

Democracy, Peace, and the War on Terror:

U.S.-Arab Relations, Post-September 11

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In-Depth Reports

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Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: I would like to start by rereading what I thought was the most important set of sentences from the president's State of the Union address earlier this year. Then, I will turn to my colleagues for their impressions on that text and on the overall issue that we are addressing today:

America will always stand firm for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, the limits on the power of the state, and the respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice, and religious tolerance. America will take the side of brave men and women who advocate these values around the world, including the Islamic world, because we have a greater objective than eliminating threats and containing resentment. We seek a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.

With this statement, the president signaled a new American approach toward engagement with the Islamic world. Whether that approach is translated into practice is an issue that we will talk about today. Let me turn to my colleagues for their reactions to this challenge, most acutely defined in the context of the Middle East today.

Lisa Anderson: Like many who have attended to the Middle East for a long time, I welcomed the president's declaration, but I also met it with a great deal of skepticism.

This is not a set of goals that has been consistently supported in the region by the United States. It would constitute a very significant change in American policy toward the region, and it could conceivably come at considerable cost to the stability of some of our allies. So, as much as we may desire renewed attention to issues associated with human rights, it is going to be an extremely complicated agenda, and not one that this administration has necessarily

thought through on the implementation side. As long as this kind of declaration remains rhetoric that we do not seriously pursue, it undermines American credibility and it undermines those values that we care about promoting in the region. So, on the one hand, we can view this declaration with considerable excitement and hope, but given the track record of the United States in the region, we also have to worry that we are not quite as serious as we should be.

Satloff: Shafeeq, what is your reaction to the president's comments?

Shafeeq Ghabra: This speech was like a vision statement, and I share some of Lisa's doubts about seriousness on the implementation side. But at the same time, more than 60 percent of the Arab world is under the age of twenty-five, and both the Arab and Muslim worlds have the potential to move in the direction of democratization and change. We are approaching reality, yet there is a whole range of intermediate issues -- for example, the Palestinian situation, not as we see it today, but as it could be in the future.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has not been a liberalizing conflict in the region. It has hardened people. Today it is Ariel Sharon reoccupying the Palestinian areas. Tomorrow, it will be the Palestinians attacking the Israelis. And there seems to be no way out of this cycle that creates greater conservatism, anger, and conflict, none of which are conducive to democratization and liberalism. If democracy is the objective, managing the Palestinian issue is going to be a central theme. It is very much intertwined with all of the issues in the Arab world as we see them today.

Dealing with the Palestinian issue would bring about calmness, peace, tranquility, and prosperity between Palestinians and Israelis that would ultimately contribute to greater regional stability. Today, fringe groups have taken over in the Arab world. Fringe groups always find ways of surviving, and they have taken over in Israel as well. In conflict, the minority becomes the majority; but in peace and prosperity, there is an opportunity to bring back the center. Only with a genuine center that is connected to a grassroots reality can such a vision evolve.

Satloff: Ambassador Freeman? Your response to the president's declaration?

Chas W. Freeman: The State of the Union address is a message delivered to Americans, not to foreigners, although foreigners listen. I doubt very much that this particular paragraph of the president's speech was much noted in the region. To the extent that it was, however, I agree with the content of the remarks made so far. It will be seen, particularly in the Arab world, as yet another instance of lofty American ideals that are colliding with tactics.

As you read part of the president's speech, it occurred to me that Hanan Ashrawi, and other moderates on the Palestinian side, could easily endorse every sentiment in that text and apply it to the occupation -- to the injustice; to the disrespect for private property, women, human rights, rule of law, and democracy that is inherent in occupation.

So in this speech we have a sentiment that strongly resonates with us as Americans: foreigners object to who we are and what we believe. On the contrary, I do not think Arabs object to who we are and what we believe. I think that they object to our failure to live up to our own stated beliefs and standards; they dislike what we do, not who we are. This kind of speech will therefore be seen as yet another instance of blindness on our part and failure to implement our own admirable ideals.

Satloff: So, we have skepticism so far. Professor Nafaa?

Hassan Nafaa: I will not disappoint you; I, too, share this skepticism. As to the statement as a whole, all peoples share this hope. Everyone would like to see democratic regimes rule, not only in Arab and Muslim countries, but everywhere. You will nevertheless find a lot of skepticism, because once you have democratic ideals that conflict with other objectives of American foreign policy -- such as oil supply or the security of Israel -- the United States sacrifices the former, being much more keen to achieve the latter. Is there a commitment to restructure the agenda of U.S. foreign policy objectives? I am not so sure.

Satloff: Amy, do you share this skepticism, based on your observation of U.S. policy over the past several years?

