

# **NATIONAL COUNCIL ON U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS**

## **18<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL ARAB-U.S. POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE**

### ***“FRESH VISIONS, OLD REALITIES, NEW POSSIBILITIES: THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP CHANGE ON ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS”***

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2009**

**RONALD REAGAN BUILDING & INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTER  
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

#### **ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS: THE WAY FORWARD**

***Speaker:* The Hon. Chas. W. Freeman, Jr.** – Chairman of the Board, Projects International, Inc., a Washington, DC-based business development firm specializing in international joint ventures, acquisitions, and other business operations for its American and foreign clients; former President, Middle East Policy Council; former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (1993-94), earning the Department of Defense’s highest public service awards for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China; former U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm); Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the U.S. mediation of Namibian independence from South Africa and Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola; and author of *The Diplomat's Dictionary* (Revised Edition) and *Arts of Power: Statecraft and Diplomacy*.

**October 16, 2009**

When you look back, some years can be seen as having inflected history, moving men and events along paths they would otherwise not have taken. 2001 – the year of 9/11 – was such a time. This year is shaping up as another, not just for the decisions that will be made but for those that most likely will not be.

The second President Bush bequeathed his successor a set of thoroughly broken policies in the Middle East and the near total estrangement of the United States from former allies and friends in the Arab and Muslim worlds. President Obama has responded with rhetorical “*change we – or at least five Norwegians – can believe in.*” In his speech at Cairo, he clearly signaled that he recognizes the imperative of solving the Israel-Palestine conflict and repairing American relations with Arabs and Muslims if the United States is to enjoy peace abroad and tranquility at home. Still, to date, in the Middle East and elsewhere his administration has made only minimal changes to longstanding American policies that are conspicuous failures. The short-term stakes in getting these policies right are large. The long-term stakes are vastly larger.

When U.S. interrogators asked Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the confessed mastermind of the 9/11 atrocities, why al Qaeda had done the terrible things it did that day, he gave a straightforward answer. He said that the purpose was to focus “*the American people . . . on the atrocities that America is committing by supporting Israel against the Palestinian people and America’s self-serving foreign policy that corrupts Arab governments and leads to further exploitation of the Arab Muslim people.*” In Osama Bin Laden’s annual “address to the American people” this September 11, he reiterated: “*We have demonstrated and stated many times, for more than two-and-a-half-decades, that the cause of our disagreement with you is your support to your Israeli allies who occupy our land of Palestine ....*”

There is nothing at all ambiguous or unclear about these explanations of 9/11 by its planners and perpetrators. Few abroad dispute their essential validity. Yet here in America, they remain completely unreported outside the Internet. Any public reference to U.S. backing for Israel as a grievance that motivated the atrocities in New York and Washington eight years ago is vigorously disputed and suppressed as politically incorrect. This has created a large national blind spot to the seriousness of Arab Muslim reaction to a core American policy. It has left our country unable effectively to analyze the very real threat to our domestic tranquility that intermittent terrorist attacks represent. By leaving terrorist attacks on the United States and Americans abroad unexplained and disconnecting them from the trends and events in the Middle East that helped inspire them, this self-imposed mental block has distorted our threat perceptions and greatly hampered the development of a realistic national security strategy.

So it is necessary to begin by recapitulating the obvious. The 9/11 assault on the United States was carried out by Muslim extremists motivated in large measure by their resentment of U.S. support for Israel and its actions. The need to avenge 9/11 and deter a repetition of it led directly to the American invasion of Afghanistan. The so-called “global war on terrorism” that this invasion inaugurated provided a spurious but politically sufficient justification for the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Our labeling of Hamas as a “terrorist organization” inspired the joint U.S.-Israeli effort to reject and overturn the results of the 2006 elections in the occupied territories, even though these elections were universally judged to be free and fair. A similar view of

Hezbollah caused the U.S. to encourage Israel in its savage mauling of Lebanon and to protect it from the huge international backlash against its more recent assault on Arab civilians in Gaza. Determination to avoid another 9/11 remains the strategic rationale for the ongoing war in Afghanistan and adjacent areas of Pakistan. Meanwhile, the insolent cruelties of the West Bank occupation and the siege of Gaza continue to inflame Arab and Muslim opinion.

