THE MIDDLE EAST AT CROSSROADS

SUMMARY OF A ROUNDTABLE
(Including Policy Recommendations)

HELD IN
NEW YORK CITY

April 17, 2013
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 1½ 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,

A year has passed since our last roundtable gathering on the Middle East, “The United States and a Changing Middle East.” At that time, holding out some hope that the Arab Spring might survive—perhaps, even thrive in some places—was reasonable. This optimism was largely absent at this year’s conference on “Middle East at Crossroads.” Another cause for concern discussed during the roundtable was Iran’s continued intransigence about its nuclear weapons program.

The once-celebrated Arab Spring is in shambles—some even calling what is happening an Islamic Winter. Even where there is relative stability in the broader Middle East—in Tunisia, for example, or in some of the monarchies, including Morocco and Oman—citizens do not know what tomorrow may bring. Who would have anticipated unrest in Turkey?

“People power” is the one relatively positive element to have emerged from the chaos. As one speaker put it, “people power is beginning to count in Arab politics.” But “people power” does not inevitably bring about a positive result, namely, an open society governed by the rule of law. The electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt did not accord with what was hoped for.

The turmoil in the Arab world, especially in Israel’s neighborhood, has overshadowed by far the Israel/Palestinian conflict. The daily headlines in the press testify to this. The Syrian civil war, terrorist Shiia Hezbollah’s material support of the Assad regime, and terrorist Sunni Hamas’s support of Assad’s opponents, which has caused Iran, an Assad supporter, to curtail its support for this terrorist outfit, have had the effect of fortifying Israel’s safety.

To ensure the continued strength and safety of Israel and the Palestinians, statesmanship dictates that Israel and the Palestinian Authority once and for all settle their political differences on the two-state solution. The way is now being paved in the economic domain by Israeli and Palestinian business interests.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) thanks the speakers and conference participants for their presentations and remarks—which sparked interesting discussions.
For providing support for the roundtable, the NCAFP is especially grateful to Mutual of America; Kenneth Bialkin, Esq.; the Eugenie Fromer Endowment; Dr. Eve Epstein; Sheila Johnson Robbins; 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 speakers and participants.

Sincerely,

George Schwab
President
SESSION I

The Arab Spring: What Is the Next Season?

The first speaker: As you know I have been very interested in the Arab Spring events from the beginning. I have been a frequent visitor to the countries affected by the so-called Spring or the uprising and I share with you some of my observations, which the subsequent speaker may not agree with. The first observation is that what has happened has been a really important change in Arab politics. It has injected into Arab politics a new element that we will call “people power.” The first important feature is the rise of people power—for the first time since the creation of independent Arab states, which, in historical terms, is a recent phenomenon (having happened in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire), people power is beginning to count in Arab politics. Now, because there is the word “people” in it, we must not automatically assume that it is a good thing; it could be a bad thing, however, because people do silly things, just as do dictators. So, which way does people power really go is one of the issues that we have to focus on and to study. The second important feature is that the two models of the Arab state that have been developed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire have been discredited and I don’t think can be revived anytime soon. One model was a religious-based idea—a monarchy with some sort of blessing, some divine blessing. The other was the military-security model. States based on the armies—in most cases created by the colonial powers. That model, too, has been discredited—so you cannot readily sell the idea of an army-based state to the Arabs at the moment. More important, officer groups, or at least the core officers’ group, are no longer interested in ruling. In Cairo recently, I had a very long discussion with General Anan—chief of staff of the Egyptian armed forces until he resigned under President Morsi. He emphasized something very important: the new generation of Egyptian officers, having been trained in the United States and in Western European countries that are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, are no longer interested in having a direct political role—unlike the previous, Soviet-trained generation. So, even the “raw material” for staging a military coup may not be available very soon. As for the idea of a form of caliphate or religious-based regime: some people started it, the Salafist Movement, for example, some elements within Turkey’s governing body are talking about it but that doesn’t get anybody anywhere either. So, there is a search for a new model of a state. There are many different and conflicting views. But, at the moment, there is confusion. Nobody
really knows how Egypt will organize itself as a nation-state two years from now. Nor how Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen will do that. And, of course, we have Syria in a state of civil war with its outcome unknown. Perhaps I will talk about Syria later. A final observation: in my opinion, the United States does not understand what is going on and is just moving with the wind; for the first time in a long time, the United States, who had become a major player in the Middle East, has become effectively marginalized. So now to the next speaker, who has the advantage of many years of direct contact with the Middle East, having good friends, good sources, and excellent access.