Amy Hawthorne: Some in the foreign-policy community are starting to address more vigorously the question of how the political and economic situation in the Arab world affects U.S. interests. For a long time the question of Arab democratization was largely off the table. It was not that people thought the lack of democracy in the Arab world was unimportant; rather, it was not seen as an urgent issue for U.S. policy. I do not believe it is viewed as an urgent question yet, but it is on the table now in some quarters.

There is a certain irony to the president's comments in both his State of the Union address and his Rose Garden remarks, in the sense that this particular moment is an inauspicious time for the United States to embark on a major democracy promotion campaign in the region.

There were many openings during the last decade for the United States to do something, but unfortunately, Washington did not seize those openings. Given the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. campaign against terrorism, and the current anti-American mood in the region, any strong U.S. initiative will not find as receptive an audience as it once might have. So the debate going on in Washington is somewhat disconnected from the actual mood in the region right now.

Even though what the president said has not yet become operational, it is important to look closely at his comments. In the State of the Union address, he did not mention political participation and electoral democracy as U.S. priorities. He talked about other elements of democracy, but not political participation. He did not call for competitive elections tomorrow in any of these countries.

The themes that he mentioned have to do with how Arab governments treat their own people. Rather than political participation, the president emphasized the rights of individuals living in the Arab world. This is an interesting theme for the United States to explore; it is an issue that matters a lot in the Arab region.

Satloff: Professor Akayleh, how do you interpret the president's remarks?

Abdullah Akayleh: In the name of Allah, the merciful and the compassionate, peace be upon you.

I am happy to hear this announcement by the president concerning U.S. support for freedom, justice, the rule of law, respect for women, and democracy all over the world. But to be frank with you, it is anti-America to push for democracy in Arab countries. The type of regime that can maintain power and good relations with America will not win elections.

We see the boiling "street" in the Arab and Muslim worlds. America claims to support justice, freedom, democracy, and objectivity, but Arabs feel that American foreign policy is not consistent when it comes to Arab and Muslim interests. The United States and Arab nations do share mutual interests, but Arabs often see that their mutual interests with the United States are abandoned in favor of Washington's mutual interests with Israel. So they are suspicious of the president's stance on democratic values in the Arab world.

Satloff: So we have across-the-board skepticism. The U.S. record on promoting political reform in the Arab world over the last two decades may justify this level of skepticism.

Is promoting reform the right thing to do? Should promoting democracy, or even the precursors of democracy, be a higher priority for U.S. foreign policy? What are the relative weights between values and strategies in the advancement of American interests in the Middle East?

Freeman: Respect for private property is not deeply entrenched in the Islamic religious tradition. Nor is respect for the rule of law.

We also have to note that, in fact, American policy over the last few decades has been to oppose democratization in the Islamic world. Take, for example, American connivance with the French in setting aside the results of the democratic election in Algeria. Witness the opposition in the secular state of Turkey to various Islamic parties,

presumably on the basis of the same theory that prevailed among Protestant northern Europeans in the nineteenth century with regard to Christian democracy -- that it was an oxymoron, that there could be no union of Catholicism and democracy because Catholicism was inherently antidemocratic. And yet Christian democratic parties now play an important role throughout our hemisphere and in Europe.

What is required in the Muslim world is an Islamic democratic party. It is anomalous that the United States, whenever presented with the opportunity to test whether such a thing is possible, has invariably opted to oppose it. As Amy remarked earlier, this is a peculiar moment indeed to be talking about promoting democratic rule in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Were there a democracy in Egypt or in Jordan, there would be no diplomatic relations with Israel at present. Were there a democracy in Saudi Arabia, it would have broken with the United States long ago, on Israel and other issues. And the extent to which American presence and influence in the region is dependent on relations with elites and ruling families rather than with the masses is particularly striking at this moment.

At least in the case of Saudi Arabia, reform has always come from the top down. It has been [members of] the ruling family that have sought to liberalize society and to open it up, sometimes paying, as in the case of King Faisal, with their lives for doing so. The masses have resisted innovations like universal education for women, wider consultation mechanisms, or the introduction of television, which was the immediate cause of King Faisal's assassination.

In the end, no one outside any of these countries can impose anything on them. But there are those, including some of the rulers, who would like to see some liberalization. I believe the United States could, in normal times, work closely and effectively with these rulers to promote reform and innovation. Not now, unfortunately.

Satloff: In the post-September 11 environment, Americans have an interest in corners of Saudi society -- education, culture, and politics -- that we used to avoid for fear of upsetting larger regional interests. Is it legitimate for us to focus on these things? Should these areas now have a higher priority in our discussions with the Saudis and other countries of the region?

