It really is an honor to have been asked once again to address this important annual conference on U.S.-Arab relations. The theme of this year’s discussion is “transition within constancy.” I confess I’m still trying to figure out what that means. My best guess is that it’s something like “progress without change” – a policy approach that only Saudi Arabia has ever managed to pull off. In many ways, however, “change without progress” would be a more accurate description of most of the conundrums in the Middle East. It’s my task this morning to briefly describe where the United States, where we Americans are in the Middle East and to do so without anyone having a heart attack or die from terminal depression. It’s quite a charge.

We are not in an encouraging position in the Middle East. We are less free of Iraq than we wish we were; groping for the exits without a plan in Afghanistan; uncertain how to deal with the Arab uprisings and their aftermath; dabbling from the sidelines in the Syrian civil war; stalemated with Iran and at odds with a belligerent Israel over it; snookered in the Holy Land; nowhere in the affections of the world’s Muslims; and in sometimes deadly peril on the Arab street.

Almost a decade ago, the United States invaded and occupied Iraq. Advocates of the operation assured us that this would be “a cakewalk” that would essentially pay for
The ensuing war claimed at least 6,000 American military and civilian lives. It wounded 100,000 U.S. personnel. It displaced 2.8 million Iraqis and – by conservative estimate – killed at least 125,000 of them, while wounding another 350,000. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq will ultimately cost American taxpayers at least $3.4 trillion, of which $1.4 trillion represents money actually spent by the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and intelligence agencies during combat operations; $1 trillion is the minimal estimate of future interest payments; and $1 trillion is future health care, disability, and other payments to the almost one million American veterans of the war.

The only way to assess military campaigns is by whether they achieve their objectives. Outcomes – not lofty talk about a tangle of good intentions – are what count. In the case of Iraq, a fog of false narratives about weapons of mass destruction, connections to al Qaeda, threats to Iraq’s neighbors, and so forth left the war’s objectives to continuing conjecture. None of the goals implied by these narratives worked out. Instead, the war produced multiple “own goals.”

Those who urged America into war claim Iraq was a victory for our country. If so, judging by results, the Bush administration’s objective must have been to assure the transfer of power in Iraq to the members of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, all of whom had spent the previous twenty years in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The former “Decider” made doubly sure of this outcome when Sunni and Shiite nationalist forces, like those of Sayyid Muqtada Al-Sadr, threatened the pro-Iranian politicians the United States had installed in Baghdad. Bush “surged” in additional troops to ensure that these politicians remained in office. And there they abide.

The neoconservative authors of the “surge” claim to have produced an important American victory through it. Certainly, in terms of its immediate objective of tamping down violent opposition to the regime, the “surge” was a tactical success. Still, one can only wonder about the sanity of people who argue that consolidating ethnic cleansing in Baghdad while entrenching a pro-Iranian government there represented a strategic gain for our country. The very same band of shameless ideologues, militarists, and armchair strategists who brought off that coup now clamor for an assault on Iran. One wonders why anyone in America still listens to them. Anywhere else, they would have been brought to account for the huge damage they have done.

If the United States invaded Iraq to demonstrate the capacity of our supremely lethal armed forces to reshape the region to our advantage, we proved the contrary. We never lost a battle, but we put the limitations of U.S. military power on full display.

If the purpose was to enhance U.S. influence in the Middle East, our invasion and occupation of Iraq helped bring about the opposite. Iraq is now for the most part an adjunct to Iranian power, not the balancer of it that it once was. Baghdad stands...
with Tehran in opposition to the policies of the United States and its strategic partners toward Bahrain, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Iran itself, including Iran’s nuclear programs. Iraq’s oil is now propping up the Assad regime in Syria. Iraq bought a big package of American weapons and training as we withdrew. But it’s already clear that its future arms purchases will come mainly from Russia and other non-American sources.

