

The Institute for Middle East Studies

2007 Annual DACOR Conference

□The Middle East□

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*****Notes prepared by Angela Simaan. Please do not quote or cite without IMES permission.*****

Conference Summary

Professor Nathan Brown, Director of the Middle East Studies Program at the Elliott School of International Affairs and Conference Co-Chair welcomed the audience and briefly talked about the conference's focus on policy and the expert panels that would be centering discussion on two critical Middle East issues. Retired Ambassador Philip C. Wilcox, Jr., President of the Foundation for Middle East Peace and Conference Co-Chair, introduced Keynote Speaker Ambassador R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in the Department of State. Following Ambassador Burns' keynote address on the current foreign policy challenges the United States faces, Professor Brown introduced panelists on Iraq Dr. Marc Lynch, Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at GWU; James Placke, Cambridge Energy Research Associate; and Christopher Kojm, Director of the US Foreign Policy Institute at GWU. Professor Brown emphasized that the panelists all have strong, diverse professional experience with Iraq, yet they share the ability to coolly, dispassionately analyze a highly-charged topic. Following the panel on Iraq, Ambassador Wilcox introduced the Israel/Palestine panel, which included Ghaith al Omari, Senior Fellow at the New American Foundation; Daniel Levy, Senior Fellow and Director of Middle East Programs at the New American Foundation; and Mark Perry, Co-Director of the Conflicts Forum. Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm delivered the closing remarks.

Keynote Speaker

Ambassador Nicholas Burns began asserting that the Middle East is the epicenter of American foreign policy today. Europe was the epicenter of American foreign policy in the previous century because the most important challenges the United States faced arose from Nazi Germany, the Soviet bloc and the Warsaw Pact. The current challenges emanate from the Middle East, where ineffective American leadership and poor foreign policy could allow terrible things to occur. Essentially, the Middle East is the most vital part of the world.

Ambassador Burns then listed the four great challenges America faces today in the Middle East. First is Iraq. We now are forced to grapple with the enormous challenges of trying to stabilize Iraq and imposing some order so the Iraqi government has time to rebuild the infrastructure. Ambassador Burns says this is our greatest national challenge, and most critical in current foreign policy.

Second is Iran. In terms of broader American interest in the Middle East, Iran is a destabilizing presence. Iran is providing technology to Shia militias that are in turned used against Americans. Iran also supports Hezbollah efforts to undermine and destabilize Lebanese government. Iran also funds and arms Hamas and the Taliban in Afghanistan. In short, Iran has an expanding sense that it should be the most dominant power in the Middle East. We also need to closely examine Iran's nuclear ambitions, which the US addressed yesterday with a series of sanctions that were "warranted and necessary" to curb Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability. The sanctions were sent as a signal that the U.S. "means business," and wants Iran to halt nuclear activities and switch to negotiation with the United States and other P-5 countries. Secretary Rice offered an unprecedented chance to Iran to participate in a nuclear forum to establish a controlled environment for using nuclear power, but Iran rejected the invitation in June 2006. However, Ambassador Burns strongly emphasized the U.S.'s foremost objective of diplomacy with Iran for peaceful solutions.

Third is Lebanon, where we are waiting to see if a country can rid itself of the influences of a strong and long-lasting occupying force. Fourth is the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the 60-year legacy of peace negotiations, and the present viable options for a solution.

Ambassador Burns discussed the shape of reform in the Arab World. American leaders plan to launch a new initiative in January 2009 to do what we can as Americans through education, travel, example and leadership to communicate that the Arab world need not be the only part of the world where democracy and reform have not taken root. Ambassador Burns says the seeds of democracy are present in the Middle East, and that it is our responsibility as a friend to the Middle East to encourage the growth of democracy.

Another interesting change in American foreign policy is that the power of the Middle East conflicts is so great and the impact of these conflicts is so pervasive throughout the Middle East and the rest of the world that the topics consistently arise during international conferences. The question has become, "how can Europe and the US work together on Iraq? Iran? Israeli-Palestinian conflict?" The Middle East issues are changing the way we work with countries all over the world, and our European policy is a function of the issues of the Middle East. The Middle East issues dominate agendas with every other country the United States sits down with throughout the world.

Panel I: Iraq

Dr. Marc Lynch opened with a short summary of the Patraeus/Crocker report, highlighting their claims in a drop in violence and the success of the Surge. However, Dr. Lynch sees no connection between the tactics and strategy used in Iraq right now, and attributed most of the successes Patraeus and Crocker mentioned to the grassroots level and the impacts of the various "awakenings" occurring throughout Iraq, leading to two main questions: what is really happening on the local level in Iraq, and second, can the local level successes be translated to the national level?