Second speaker: Thank you, I’m delighted to be here. I have recently come back from Israel, Palestine, and Egypt and this trip was perhaps more discouraging than any I’ve had in a long time. That’s when George Schwab and I ran into each other at the Council on Foreign Relations and I said that it was time to do a kind of early assessment of the Arab Spring. You’ve all probably read about this, but things are still evolving at a breathtaking pace. In Egypt, I was there less than a year ago, and yet I returned to a very different country. I have been going to Egypt since 1970, so I have seen a fair number of administrations, considering Mubarak was there for 30 years. But, let’s start with an overview of whether or not the Arab Spring should still be called the Arab Spring or whether or not we could accurately call it the Islamist Winter, which is what several people have already dubbed this new phase of Middle Eastern history. I think we should start by giving this caveat to my remarks: all of us, all of the experts, with some exceptions, missed the Arab Spring. And, if you want to worry about how much better our intelligence is since 9/11, I would simply point that out because this is not something like WMD where mistakes are understandable because information is hard to get. Signs of this revolt, this popular revolution that swept the region were everywhere, and we all missed it. And, sometimes I go back and I wonder how did we miss this?—because if we’ve missed that, we may very well miss the next phase of the revolution. And, in my case, I think it’s because I’ve been going to Egypt for so long that I was still talking to the same people I had talked to, even though I had talked to NGO people and others, my circle broadened, I had always talked to the Brotherhood and I can tell you for a fact they missed it, too. They missed an event that would essentially propel them into power. But, since we all missed it, I think we should understand that our impressions are maybe wrong and speak with humility rather than hubris. My impression is that, at the moment, the Arab revolution is not playing out to America’s interest. I’m going to leave to the end discussion of whether or not it is going to enhance Arab interests or the interests of the average Arab. I think when I wrote my book, God Has 99 Names, about the riots in militant
Islam in 1996, I said that generalizations were dangerous because each Arab country was so different—I think that this is especially true now in the Arab Spring. You look at where we are based on where you’re standing. If you’re in Tunisia or Yemen, looks pretty good. And, I think part of the reason is the transition to this second state-to-government is more reflective of the will of people. You will see a relatively smooth transition: the people in control saw that they could not withstand the movement and they stepped aside however gracefully or ungracefully. With a little prodding from Frank Wisner, Mubarak did step aside and understood that his son was not going to continue the dynasty. Because of that, a lot of bloodshed that could have occurred did not. Contrast that with the revolutions in Bahrain, Libya, and Syria—where the leaders have not been willing to give up their power. There you have uglier scenarios; even though the elections in Libya were the only ones that produced secular leadership, Libya is, nevertheless, a mess. I do not believe it to be secure enough to have a productive trip. The real mess is Bahrain—where there is still overwhelming suppression of a people. The ruling party is mostly Shiite and the repression of the people continues. In Syria, you have the same thing. Even if Bashar Assad falls tomorrow, and I don’t see that as likely, he’s going to hang on because he’s fighting for all of the Syrian Alawites and minorities. You have 40 percent of the country still on his side. This, coupled with the support from Iran, Russia, and China, lets me see no swift end. But, even were he to go tomorrow, I suspect the fighting would continue and there would still be fighting near Israel’s borders. There’s a third category of countries that I think has received all too little attention and those are, by and large, those that pass for monarchies in the Arab world. These are Oman, Jordan, and Morocco. These were countries ruled by very shrewd men who understood that their monarchical status is related in some way or another to their religious legitimacy. They are either related to Mohammed or come from one of the religious families, and they understand the advantage of making reforms and appearing to respond to the will of the people without giving up sovereignty. They have done very well. Morocco enacted a series of reforms. Tourism is holding firm. There is no transparency in that country. There is incredible corruption but it is perceived as being under control. Jordan, as any of you have had the pleasure of reading Jeffery Goldberg’s astonishing interview with King Abdullah know, has to worry about the future of Jordan under a man who would say such extraordinary things. It’s one thing to berate the UAE leaders and the leaders of the Gulf who support your penniless kingdom. It is another thing to call your own Bedouin tribal leaders, upon whom you power base depends, “dinosaurs.” He is totally out of touch with his people. When I finished reading the interview, I sent an email to Jeffery and asked him how much he had been drinking! Nevertheless, Jordan has enacted some
reforms. It has changed PMs every time people get unhappy and prices go up. This seems to alleviate some of the pressures building in this country. Oman has not gotten as much publicity because it does not seek any. It is developing, very slowly, a high-end tourism sector and has an incredibly serious Omanization program for the people it's turning out of the schools. It has always been wealthy, but not that wealthy, yet it has been able to enact reforms and satisfy popular demand. The sultan is an extraordinary leader. He is gay—though that word is not printed in any media. He is an extraordinary gifted man and the best man. He is a very staunch American ally while talking all the time to his neighbor Iran and has a very good feel for the Iranians. About a year and a half ago, it was he who told me to talk to the Iranians now about the nuclear program because the sanctions are hurting them. When this was not received through private channels, he conducted his second interview ever with an American journalist.

So what do we have? Three categories: countries that have made the transition; have had elections with Islamist leaders; those that have bloody struggles on their hands; and monarchical countries that have sustained themselves by enacting small reforms. What am I worried about for the next year? Egypt, Egypt, Egypt. Nothing other than Egypt because the country I saw three weeks ago was on the verge of collapse. There are three groups vying for power: the Muslim Brotherhood, which is failing dramatically because they simply don’t know how to govern. They don’t know how to do the information trading that most of us take for granted. There is a huge fight going on within the Brotherhood. Further, the economy there is very bad. The Suez Canal revenues are the only steady source of income. I don’t see how they get through the summer without food riots. Morsi needs a $4.8 billion loan from the IMF if anyone else is going to lend Egypt money other than the Qataris. The question is how do you raise food subsidies without incurring the riots that we have seen all over the country? You have pop-up demonstrators across the country. Demonstrators want power. They will not let the government take over control of Tahir Square. They have legitimate demands. Demands to share power, demands not to be awoken at three in the morning from the knocking of the new Mukhābarāt or secret police, and so they do these pop-up demonstrations. People are calling for the army to come back, but the army does not want to come back. The army only wants to rule its sector of Egypt, which is mostly post-production sectors and industries. Otherwise they want to be left alone. They do not want to go to war with Israel—which is very important. They understand that in a real war, they would be clobbered. The American embassy does not see the Egyptian military coming back. I don’t know either, but I see very rough times ahead. Now, why do I focus on Egypt? Well, let's be honest here, Egypt is the Arab world. Egypt is
90 million people. You put everyone else from the 22 countries together, you don’t have the population of Egypt. Where Egypt goes, the Arab world follows. So, if you want to see the Arab Awakening II, look at Egypt and we may have some tips for the future. There is not much we can do, the outlook looks bleak. They are mad at the United States for “supporting the Brotherhood.” I said, “No, we are recognizing the party that won your election,” but somehow we are being blamed. The American embassy in Egypt is the largest in the region, and, if I were they, I would be looking at evacuation plans as this could go south very quickly. Food riots are very ugly and very nasty and do not bode well. I welcome your questions.

First speaker: Thank you very much for a very disturbing exposé of what’s happening but since you are familiar with this we always want something more. Could you tell us a little bit more about your Palestinian sortie?

