

## Keynote Address:

### John Kerry and the Middle East (full transcript)

by [Wendy Sherman \(/experts/wendy-sherman\)](/experts/wendy-sherman)

Oct 16, 2004

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Wendy Sherman \(/experts/wendy-sherman\)](/experts/wendy-sherman)

---



#### In-Depth Reports

**O**n October 16, 2004, Wendy Sherman addressed the 2004 Weinberg Founders Conference. Ms. Sherman, former counselor to the secretary of state, is senior foreign policy advisor to the Kerry-Edwards campaign. Following is a full transcript of her presentation. [Read a summary of her remarks. \(templateC05.php?CID=2178\)](#)

I'm very delighted to be here tonight representing John Kerry. I've known him for many years. And if I wanted, when I was Assistant Secretary of Legislative Affairs, someone on the floor who I know would not leave anything undone, would not leave anything untouched, would make sure the job got done, just as he did for his Swift Boat colleagues back in Vietnam, I would want John Kerry on the floor.

Now, I know there are all kinds of views in this audience tonight. And I also know that some of you had expected Senator Biden or Ambassador Holbrooke this evening. But, given this audience, if one or the other had come here tonight representing John Kerry, then, everybody here would be absolutely sure that that man would be the next Secretary of State. [Laughter.]

This is a very, very rough election that we're in the middle of. I have a very bad cold from too many airplane rides. And I have an air-cast on my ankle from one too few steps rushing to catch a train. But I can't complain. President Bush's hair is nearly as silver as mine is now. And Senator Kerry's bags under his eyes almost compete with the dark circles under mine. But tonight's discussion is crucial. You are all leaders on the most important national security issues facing our country, facing the world, facing our time in the 21st century. Issues that are, indeed, deadly serious.

In fact, one year ago today, Donald Rumsfeld wrote in a memorandum, which later appeared in USA Today, "Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrasses and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?"

Sadly, painfully, crucially, these critical questions still stand. And the evidence of the last year, to my mind, is not encouraging. Three years after September 11, terrorist networks are spreading. Al-Qaeda-trained militants are operating in sixty countries. New terrorist leaders are replacing those we have taken out. And al-Qaeda is

transforming itself into a more elusive and dangerous network of extremist groups. The threat of terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction is growing.

The American people have a right to hear the answer to a simple question: How are we going to win this war? What is our strategy for eliminating the terrorists? Discrediting their cause and smashing their forces so that America and our allies can actually be safer?

John Kerry has a comprehensive plan to wage a relentless, single-minded war to capture or kill the terrorists, crush their movement, free the world from fear. He will destroy the terrorist networks, take strong action to prevent nuclear terrorism, cut off terrorism financing, protect the homeland, deny terror safe-havens and new recruits, support democracies in the Arab and Muslim world, and restore our alliances to combat terrorists across the globe.

Across the board, Kerry would take a more activist approach. He would do so in a way that each element also acts as a force multiplier. The first element of Kerry's plan is to transform our military--to increase the depth and breadth of our counter-terror capabilities and to relieve the burden on our overextended forces.

Kerry will double Army Special Forces and increase other Special Operations Forces. He will expand our army by 40,000 troops so we have more soldiers to fight the war on terror and relieve our overstretched army and military. And as part of this expansion, he will increase specific post-conflict capabilities--precisely the forces we should have had ready for a stabilization phase in Iraq--and the type of forces we must now build in order to increase the efficacy of our military response.

On intelligence, the agenda is clear: The 9-11 Commission has offered a broad range of steps that must be taken. Kerry will implement the 9-11 Commission recommendations and support them immediately. He will create a national intelligence director to lead the reform of our intelligence agencies and double our clandestine agents overseas. Kerry will transform intelligence services to deal with today's threats, ensuring that our intelligence services have sufficient personnel with the skills, languages, training, and orientation needed to meet today's and tomorrow's threats--terrorism, particularly, nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons terrorism.

Kerry will pursue an aggressive strategy to keep weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of terrorists. Fewer nuclear weapons and materials in the former Soviet Union were secured in the two years after September 11 than in the two years before. The Bush administration has been on the sidelines while nuclear dangers in Iran and North Korea have mounted.

Kerry's plan will secure all nuclear weapons and materials in the former Soviet Union within four years. At the current pace, it would take thirteen. Kerry will seek a verifiable global ban on the production of materials for nuclear weapons. He will get tough with Iran, about which I'll speak more in a moment. And work with our allies to restart talks with North Korea and talk directly to North Korea. Kerry will impose sanctions against any nation and any bank that launders money and he has a plan to make us independent of Mid-East oil, ensuring fuel-efficient cars and SUVs of the future are built here in America.

