

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS

17TH ANNUAL ARAB-U.S. POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE

“TRANSITIONING THE WHITE HOUSE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS”

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2008

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

1:30-3:00: "U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2008: VIEWS FROM THE ARAB WORLD"

Chair: Dr. Abderrahim Foukara – Washington Bureau Chief, *Al-Jazeera International* and former longtime BBC Correspondent

Speakers: Washington-based correspondents from the Arab press and analysts covering the Arab world

Mr. Hisham Melhem – Washington-based correspondent for *Annahar*, the leading Lebanese daily, *Al-Qabas*, the Kuwaiti daily, and *Radio Monte Carlo* in France. He is currently the host of "Across the Ocean", a weekly talk show for *Al-Arabiya*.

Ms. Dalia Mogahed – Senior Analyst and Executive Director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, a nonpartisan research center dedicated to providing data-driven analysis on the views of Muslim populations around the world. With John L. Esposito, Ph.D., she is coauthor of the book *Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think.*

Mr. Mohamed Elmenshawy – Editor-in-Chief of *Taqdir Washington*. Before joining *Taqdir Washington*, Elmenshawy worked as the managing editor for *Global Issues*, an Arabic-language bimonthly publication. He also served as a Washington correspondent for the daily pan-Arab newspaper *Asharq Alawsat* where he covered the White House, the State Department, and Congress.

Transcript by Ryan & Associates

DR. JOHN DUKE ANTHONY: Ladies and gentleman, many people focus inappropriately on the role of the media and its position in the discourse of people's effort to obtain relevant and truthful information and insight, and the relevance of both to enhance awareness, to increase knowledge and to deepen understanding. We have four individuals who do this all day, nearly every day of the week. And this has been their career. It represents among the four of them at least a century of effort of trying to tell the truth and do the right thing in the right way, for the right reasons, at the right time. It's an uphill battle and if indeed the media, in many cases in the United States, has confused and misled us, it also has enormous potential to approach the soft underbelly of objectionable policies, namely public attitudes and key to public attitudes is information and the media plays a central role in that, not a marginal one.

We have Doctor Abderrahim Foukara to chair this session. Many will remember him from last year when we asked him to speak as much from the heart as from the head in terms of Arab feelings toward the United States in their multifaceted dynamics, aspects and dimensions. Born in Morocco – Morocco not being a marginal country at all – it's an Arab country, Islamic country, Mediterranean country, African country – also happens to be without any competition, as America's first friend during the time of the Administration of our first President George Washington. He went to Great Britain and obtained his doctorate at Columbia on Western and Colonial Imperial Literature and American and Western Literature focusing on the apartheid system of South Africa. He worked for the BBC for at least a decade, this was when I first met him, before relocating to the United States to Boston and New York where he has been involved in educational programming ever since and been in Washington as the head of the bureau of Al Jazeera International for the last two years where he produces and hosts a program called "From Washington" to help millions of Arabs understand American issues and policies. Doctor Foukara..

[ABDERRAHIM FOUKARA] Thank you very much, Doctor Anthony. It's a real pleasure for me to be here today, to chair this panel. We are, as already has been pointed out, on the threshold of an American election obviously of historic importance.

This is actually my fourth election in terms of coverage. I covered 96, 2000, 2004 and now this one and as far as my memory can go back every time that I approached the election thinking this is a historic event but I think there's general consensus that this one is the one. For all the various reasons that we were going to try to look at in this panel. I'm obviously a journalist and we journalists tend to think that the world revolves around us. In some ways it does because we end up shaping perception. We, the four of us here, are responsible to one extent or another for shaping, or at least contributing to the shaping of Arab perception of this particular U.S. election. Without further ado I'm just going to open it up for discussion. I'm going to go to the panelists, introduce them quickly, and we'll get going.

Hisham Melham is the Washington based correspondent for *Annahar*, the leading Lebanese daily; *Al-Qabas*, the Kuwaiti daily; and Radio Monte Carlo in France. He is currently the host of *Across the Ocean* a weekly talk show for *Al Arrabiya*. Hisham can be seen as a contributor to various programs and he has tremendous experience on the Washington scene. It will be interesting to hear his insights.

Then we have Dalia Mogahed. She is Senior Analyst and Executive Director of the Gallup Center of Muslim Studies. A non partisan research center dedicated to providing data-driven analysis on the views of Muslim populations around the world. With John Esposito, she is co-author of the book “Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think.” She is based in Washington, DC.