Second speaker: Yes, there’s a Palestinian Spring, but it’s going nowhere I think. It went instantly from spring to deepest darkest winter. I could have schlepped down to Palestine to talk to Rahman Sayed, who was on his way out already, but I didn’t think that was productive. But, what I did see was a new city being built with private money. With Qatari money, not charity money but investment—unlike the money they’re pouring into Egypt. This is an investment in middle-class housing outside of Ramallah, which is about 40–45 thousand people. It’s a new city being built with almost no help from the Palestinian Authority and very little help from the United States. The Israelis are actually making money on the project from supplying products. The first 3,000–4,000 units are opening at the end of May and they will be filled. There’s a waiting list and this housing is less expensive than the housing in Ramallah. It’s a little delayed, but not too much given the region. And, it sits opposite a village of illegal settlers. If I were the United States, I would make sure that the American people knew about this to show that the Palestinians are real people with homes and they’re doing well. It’s a Palestinian lifestyle with modern technology. There is Internet. This is what we should be encouraging. The Palestinians are seizing their future and recognizing that, if the middle class keeps leaving, they’re not going to succeed. This is sort of a last gasp.

Participant: Why do you think King Abdullah of Jordan was so impolitic? Also, would you expand on the Qatari purchase of al-Jazeera?

Second speaker: I think he was drunk! I really do. He drinks a lot, he gambles. He is known to be out of control. I don’t think he’s allying
himself with the Palestinians. They hate him. They’ll never accept him. They don’t see him as a reflection of them or what they want for their future. It is not clear to me what Jordan’s future is. I’ve been focused on Egypt. I would need to take a more in-depth trip there. I don’t have as a good a feel as I would like to have for what he was thinking or if he was thinking.

Qatar—I don’t understand the motives. The Qatari have put up much more money for Egypt than has been publicly recognized. I do think that they see themselves as part of an epic struggle between the Shiite crescent of Hezbollah, Lebanon, the Shiites of Bahrain and Iran and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood crescent. Qatar, with its money, hopes to buy itself some protection by paying off lots of people for lots of things and it is hoping that the Shiite crescent does not prevail. At their heart, they are Sunnis. Qatar is definitely playing above its weight. Buying the former vice president of United States [Al Gore] was very important.

**Participant:** I’d like to ask about the contest of a rising secularism as evidenced by some of the elections and the continuation of religious leadership. In several of his articles, the first speaker pointed out that in Egypt although the Muslim Brotherhood got more seats in parliament and is said to be in control, in those elections there were dozens, maybe hundreds of different parties, who voted and whose votes were counted but, because they were separate, they gained no representation. Under these circumstances, perhaps a democracy is not out of reach. How do you see the structure of that world?

**First speaker:** First, about the election, in the first round, Mr. Morsi got four million votes. About 9 percent of the vote. In comparison, none of the U.S. presidents have really been elected by a majority of voters. It’s usually only 50 percent of the citizens who take part in U.S. elections. There are several important elections that happened in Egypt. There was an election for the leadership of Al Azhar, which is the religious university; the candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood lost. There was another election in the Egyptian lawyer’s association, all the Muslim Brotherhood candidates lost. They also lost in the elections with the trade unions. So, it’s not a foregone conclusion that Egypt has fallen into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, the Muslim Brotherhood is on the defensive. Today, they have divided themselves, they do not know what to do. As the previous speaker said, they did not expect to ever come to power, especially not so quickly or so easily. They are really looking for a way out. There’s a question mark on Egypt. We really do not know what is going to happen.
Qatar, why is it behaving this way? For three reasons. The first is that they want to make sure that a strong power defends them. So, they look to the United States. This happened after Saudi Arabia invaded Qatar and took a part of their land [the frontier they had with UAE]. Now, Qatar is encircled by Saudi Arabia and is especially angry with them because the Saudis tried very hard to restore the previous emir by organizing a military coup with Pakistani officers in Qatari armies among other things. So, the Qataris were looking for someone to protect them from Saudi Arabia. The Saudis then tried to isolate Qatar in the Arab world and then relations with Egypt soured, and, at one point, they even cut off diplomatic relations. So, Qatar became a refuge for the anti-Mubarak parties, especially those from the Muslim Brotherhood. When Mubarak went down, Saudi Arabia lost its biggest ally. They are very sore about having lost their biggest ally and the party they supported. Qatar has also been cultivating new relations with Iran—telling Iran that it could eventually be a bridge for them to the United States. But they have even bigger ambitions. They wanted to create an association of many countries. Qatar has a population of about 600,000, with only about 10 percent of them being Qataris. But, it is the first small Arab country to do that. Before the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, Kuwait was playing that role.

Second speaker: When I was in Egypt, two things happened. One, the universities just had their elections and the universities in Egypt have always been Muslim Brotherhood strongholds. They lost every seat everywhere, throughout the country. This sent shivers down the Muslim Brotherhood’s spine. They couldn’t believe that the future may not belong to them. The second thing that happened was that the Christian publication journalist syndicate had an election and there was a female reporter who had nearly been raped and, for the first time ever, her Coptic organization was elected to a seat on the journalist syndicate. This means the people are trying to send the Brotherhood a signal: “Get out of the way, we’ve given you a chance and you’re not successful.” So, why do I think the Muslim Brotherhood could be reelected? It’s because of the pathetic weakness of the democratic opposition. These guys are dinosaurs. They’re the National Salvation Front. Mohammad Buhari is smart, but a National Salvation government only supports the Brotherhood. Hassan Zahbahi—young, charismatic, no strategy for Egypt. These people cannot organize a political party. The Egyptians may be done with the Brotherhood but they are not done with Islam. I am worried about the people the Saudis are supporting—the Salafis.