Taken together, these developments have caused a growing number of Arabs and Muslims to posit a broad American crusade to humiliate them and their religion. Their estrangement from the United States and other non-Islamic societies has deepened. Al Qaeda has discredited itself through its excesses, but Islamic extremism has continued to metastasize. In Gaza, for example, political forces far more fanatical than Hamas are beginning to emerge from massive suffering. What began as a conflict between Jewish colonists and indigenous Arabs has become a worldwide struggle between Jews, Muslims, and their respective allies. As Israel's sole protector, the United States has become the target of sustained asymmetric warfare by terrorists who espouse extremist Muslim agendas. Governments allied with the United States or dependent on it – especially governments in Arab and Muslim countries – are targets too. The threat we Americans now face derives less from al Qaeda than it does from widening Muslim rage at continuing humiliation and injustice.

A just and durable peace in the Holy Land that secures the state of Israel should be an end in itself for the United States. But the fact that the conflict there enfevers and radicalizes the Islamic body politic worldwide should make the achievement of such a peace an inescapable, central task of United States strategy. This is why it was right for President Obama to take time this June to deliver a message of reconciliation to Arabs and Muslims at Cairo. Despite all the other urgent tasks before him, he has focused on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has repeatedly expressed determination to stabilize Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors through a "two-state" solution. The Obama Administration's initial efforts have, however, met with contemptuous rejection from Israel, feckless dithering from the Palestinians, and skepticism from other Arabs. This should not surprise us. It does not augur well.

The current government of Israel rejects trading land for peace. It sees itself as on the verge of achieving a level of colonization of Palestinian Arab land that will make anything resembling a Palestinian state physically impossible. In the exclusively Jewish state of Israel that its leading figures envisage, only Jews will be full citizens. Some Arabs will have limited rights but most will live in an archipelago of checkpoint-ringed ghettos. They will be free, should they wish, to call these ghettos a "state" but once they leave Palestine, Israel will not allow them to return. Given this Israeli vision, the American attempt to arrange a settlement freeze so that negotiations can create a Palestinian state is, from the Israeli government point of view, at best an unwelcome distraction and at worst a hostile act. Mr. Netanyahu does not fear pressure from the United States to change course. He is confident that his American lobby will arrange for Congress to punish the president if the president tries to punish Israel for its intransigence.

An Israeli cabinet-directed assassination campaign has long focused on ensuring that "there is no one to talk to" on the Palestinian side. With a little help from their Israeli conquerors and us Americans, surviving Palestinian politicians remain hopelessly divided. Israel has not presented a proposal for peace to the Palestinians. Sadly, if it now did so, there would be no one with the

authority to accept on behalf of the Palestinian people. The United States, meanwhile, is seeking to ease Palestinian suffering in ways that improve the political standing of collaborators with the Israeli occupation authorities. Will Palestinian leaders emerge who are willing to take whatever they can get from Israel and who are able somehow to call off the resistance to it? That seems to be the hope, if not the plan. It is not, of course, the trend.

The Obama administration is unwilling, at least for now, to put pressure on Israel. Instead, it has fallen back on the use of diplomacy as psychotherapy for Israel's political pathologies. It is trying to induce better Israeli behavior by arranging Arab gestures that appease Israeli apprehensions and signal Arab acceptance of the Jewish state in their midst even before its borders are fixed or the status of both its captive Arab population and those who fled to the refugee camps in neighboring countries is resolved. American diplomats see these gestures as down payments on the normalization of relations with Israel that the Arab League proposed at Beirut in 2002 in the so-called "Arab Peace Initiative." But the Arabs premised their willingness to accept Israel on Israel's reaching an acceptable agreement with the Palestinians. With Israel now neither doing nor promising anything that might lead to an acceptable status for the Palestinians, the Arabs see no reason to appease it. Nor do they any longer feel obliged by friendship to accommodate what they judge to be ill-considered American requests.