Then we have Mohamed Elmenshawy. He is editor in chief of *Taqrir Washington*. Before joining *Taqrir Washington* Mr. Elmenshawy worked as the managing editor for *Global Issues*, an Arabic-language bi-monthly publication. He also served as a Washington correspondent for the daily pan-Arab newspaper Asharq Alawsat where he covered the White House, the State Department and Congress. Now we get down to it.

Hisham if I may start with you. As I said in my opening remarks there’s virtually universal consensus that this is a historic election whether you talk to people from Africa, Latin America, Asia, they all agree that this is a historic election. In what way do you think we Arabs see it as being historic as different from the way others in other parts of the world do?

[HISHAM MELHAM] The world that the next American President is going to inherit from George Bush, probably Barack Obama, or at least if the world had any say, they already voted for Barack Obama, the world that the new President will inherit including the Middle East is radically different than the world George Bush inherited from Bill Clinton eight years ago. This is a more brittle world, this is a world that is facing economic and political uncertainty. As you’ve seen in this country recently.

As far as the Middle East is concerned the region that now during the George Bush reign we call it the Greater Middle East after George Bush’s tsunami, or rampaging years, it’s more fragmented, politically, economically it’s facing a great deal of uncertainty with few islands of exceptions, such as in the Gulf, but even there, there’s new uncertainty on the horizon.

There is something that you haven’t seen in recent years, that is the rising tensions, the sectarian tensions between the Sunni and the Shia. Various entrenched Arab autocratic regimes as well as Iran, which is worse than autocratic, are facing tremendous social, economic challenges, not only from assertive and at times armed groups but also from the growing army of young men and women who are facing an uncertain future. Many of them are underemployed, many of them will be unemployed.

Beyond that obviously President Bush is going to bequeath to a new President two costly, bloody wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Two wars where we don’t see an end in sight anytime soon. A “war against terror” which is badly framed, conceptually flawed – because you cannot wage a war against a tactic – because terrorism is a tactic not an ideology. Instead of saying clearly we are waging a relentless, unmerciful, unending war against Al Qaeda and its like minded groups which will be understandable. Waging a war where we don’t talk about Crusades and where we don’t talk about Islamofacism, borrowing from European history and experiences things that are alien to the Middle East and then project them over the Arab and Muslim world.

Even the so-called Freedom Agenda that the President waged in the Middle East led to very painful results. In fact, George Bush, I give him credit, in his second inaugural speech he did say something that no previous American President since the Second World War dared to say, which is simply we the Americans through both Republican and Democratic administrations for the past 60 years looked the other way, when our buddies in the Arab and the Muslim world, our friends that we slept with were engaged in massive violations of the human rights of their own people, not their citizens, because they don't have citizens, they have subjects there -- and we look the other way in the name of stability, free flow of oil from the Gulf, and striking alliances with these regimes against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

There was this naïve approach on the part of the Bush Administration that if you have snap elections in societies in the Middle East you will have the right people elected. Someone should have reminded them that democracy requires tradition, vibrant – or more or less – lively civil societies, and yet in a region that was pulverized literally and physically by autocratic regimes since the Second World War, political life was destroyed. The so-called liberal era in between the First War and the Second War, in places like Egypt and Iraq, where you did have a semblance of political life, this was destroyed and then we had these elections, these snap elections, in which the wrong people as far as the Bush Administration, as far as I'm concerned got elected. So this legacy two unending wars, two bloody wars, a badly framed war on terror, a badly executed freedom agenda – this is the legacy that George Bush is going to leave.

Now one word about the [unintelligible] about this whole thing. There is very good reason to be fascinated with the American election this year. It is the first time we see a credible woman candidate, Hillary Clinton, getting almost 18 million people, and then you have the candidacy of Barack Obama, because of his biography, because of his history, because of his views, because where he grew up, he fascinates the whole world, including the Arab world, people are looking at this election with a mixture of fascination and cynicism, fascination and even horror.

And the cynicism is understood because in the year 2000, who were cheerleading George Bush because they thought that he was going to be like his father were disappointed obviously. So people would tell you nothing will happen. The Americans will continue to be, you know the friends of Israel and the friends of Arab autocratic regimes and nothing will change.