Anderson: If the United States does not focus on the things you mention, we will pay a price. Yes, this is an odd time to be thinking about these issues, but it will not become any easier if we wait. We should seize this moment and start thinking about what our real interests are in the region. Chas referred to nineteenth-century Europe. Arabs now have a similar opportunity to reform themselves away from revolution. If they do not, these regimes will not be stable features of the region during the next fifty years.

Arab democratization will be extremely difficult. The United States will see widespread anti-Americanism as soon as press censorship is lifted. And we will see real challenges to the foreign policy positions of many of these regimes as soon as people have an opportunity to freely express their opinion. But the alternative is pretending that none of these challenges exist, which is what we've been doing for the last twenty or twenty-five years.

The distinction between a human rights agenda [and] a democratization agenda is an important one. It might be one of the ways to start thinking about the subtleties available to Arab governments and to the American foreign-policy establishment in approaching issues that have to be confronted -- without necessarily demanding free and fair elections tomorrow.

Satloff: Amy, if you were to advise the administration, how would you translate the president's position into practice? Would you focus first on countries that are the most egregious violators of human rights, such as Iraq? Or would you focus on countries that are making some progress -- in order to have a shining example to show the rest of the region that it can be done?

Hawthorne: Instant electoral democracy is clearly not the immediate answer to the challenges that the Arab world faces. But it is equally clear that the absence of electoral democracy affects all of these challenges. We can close our

eyes to the lack of democracy, or we can try to think about it in new ways, but it is there.

The United States seems to treat democracy in the Arab world as if it were in limited supply -- as if there were only enough democracy-oriented diplomacy to go around to a few countries at once. We need a new strategy that integrates these issues into our policy objectives throughout the region. Of course the region is incredibly diverse, with different issues and contexts for U.S. policy in each country. So, there can be no one-size-fits-all approach. But to think of democratization as something that we can pursue only in a few countries, when it is a pressing need throughout the entire region, is very shortsighted.

Satloff: Our three Arab guests come from three very different political experiences. I'd like to get a bit more specific about the political contexts from which they come to Washington.

Dr. Akayleh, you represented the Islamic Action Front, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, in Jordan's parliament. You were a minister representing the party in government in 1990. How would you explain to an American audience what democracy would look like in Jordan if, say, the Muslim Brotherhood or the Islamic Action Front were the dominant party?

Akayleh: Does America believe in democracy as a concrete political objective? Or is it a tool used to remove regimes that conflict with American interests? If it is an objective, it should be supported in whatever form it comes -- communist, Islamist, nationalist, liberal, whatever. But let me be more practical, and assume that Washington is mainly concerned with its own interests.

If the Islamists come to power in Jordan, what could happen? Many journalists, experts, and analysts try to warn the West that if Islamists come to power, they will be your enemies. That is not true. If we all support the rule of law, justice, fair and free elections, human rights, and if we are against corruption, and if we all maintain such values, what will come between us? Why should you and I be enemies if we believe in human rights and that human beings cannot live civilized lives without such values?

We participated in government and nothing bad happened. To the contrary, when we came into power the government began to overcome corruption and increase official responsibility and accountability.

Jordan began to enjoy a clean atmosphere, free from corruption. People began to see that Islamists were pushing an agenda that was in the public interest. Before we joined the government, there was autocracy. There was so much corruption. There was no accountability.

Satloff: Shafeeq, you are a liberal reformer. How would you characterize governments that include Islamic parties in the majority?

Ghabra: Across the Arab region, we see unbelievable politicization, heightened emotions, and feelings of helplessness. Prime Minister Sharon's invasion of cities and towns in the West Bank in the spring of 2002 has led to widespread demonstrations: 1 million people in Morocco, 8,000 in Kuwait, more in Bahrain. So the question becomes, "What is democracy?" Could democracy be the young demonstrators in the Arab world who seek fulfillment and empowerment? Is democracy the liberalization that exists today in Lebanon or Jordan? Is democracy equated with the parliament and the elections that have already taken place in some Arab countries? Is it a matter of improving what already exists? We are not beginning from zero, but we still have a long way to go.

Kuwait also has a parliament, and though Islamists dominate the Kuwaiti parliament, there is a civil society and a true debate. If parliament becomes too aggressive on certain issues, civil society can stand up and express itself. There was a proposal for women to vote in Kuwait. The government wanted it. Parliament vetoed it. Next time, people will work harder for it.

Democracy will not emerge in the context of a narrow U.S. foreign policy. If a foreign policy says one day, "Yes to

democracy in Iraq, but not in other places," it will not work. Neither will a foreign policy that says, "Democracy in the Arab world, but not for the Palestinians." There must be a genuine paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy as well as in the Arab world.