Investing in homegrown renewable fuels, our farmers can grow the crops. Our people can run the factories that turn it into oil and invest in a variety of fuel resources. Homeland security must also be a priority, with real resources and stronger safeguards against attack. Across the board, significant changes are required from getting resources to our cities and first responders, to expediting a system to safeguard our chemical and nuclear plants and mass transit systems. Our port security programs must be significantly expanded and our public health system needs to be strengthened to defend against bioterrorism.

Rumsfeld's memo made clear what we are not doing, where we are failing. The question is: How do we change course? What should be the shape of a long-term strategy to change the political equation in the Arab and Muslim world? How do we change perceptions of our country, which has lost an enormous amount of respect around the

world? And how do we launch a serious effort to use our influence, our experience, and our strength as a pluralist nation to support reformers?

The strategy cannot be monolithic, it requires a differentiated approach based on an effective assessment in each country. By tailoring our approach, we are maximizing the impact of our efforts in support of efforts to defeat the abject poverty and disease that destroys lives and creates failed states, and working with our allies to make sure children go to schools, good schools, not schools that teach hate.

A new approach means standing up to repressive governments, and it means a strategy for reform backed by an effort to train a new generation of American scholars, diplomats, military officers, and democracy builders so we can reach out effectively to Arabs and Muslims.

And a new approach means bringing allies on board. This cannot and should not be work that we do alone. To work together means serious high-level planning and coordination, working effectively to bring European allies to the effort and to coordinate activities with governments and nongovernmental entities interest he Arab and Muslim world.

Just this week, the Jaffe Center's Annual Middle East Strategic Balance Study found that, "During the past year, Iraq, has become a major distraction from this global war on terrorism. Iraq has now become a convenient arena for Jihad, which has helped al-Qaeda to recover from the setback it suffered as a result of the war in Afghanistan. The U.S. presence in Iraq now demands more and more assets that might have been otherwise deployed against various dimensions of the global terrorist threat."

This grim picture cannot be divorced from the planning failures of the current administration. Nor can it be presented as a justification for withdrawal. The challenge could not be clearer--the consequences of failure in Iraq would be devastating.

We can still avoid a failure in Iraq. Kerry has outlined a clear plan, four elements. I won't go into all of the nitty-gritty detail tonight, but I'm glad to in Q and A.

Secure promised international support, get serious about training Iraqi security forces and really get it underway. Carry out a reconstruction plan that brings benefits to the Iraqi people. And finally, take the essential steps to hold promised elections next year. Allies should be approached with requests to fill specific roles: the training of Iraqi forces, in-country and outside, securing Iraq's borders, providing the needed protection force for the UN election staff, and more.

Coalition building requires detailed discussions with potential contributors. It requires identifying roles that they can fill and then tailoring a diplomatic strategy aimed at achieving necessary commitments. In this regard, our diplomacy, to date, has not been adequate. Kerry has outlined not only the needs, but his approach to filling them. This offers a clear contrast and a needed fresh start. We must succeed in Iraq and we must deal with the situation next door in Iran.

Over the past four years, the situation in Iran has deteriorated. In January 2001, Iranian reformers had a strong majority in the parliament. Today, after the invasion of Iraq, which some in this administration thought would lead to democratic change in Iran, hadliners are firmly in control of the Majlis, having crushed the reform movement. Iran has steadily made progress on its nuclear program as well. It is currently, openly defying the IAEA resolution by continuing with uranium enrichment activities.

If it is left unchecked, Iran is poised to make important technological advances that will bring it even closer to the point where it can enrich enough uranium for several nuclear weapons.

Iran's support for terrorists also continues unabated. It is currently listed by the State Department as the world's

leading sponsor of terrorism. It has senior al-Qaeda members supposedly in custody, and Rumsfeld recently said that the Iranians are managing them, "in a way that they hope might benefit them." And support for Hizbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad is as strong as ever.

While these developments have been underway, the Bush administration has had no Iran policy because of the deep divisions that exist between the State Department on the one hand and the Defense Department and the Vice President's Office on the other. That division continues right up until this very moment.

That is why we have seen no coherence in the administration's approach. President Bush put Iran in the Axis of Evil, but his administration continued its discussions with Iranian officials for several months in Europe. Officials in the Defense Department have pushed for a regime change in Iran, while State Department officials have testified that regime change is not American policy. The administration says it does not want to talk to Iran, but Iraqi officials and others say that one of the main purposes of the meeting of Iraq's neighbors in the G-8 in Cairo is to get the U.S. and Iran in the same room.

The president, to this day, has not put his foot down and demanded a coherent unified policy in his administration. Instead, he has let our policy drift even as Iran enters closer to nuclear weapons capability.

As a result, the EU-3, France, Germany, and Great Britain, stepped into the breach and engaged the Iranians last October. The Iranians, as you all know, have now reneged on their agreement to suspend uranium enrichment-related activity. And in the latest confusion, just over the last couple of days, G-8 political directors met in Washington and, reportedly, our European allies put forward their ideas for a carrot and stick policy.