On the other hand people look at Obama and they would hope that his views on Iraq, withdrawal, timetable for withdrawal, engaging Iran, could lead to a new page with the Middle East. And I think it is going to be funny watching Mahmoud Ahmadinejad trying to demonize an American President whose full name is Barack Hussein Obama. Good luck, Ahmadinejad. So, if Obama is elected the world will be more charitable to America. They will probably give us a longer honeymoon, a longer grace period. And, one final word, it's funny in the Arab world when they, like the Europeans, like to lecture the Americans about tolerance and this and that. Many of my friends, people who studied in this country, speak beautiful English, got PhDs from the best American schools, come and whisper in my ear, "Do you really believe that the Americans will elect a black man?" They don't know that they are projecting their own silly, stupid biases and prejudices and discrimination on the American electorate and I tell them, "Yes." And if you want to know I voted for him. Anyway, the point is if Barack Obama is elected the world will be

more understanding of America and I think the world will give us some more time to sort out the mess that was created during the eight years of the Bush reign.

[FOUKARA] Thank you, Hisham. Dalia, just to pick up where Hisham left off. The issue of Barack Obama, if, and it's obviously a big if, all was hunky-dorie between the United States and the Arab world do you think the Arab world would have been excited and enthused about Barack Obama just on the merit that he is the first African-American candidate with a real shot at the Presidency?

[DALIA MOGAHED] Well, let me first start by asking the question, "Do Arabs believe that a change in the White House is a significant change in regards to policy toward their region." And the answer to that question is, the majority do not.

So we have asked people around the world and the majority of Muslim countries if they think the change in Administration will make a difference, and the majority either say they don't know or they say for sure they don't think a difference will occur, primarily in the Palestinian Territories where 73% say it will make no difference. So let's start with that as a basis.

What we're looking at is a contest between people who look at Barack Obama as a hope and people who are indifferent. So our election in the Arab world is between Obama and indifference. Very few people support McCain. Now is there significance to his biography, to the fact that he's a son of an African immigrant. I think the answer is definitely yes, but it's more anecdotal than anything that would be measured more broadly. I think the real story out of the Arab world when it comes to this election is as significant as it is, as you rightly point out, and as different as it looks to the world, the Arab public has become so cynical and essentially so short in hope when it comes to American policy that even Obama isn't succeeding in making them believe that anything will change. They are much more likely now to look to the East. China is much more popular in the Arab world than even Europe, and certainly more than the United States and, probably positively, they are much more likely to look inward, not toward their own government but toward themselves.

So when we ask Egyptians, what can Muslims do to help their own condition, the most frequent response Egyptians give is to stop depending on the United States, as just a spontaneous response, not something they are choosing from a list. So more and more I think we're losing influence and people are losing any hope that America is the answer.

[FOUKARA] Mohammed we all follow the debate here in the United States and we all hear the umpteen statements that are made every day about John McCain and Barack Obama but we also hear it from those two camps about how the media have covered them. We hear complaints from the McCain camp, that's what we've been hearing over the past couple of days, that the American media have been way too biased in favor of Obama. Now in the Arab world there are obviously over 20 different countries, there's even an even bigger number of Muslim countries. We know that Barack Obama is a dove in certain situations but he is a hawk in certain other situations when it comes to sitting with the Iranians and using diplomacy he is on the dovish side when it comes to dealing with Al Qaeda in Pakistan for example he's a hawk. Given this

diversity of sensibilities in the Arab and Islamic worlds, what is it that unites all countries of the region when it comes to favorability vis a vis Barack Obama?

[MOHAMED ELMENSHAWY] Actually when I look to the Arab world that I visited several countries in the past few months I see big division between the public and the elite in the Arab world looking at Obama. Public always asked will America ever elect a black son of poor immigrants who has some Islamic roots, educated in Islamic school in Indonesia. The answer is obvious, he's a step away from the White House. The elite connected to the ruling regimes don't really favor it. They don't really like someone who has come from nowhere, two years only in the Senate to head a state, not just a state the entire free world. The White House itself. A very traditional society. They admire age. And they don't understand this two years old senator asked his running mate who is 30 years older in the Senate to be his assistant or vice president here. They can't get it. The dynamics of American politics and American life is not understandable among the elite level in the Arab world. Because they like the status quo and the rule of old people unfortunately.