Dr. Lynch began by talking about the dramatic changes occurring on the Sunni side. Salvation councils and tribal leaders that are aligning with the US are a small part of the reasons behind success at the local level. The larger reason dates back to last summer, when Al-Qaeda in Iraq declared an Islamic State in Iraq, sparking a reaction amongst these Iraqi tribal leaders. Al-Qaeda began to kill off prominent tribal leaders, infringe and trade and economic interaction, and impose moral codes on the Iraqi people. The tribal factions reacted strongly, battling against Al-Qaeda both literally and figuratively. At this point, General Patraeus began forging alliances with the tribal leaders fighting Al-Qaeda. To a large extent, Dr. Lynch believes this strategy has run its course, and that Al-Qaeda in Iraq has lost its actual power in Iraq and its claims to hegemony. Iraqi Sunnis now believe that while they have won the struggle against Al-Qaeda in Iraq, they are losing the battle against the Shia, who are the main threat to their security.

The argument behind the Surge was that the hostility and political problems we see at the national level are the result of local-level problems. However, local-level strategies fail to scale to the national level, and the Iraqi government is undergoing increasing fragmentation because of the widespread fragmentation occurring among Sunni and Shia local groups. Fragmentation is problematic for several reasons, most importantly because a lack of cohesive leadership translates into an inability for *anyone* to make and deliver on negotiated deals. Lynch argues that the Surge strategies fueled this fragmentation by empowering certain leaders. American policy in Iraq has reduced both side's ability to sign and deliver a deal, and also exacerbated intra-group fears. Unless the underlying factors driving civil wars are dealt with directly, the problems causing the strife will not be solved.

Finally, Lynch emphasized that the United States lacks genuine, strategic objectives, which makes policy making inefficient and counterproductive. For example, if our aim is truly a unified, strong Iraq, our current policies are working against that aim. The deeper strategic political questions are not being discussed in policy. Do we support partition or not? If we don't, then why are we pursuing policies that make such an outcome likely? The overarching problem is that current U.S. policy is ignoring these big strategic questions.

Christopher Kojm began by stating the unquestionable ability of the United States military to clear an area and win a fight, but its inability to sustain and build. He looks to Iraqi opinion and statistical data following the Surge as evidence of U.S. failure to sustain and build – Iraqi opinion polls do not necessarily agree that violence is down, 60,000 refugees a month are still fleeing Iraq, and the number of detainees after the Surge is at its highest level ever.

Kojm closed on two central points. First, the United States has pursued policy more in form than in content, leading to ineffective diplomacy. There have been regional diplomatic meetings between U.S. and Iraqi leaders, but Iraqi leaders are smart and do not see a real American commitment to regional diplomacy, they recognize the United States' "going through the motions" attitude. Second, it is hard to believe the next administration will pursue any policy other than troop withdrawals because we do not have the numbers of troops necessary, spending has reached \$10 billion a month, and Iraq has taken all the time and energy of current American foreign policy. Kojm closed by saying Basra is his vision of a future Iraq: militia governance fueled by both legal and illegal oil exports.

James Placke continued on Kojm's last note on oil and Iraq's economy, which is suffering largely from the widespread problems stemming from security and violence. Ethnic and sectarian violence is central to the economic future of Iraq, and the Kirkuk referendum, which looms in the near future, contributes to the broader sense of economic insecurity. In addition to insecurity, the government lacks the ability to function efficiently enough to spend its budgets. In 2005, the Iraqi government only spent 10% of its total budget, and this year's expected spending settles at a low 35%. Consumer inflation is now declining to close to 12%, but consumers are still suffering a 12% loss of income. The growing GDP, a number some experts point to as proof of progress, can be mainly attributed to the increase in world oil prices and not an actual indicator of improving economic conditions.

In addition, foreign exchange assets have risen quite sharply, due to a few factors. First, several States have forgiven Iraq's debt, and the Iraqi government's failure to spend money allocated from foreign countries results in a surplus. Second, oil production before 2001 had reached 2.6 million barrels a day. The U.N. Oil for Food program opened the door for increased oil production. During the 2001 invasion, oil production dropped to 1.4 million barrels a day. Oil production presently is still much lower than it was in pre-invasion Iraq. Security restoration is a primary factor in determining the future of oil production in Iraq.

In conclusion, Placke, like Kojm, sees Iraq drifting toward a warlord state. Corruption and oil smuggling in this warlord state are financing militias and detracting from the central government's income.