We cannot afford this kind of a vacillation any longer. Time is truly running out. So, here's what John Kerry would do. As we've said, a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable. We should sit down with our G-8 partners, beginning with our European allies, and forge a united front. If Iran does not accept the offer of a guaranteed supply of nuclear fuel, as long as spent fuel is removed in exchange for a verifiable end to Iran's development of a full nuclear fuel cycle, we would lead our partners in seeking tough sanctions and penalties, including through action by the UN Security Council.

This is not to suggest such an approach will be easy or a panacea. Iranian hardliners appear determined to forge ahead. And getting them to abandon their nuclear ambitions may require an escalating set of steps to change their mind. The point is, we cannot even begin to affect their decision making if we don't decide first what our policy is. And then agree on a common approach with those who have greater economic leverage with Iran.

We must also work together to implement a unified strategy for getting Iran to cease its support for terrorist organizations, which threaten all of our security. And we will make this a priority to end it. We should also work with our European allies to develop an agreed set of benchmarks for human rights and liberalization within Iran. Iranian reformers today are on the defensive and a public that badly wants change is growing apathetic. We must offer them hope and support. They must know that we stand with them in their desire for a democratic government. If you believe that the current administration has supported the democracy movement in Iran, I urge you to think again.

Despite recommendations from the Congress and others, to this day, the administration maintains regulations that make it legal for American nongovernmental organizations to give assistance to those struggling for democracy and human rights in Iran.

The president could change that with an executive order tomorrow, yet, in four years he has not done so.

We will do a better job of developing a coherent policy toward Iran, aimed, in the first instance in putting effective international pressure on Iran to end its nuclear program and we can do a better job of confronting Iran's support for terrorism and its suppression of domestic dissent.

Finally, I want to turn to the Middle East and begin with a set of propositions so that it is crystal clear where we stand.

First, the American commitment to Israel is unshakable. It is a bipartisan commitment, it is a moral commitment, and it is a strategic commitment. We do take sides in this conflict and we are not embarrassed to say so.

Second, no one should be under the illusion that they can drive a wedge between us and Israel. Israel should be treated no differently than our closest allies, like Britain and Australia. There should be no visible daylight between us that Israel's enemies can exploit.

Third, Israel not only has the right but it has the duty to defend itself and its citizens in the face of terrorist onslaught and the unwillingness of the Palestinian Authority to end terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. The fence has brought down the level of attacks. Israel has said that the fence is not permanent and can be adjusted in accordance with the peace agreement. And, indeed, Israel's supreme court has considered the route of the fence and the impact on the Palestinians and ordered adjustments to reduce hardships.

Fourth, the burden of the current mess in the Middle East, the collapse of the last serious peacemaking effort under President Clinton, the wave of terror that has followed, and the failure to end terrorist violence today rest primarily with the Palestinian leadership and Yasir Arafat, in particular. Arafat has proven that he is incapable and unwilling to make the decisions and take the steps that could end this conflict.

Fifth, the Palestinians deserve to have a viable state living in peace and security side-by-side with Israel. Their quality of life today is abysmal. And they are losing hope for the future. Tangible progress toward a state can rekindle hope and diminish support for extremism.

Sixth, the Arabs must walk the walk not just talk the talk. If they are really in favor of a two-state solution as they say they are, if they really do favor reconciliation and are prepared to accept Israel, then why not begin the process of normalization today? Why continue to teach hate to children? Why continue to let officials spew virulent, anti-Semitic diatribes? Why not begin to prepare your people for peace, not war?

Those are our starting assumptions. Now, I want to give you a little bit more texture and a sense of how we view things today and what we believe should be done differently.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the key strategic problems our country faces. It is on the list of priorities that we don't have the luxury of ignoring. Whether it is winning the war on terrorism, succeeding in Iraq, or preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Simply put, the stakes could not be higher. Yet, we do not see a commensurate level of urgency, nor sustained and consistent involvement from the Bush administration. Our hopes were raised last year when the president traveled to the Middle East and put his personal prestige on the line. He appointed a diplomat, Ambassador John Wolf to ride herd and he said that his national security advisor would act as his personal representative. For a brief moment, there was hope and there was progress.

But then, as we've seen in so many other instances, the interest level seemed to wane, and the Middle East, which presents a formidable challenge to even full-fledged peace efforts, overwhelmed what soon became a half-hearted effort.

John Wolf's mission never really got off the ground and he has retired from the Foreign Service. And Dr. Rice has little to show for her role as the president's personal representative.