Participant: I just wanted to add something about Qatar. I met with the emir in New York when they received an award for what they were
doing for education in Qatar. They’ve opened up their country to campuses of universities throughout the United States. There are a number of American universities that have set up campuses there. With all of this education, isn’t it bound to have an impact on the population of Qatar?

First speaker: There are many American universities. Ninety percent of people who go to these schools are not Qatari. The 90 percent of people going to the universities are from Iran, Pakistan, and India. Qatar has no population of its own. Universities are used as gadgets—they have money, so they buy everything. The education provided there is technical—medicine, engineering—but no humanities.

Participant: Is there any possibility that the Egyptian army/military might take some role in securing some part of the area to facilitate tourism or is there anything else you’d like the share with us?

Second speaker: Port Said is already controlled by the army because it has an economic interest in the port. It is just not a going proposition for the army to rule Egypt. There’s a popular demand that they come and even then I would only see it as a transitional role. Morsi says that we’re going to see elections in October. He wanted to buy a little time to put his own house in order. So, I think that’s where the fight will come. They all say that they need to get rid of the Brotherhood in this round. If you can defeat them now that will send a signal that they can’t do business as usual and can’t exclude everyone from the constitutional committee and expect to keep control. But, most people fear that because the Brotherhood knows how to get out the vote, that they will be reelected, and, at that point, Obama will have to support them and they’ll do things that they’ve wanted to do and held back from doing during their first administration. They’ve replaced a couple governors, but they haven’t tampered with the army or security services. They’ll go after that and then you’ll never be able to get rid of them. There will be an illusion of democratic government. It’s a big moment setting up for the fall. Egyptian elections are marvelous things to watch.

Iran and the United States: The Double Misunderstanding

Third speaker: I am going to talk about the double misunderstanding between the U.S. and Iran. Let’s start from the American standpoint. In September 2008, the secretary of defense, Robert Gates, made a speech at National Defense University in Washington and masterfully defined one aspect of U.S. policy toward Iran in the past three decades. He declared:
“I have been involved in the search for the elusive Iranian moderates for 30 years. Since 1979, every administration has reached out to the Iranians in one way or another and all have failed.”

This “illusionary search for moderates” and the hope that the Iranian regime would transform into a more rational player that will end hostilities with U.S. has, at some occasions, led to political embarrassment. President Reagan’s illusion about Rafsanjani and the Iran-gate scandal are revealing examples.

But, the U.S. misconceptions and illusions about the Iranian regime have, in some occasions, resulted in strategic missteps.

The most dramatic example occurred in 2002–03 when the Bush administration coordinated the invasion of Iraq with the Iranian regime. This invasion gave the clerical rulers of Tehran a golden opportunity to become the major player in Iraq, challenge the U.S. presence, shape the future of this country and finally strengthen Iran’s influence in the Middle East.

President Obama is not an exception to this rule. In 2009, in the middle of the Iranian uprising, while millions of Iranians were challenging the regime, Obama ignored this historic opportunity and instead sent his envoys to sit down with Iranian officials and engage in vain negotiation over the nuclear issue.

Why, over three decades, have U.S. administrations nourished an exaggerated and ill-conceived hope that someone will emerge in Tehran and will respond positively to the U.S. extended hand? And, why has the U.S. nurtured so many illusions about the Iranian regime?

Why, at every turning point when the policymakers arrived at an impasse with Iran and were ready to examine alternative policies, were they given advice and fresh hope that a new pragmatist, moderate, realist, or reformist leader will rise in Iran and would resolve U.S. concerns.

Are the U.S. government, think-tanks, intellectuals and policymakers so inept that they cannot even learn from their repeated mistakes? Are the Iranian ayatollahs so shrewd that they have outsmarted the U.S. constantly for more than thirty years?

I would like to answer this question from a different angle. I believe that these misconceptions and confusions about Iran are, in good part, created by a coalition of political forces and business interests that I call the pro-engagement lobby.
Since the beginning of the Islamic Republic in Iran 35 years ago, there have always been political forces in Washington that have preached coexistence and friendship with the Iranian regime and have urged the administration to follow the example of Nixon’s initiative toward China in the 1970s. That means accepting Iranian influence and hegemony in the region and treating the Iranian mullahs as genuine partners.

Oil companies and trade lobbies have played a significant role in shaping this pro-engagement drive. Iran has the fourth-largest oil reserves and the second-largest natural gas reserves in the world. According to the oil lobby, friendship with Iran will open the Iranian oil and gas sector to U.S. corporations, it will also bring stability to the region and oil supply from the Middle East and will also allow access to much cheaper oil and gas from Central Asia.

In 1997, the so-called reformist Mohammad Khatami became president and launched a charm campaign to soften Western attitudes toward Iran and ease economic sanctions. The American business interests grasped the opportunity and the National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC), representing large U.S. corporations, launched its own lobby arm called USA*Engage—joining forces with oil giants.

This campaign by U.S. corporations created a favorable environment in which various groups that, for different reasons, sought friendlier policies with Iran. A formidable political force was created in Washington in favor of friendship and coexistence with Iran.

Khatami’s presidency was, in fact, the impulse of the pro-engagement lobby in Washington that has continued to grow in power and influence since 1997.

The invasion of Iraq and its disastrous consequence was a boost for anti-war groups and the American left that opposed U.S. policy in the Middle East. These groups declared that the Iranian nuclear program and its alleged terrorism are pretexts used by the U.S. administration and warmongers to wage a military attack against Iran. These groups have gradually espoused the Iranian regime’s cause and have become an important part of the pro-engagement lobby.

The invasion of Iraq revived the public debate about the Israeli influence on U.S. policy in the Middle East. The pro-engagement lobby has been able to highjack this debate and morph it into a campaign to blame Israel for the U.S.-Iran impasse. Israel is depicted
as the spoiler of U.S.-Iran good relations and the pro-Israeli lobby (AIPAC) is presented as the bullying organization that forces U.S. administrations to follow Israeli demands, to ignore Iranian readiness for compromise, and therefore maintain a hostile attitude toward Iran. Anti-AIPAC and anti-Israeli forces play an important role in the pro-engagement lobby.