If the point was to prove that secular democracy is a viable norm in the Middle East, events in Iraq have borne savage witness to the contrary. The neoconservatives asserted with great confidence that the fall of a corrupt and tyrannical regime would pave the way for a liberal democratic government in Iraq. This was a profound reading of history as well as Iraqi realities. The Salafist awakening and the sectarian conflagration kindled by our attempted rearrangement of Iraqi politics have not abated. Sectarian conflict continues to scorch Iraq and to lick away at the domestic tranquility of its Arab neighbors in both the Levant and the Gulf.

If the aim of our invasion and occupation of Iraq was to eliminate an enemy of Israel and secure the neighborhood for the Jewish state, we did not succeed. Israel’s adversaries were instead strengthened even as it made new enemies – for example, in Turkey – and began petulantly to demand that America launch yet another war to make it safe, this time against Iran. Mr. Netanyahu wants America to set red lines for Iran. Everyone else in the region wishes the United States would set red lines for Israel.

If the idea was to showcase the virtues of the rule of law and American-style civil liberties, then our behavior at Abu Ghraib, our denial of the protections of the Geneva Conventions to our battlefield enemies, and our suspension of habeas corpus (as well as many other elements of the Bill of Rights) at home put paid to that. These lapses from our constitution and the traditions of our republic have left us morally diminished. They have greatly devalued our credibility as international advocates of human rights, human freedoms everywhere, not just in the Middle East. We have few ideological admirers in the Arab world or broader Islamic worlds these days. Our performance in Iraq is part of the reason for that.

All this helps to explain why most Americans don’t want to hear about Iraq anymore. A few weeks ago, the Congress failed to authorize funding for the continuation of the military training mission in Iraq, forcing the Pentagon to come up with the money internally. Almost no one here noticed. On one level, the failure to fund a relationship with the Iraqi military through training represents a shockingly casual demonstration of the willingness of American politicians to write off the many sacrifices of our troops and taxpayers in our Iraq war.

On another, it is an example of America’s most endearing political characteristic: our capacity for nearly instant amnesia. (“Iraq war? What Iraq war? You mean we sacrificed the lives and bodies of one hundred thousand Americans and took on debt equivalent to one fourth of our GDP to occupy and refashion
Iraq? Really? Why?”) They say the test for Alzheimer’s is whether you can hide your own Easter eggs. Apparently, we Americans can.

Failure is a much better teacher than success, but only if one is willing to reflect on what caused it. Our intervention in Iraq was a disaster for that country as well as for our own. It reshaped the Middle East to our disadvantage and to that of our friends. Yet, we shy away from attempting to understand our fiasco even as those who led us into it urge us to reenact it elsewhere.

The military lessons we took away from Iraq have so far also proven hollow or false. When applied in Afghanistan, where we have now been in combat for more than eleven years, they haven’t worked. Analogies from other conflicts are not a sound basis for campaign plans, especially when they are more spin than substance. “In for a billion, in for half a trillion” is no substitute for strategy, let alone grand strategy.

Communities engaged in resistance to the imposition of government control where it has never before intruded do not see themselves as insurgents but as defenders of the established order. Counterinsurgency doctrine is irrelevant when there is no state with acknowledged legitimacy against which to rebel, no competent or credible government to buttress in power, and no politics untainted by venality, nepotism, and the drug trade to uphold. Pacification by foreign forces is never liberating for those who experience it. Foreign militaries cannot inject legitimacy into regimes that lack both roots and appeal in the communities they seek to govern.

One cannot reap the fruits of politico-military victories one has not won. Military reinforcements are not a substitute for policy failure. Surges don’t work when there is no regime with a strong, independent power base for the additional troops to prop up. Invading men’s homes and humiliating them in front of their wives and children does not endear them to new codes of conduct, still less instill feminist values. No one can one beat a set of ideas – even bad ideas – with targeted killings of militants, especially when the definition of a militant is anyone killed during a drone attack. Drones multiply enemies, fuel rage, and invite indiscriminate reprisal. They ensure that we will never run out of terrorists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Horn of Africa, Yemen, and elsewhere.

There is an international consensus that it’s time to leave Afghanistan, letting Afghans be Afghans. After eleven years of combat, we’re all out of patience and pretty much out of money. So far, the United States alone has spent about $575 billion in Afghanistan. Almost 2,000 Americans have died and 16,000 have been seriously wounded in Afghanistan. In the end, the Afghan war is likely to cost us, our children, and our grandchildren about $1.5 trillion – all of it borrowed. That’s about $50,000 per person in a country where the per capita income is about $1,000.