When we talk about the public and I mean here the youths as we know, Arab countries are very useful in terms of the numbers, 70 percent or plus are younger than 35 years old and they are really excited to a point I never saw before about the American public about the Obama thing. America that they really don't like. If you look at any Gallup poll. 90 percent of average Arabs don't like anything about the United States politics or American political system, or foreign policy, especially after 9/11, invasion of Iraq, relationship with Israel, or Afghanistan war and occupations there. They can't understand with all this negative media, Arab media portraying as it is not necessarily negative they can't imagine with these realities Americans are coming close to elect that Obama thing, that two years old senator, who happened to be, has some Islamic roots.

And after 9/11 to imagine a President in America who has any Islamic roots it's unimaginable in the Arab world. So youths I believe are very excited. They have some hope in Obama. It's maybe illusion here because no doubt they will be disappointed whether Obama wins because it won't make a great difference in their immediate lives and they will have great disappointment if McCain wins of course.

The media like any other media, most Arab professionals in the media are highly educated like Americans, they lean toward the most intelligent candidate in this campaign who is obviously Obama, so are no different compared with European or Asian or even American media favoring Obama for the White House.

[FOUKARA] Thank you. I think now we can open it up for discussion and questions from the audience.

[ANTHONY] One that was provided was to have you comment on the position and roll and influence of advertisers on the editorial content and overall news coverage and questions of self-censorship. If it was true even as early as 1967 and James Reston's book, "The Artillery of the Press," that 75 percent of media revenues come from advertisers and that more recently that figure seems to be around 85% and that people pull their ads when they see critical articles

toward U.S. foreign policy either toward the Palestinians or toward Israel, and that.. they are within their legal rights to do that, and that publications' shareholders are driven by the bottom line. They don't want any advertisers to pull their ads.

Can you comment on this aspect and what if anything can be done about it? And is it a kind of dealmaker or breaker for the American media dealing with these issues?

[FOUKARA] Any takers?

[MOGAHED] No.

[MELHAM] Briefly, the media scene in America and the media scene in the Arab world and world in general has changed radically in the last 10-15 years, because of the satellite phenomena, because of the blogosphere, and the diminution of, if you will, the old control of the few networks, few executives, few publications in fact.

This changing media landscape is making it difficult for the old practices to remain including the power of the advertisers. I don't want to diminish that but .. and I have, I know this is somewhat unorthodox for Arab reporters. I am not a basher of American media. I used to be more strident of my critique of American media 25 years ago when I started in this business in this city. But I've seen the trajectory of what happened in the past 25 years and I can give you chapter and verse about how the American media has improved a lot, especially print media. When you talk to Arabs they talk about the American media, they say American media is synonymous with Fox. Well, no, American media is not synonymous with Fox. And great things are published by the American media. Great things are published by the American media. The American media covered the Shabra and Shatila massacres in a more dignified professional way than all the Arab media put together. Make no mistake.

It was the American media that uncovered Abu Ghraib. *The New Yorker* and CBS. It was the American media that talked about the, that revealed that the CIA is in charge of an international prison system. *Washington Post*. It was the media that uncovered the NSA's involvement in listening probably some of our conversations overseas. That was the *New York Times*. It was the media that uncovered certain massacres in Iraq, such as Haditha. This was *Time* magazine.

This is the American media which I criticized during the run up of the Iraq war because they did not engage in the usual cynical questioning of authority and they did engage later on, a few months afterward, when we found out that there were no weapons of mass destruction and all that nonsense and there was no relationship between Al Qaeda and that awful regime of Saddam Hussein. They did engage in their own version of self-flagellation and mea culpa.

I've always said and I will continue to say that the American media always get the story right. The problem with the American media is that they do not get the story right at the right time, sometimes. Look at the editorial today in the *Washington Post* about Rasheed Khalidi and the dumbing of America by the McCain campaign which keeps insulting the intelligence of the American people on a daily basis.

And look at how people saw and dealt with General Colin Powell when he said what he said on Meet the Press. Yes, some people still demonize the Arabs and some people still demonize Islam in this country. And of course on the other side we still have our nuts too. But today you can still find serious reporting on Iraq in the American media, although in the last few years because of the violence we didn't see that. But nobody in the Arab world writes as beautifully as Anthony Shadid when he was writing about Iraq and what that war did about Iraq. I remember when the Israelis, you know, during the first days of the Intifada. On the front page of the *New York Times*, Deborah Sontag's dispatches from the occupied territories. First rate journalism. Even the *Wall Street Journal*.. you can still find.. the *Wall Street Journal*, by the way, if you overlook the editorial "BS", sometimes gives you good reporting. It was the Wall Street Journal that said initially after Abu Ghraib that the International Red Cross sent the American army a detailed study talking about the abuse at Abu Ghraib. The *Wall Street Journal* which supported the war!