Panel II: Israel/Palestine

Ambassador Wilcox sparked panel conversation by raising questions about success of the future Annapolis meetings. Ghraith al Omari started by describing the domestic scene in Palestine, beginning specifically the point when Hamas took over leadership in Gaza. Al Omari asserts that there is no opportunity for a real political dialogue between Hamas and Fatah right now for several reasons. First, a dialogue between Fatah and Hamas entails losing domestic political capital for Fatah. Hamas is in a very strong negotiating position, and Fatah leaders recognize that negotiations would be a first step in granting Hamas more power. Additionally, no steps have been taken to solve the problems that led to the June 2007 split, leaving the two parties in a deadlock. Fatah feels they have completely lost control of Gaza, with little hope of regaining unity or control. All these elements depict a very fragmented Palestinian domestic political scene, and all the various factions need to reconcile on some level before real peace negotiations can begin.

The public perception of Annapolis is that it will be similar to Camp David because it will be a “summit to end all summits,” which is unrealistic because the two sides have not talked during the past six or seven years and the domestic problems facing both sides limit the possibilities of major breakthroughs during the negotiations. Al Omari argues that a “new element” needs to be injected to revitalize the process on both sides, which has become a bit “stale.” Israelis need the participation of another Arab party injected, such as the Saudis. On the other hand, Palestinians need the practical issues such as increased diplomatic opportunities, national aid and incentives for progress addressed during Annapolis.

The U.S. lacks a plan for approaching Annapolis. Al Omari stressed that it is not enough for the United States to act as a moderating presence, that they must take a more active role and nudge the two parties toward certain agreements.

How can Americans deliver on the expectations of Annapolis? Daniel Levy suggests a four-point checklist for what we s be getting out of Annapolis if it is going to prove to be a constructive meeting for moving forward. The first point on the “checklist” is the content of what Annapolis says about parameters for permanent status. In other words, what is the substance for the guidelines the parties should set forth for looking at final status agreements? Second, Annapolis has to be substantive enough to survive changes in leadership and serve as a concrete point for moving forward. Third, Annapolis must include other Arab parties, as al Omari mentioned. Fourth, there must be daily visible improvements in the security conditions on the ground in the wake of the conference. Above all else, political will determines the effectiveness of Annapolis. Levy argues today that political will also needs to come from the United States.

Mark Perry began by talking about his personal familiarity with Fatah and Yasir Arafat, the Tunis cohort, and his understanding of Hamas as the “other,” an aside removed from legitimate Palestinian leadership. He shared an anecdote from the Oslo aftermath in which the leader of Hamas visited Arafat, accusing Arafat of being a traitor and hurling invectives at the PLO leader until Arafat conceded, asking the Hamas leader what he wanted. The man demanded forty seats in Parliament. Perry shared these anecdotes to emphasize that several Islamic groups have made a commitment to democracy, to leading their people, but that the United States and policy making circles in the U.S. see what they want to see about these Islamic groups, and not what is necessarily true.

Perry continued by dissipating a set of myths believed true in the United States. First, Hamas is not losing popularity – on the contrary, they are gaining status. Second, we would like to believe that Hamas does not represent Palestinian society, but this is wrong. Palestinian society is Arab, conservative, and traditional, not progressive. Third, Hamas is not irrevocably wedded to violence. We are the ones who decided to reverse the democratic process. Fourth, Fatah is broken, weak, aging, corrupt, disorganized, funded exclusively from outside sources, dependent on the United States and people are abandoning it. Fifth, because Fatah is “broken,” the political battle being waged in the West Bank is being waged inside of Fatah over whether or not to come to Annapolis. Sixth, Abu Mazen is increasingly isolated. Nonpayment of salaries within Fatah is causing deep

disenchantment between tribes and family ties. Seventh, the US-encouraged front being built against Hamas across the Arab world is largely a myth that lacks actual support. Eight, Hamas's reign in Gaza undermines the organization's actual role and legitimacy as an elected. Finally, Abu Mazen has exacerbated divisions by conferring an emergency government and rejecting an elected Prime Minister, divisive actions.

Perry wrapped up with three conclusions about the U.S., Palestine, and Israel. First, Israel is not interested in the establishment of a Palestinian state; they are interested in the destruction of the movement for a Palestinian national identity. Second, the U.S. is not interested in negotiating a final settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians. Annapolis, seven years into the current administration's term, is more of an afterthought than an actual interest. Third, the Palestinians are united and strong, but political divided. Without political union, they cannot come to the negotiating table.

Closing Remarks

Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm delivered closing remarks. In short, he observed that the panelists' and keynote speaker's addresses evoke the complexity of the situations in the Middle East, and encouraged the audience to think more deeply about the intensely penetrating problems our current administration has to deal with.