In Chicago last May, NATO agreed on a broad exit plan reminiscent of “Vietnamization.” It’s only thirty-seven years – less than two generations – since
Saigon fell. Did our political elite really forget everything we learned in Vietnam? Apparently so. In any event, in Afghanistan, as happened in Vietnam, we’re in final fallback mode. The plan this time is to train Afghans to be soldiers for their national government, not just natural warriors committed to the defense of their tribes and clans. But when those being trained are so uncommitted to this cause and so annoyed by the demeanor of their foreign trainers that they kill them, it’s hard to take “Afghanization” seriously as an exit strategy.

Al Qaeda fled Afghanistan during the battle of Tora Bora in December 2001. There has always been a possibility under the Pashtunwali (the ten ethical principles that define honor for the Pashtun people) that the Taliban might join other Afghans in agreeing to deny reentry to anti-American terrorists, including al Qaeda or other movements like it. It’s never been conceivable that religious Afghans would agree to adopt Western norms for their country’s governance. No one can say we haven’t made a serious effort to transform Afghanistan, but it’s time to admit that some designs are beyond reach.

When we entered Afghanistan in 2001, we had no thought of transforming the place. Our aim was simply to bar “terrorists with global reach” from using its territory as a sanctuary or training ground in which to prepare further assaults on America and Americans. A deal that supported this essential but limited objective of strategic denial, but not the remodeling of Afghan mores, has long been open to us. Sadly, however, it may now be too late for an agreement with all concerned to deny bases to Islamist terrorists.

How much that actually matters is a question on which reasonable men and women might differ. Whatever they may think of jihadis, there can be few Afghans eager to invite further foreign intervention in their country by once again harboring “terrorists with global reach.” But it’s still worth a try to try to formalize an understanding on this. After all, that would vindicate our original purpose in invading the place.

Afghanistan itself has become largely irrelevant to the problem of global terrorism but the unfortunate net effect of our operations there has been to ignite a broader struggle with the Muslim world. The result has been to entrench anti-American terrorists in Pakistan, Yemen, parts of North Africa and the Sahel, and a few places in Europe and Asia, not to exorcise or contain them. Calling off the attempt to pacify Afghanistan would remove it as the potent symbol of American crusade against conservative Islam because that’s what it has become.

This brings us back to the causes of virulent anti-Americanism and its spread. For anyone with an open mind, these causes are not hard to understand. The fanatics who carried out the atrocities of 9/11 went out of their way to describe their motivations and outlined their objectives to anyone who would listen to them. America turned off its hearing aid. It’s still off. The grievances that catalyzed 9/11 remain not simply unaddressed but ignored or denied by Americans.
Al Qaeda saw 9/11 as a counterattack against American policies that had directly or indirectly killed and maimed large numbers of Muslims. Some of those enraged by our policies were prepared to die to achieve revenge. Still, there were very few in the Muslim world in 2001 who sympathized with al Qaeda’s attack on us. There are many more now. It is not our values that they hate. It’s what we have done and continue to do. We won’t stop terrorists by trying to impose our narrative on them while ignoring theirs, however politically expedient it may be to do so. We can’t fight anti-American extremists effectively or otherwise fend off the menace they present if we refuse to consider why they attacked us and why they still want to do so.

The chief planner of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, testified under oath that a primary purpose of al Qaeda’s criminal assault on the United States was to focus "the American people . . . on the atrocities that America is committing by supporting Israel against the Palestinian people . . . .” In so-called “fatwas” in 1996 and 1998, Osama Binladin justified al Qaeda’s declaration of war against the United States by reference to the same issue, while levying other charges against America. Specifically, he accused Americans of directly murdering one million Muslims, including 400,000 children, through the U.S. siege and sanctions against Iraq, while “occupying” the Muslim heartland of Saudi Arabia.