When we talk about the American media I guess we should be a little bit, more sophisticated than sometimes you read in the Arab media about the American media.

[MOGAHED] Let me just add to that that I think that everything that's just been said is true and America's print media is definitely much better than our television media. But unfortunately if you look at viewer ship and where people actually get their news it is primarily from TV news media and the most watched TV channel is Fox News.

If we look at the.. So the source of information for the general American public is TV news media, primarily Fox News, which has many, many more viewers than say CNN or BBC certainly. If you look at Fox News and if you look at just the three top TV news media, a firm out of Germany called Media Tenor did a media content analysis over the period of, the beginning of 2007 until March of 2008 and looked at how Islam and Muslims were portrayed in that time period of about 18 months and what they found was that the majority of coverage on Islam was negative. They actually went and did a qualitative analysis of all statements made. And in news, this isn't just editorials, it should be neutral. It shouldn't be positive, it shouldn't be negative. But when you have the majority as negative that's alarming.

The other thing is they looked at protagonists. Who was representing Islam? They found that 53% of the time it was militants. So if you look at 53% of representation of a faith is militants, when militants only make up only a fraction of 1% of the actual population of Muslims this is alarming. And what we found in our research at Gallup what we found was that during this time period Americans views of Muslims went from a negative 4 to a negative 17. From the beginning of 2007 until March 2008 it actually got worse despite the fact that there were no terrorist attacks during that time period and the violence in Iraq had actually improved. So the American news media is having a detrimental effect on American public opinion when it comes to Muslims in spite of the fact that world events have actually improved.

[FOUKARA] Dalia, if I may call on you again on a question. If I could urge all three of you to be brief to the extent possible because we are running out of time and we have an awful lot of questions and issues to go through. There's a question specifically addressed to you from the

audience asking what are the differences between the opinions of Arab-Americans and Arabs in the Arab world.

[MOGAHED] I unfortunately can't answer that because we haven't completed our Muslim-American data set yet. That will be completed at the end of this year. So I can't answer the question.

[FOUKARA] Hammed, we have another question from the audience and they're asking about the reaction of Muslim elites to Obama's speech a few months ago before AIPAC.

[ELMENSHAWY] It was very negative in the Arab media. It was reported all over the main media, Arab major outlets in the Arab world. And there's no surprise here. Yet last week Colin Powell had the great statement about Obama and whether if he were a Muslim what's wrong with being a Muslim and running for the White House. Unfortunately it was not widely reported in the Arab media as the report about Obama's speech further back in June of this year.

[FOUKARA] And I'll stay with you for the next question. Can any American President recover the image of the United States in the Arab world, and what should be the first steps a new American President should take?

[ELMENSHAWY] The American image is really a complicated issue. I doubt any President will be able to fix the entire problem, yet Obama's victory will be a great correction in the right direction, to correct American image. It will be very difficult for American enemy abroad to attack America based on racial, or anti-Islamic or biased, or money role, or Jewish lobby as stereotype for attacking America in the region. I believe it will be very, very difficult for America's enemies to attack it based on these realities.

What the next American President should do is very difficult. Because America in the region is there. There are a quarter of a million Americans in the Middle East, in the Arab world, in the form of occupation in Iraq, or scholars in Egypt or Syria, or expats in any international organizations there.

So America is the reality in the region. So to get by it is very difficult. What any Arab would wish is for America to be a leading force to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, but it has been adjusted for 60 years and any realistic analyst will not expect to fix it in the next Administration or the next few years. What he is supposed to be doing if he is elected the President is, I believe, to distance himself a little bit from Arab regimes. If he talks directly to Arab people they may listen. But this hypocrisy of dealing with non-democratic regimes is very difficult for Arabs to like anything about America when they are distancing themselves from the values that America stands for.

[FOUKARA] Hisham, we have a similar question but coming at it from a slightly different angle. Many have said that a new U.S. President should go on a listening tour early in his term. Specifically in the case of Barack Obama given all the flack that he's been getting about trying to distance himself from Arabs and Muslims in this country is there any practical value in him undertaking such a tour in the region.

