflict are: Jerusalem, borders, security, and refugees.” To this, according to the presenter, Netanyahu had added a fifth: recognition of Israel. “If there is going to be a Palestinian refugee resolution, then there is going to be an analogue. And that is recognition of the state of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.”

The presenter gave three reasons why the conflict under the present circumstances cannot be resolved: 1) the absence of “leaders who are masters of their political constituencies, not prisoners of them”; 2) “insufficient urgency”; and; 3) not since George Herbert Walker Bush and James Baker have we had leaders who were prepared “to be tough and fair and reassuring, the three things that are elemental for serious negotiations and agreements.”

Expanding on these three points, the speaker noted that “every time there was a breakthrough on the Arab-Israel conflict, it was due to men who, not for moral or ethical reasons or purposes,” decided to take a risk—which Sadat and Rabin did and for which they paid with their lives. In regard to the second point on urgency, “paradoxically, the Palestinian institution-building enterprise” is not for reasons of security. “And Hamas’s own

decision to stand down, to part with the gun, has, in effect, deepened the attractiveness of the status quo.” The so-called Arab Spring has created for Israel the backdrop against which the prime minister and others validate doing nothing. In the absence of these three elements, according to the speaker, we will just “continue to talk to ourselves and say that somehow through this creative idea and this meeting and this settlement freeze and this UN resolution for Palestinian statehood, that we could fundamentally change and move the tectonic plates. But they will not move unless there is more of each of these three elements than we have right now.”

Observing that President Obama came “into office determined to change the trajectory of American foreign policy,” it was naïve of him to think that he could drive policy by “rhetoric and speeches that he could never enforce.” Still, in the course of his presidency so far, and in view of his “priority which is to fix America’s broken house,” the president has learned lessons of what is achievable and what is beyond his reach. In conclusion, the speaker, who has served many presidents, ruminated about being “tired of seeing America fail, and we fail because we don’t think. We fail because we don’t think things through. We fail because we don’t analyze things correctly, and we fail because we have a compulsion to fix things. And that is one of our endearing qualities, because we can fix things when we are smart, tough, cruel, and unforgiving on how we look at the world. And I am hopeful that we are that.”

The questions that followed the presentation centered largely on the presence or absence of the United States in the region. In the words of one presenter who noted that “changes in the Middle East create new opportunities that should not be missed.” Rather than sitting back and waiting to “see what will happen,” the United States should begin to act like a big power and not be distracted by “narrow tactics and interests.” “Why,” this presenter asked, “is the United States so disliked in much of the Middle East but not in Eastern and Central Europe where the United States is viewed as a model... and inspiration” because we serve as a “counterbalance to Russia, which still to many of them is a threat. They look to the United States as a guarantee that they could stand up to the big powers of Western Europe as well.”

The speaker noted that in formulating policies, a president must be mindful that “the center of the world for America is America.” What is not “adequately appreciated is how a president’s actions appear in his own arena where he lives.”

Contrasting the current administration with the previous one, which “acted for moral reasons, for political reasons, for ideological reasons, in ways that few other administrations have ever acted in this region.” And, “what did we get for it in Iraq,” for example? “It has cost the United States 4,500 dead, scores of thousands Iraqis dead, 30,000 Americans with life-changing,

crushing injuries, and trillions of dollars. And all this for getting rid of the evil Saddam?”

The United States, according to the speaker, cannot afford to have policies “impelled by emotions and in some respect irrational motivation.” The “strange alliance between liberal and neo-conservative interventionists would have us on the march in many parts of the world.” But, a president cannot always take “moral and ethical considerations” into account when deciding on a course of action in defense of national interests.

Returning to Iran’s Green Revolution, the speaker asked what could we have accomplished by lobbing cruise missiles? Would this have “fundamentally, substantially, and significantly altered the events of 2009?” “I (the speaker) am not trying to give you a hard time, but when you use words like abandon the Iranian people, what comes to mind as an American is the responsibility for the Iranian people somehow our responsibility?”

The speaker was then asked to clarify the comment the presenter made about the United States going to war with Iran by the end of the year. Addressing the military dimension of the Iran issue, the speaker noted that President Obama does not appear to be “prepared to accept Iran as a nation that has a nuclear capacity.” In this context, the speaker distinguished “between that and nuclear weapons. I don’t believe that the president is prepared to go to war now if nothing changes with respect to Iran’s nuclear [weapons] program. Assuming that the president is reelected, it will be a core issue in his second term.”

One presenter challenged the speaker to explain the reasoning for favoring Obama’s hands-off policy toward Syria, not only because of the murders being committed by the Assad regime, but especially in view of Assad’s close ties with Iran, which facilitate Iran’s hegemonic ambitions. According to the speaker, “the last thing we need right now is any military intervention” in Syria. But this is not to say that we are not “drifting toward an incremental change in our policy. Now it is nonlethal assistance.”

In the minutes that remained, a participant asked for the speaker’s assessment of the status of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. As the speaker had noted earlier, a complete solution is not possible in the near future. Adding to what was previously said, Palestinians do not trust the present Israeli leadership, the Israelis face a “fundamentally divided Palestinian national movement where there is no monopoly over the forces of violence, no one gun, no one authority, and no one negotiating position,” and the Israelis and Americans do not see eye-to-eye on issues. Of the three key actors, you need two to be in harmony and the third will be brought in.”



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

U.S. national security interests would be best served in the rapidly changing and tumultuous Middle East by:

- Supporting the youth-led techno-revolutionaries—those who mobilized masses on the streets—as well as liberal democratic movements and like-minded NGOs;
- Supporting countries that share the values the U.S. cherishes;
- Supporting countries that are well-disposed toward U.S. national security interests;
- Preventing a hegemon from emerging in the region;
- Safeguarding the freedom of navigation;
- Preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability;
- Preventing the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, including the falling of such weapons into the hands of extremist movements;
- Supporting the emergence of a stable and peaceful liberal democratic Syria following the current civil war;
- Destroying al Qaeda and movements of a similar ilk; and,
- Promoting a peaceful resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.



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