Al Qaeda members have described the war strategy they ultimately adopted as having five stages. Through these, they projected the Islamic world could rid itself of all forms of aggression against it.

In stage one, al Qaeda would produce massive American civilian casualties with a spectacular attack on U.S. soil in order to provoke American retaliation in the form of the invasion of one or more Muslim countries.

In stage two, al Qaeda would use the American reaction to its attack to incite, energize, and organize expanding resistance to the American and Western presence in Muslim lands.

In stage three, the U.S. and its allies would be drawn into a long war of attrition as conflict spread throughout the Muslim world.

By stage four, the struggle would transform itself into a self-sustaining ideology and set of operating principles that could inspire continuing, spontaneously organized attacks against the U.S. and its allies, impose ever-expanding demands on the U.S. military, and divide America’s allies from it.

In the final stage, the U.S. economy would, like that of the Soviet Union before it, collapse under the strain of unsustainable military spending, taking the dollar-dominated global economy down with it. In the ensuing disorder, al Qaeda thought,
an Islamic Caliphate could seize control of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the rest of the Middle East.

This fantastic, perverted strategy or vision reflected al Qaeda’s belief that if, against all the odds, faith-based struggle could bring down the Soviet Union, it could also break the power of the United States, its Western allies, and Israel. This strategy seemed ridiculous when al Qaeda first proclaimed it. It is still implausible but, frankly, has come to sound a bit less preposterous than it once did.

The immediate objective of the 9/11 attacks was explicitly to provoke the United States into military overreactions that would enrage and arouse the world's Muslims, estrange Americans from Arabs, stimulate a war of religion between Islam and the West, undermine the close ties between Washington and Riyadh, curtail the commanding influence of the United States in the Middle East, and overthrow the Saudi monarchy. The aftershocks of Al Qaeda’s 9/11 terrorist operation against the United States have so far failed to shake the Saudi monarchy but – to one degree or another – it has realized all its other immediate objectives. Among other things, it has burdened future generations of Americans with about $5 trillion in debt from the Afghan and Iraq wars, helping to thrust the United States into fiscal crisis.

Mao Zedong once observed that “a single spark can start a prairie fire.” His point was that, when conditions arise that can be exploited to favor a cause, it can spread with frightening speed and ferocity. The U.S. response to 9/11 has inflamed Islamist anti-Americanism in a widening swath of the Muslim world. By the time he died, Osama Binladen surely felt entitled to pronounce the first stages of his mission accomplished. Islamist terrorism did not die with him. It lives on. One cannot decapitate a network. Nor can one shrivel an ideology by military means alone.

Islamist terrorists were initially encouraged by the extent to which the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012 upended the regional order in North Africa. These uprisings liberated Salafism, which is of course the tendency within Islam from which extremists draw their spiritual inspiration. It liberated Salafism from political repression. Where the uprisings succeeded, however, the changes they set in motion set back the cause of extremism by entangling Salafis in tasks of governance from which they had previously been excluded. By contrast, where the uprisings achieved only limited success or went nowhere, as in Yemen and Syria, maybe Bahrain, Salafi jihadism has found fertile soil in which to grow.

Overall, the past two years have represented less an Arab awakening than a Salafist awakening. Salafi populism asserts that the failings of contemporary Muslim societies are due to their distance from the most repressive traditions of Islam and that secularism and moderation cannot be reconciled with true Islam, as they define it. This view has gained major ground in the Arab world. The elected governments in Egypt and Palestine for example, that is the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas face their most formidable challenges not from the secular left but from the Salafist right.
The U.S. was long antagonistic to the Muslim Brotherhood and proscribed official contact with it. America has labeled Hamas a terrorist organization and sought to isolate it and overthrow its rule in Gaza. But the militant Salafist opposition to Muslim Brotherhoods rule in Egypt seeks to revise or repudiate the Camp David accords. The opposition to Hamas seeks to end its de facto cease-fire and acceptance of Israel. If U.S. interests are to be protected, U.S. policy must recognize and deal with the emerging political realities in the Middle East, not stick to dead narratives. As Kierkegaard said: “life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

The NATO approach to Libya assumed that the removal of a tyrant would somehow inevitably lead to a liberal democracy. Indeed, this was the dominant initial interpretation of the so-called “Arab Spring” in the West. Most pundits thought that, as corrupt and tyrannical governments fell, regimes that used social media to implement Western principles of democratic governance would sprout up in their place. Implicit in this was a profound lack of understanding of the political cultures of the countries where the uprisings occurred, the strength of their rulers, the diversity of the opposition in each, and the likely forces that would emerge from the success of that opposition.