[MELHAM] After Karen Hughes' disastrous listening tour I wouldn't advise the Barack Obama Administration engage in a quick listening tour. It's not a question of a listening tour. I mean it's not that, as if we don't know what's happening there. As if someone tells you I have new ideas about how to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Give me a break. We all know how it should be resolved. We all know the contours of a peace. We all know what's ailing America's relations with the Arab and Muslim world. And by the way if he speaks to Arabs, I'm going to tell you he's going to talk to the Arabs the way he talked to the African-Americans. He's going to give them some tough love. And he's not going to tell them, "Oh, you Muslims are great people." And he shouldn't say that. He shouldn't say that. Because there are so many things that are rotten in that whole world that we call the Muslim world. And the people are in the main responsible for what is rotten in the Kingdom of Islam, in the Arab world.. they are Muslims and Arabs themselves. But when we talk about America's image in the Arab world, let me tell you, perceptions and images change, they are not etched in stone. For most of America's history with the Arabs, America's legacy in the Arab world was positive. Arabs and Muslims looked up to America. They loved the Wilsonian declarations. They loved the fact that the United States did not have a colonial legacy in the Arab and Muslim world. They loved the fact that the Americans did not rule over Muslims, like the Brits, the French, the Spaniards, even the Italians for crying out loud. Okay? Things started to go south in 1948. Dwight Eisenhower corrected it in 1956. John F. Kenney was lionized in Algeria because he supported the Algerian fight for independence.

Things could change if there is a different American approach to the problems of the Arab world, including the Arab-Israeli conflict because there are more problems in the region that go beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict. But perceptions do change and I think if Obama is elected President he is going to say some tough things to the Arabs and Muslims which he should as long as he couples that with a different approach that takes them seriously, treats them as grown ups, and listen and change certain American attitudes and policies in the Middle East.

Things are not going to happen immediately and quickly. He will be the President of the United States but he will not be an absolute ruler and there will be constraints, which we have seen even during the campaign. So I hope the Arabs don't have too high hopes as many Americans do, pin them on this young man, because the world that he is going to inherit is going to be a messy one. And it's going to take more than four years, believe me, to fix the damage inside this country.

So, those who are saying we are going to enter a new period as happened in 1932 with the great FDR. Well, FDR was elected four times and then he made the changes. I don't know I think we're going to need eight years of Barack Obama. I think we're going to have to pray for him, even people like me who don't pray often.

[FOUKARA] Certainly some provocative food for thought there. Hammed, another question about Barack Obama from the audience and it's asking about the extent of the Arab world's awareness of the issue of terrorism being used to smear Obama, as the question says, by associating him with the Arabs here in the United States.

[ELMENSHAWY] This kind of news is widely reported in the Arab media. The average newspaper in any Arab country dedicated at least two pages on average to American news. So any bit of news we hear here in no time is reported there. And thanks to technology there's nothing hidden any more about America. America is very accessible today as compared to any time I've ever been here and details about American political life, American election is all over there, and TV stations and web sites news, and daily newspapers, and blogs, and forums, and *Facebook* as well.

There are a lot of .. of Arabs and Muslims who are for Obama and for Democratic nominee in Congress in general. So what, all these kind of attacks against Obama here based on his connection to Palestinian professors, or Islamists, or Arab money is widely reported there. Yet as good news it's on the same page you may find a poll by Gallup or Reuters showing Obama ahead in major states by two digits. So there's bad news and good news. I believe this has created confusion for most Arabs based on his Islamic connection as used by the McCain campaign and then on the part of the same page he's leading in the poll. I think it's very healthy to see this kind of America in our newspaper.

[FOUKARA] We have another question addressed specifically to you Hammed. In light of the amazing use the Obama campaign has made of the electronic media and the question is asking how has the blogosphere changed the atmosphere, structure and impact of journalism in the Arab world and who reads what you, personally, write electronically. Do you think you have a stronger or weaker impact on opinion than the print media in the Arab world?

[ELMENSHAWY] I work for a non-profit organization, an American non-profit organization. We are free of money influence, and advertisement. We have no advertisement and we have no government role. We have just money from foundation like Ford and Carnegie of New York and private citizens like yourself here. And this gives me and my news agency, *Taqrir Washington*, a great freedom in reporting America as I understand, as I live it here.