The pro-engagement campaign led by the trade lobby claims that the U.S. and Iran do not have fundamental conflicts of interest and the hostilities between the two countries are the result of mistrust and misunderstanding. Therefore, in order to resolve the U.S.-Iran standoff, the U.S. should build trust with Iran and prove its friendly attitude. The lobby’s policy recommendation is simple and clear: The U.S. should stop its belligerent attitude, lift the sanctions, accept a nuclear Iran, recognize Iran’s influence in the region, and offer security guarantees to the Iranian rulers. The lobby claims that a friendly attitude by the United States will empower Iranian moderates and that sanctions and pressure will strengthen hardliners.

Since 1997, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to support this pro-engagement campaign that has effectively transformed the political discourse about Iran. Tons of advisory reports, expert analyses, press articles, and books have been produced; hundreds of conferences have been held to promote friendship and coexistence with Tehran.

Tens of opinion polls have been released to prove that the Iranian regime is popular and stable, its nuclear program is supported by the vast majority of Iranians and sanctions are useless.

The exchange programs between Iran and U.S. have allowed the Iranian regime to send a large number of its pundits, high-ranking officials, and lobbyists to U.S. think tanks, media, and universities where they are recycled as respectable scholars and Iran experts and join the pro-engagement lobby.

The Iranian rulers also nurture illusions and misconceptions about the U.S. They have ignored the best opportunities to reach a compromise with the U.S. and, instead, have maintained a policy that has deprived Iran of foreign investment, ruined the Iranian economy, and isolated the country.

In 2004–2005, the Iranian leadership reached the conclusion that it can defeat the U.S. in Iraq and get an upper hand in this country and, consequently, solidify its regional dominance. The psychological victory
of Hezbollah in its war with Israel in 2006 and the fact that the international community remained idle and watched Hezbollah take over Lebanon confirmed the Iranian leaders’ belief that they were the major player in the region.

The U.S. capitulation to the Iranian demand to accept Nouri Al Maliki as prime minister in Iraq and the manner of the U.S. departure from Iraq were additional confirmation of Iranian calculations.

Iran’s “total” involvement in Syria and the U.S. and international community’s lack of response emboldens Iran and will encourage the Iranian rulers to speed up their nuclear program.

Considering all these elements, the Iranian leaders strongly believe that nothing could prevent them from acquiring a nuclear deterrence and consolidating their regional dominance.

But, the Iranian leaders have neglected the flaws in their calculations.

After the invasion of Iraq and the WMD dilemma, the U.S. administration lost public support to counter Iran and impose tougher sanctions. But Obama’s failure in the overture to Iran and several rounds of failed talks with Iran changed the dynamic. The U.S. Congress successfully adopted tough sanctions against Iran in 2010 and Europeans implemented U.S. sanctions and also added their own tough measures against Iran. This is a game changer that Iran gravely ignored and miscalculated.

Recently, the esteemed Iran expert Dr. Gary Samore, who, until few weeks ago, was President Obama’s top adviser, made a very interesting speech and elaborated on this issue:

“The supreme leader believes that the United States is trying to destroy the Islamic Republic. And the irony is that because the supreme leader has obstructed the negotiations, he has, in fact, created a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are, in fact, seeking economic sanctions which could potentially pose a threat to the survival of the regime.”

Iran has put itself in a deadly situation. Stopping its nuclear program will have disastrous domestic and regional consequences for the regime and its continuation will intensify the sanctions that would endanger the regime’s survival.

There are many in Washington who believe that even if the regime halts its nuclear program, the Congress will not allow the removal of sanctions.
Iran’s second miscalculation: Iran thinks that once it has the nuclear weapon capability, the U.S. will be faced with a fait accompli and, therefore, will accept Iran as a regional power, the sanctions will end, and Iran will harvest the result of its well-designed policy. This is a huge mistake. Again, Dr. Samore explained this issue very clearly:

“I think President Obama has explained in speeches and interviews why he thinks a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable from the standpoint of U.S. national interests. The risk that it would lead to further proliferation in the region, the risk that a nuclear-armed Iran would threaten our allies, both Israel and the Saudis and others, the risk that a nuclear-armed Iran might—on purpose or inadvertently—provide weapons of fissile material to terrorists. So I think the president has in his mind a very clear basis on which to say, as he has said, that he will use any means necessary, including military force, to stop Iran from having nuclear weapons.”

Finally, Iran misunderstands the dynamics in regional changes. Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries, and Turkey have become Iran’s regional rivals, not to say enemies. They exert enormous pressure on the U.S. to confront Iran. While the Iranian regime and its American allies have focused their campaign against the Israeli lobby, Iran is faced with new and powerful enemies in Washington.

Participant: In 2010, the leaders of Iran decided that the U.S. policy would oppose any Iranian bomb and would do anything to stop it. Therefore, Iran decided that the United States was a hopeless partner and they would go forward in developing a nuclear bomb by themselves and ignore America. Is that what you were saying?

Third speaker: No, I would say that in 2003, there was a rift on what to do about the nuclear program. Some said stop, Khomeini said they just needed time. In 2004 and 2005, the leaders agreed that the United States could not stop them anymore from dominating Iraq and getting a nuclear bomb. They needed time. The United States prevented sanctions until 2010, so they believed nothing can stop them. And, I think they still believe this. Once the United States passes sanctions, it is almost impossible to lift them. In 2010, the dynamic changed but the Iranian calculation did not change. They need two years to have the bomb. They will not abandon this because they cannot retreat.

Participant: So Iran will go forward and develop the bomb?

Third speaker: Yes, they will continue to develop the bomb.
**Participant:** Can you please explain about Mr. Velayati, the connections with Washington, and trying to get money?