What actually followed Muammar Qaddhafi’s regime in Libya has been ongoing warfare between clans, tribes and ideological militias, including some determined to take advantage of any opportunity to strike at the United States. The Libya where Ambassador Chris Stevens died was not the Libya of Washington’s imagination.

Wishful thinking and ignorance have nowhere been more in evidence than with respect to Syria, where the demise of the Assad regime has been just around the corner for nineteen months now and early, enthusiastic descriptions of the nature of the opposition to Assad have not withstood scrutiny. More than 31,000 Syrians have died to date in an escalating civil war. From a humanitarian point of view, this is appalling. But to cynics determined to deprive Iran of Syria as a strategic asset, either regime change or continuing anarchy in Syria get’s the job done – so it doesn’t really matter if the war never ends. Some dream of post-Assad Syria as a platform from which to mount rollback operations against Iranian influence in Iraq.

Unlike other revolts in the Arab world, that in Syria risks jumpstarting interstate conflict. Syria is already, in many respects, a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, on the one side, and Iran and Hezbollah on the other. The fighting has begun to spill over Syria’s borders into both Turkey and Lebanon. Nearly 700,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. As Syrians leave, jihadis arrive.

It has long been clear that the international consensus that permitted so-called “humanitarian intervention” in Libya will not be replicated in Syria. The UN Security Council’s authorization of a “no-fly zone” in Libya was blatantly stretched
way past its breaking point to rationalize an open campaign of support for rebellion and regime change. This destroyed Muammar Qaddafi’s regime and killed him. It probably also killed the possibility that the “responsibility to protect” will ever become a generally accepted international law.

China on the Security Council sees what happened in Libya as the deliberate exploitation of a humanitarian crisis by outside forces bent less on relieving suffering than on justifying foreign intervention to engineer regime change. Russia agrees with China on this point and, unlike China, has a substantial investment in the Assad regime to protect. Neither China nor Russia will allow the UN Security Council to repeat the Libyan precedent. In the absence of some new approach that obviates this political reality, all that can be said with assurance is that the fighting in Syria will continue to escalate until some development in Syria brings it to an end.

Syria’s neighbors seem more likely to suffer spillover from the turmoil than to enter it directly themselves. Overt foreign intervention in Syria is not impossible to imagine but it is unlikely, given its probable knock-on effects. Russia might well respond to an attempt to establish a “no-fly zone” in Syria behind the back of the UN by equipping the Assad regime with advanced air defenses, thus further internationalizing the conflict. Though neither side wants this, Syria’s air and artillery duels with Turkey could progress to the point that NATO feels obliged to act militarily. Syrian Kurdish separatists in league with their fellow Kurds in Iraq and Turkey could draw either or both countries into conflict. Iraq and Iran both support the Assad regime against its opposition. This risks their being dragged into direct participation in the fight. Then, too, as Libya shows, a sudden end to civil war can release warriors with weaponry to destabilize an entire region.

Syria is not just a horrible humanitarian disaster. It is a dangerous international dilemma. So, in its own way, is the state of U.S. relations with Syria’s ally, Iran.

Iranian-American relations are at their lowest level in the 137 years since the two countries first began to deal with each other officially. There is no serious dialogue between the two governments. People-to-people exchanges between the U.S. and Iran are virtually nonexistent, and media on both sides are biased and inaccurate in their reporting about the other. The United States has effectively outsourced its Iran policy to Israel, with the only difference between the two presidential candidates being whether to do so with reservations or without. The issue Israel cares about is whether Iran acquires nuclear weapons, not Iran’s aspirations for hegemony in the Persian Gulf region, its struggle with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the world’s Muslims, or its search for strategic advantage in Bahrain. In virtually every respect it must be admitted, the American view of Iran more closely mirrors Israel’s than that of our Arab friends.