Last year, a Palestinian Prime Minister, Aba Mazin, took office and took on Arafat. Unfortunately, despite the pleas from Congress and elsewhere, to back him by drawing up a list of high visibility, high impact projects that his name could be stamped on, this administration failed to follow through and back him strongly enough. As a result, when he left office, his approval rating hovered around 3 percent because he was unable to deliver. That suited Arafat fine. He thrives on the suffering of his people.

Instead of American leadership creating new opportunities, events on the ground have driven a reactive policy. Dennis [Ross] put it best when he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this summer that since 2001, "There really has not been a peace process." He added that when he is asked whether the Roadmap is dead, he answers by saying, "It has to be born first."

Prime Minister Sharon's bold initiative with the disengagement plan is a case in point. Egypt has made moves to fill the vacuum in the absence of American diplomacy. Egypt and others can help, but they cannot fill the vacuum created by the absence of U.S. involvement. One can argue over whether we were too involved in the past, whether Dennis [Ross], Secretary Albright, and President Clinton were too immersed in the issue. But I would argue that they did the right thing. And the incoming Bush administration at the time agreed and supported that effort during the transition period.

Some might say that the parties need to grow up and that some benign neglect is in order. They would have you believe that American engagement is a euphemism for pressuring Israel. But as events on the ground demonstrate, there is no such thing as benign neglect. And, indeed, the lack of involvement is what imperils Israel, not American engagement--as the current state of affairs with respect to Gaza disengagement demonstrates. Even if you think we shouldn't be involved in all the details, does it really make sense for us to be out of the room completely? To be in a passive mode getting briefed after the parties meet?

Does anyone here believe that Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinians have the trust and confidence among themselves to make the arrangements on their own for successful withdrawal from Gaza?

As the recent round of Kassam attacks demonstrate, the success of Gaza withdrawal rests on a basic assumption that Israeli security will be enhanced by getting out. If it's done right, then this could be the catalyst that we all have been hoping for. But if there is chaos, if there are Kassams and Katyushas coming from Gaza after withdrawal, if the Egyptians don't have an effective control of smuggling, then Israel is left with very unpalatable choices.

And we will be back to the drawing board looking for a new idea on how to move forward. If we truly want to see Gaza withdrawal succeed, we need a sense of urgency and we need to be more involved than we are now.

That is the bottom line and it is hard to see why the Bush administration doesn't get it. It's not as if we have the luxury of time, making progress has never been more important. I'm not suggesting this is easy, either, nor am I suggesting that American leadership, alone, can solve it. The Arab states, our European friends and the parties, most of all the parties, must step up to the plate. But only American leadership can synchronize these efforts and begin to move this gigantic rock up the hill.

We have to be more engaged in coordinating Gaza withdrawal. We have to rally the international community in a comprehensive effort to marginalize Arafat through a constitution that empowers Palestinian reformers and a younger generation that is sick and tired of cronyism, corruption, and stagnation of the current leadership. That is the only way that the Israelis trying so hard will have a partner for peace.

We have to demand of the Arabs that they end the vitriol directed at Israel and, instead, begin the process of normalization so that Israelis can be convinced that the region is prepared to accept their existence. Promoting peace and securing Israel requires hard work, day in, day out. Virtually 24 hours a day--Dennis can attest to it--Debbie can, too. Benign neglect punctuated by episodic engagement, imperils strategic American choices in the region. We have no choice but to be involved.

I want to leave you with four images, which for me sum up what is at stake.

When I was in government, I had occasion to go to a refugee camp in Pusher and sit with women who had escaped from the Taliban. Their stories were horrific. There was a 14-year-old girl at the time, my daughter's age, they're now

much older, who had been raped, had seen one of her other sisters jump out the window to avoid being raped. And I thought to myself, what kind of life for a 14-year-old, as opposed to my 14-year-old?

To a high school in Rumalla, where I sat with high school students, who, quite frankly, hated me and made me think, what are we doing to create such hate? But more importantly, what is Arafat doing to create such hate? What are we allowing to continue here to create such hate?

To thirty-four children who stood at the opening of a sewage plant in Iraq, their hands outstretched for candy, for hope, that we all want children to have, only to be blown up, thirty-four children, by a suicide bomber.

And, finally, almost, most painfully because it was people that had freedom and democracy and the possibility of a future--a father and a daughter. The night before her wedding, sitting in a cafe for a last father daughter chat, killed by a suicide bomber.

We can do better than we have done. We can give children around the world a future. We can ensure Israel's security. We can make sure that Iran does not have nuclear weapons. We can finish the job in Iraq. We can win the war against terrorism. John Kerry and John Edwards believe in a better, stronger America and world. An America that is respected, not just feared. An America that listens and leads, that cherishes freedom, safeguards our people, uplifts others, forges alliances, and deserves respect. This is the America they believe in. This is the America I believe in. This is the America we are fighting for and this is the America we can be. Thank you very much. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

### TOPICS

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)