Adding poignancy to the impasse are two dreadful ironies. The state of Israel was established to provide the world's Jews with a homeland in which they might safely enjoy the pursuit of happiness free from continuing persecution by Gentiles. But the Jewish state has become the most dangerous place on the planet for Jews to live. And, with anti-Semitism now universally rejected in its traditional Christian heartland, Israel's actions and policies have become the only significant stimulus to anti-Jewish animus there and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the replacement of Zionist idealism, humanism, and secularism with the cynicism, racism, and religiosity of contemporary Israeli politics has precipitated a mounting moral crisis and loss of confidence among many committed to the Jewish state.

Although some settlers continue to arrive, one-fifth of Israelis now reside abroad. Jewish emigration is accelerating. Meanwhile, the Arab population of Israel and the occupied territories continues to grow, as does the size of the Palestinian Diaspora. By 2015, barring mass deportation, half the people in Israel and the occupied territories will be Arabs. Thereafter, Jews will be a declining minority. The international community, including I daresay most of the Jewish Diaspora, does not accept the settler propositions that Jews can and should by divine right entrench their rule over the Arabs of the Holy Land or define them as morally inconvenient and deport them. An anti-apartheid-style campaign of ostracism, boycott, and disinvestment against this version of a Jewish state has already begun.

In combination, current trends portend the perpetuation of violent struggle by the Palestinians against their Israeli overlords, even as the Jewish state is isolated from without and corrodes from within. These trends lead to escalating antagonism between the United States and the Arab and Muslim worlds. Given the self-identification of many Jews with the state of Israel, these trends also risk a rebirth of anti-Semitism and a spillover of violence to the Jewish Diaspora.

So where does this leave the Obama Administration's peace project? In Israel's own estimation and that of the region, the Jewish state is at a turning point. Time is running out on the prospects for peaceful engagement between it, the Palestinians, other Arabs, and non-Arab Muslims. No peace is conceivable without the full use of American moral and economic leverage to bring Israel to the negotiating table. A decision by the Obama Administration to compel Israel to make the choices necessary to achieve mutually respectful coexistence with the Palestinians and other Arabs would, however, lead to immediate political crises in both Israel and the United States. The Administration speaks with determination but is it really prepared to risk this? It is too early to say.

Peace with the Palestinians would enable Israel for the first time to be accepted by 340 million Arabs and 1.2 billion non-Arab Muslims as a legitimate part of the Middle East. It would end the conflict in the Holy Land. It is the key to deradicalization of the Arab and Muslim worlds and to ending their violent backlash against the West. It is the prerequisite for the restoration of peace within the realm of Islam.

The alternative is the current Israeli government's effort to impose a Jewish dominated state dotted with little Arab ghettos. This is a "success" that Israelis would almost certainly come bitterly to regret. Would a Jewish state seen by the world as embodying racism and religious bigotry retain the support of the Jewish Diaspora? Would the United States continue indefinitely to guarantee its security? The safety of such an Israel and its citizens would depend on the so-far undemonstrated ability of intimidation, ruthlessly sustained, to grind Arab resistance into acquiescence. Cairo and Amman would have to be kept within a Camp David framework that Egyptians and Jordanians, if allowed to vote, would even now overwhelmingly repudiate. Israel's right to exist as a state in the Middle East would almost certainly be reviewed in intermittent tests of arms, conducted – as in the case of the Crusader kingdoms in Palestine – over decades, if not centuries. Israel would have to sustain military hegemony in perpetuity over larger, ever more populous and ever more modernized Arab and Muslim neighbors. If these conditions were not met, as they almost certainly could not be, this unilaterally imposed outcome would be an invitation to protracted Arab and Muslim struggle against Israel and its supporters abroad.