Israel’s view combines what can only be described as psychotic fears that Iran might attempt to annihilate the Jews in the Holy Land with entirely rational apprehensions about the impact on Israel’s military freedom of action if it loses its nuclear
monopoly in the region. Few outside Israel believe that Iran’s possession of nuclear weapons would embolden it to attack Israel, given Israel’s ability to obliterate Iran in response. And no one has suggested that Iran might attack Israel with anything other than nuclear weapons – which it doesn’t yet have. But Israel’s threats to attack Iran give Iran a very convincing reason to try to secure itself by developing a nuclear deterrent. Given this logic, Israel’s fear of losing its nuclear monopoly in the Middle East seems likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In this connection, all concerned are playing very duplicitous and dangerous games. Iran claims that, inasmuch as nuclear weapons are immoral, it will not acquire them. Yet it seems in practice to be reenacting Israel’s clandestine weapons development program of five decades ago, developing capabilities to build and deliver nuclear weapons while denying that it intends actually to do any such thing.

Israel lacks the capability to eliminate Iran’s nuclear programs but keeps threatening quixotic military action to do so. Israel’s purpose is clearly to force the United States, which could damage Iran’s facilities, as Israel cannot, into a war with Iran on its behalf. In pursuit of this, the Israeli prime minister has blatantly intervened in the U.S. elections in support of the Republican candidate, who has explicitly committed himself, if elected, to allow Israel to dictate U.S. policy on Iran, Palestine, and other issues in the Middle East.

The United States, joined by some of its allies, has bypassed the UN to impose what it describes as “crippling sanctions” on Iran. American politicians and pundits gloat over the suffering these are causing the Iranian people. Washington has offered Tehran no way to achieve relief from these sanctions other than complete capitulation to U.S. and Israeli demands. Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress has provided generous funding to efforts to overthrow the Iranian regime. America is working with Israel and the Mujahedin-e Khalq to carry out cyber warfare and assassinations inside Iran. By any standard, these are acts of war inviting reprisal. There is no negotiating process worthy of the name underway between the United States and Iran.

In these circumstances, instead of bringing Iran to its knees, U.S. sanctions seem far more likely to provide further evidence of the truth of Dean Acheson’s observation that “the idea of using commercial restrictions as a substitute for war . . . is a mischievous superstition in the conduct of foreign affairs.” Politically convenient as they may be, sanctions will not end Iran’s nuclear program. To pretend they will is naive or disingenuous.

On the other hand, there are no good military options. An attack by Israel on Iran would thrust the entire region into turmoil and deal a heavy blow to the world economy, while stoking Iran’s nuclear ambitions, not curbing them. An attack would not permanently cripple Iran’s ability to go nuclear. Air and related attacks on Iran by the United States could set back its nuclear program substantially but not eliminate it. They would, in fact, unite Iranians in demanding that their government
develop and field a nuclear deterrent. Any attack by either Israel or the United States would result in Iranian retaliation against Israel and the Arab countries of the Gulf, while creating a far more active, long-term Iranian threat to both than at present. Such a war could deepen the dependence of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries on American military power for their defense, while simultaneously making the military presence of the United States on their soil politically precarious.

So far our policy toward Iran resembles the approach we have taken with North Korea. In the absence of major adjustments in the U.S. approach to reach a compromise with Tehran, this diplomacy seems likely to yield the same result it has with Pyongyang. The only thing worse than an Iranian nuclear weapon would be an attack on Iran to stop it from developing one. The most likely prospect is that Iran, like North Korea, will eventually get its bomb. This will ensure that some other countries in the region will too, either on their own or through arrangements with powers like Pakistan to station nuclear weapons on their territory or otherwise extend nuclear deterrence against both Iran and Israel.