**Third speaker:** This is a WikiLeaks document. There are even WikiLeaks documents about me. I have read many of these documents. It means the Americans do not have any clue. Velayati is a doctor who has been in the United States; no, it is not true.

**Participant:** Sanctions never work—so, how is this a game changer? We sanctioned North Korea, the poorest nation in the world, and Cuba, but they moved forward.

**Third speaker:** Sanctions *alone* never work. You should decide what you want to do with sanctions. They worked in South Africa and Libya in 2003 when they abandoned their nuclear program. The United States has a choice, go for tougher sanctions or not. They don’t go for the tougher sanctions. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, suggested that with sanctions there should be a regime change. This does not mean a ground war or Iraq scenario, but there needs to be something to go with the sanctions. The sanctions so far have not been complete.

**Participant:** When George W. Bush was president, the Iranian government wrote him a letter suggesting they meet and have conversations. He did not even answer the letter.

**Third speaker:** This is not true. I have studied this topic extensively. If they had an offer, why didn’t they give it to Javad Zarif, Iran’s Ambassador to the UN?

**Participant:** A letter went to Bush from Iran, I know it. I was informed by Gary Sick.

**Another participant:** Gary Sick works for the Iranian lobby. He is not a reliable source.

**First speaker:** May I add some more information to this subject on the 2003 letter to Bush from the Iranian government? The Bush administration wanted to have a dialogue and tried to have one but, in the end, nothing happened. Something must have happened on the Iranian side. Even if the leadership wants to make a deal now—they cannot. They have to play this hand to the bitter end. They have a belief in standing up to the great power with political machismo. A deal could not happen. In Western democracies, you admire people who bring others together in a compromise. In the East, we admire
people for the opposite—people who don’t compromise and do not bow to anyone. We believe in those who stick to their word even if their word is very stupid. It is very hard for Khomeini to go on television and say, “We are going to make a deal with the Great Satan”—they cannot do it. These Iranian leaders work themselves into a corner and they cannot get out. This will only end with regime change. The illusion of making a deal with the current Iranian regime is nonsense. It will not happen.

Participant: I have no reason to disagree with anything you said, but it has been confirmed by many in the State Department that a letter was sent to President Bush from the Iranian government.

First speaker: A letter may have been written but an ambassador needs to write to the secretary of state, not to the president. This is the protocol. Iran has no diplomatic relations with the United States because the Iranians cut ties in 1979. Anyone can write a letter to the president, but it does not have any legal weight. At this point, the Swiss government handles the relations between the two governments. The Iranian foreign minister could have called the Swiss ambassador to Iran in to say that they have a letter for President Bush. If the letter was that important, the Swiss ambassador would have flown to America to present the letter to the U.S. government. Maybe in their hearts the Iranians want to normalize relations with the United States, but it is very difficult to get out of this situation.

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The Kurds: One People, Different Destinies

First speaker: In Turkey, it is possible to imagine a situation in which the Kurds have a large amount of autonomy. The Kurds represent a very important block of voters, the Justice and Development Party would not be ruling Turkey without the Kurdish vote. In Iraq, it is already happening. The risk there is that the new generations of Iraqi Kurds don’t know Arabic because they have only been taught Kurdish. For the first time, you have a new generation that would be unable to communicate with the rest of the Iraqis and I criticize this. They are doing a disservice to their own people. They cannot access the bigger job market. If an Iraqi Kurd comes out of university, he cannot get a job in Iraq because he does not speak the language. Nevertheless, in Iraq there is a Kurdish autonomy. In Iran, it is possible for the Kurds to continue and to have more cultural freedom and economic autonomy,
which is in the Iranian tradition anyway. Iran was always a loose federation. There was a king, but there were local princes. In Iranian Kurdistan, you have a lot of Kurdish princes who pay respect to the former shah in Tehran.

In Syria, what has happened is that the Kurdish areas are already outside of the anti-Assad opposition and Assad control. If Syria disintegrates, they will create an autonomous Kurdish area and there is talk of them joining with the Iraqi Kurds to create a larger area. In Azerbaijan, what we have to do is persuade the government to accept the existence of the Kurdish minority along with other minorities. You have to talk the Russian government into accepting the existence of a Kurdish minority. They accept other ethnic groups like the Dagestanis and Abkhazians. The Kurds are excluded because Russia is afraid of unrest and attacks.

**Third speaker:** The Kurdish future cannot be separated from regional developments and they are already being affected by this. Three points: 1. Even in the United States, Joe Biden was opposed to more independence for Kurdistan. The main reason the Obama administration does not support more independence for Kurdistan is the regional context, especially Iran. If the Kurdish province gains more independence, then more land is given to Iran. It could also be a threat to neighboring Saudi Arabia. 2. Oil—between 20 and 40 billion barrels of oil have been discovered in the Kurdish part alone. Exxon Mobil had a big contract with the Iraqi central government and then had to choose between a contract with the Iraqi central government or with Kurdistan—it chose Kurdistan. The Iraqi government asked President Obama to send a letter to Exxon asking it to remove itself from Kurdistan but Obama said they cannot ask the oil company to do this. Exxon sees a bright future for Kurdistan that will be very profitable. Exxon has 400 people working in Washington on this issue and knows a great deal about the region. 3. Turkey—the government has distanced itself from the Iraqi central government and has become closer with Kurdistan. Turks also see a bright future for Kurdistan. The balance of power in the Middle East is changing and it is getting further from Iran.