It is hard to see this as a formula that leads to anything but eventual disaster for Israel and its foreign backers, now essentially limited to the United States. Israel's nuclear doctrine – based as it is on an amalgam of Armageddon with the heroic suicide at Masada – seems to recognize this. On the whole, for sensible people in Israel and for Americans, the peaceful emergence of a viable Palestinian state in the occupied territories and Gaza looks like a much better bet than self isolation..

In the meantime, the region presents other challenges – even if none of them has the transformative potential of a peace or continued warfare in the Holy Land. Let me now turn briefly to these.

It is good that the end of the American misadventure in Iraq is in sight. But its termination is not likely to repair the injury it did to the standing of the United States in either the international or Muslim communities. The "surge" averted disaster; the withdrawal may yet deliver it. The post-

occupation order in Iraq is unlikely to emerge smoothly or without further stressing regional stability. In the land between the two rivers, the United States will leave behind a battleground of grievances. The Kurdish and Sunni Arab minorities, among others, must likely undergo still more suffering before things settle down. There will be no harvest of goodwill from the carnage in Iraq.

The same seems likely to be true of our eight-year intervention in Afghanistan. We began it with simple and straightforward goals – the apprehension of al Qaeda and the chastisement of its Afghan hosts. But these goals have been buried in a barrage of competing ideological and special interest objectives. The result is combat in a political vacuum – a war whose only apparent theme is now Western hostility to militant Islam. This has destabilized Pakistan and nurtured a particularly virulent form of terrorism there and in the Pakistani Diaspora. It has spurred a recent surge in financial contributions to the Taliban as an apparently heroic resistance to infidel trespasses on Islam.

What then to do about Afghanistan, where everyone admits the most likely outcome is now failure? If you ask a religious scholar or ideologue, you will hear a sermon. From an economist, expect a development scheme. Ask an NGO and prepare to receive a program proposal. People come up with the solutions they know how to put together. Ask a general what must be done, and you will get a crisp salute and the best campaign plan military science can devise.

The Obama Administration is now pondering yet another military-proposed campaign plan. This one features a pacification effort extending over as much as another decade. But al Qaeda has relocated to Pakistan from Afghanistan. Neither the Taliban leadership nor anyone else in Afghanistan seems to want it back. The proposed pacification campaign is called a “strategy” but it is not. It strains to find a military way to transform Afghanistan, even though its authors – who are very smart soldiers – recognize there is none. Our civilian leadership finally shows signs of taking charge of policy rather than – in a strange evasion of civilian control of the military – delegating its formulation to the generals. What we need is a strategy backed by force, not the use of force as a substitute for strategy.

This brings me, at last, to Iran. Tehran had nothing to do with the assault on America on 9/11, but no nation has benefitted more from the American reaction to it than the Islamic Republic. Its revolution seemed to be flickering out when 9/11 happened. In short order, its greatest enemy, the United States, then eliminated its other enemies in both Kabul and Baghdad and embarked on a military rampage through the Islamic world that estranged Americans from our traditional allies there. But, wait! It gets even better from the Iranian point of view.

In Afghanistan, the Iranians have been able to sit on the sidelines and watch us exhaust ourselves in inconclusive warfare. In Iraq, Iran is the dominant foreign influence in Iraq’s newly sectarian politics. (Of course, no one can say whether Baghdad will continue its *de facto* alliance with Tehran after the United States withdraws.) Israel and the United States brushed aside efforts by Damascus to dilute its longstanding dependence on Tehran, thus cementing rather than eroding Iran’s influence in Syria. The 2006 Israeli savaging of Lebanon drove Iran’s client movement, Hezbollah, onto the commanding heights of Lebanese politics. This reduced Tehran’s need to go through Damascus to affect events in Lebanon or to reach northern Israel. Israeli and American

efforts to ostracize and overthrow the elected Hamas government in Palestine meanwhile left it nowhere to go but into the arms of Iran. Assertively Shiite Iran has, for the first time, acquired the Sunni Arab following it had long sought. Current American policy seems clueless about how to reverse these Iranian gains.