Israel and the United States, having done much to push Iran into this corner, have no common stand on how to help Iran get out of it. What if Iran offers to accept truly credible verification measures to assure that it has forgone the development and fielding of weapons? There are hints that Iran may in fact be preparing such an offer for presentation after the November 6 U.S. elections. If Iran puts forward an offer that the United States considers acceptable, will Israel also accept it or try to move the goalposts? Given the Israeli hammerlock on U.S. Iran policy, could the United States actually take yes for an answer from Iran? We don’t know.

If the United States and Israel were to reject a forthcoming Iranian offer, should one be put forward, the entire region would have to live with the consequences. These include broader proliferation of nuclear weapons throughout the region. The hobbles such a bloom of nuclear deterents in the region would impose on Israel’s ability to attack its neighbors with impunity might lead Israel finally to try diplomacy with them. Other than that, it’s hard to see what anyone would gain from the United States rejecting compromise with Tehran.

Meanwhile, U.S. diplomacy on the Israel-Palestine issue has become unsustainable. The half-truths with fantasy sauce that America’s professional peace processors have been cooking up for so long now have no takers. Neither the world nor a politically awakened Middle East will be fooled by happy talk about a nonexistent and unrevivable peace process. The day of reckoning is at hand. Israel must come to grips with the consequences of its successful territorial expansion. Palestinians must recognize the defeat of their aspirations for self-determination. America must acknowledge its political and diplomatic impotence. All sides must move on.

Israel has now effectively incorporated almost all the territory of Palestine, if not its inhabitants, under its sovereignty. There is no longer any prospect for a two-state
solution in Palestine, unless one considers Indian reservations or Bantustans to be states. One state is a reality in Palestine. Within this state, Palestinians inhabit a jail administered by Palestinian trustees dependent on Jewish guards for their livelihood, personal safety, and authority. The Palestinians face an unpalatable but unavoidable choice between the security of prison life and a struggle for their rights in the only state they will ever live in, which is Israel. In short, the two-state solution having been strangled by the success of scofflaw Israeli settlement policies, the Palestinian question has ineluctably become one of human and civil rights within the State of Israel, not one of self-determination.

The consequences of the death of the two-state solution for Israeli Jews are already apparent. Ensuring that Israel is a democratic state that provides a national home for both Jews and Palestinians – rather than a country based on ethno-sectarian apartheid – is now the only way to realize Zionism on a basis acceptable to the world, including the vast majority of non-Israeli Jews. In default of this, Israel will suffer boycott, disinvestment, and sanctions in the West, escalating terrorism at home, rising tensions with ever more independent-minded and militarily competent neighbors, and widening international isolation. The immediate danger is that, before civil rights and democratic liberties can be extended to the Palestinian inhabitants of Eretz Yisrael, Israeli Jews will have sacrificed these values to aggressive medievalism and racism.

Let me conclude.

Americans cannot undo our past mistakes in the Middle East. We must learn from these even as we deal with their consequences. Among these consequences is a major reduction in U.S. prestige and influence in the region. Events there are now being driven as much or more by the policies of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China or by forces on the Arab street as they are by American preferences. The situation is evolving amidst intensifying animosity between Americans and the world’s Muslims, not just those in the Middle East.

When President Obama entered office nearly four years ago he made a good-faith effort to deal with all of the issues I have discussed this morning. With more than a little help from our self-proclaimed friends in the region, he failed. The past four years have seen a great deal of change without much, if any, progress toward realization of any part of the U.S. agenda. They have also seen a shortage of American audacity and steadily diminishing hope for an effective role in resolving conflicts and reducing tensions in the Middle East.

Thirteen days from now we Americans will elect a president. We will do so following a campaign in which the issues before this conference which are terribly important to our country and to the people in the Middle East. The issues before this conference were dealt with if at all in this campaign, through exchanges of posturing, misleading sound bites, and invective. The next president, whoever he is, whether he wants to or not, will have to deal with these issues as they are, not as his
campaign donors or even our electorate would prefer them to be. He will do so with a weakened hand. He will not succeed by pursuing the course of least political resistance at home or by doing more of the same abroad. Our country’s interests and those of our friends in the region will not prosper without painful adjustments in U.S. policy.

On that cheery note I will end. Thank you very much.

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