**America & the Middle East: A Quest for Change**

**First speaker:** The United States is a reluctant player in international affairs because the United States is a continental country that has been self-sufficient for a long time. It doesn’t have too many neighbors to corner it and it has the natural resources it needs. Because it is designed as a federation, it cannot play an imperial role. But, for a number of reasons, the United States has been sucked into international affairs and Middle Eastern affairs. Within its means, it has tried to understand what
is happening and how to make a contribution. In the case of the United States, it is not easy because a change of administration could mean a change in direction. The United States is not designed to play the role of empire builder and there is no support to play that role from the American people—certainly not on a long-term basis. So, despite this, the United States has found an interest in the broader Middle East. Americans do something sporadically. They do something and go away. It was not until the arrival of American missionaries in the Middle East in the nineteenth century that the ordinary people of the Middle East got a glimpse of the American people. The image created of America was of an exotic, quaint, and harmless country. It was not imperialist. It was also new. Some of these individual Americans gradually got involved in local politics. But it was not until the fall of the Ottoman Empire that the United States emerged as a power player in the Middle East. The Americans arrived with no real knowledge of the region but became an arbiter. So, they inflicted their experience on these people. The last attempt by U.S. administrations to influence the situation in the Middle East on a lasting basis came during the administration of President George W. Bush with the freedom agenda in the greater Middle East–North Africa region. The assumption was that as long as this region had not democratized, it would become a danger to American security. The United States is unable to follow a long-term policy because when administrations change, policy changes.

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SESSION III

The Future of the Freedom Agenda in the Middle East

Fourth speaker: I wanted to start by saying that the Bush administration probably gets a bit too much credit or blame, depending on your view of it, for facilitating democracy in the Middle East. It is the case that after 9/11, the president sought an explanation in his own mind of “what was this” and the ready-made explanation given by the State Department was Israel. They [the Middle East] hate you because you support Israel. George W. Bush rejected this idea because it was not what he was hearing from Osama bin Laden and others who hated us for our relationship with Saudi Arabia. So, he rejected that explanation, and he ultimately came to the view that the problem was the closed societies in the Middle East with very little mobility and social freedom. This idea was in the air, Bush didn’t just invent this. They weren’t talking about it in the UAE, maybe Saudi Arabia but you know, Kuwait had a parliament and there was already a struggle between the royal family and the parliament.
In Egypt, there was a reformist movement. So, Bush came to the view that this was the problem and steps had to be taken to push them [the Middle East] in this direction [toward democracy]. It is not the case that the United States or Bush predicted or wanted the Arab Spring. Bush said that the Arab Spring was the work of generations. It was a 25-year process. In the beginning, one can attribute the Egyptian election of 2005 to the U.S. government. Prior to this, Mubarak had had no elections. He was elected by a fake parliament. For the monarchies, the United States was not saying “all of you guys should leave”—the message we were giving to these countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait was “you don’t own the country, you are just the king, there has to be some sort of partnership with the people or you’re heading for trouble.” I think the Kuwaitis believed that, the Saudis were shocked to hear this. This thought had never occurred to them.

Now, let me jump ahead. I agree with you that part of the problem is that promoting democracy in the Middle East is not a long-term American policy like securing the oil supply is. This will occur no matter what president or party is in power. We have seen severe change and reduction in American interest in the Middle East. I often hear from Egyptians, “Where are you, why have you abandoned us?” I hear the same thing from Syrian oppositionists. I think it’s true that the administration has made a decision to pull back generally. Why? First, it’s a Bush thing, they don’t want to go along with it—they’ve thrown out the good and bad parts. A second reason is that the Arab Spring is not going very well. If you had a series of velvet revolutions, you’d have a lot of people saying this is great, and this is what the Arabs want, and we should be supportive because it brings them closer to our Western ideas. But I think that the people are just confounded now, especially by Syria and Egypt. Egypt and Syria present the problem. First of all, they want democracy but maybe the bad guys will win. If it is the case that a democratic system will lead to a permanent Islamist government, do we really want to support the expansion of democracy? I think that the Obama administration’s answer is no in the case of Egypt. They have really not been supportive. It is exactly how we treated Mubarak saying, “He’s our guy even though he is not perfect.” Now Morsi is our guy. My own view of this is that it is somewhat short-sighted. I think what we see in Egypt is actually a battle. The elections are close! Morsi won the election 51 to 48. Such public opinion polls suggest that the Brotherhood’s popularity is declining because they are doing a bad job, the economy is collapsing, and they are oppressive rulers. Popularity is falling. More people have been arrested for insulting the president in one year under Mohammad Morsi than in the 30 years of Hosni Mubarak. I think this suggests that this is going to be a long-term
battle. This is a 25-year battle. I do not believe the Brotherhood or the Salafis believe in democracy. I think they’re willing to use democracy to gain power. I think our job would be to loudly protect and advocate for a democratic system. I think that is the best American policy for countries in which there is going to be a generational battle over democracy. To believe that I’m right, you have to believe that there is nothing in Arab culture that means democracy can’t exist or can be defeated. It is possible to have a Muslim democracy—one can look at Tunisia or Bangladesh. I think that there is a case that there are aspects of Arab culture that make this more difficult. This is hard to do in public because you are automatically accused of various forms of bigotry.

I think this is the same with Syria. We should have wanted to get rid of Assad a long time ago because he is an enemy of the United States. At least in the first Obama administration, there was a refusal to believe he was a problem and he was viewed as a reformer and potential friend, despite doing everything he could to kill Americans in Iraq.

Now we face the problem that there is a significant jihadi presence and that a post-Assad Syria will be a terrible place for years. It seems that our interests and ideals are not at variance here. We have an interest in breaking up the Shiite crescent. The Syria-Hezbollah-Iran alliance axis. We want to make sure the jihadists do not have an active role in post-Assad Syria and I think this calls for a much greater American role than we have taken in the last two years. I am not only closer to the British and the French, I would say that I am closer to everyone in the government except for the president. Secretary Clinton, Secretary Gates, General Petraeus, and the Pentagon argued for a more interventionist policy and the president rejected this. The Pentagon and Joint Chiefs also argued for this—not on idealistic grounds but nationalistic grounds. I think the administration is right and the president is wrong on this.