And we are trying to be free reporters for Arab media that are not privileged to have resources to have a place in Washington here. So our free reporting to many newspapers that cannot afford to be here. So what we write is reprinted in dozens of newspapers every week. And we are a weekly news service so far. And they like to take from us what they can't find in the mainstream Arab media outlets.

We cover like no one else, I claim, the Congress.. the election in Congress which is forgotten in the major newspaper and media outlets in the Arab world. We care much more about the American situation about the Congress and the role of Congress in the Arab media. Sadly there is no such Congressional reporter in any Arab news agency or TV stations, that have the resources.

That's led to a bigger issue of how to deal as Arab government or Arab embassies or Arab public even, with the Congress. We have serious problem and maybe it's driven by the fact that we are very centralized in our region on the Presidency, the head of the state and we think America is similar in focusing on the White House and no other part of the region.

When you write some stories about Arab-Americans in a positive way which really doesn't make news in many major newspapers it's widely reprinted and we try to present as well the America that other media can't afford to provide like book reviews and event summaries, which we have weekly on a deadline once a week. So we have better advantage compared to other media because they are working through the hours but I work through the day..

[FOUKARA] Dalia, we have an issue concerning, not directly though, immigration. It's a subject of great importance, as you probably know in the Arab world given the numbers of people who have over the years emigrated from the region. And the merit of that alone, there's obviously a special way of perceiving Barack Obama being the son of an immigrant father.

The question says why did you describe Obama as the son of poor immigrants? Certainly wealth is relative, but he is for sure the son of scholars. His father has a PhD and he was an economist and his mother was a PhD and an anthropologist.

[MOGAHED] I don't think I described him as the son of poor immigrants. What I meant to say, and thought that I did say, was that he was the son of an African immigrant. It's more that he had, one of his parents was an immigrant and the other was, of course, a natural born American.

I think that his biography, like I said, is significant and does make people question their old assumptions about America. And often times I've heard from people the same question that we just heard from Mohammed, will Americans ever elect a black man whose middle name is Hussein. It completely flies in the face of everything that people believe about America. And I think that electing him will imbue more new hope in the American public, but not necessarily new hope in policy changes. That's the distinction that I am trying to make.

What we asked people to tell us how much hope they place in different approaches to changing U.S. policy. The thing that they said was most significant, that they had most hope in, was the American public putting pressure on their government. It got more.. People put more hope in it than dialogue between leaders from both countries, more hope than specifically Muslim Americans being active, more hope than their own governments' diplomatic approaches, and much, much more hope than local protests in their countries or, of course, terrorist attacks against American civilians.

So if there is any hope it is placed in the American people and the election of Obama will be, I think, seen as a renewed hope in those American values that people believe the American people hold. But that change, I don't think, people have, they don't have the unrealistic expectations that we might assume they do, because many people are saying they don't think a change in the White House will actually be a change in reference to policies toward their country.

[FOUKARA] Okay, I think we only have very few minutes left in this panel. Let me throw another question at you. This is actually from the audience directed specifically to you. It is about your book. It says, "Your book, coauthored with John Esposito, has become the target of significant criticism largely on political grounds." How do you respond to that?

[MOGAHED] Well, I would differ with the word significant. It's not significant at all. We've had significant praise and I'm very proud to say from a wide spectrum of intellectuals in this country ranging from a conservative like Dinesh D'Souza, to someone who supported the Iraq war like Ken Pollack, to Desmond Tutu, to the former CIA head of the Bin Laden Unit Michael Scheuer, so we've actually had wide ranging praise from a spectrum of intellectuals and the criticism has been from a very narrow point of view and it has not been significant although it has been echoed in the right wing blogosphere.

My response is that the data stands for itself. The data speaks for itself. And Gallup is a name that is not going to risk its reputation on putting out something that is biased and isn't accurate. Basically at the end of the day, Gallup as a name, to be a name into the future it is in its self-interest to be completely objective and accurate. And those who are criticizing it, it is in their self-interest to be biased and political. So look at self-interest and you can decide for yourself who is who might be telling it like it is.

FOUKARA Hisham has a commitment, which he has to go and take care of. So Hisham if you would like to..

MELHAM ..like to be released.

FOUKARA ..we'll release you. I have one more for you. By the way, Doctor Anthony has a question for you.