Meanwhile, Tehran seems on track to acquire the ability to field its own deterrent to the threats of nuclear attack Iranians have serially heard from Saddam's Iraq, successive Israeli governments, and George Bush's America. David Ben Gurion wrote the book on how to build a clandestine nuclear weapons capability. He skillfully appeased President Kennedy's passion for non-proliferation even as his government subverted and circumvented it. The ayatollahs have read and absorbed the Israeli playbook, minus – one hopes – the bit about Masada. Israelis, better than anyone, know how this script ends. It does not end in a war that secures Israel's nuclear monopoly in its region. It is time to start thinking about how to mitigate the undeniable dangers of an Iranian as well as an Israeli nuclear arsenal.

I must not close without a brief mention of the longstanding Arab friends of the United States and the West in the Gulf and Red Sea regions. Despite welcome new activism on the part of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council have to a great extent been bystanders as a strange combination of American diplomatic default and military activism has dismantled the regional order that once protected them. Iraq no longer balances Iran. The United States no longer constrains Israel, which has never behaved more belligerently. Iran has acquired unprecedented prestige and influence among Arabs and Muslims. The next stage of nuclear proliferation is upon the region. For the first time ever, Shi'ism dominates the politics of Arab states traditionally ruled by Sunnis. Islamist terrorism menaces Egyptian and Gulf Arab domestic tranquility as well as that of the West. The United States, once attentive to Arab security and other concerns, is now obsessed with our own issues and objectives in the region.

The Gulf Arabs have the financial resources but neither the institutions nor the will to mount the unified effort needed to cope with these challenges. They are adrift; not sailing to a new strategic strong point. The drift is taking them away from their traditional reliance on America and toward new partners. These are mainly the so-called BRIC countries of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, plus South Africa. But Egypt and the Gulf Arab states seem destined to remain on the strategic sidelines, not in the game. They will not step forward to take the lead in addressing the disputes of which I have been speaking. Hence the need for continuing American leadership.

So what is to be done? In the case of Israel-Palestine, a failure to decide is in fact a fateful decision. The avoidance of choice risks future tragedy for America as well as Israel and the Arabs.

The best thing the United States could do for Iraq now is to engage its neighbors. All should share our interest in supporting non-violent Iraqi solutions to Iraqi problems. We need to work with Turkey and Arab allies to enlist Syria, Iran, and others in this task and hold them to it.

In the region as a whole, the American effort to build a coalition of opposition to Iran has failed. We must now join our allies and friends in offering those who have come to depend on Tehran

alternatives to doing so. Iran is a proud country that will not surrender to threats. Iranians remain obsessed with the affront they believe we pose to their national identity, independence, and honor among nations. Without a parallel normalization of US-Iranian relations, there is no hope of resolving the nuclear issue in a way that mitigates its menace. President Obama's several messages to the Iranian people have opened a path to respectful Iranian-American dialogue that might lead to this. We must persist in inviting Tehran to walk this path with us.

Finally, in Afghanistan, we need a comprehensive strategy, not another campaign plan. We must leverage religious and tribal realities rather than seek to overturn them. Our objective should be to consolidate the exclusion of al Qaeda from Afghan territory. To do this, we must work with Pakistan and in partnership with friendly Arab and Muslim countries, not at cross purposes with them, and we must support, not undercut, the Pashtun tribes. This, not a Western military presence on Afghan soil, is how we helped Afghans expel the Soviets from their homeland. This, ratified by a reconvened Loya Jirga and supported with generous economic assistance, is how we can keep al Qaeda out of Afghanistan while we work to expel it from Pakistan.

President Obama's message to the world's Muslims at Cairo last June illuminated a different way forward than the road we appear to be on. We can yet take that way forward. It is time to do so.