First speaker: First, democracy has not been adopted as a long-term interest of the United States. Maybe it is time to do that and realize that other things cannot be achieved without adopting that as a long-term national interest. Second, the Arab Spring was uncertain, but one could argue that the American absence contributes to that uncertainty because when a big player is not there, uncertainty increases. Third, Syria, of which I was a personal witness at the start of the Syrian uprising—my impression was that the United States was going to support the Syrian uprising.

Participant: From the point of view of an Iranian, I believe that what George W. Bush did to us [the Iranian people] has been more
catastrophic than all of the other liberal politicians combined like Clinton and Obama. In 2002, there were more al Qaeda members in Iran at the time than in Iraq. There was more evidence of WMD production in Iran than in Iraq. Iranian influence is much broader than Iraq’s. But they call it an invasion of Iraq. I don’t understand, is it a disillusionment, or democracy building . . . ?

**Fourth speaker:** I think the policy starts a lot sooner. In fact, on numerous occasions since 1979, Iran has killed Americans and they have never been punished. You can say this about 2002 and the entire Iraq war. There was no point at which the United States said to Iran that this will not be tolerated. We didn’t even do it with Syria. I suppose the word from the Pentagon is one war at a time and then when we went to war against Saddam Hussein, they said two wars is all we can handle. I think that we should have closed Damascus International Airport but Petraeus wanted to talk with Assad.

**First speaker:** What is often not mentioned by Middle Eastern activists and human rights (HR) campaigners is that the Middle East human rights campaign’s people are not doing their job either. If they were doing it correctly, there would be changes. Intellectual clarity is necessary. The illusion that you can make it with Iran is gone. Instead, what is going on is that you are fighting with yourself. This is the same with Middle Eastern networks. This is why in the past two years I have decided not to talk to them about Iran at all. Because they are pursuing a particular agenda. It is easy to blame whoever, but these poor Americans, whatever they do, they get blamed for everything.

**Fourth speaker:** There are two elements to this point: do we believe that people want freedom? I think now more people are believing that the Iranians do not like their ruler. I think it came as a surprise to see people overthrow regimes. This is a question we need to be clearer on. The first thing is to recognize that people want to be free. One does have to assume that a portion of the electorate do not favor democracy. They simply want power. The second question is what will happen? People want democracy but that is not going to happen. What is going to happen all over is that instead of being a pro-American dictatorship, you’ll have an anti-American dictatorship. My answer to that is there is a reason why Castro took over in ’59 and why the ayatollah took over in ’79. This is because there was vacuum and places needed to be filled and we allowed them to. We need to be sure going forward that when these vacuums arise, there are not unknown advantages to the other side. For us to sit back and say that we are not sure what the outcome of what is going on in Syria is, we are giving the government a huge advantage.
Participant: I am interested in the nuclear weapons issue. The way I see it, Obama has boxed himself into a corner saying that unless they do ABC, all options are open—including the military options. What is your opinion?

Fourth speaker: I see one way out of that corner. He keeps boxing himself in a little more tightly each time. For example, before his trip to Israel, he said my policy is not containment, my policy is prevention. But, when he got to Israel, he went further and said containment is not possible, there cannot be containment. He has taken a tougher line recently. It seems the way out of it is the negotiations. If it were possible to do a deal that I think is bad, it would make it almost impossible for Israel to attack. So, Obama’s way out is an agreement that at least pushes the date that they have a nuclear weapons back to after Obama is no longer president. The problem seems to be though that their supreme leader does not want an agreement. I’m not so sure they’ll grab an agreement. To the supreme leader, the key element of any agreement is that you’ve made an agreement with the great Satan. There is no evidence that he wants an agreement. I think Obama is in a very tight corner. If the supreme leader doesn’t want a deal and isn’t afraid of a bombing from Israel or the United States, then what does Obama do? The answer suggests that he will bomb Iran. And, there are some who say he will, he’s no pacifist. I don’t know, I can’t judge his heart and mind enough, but I could put it that it is politically advantageous to him and the Democratic Party to do this. He would be able to say I have expanded the government at home and I have been tough abroad. That would make the Democratic Party very strong at home. I don’t think that it is impossible that he would bomb Iran, but I think that he would go to very great lengths to get a deal and not bomb.

First speaker: What has happened is very interesting because the primary opposition was never really clear. Iran never said that they wanted A, B, and C. There are five UN Security Council resolutions that demand Iran should be stopped. These are very clear tangible demands. But, gradually, over the negotiations, these resolutions have been pushed aside, no one talks about them. Both sides are comfortable with this situation. The Iranian side is comfortable because Iran has had several leaders who prefer to play with a weak hand right to the bitter end. They could not be satisfied even with everything; they’ll just want something more. So, the best solution for Obama is to keep the question parked in negotiations. Obama has also parked the sanctions. So, he can say I give diplomacy a chance. They will talk for a long time about when to meet again so one side is playing the game as a long one and the other is playing a short game.
Most of them are comfortable. I don’t see any deal. Making a deal would make both of them accept something.

The present regime in Iran is an ideological regime. It consists of anti-Americanism. With the fall of the U.S.S.R., there is no power to stand up to the arrogant power of the United States and the fight for the downtrodden is ours and we should have its leadership. It is very easy, if you follow the Iranian media, to identify the only consistent topic: the hatred of the United States. They also attack Israel and Britain, but these are all connected to the United States. To suddenly abandon the core of your ideology, what are you going to say tomorrow? You have nothing to say and it is very difficult for this regime to negotiate a way out of this impasse it created for itself.

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**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

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

- Promoting values the United States cherishes. Toward that end the United States should materially expand its cultural programs.
- Supporting countries that are well-disposed toward the United States.
- Preventing a hegemon from emerging in the region.
- Supporting the pro-reform forces in the Arab Muslim world and Iran.
- 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.
- Safeguarding the freedom of navigation.
- Destroying al Qaeda–linked forces.
- Promoting a peaceful resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Given the overwhelming military power of the United States, including the cyber weapons in its arsenal, much of the hard power recommendations may be achieved without necessarily committing boots on the ground.

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