ANTHONY It's one from here. It says assume that the media is far more effective and influential in educating people in knowledge and understanding. And then freeze that thought. And then contrast it with another reality where this one deals with the American political finance campaigns and the role of money and the politicization of America's electoral dynamics.

The reference is to Richard Clarke's, the former National Security Advisor for Counterterrorism, book recent out, "Your Government Failed You," in which he writes that in each administration there are 9000 political appointees that the President has very little leeway to reject because these 9000 are thrust upon her or him by the donors to their campaign war chests in the primaries and general election. And many of these individuals agree to contribute only after they ask the candidates what would be their position on Jerusalem, or Palestine, or Iran, and in order to get their check the candidate was in a corner. So the question is, that as most of these check writers are not the niece of Desmond Tutu, or the nephew of Nelson Mandela or the sister of Mother Theresa, even if the media made a profound change, what difference would it really make?

MELHAM Look, we've written a lot about the role of money in American politics and we've seen it this year and there is this huge debate about public financing and maybe we should go that route. This is a capitalist society money talks, unfortunately, and you always go back to the original framers of the Constitution when they were talking about an informed citizenry. And I still think, notwithstanding the role of money, people in society if they are very well informed and if they are driven by a sense of fairness.. yeah, in fairness.. they can still change things.

When you talk about lobbies. Arabs love to talk about lobbies. The pro-Israel lobby. This lobby and that lobby. There is something fascinating about this country, which undermines democracy.

I'll give you one example about two lobbies. The National Rifle Association, the NRA. And then the pro-Israeli lobby, let's say AIPAC. It's not secret. I don't believe in this whole nonsense about the Jewish cabal and all that shit. It doesn't exist. The point is.. there are certain criteria for the success of any lobby, particularly a lobby that generates a great deal of enthusiasm and controversy. A majority of the American people support gun control. And yet we don't have gun control specifically because we have a powerful lobby. Now what happens with this lobby. The members of this lobby participate in every electoral cycle -- local, national, state level, whether there's a blizzard or sunshine they always vote. These people provide funds and money and they are driven by enthusiasm for that single cause. These are the three magic ingredients.

Now on the Palestine issue. Most American people -- I'll give you a million opinion polls -- either support a Palestinian state or don't mind a Palestinian state. And yet we don't see the Congress crazy about this. Although now in the last few years, ten years, whatever, everybody is talking about a two state solution, along the line of '67 or whatever. Why? Because there is a small, vocal group of people, American Jews and their friends, and the pro-Israeli lobby friends, as John McCain keeps telling his people, are not necessarily Jews. I'm frightened more by the religious right in that lobby, if you want to call it, than the liberal Jews with whom I agree on a lot of things, not on Israeli policy or Israeli settlements. But there is enthusiasm. People contribute funds and Jews in this country because they are highly educated, and highly involved in politics as they should, like other minorities, like the Armenians, the Greeks, the Lebanese, whatever, they vote with larger proportion than the average American -- the average "Joe the Plumber" and the "Sixpacks."

There are ways of dealing with these things. Instead of complaining about this money, contribute money! Play a role, be an informed citizen, get into it, go into the arena. In this country, notwithstanding what we read sometimes people can do things. And, whether we're talking about the struggle of labor movement in this country, or talking about women for universal suffrage, or whether we're talking about the struggle of the African Americans, or other minorities, the history of this country is written by people like that, who struggled and who worked and walked in the streets, found them facing dogs, you name it. This is still a democracy and this whole notion that everybody who writes a check is going to ask the President what are your views on Jerusalem, I don't necessarily buy. And I can tell you a lot of Jews are giving money who don't like Israeli politics. They don't like Israeli politics!

Many of my Jewish friends and others who are as horrified by what the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians, write about these things and they talk about these things, and.. so it's not that we don't have allies in this society. It's just sometimes Arabs as always, and I don't want to generalize because you know, they love to complain. And they roll their heads and they talk about conspiracies and you know they don't do what they are supposed to do. Go into the arena. Be enthusiastic about a cause. Try to pay some money if you have some money. And vote, and vote, and vote. As I did.

Gotta go.

FOUKARA Thanks, Hisham. I think on that note we'll conclude this panel.

Thanks very much Hisham Melham. Thanks also to Dalia Mogahed and Hammed Elmenshawy.
Doctor Anthony, thank you very much.

ANTHONY Thank you Doctor Foukara.