I sometimes wonder whether the Algerian election results should have been left to stand. Because the elections were quashed, a civil war erupted that was far worse than any mistakes an elected Islamist regime might have made. Such a government could have been confronted; it could have matured.

We also have experience with Iran. There are two genuine centers of power in Iran. It is not a democracy. Iran, like the Arab world, will get to democracy through a process. It will be no less painful than the processes that Western civilization has gone through. Maybe it will be easier for Arabs in certain ways, for we have models to follow, but democracy will come at a price.

In the end, yes, Islamists will have to play their role in society along with liberals and everyone else. We must confront that fact even as we confront Islamists over public issues. Such confrontations contribute to the maturity of society.

Satloff: By pointing out the Iranian case, you underscore one of the best arguments for a greater American push toward democracy. Iran has two governments. One -- the external government -- sends missiles to Lebanon, seeks to proliferate nuclear weapons, and promotes terrorism. The United States would like to see that government go away. The government at home -- the reformist government -- represents 75 percent or more of the Iranian people. That is the government Washington would like to promote.

Does this mean that America should become even more engaged in the affairs of Middle Eastern countries? Whenever America does get more engaged -- if it brings up an Egyptian professor who has been incarcerated, if it suggests that Egyptians should vote -- then many in the region accuse Washington of meddling in their internal affairs.

So, which is it? Should the United States be active in promoting democracy, or should Washington stay away?

Nafaa: I assure you, I have been very critical of the Egyptian government, even publishing articles personally critical of President Hosni Mubarak, and I have not been jailed.

Professor Ghabra touched upon a crucial point. Democracy is a historical process that should come from within a society. If you do not have the social balances that are required to sustain such a democracy, it will never prevail.

Another point is absolutely important. Why is it up to the United States alone to follow the noble objective of promoting democracy and defending human rights? This should be the responsibility of the entire international community. If you carefully read the United Nations (UN) Charter, you will find at least twenty passages talking about respect for human rights. All of the UN member countries are committed under international law to respect human rights. If America adopts this as an international responsibility, it can work from within the United Nations -- including invoking UN authority for intervention.

The United States has a variety of things that it can do in a responsible way, but Washington prefers to work alone. My question is, "Why?" Why this insistence that the United States should act alone, should intervene unilaterally in the internal affairs of other states? Why does America not make democracy an international responsibility, working with the United Nations to promote liberalization? This would be accepted.

It is also important to consider the Arab world in its own specific context. Egypt, for example, is an interesting country. It has existed for thousands of years. It is very centralized. Egypt had a very promising democratic experience between the two world wars that failed because of external factors, not because of failures from within.

Those external, antidemocratic factors continue to this day. I can give you hundreds of examples in which the

process of democracy in the region has been arrested because the West preferred to propagate peace with Israel at the expense of democratic transformation.

Anwar Sadat is beloved in the United States. Yet in 1979, after signing the Camp David peace treaty, Sadat amended Egypt's constitution in a nondemocratic way in order to preserve the peace process.

Satloff: Professor Anderson, if you wanted to promote the president's agenda on democratization, how would you do it? Would you have a "shining city on the hill" strategy, trying to build a successful democratic Arab state as an example for the others? Or would you look for small victories?

Anderson: U.S. strategy has to reflect America's commitment to certain values. Assume for the moment that Washington actually cares about these values. It does not seem to me that the United States can afford to be particularly selective, and put all of its eggs in just a few baskets because it thinks that some countries are more likely to succeed or to yield strategic benefits.

Some countries are more open than others. They have active human-rights movements and clear partners with whom Washington can work. Those countries offer a set of opportunities, but that does not mean you can write off everyone else because their terrain is not fertile enough.

There are human rights groups in Egypt, for example. And where there are not human rights groups, Washington should say to governments across the board, "One of the things we expect to see is space where groups like that can operate."

In the early 1990s, there were a number of liberalization efforts in the Arab world. Many of them are seen in retrospect as having been completely cynical on the part of both the local governments and their American and European supporters.

So Americans need to be careful to articulate why they are promoting democracy again, and whether there is any way to persuade Arab peoples that this is not just another cynical effort to make their governments look better without making them be any better qualitatively.

Satloff: It is fair to say that Americans are looking with renewed scrutiny at Arab politics, society, and culture. One U.S. official spoke to this Institute several months ago and said that in order to protect the way Americans live, it has to help change the way Arabs live.

Americans hear all sorts of things from the Arab media, and whether or not these expressions reflect the views of local governments they certainly have a conditioning effect on the local environments. Americans now view these expressions in a national-security context, not merely in the context of local politics.

What lessons do most Arabs and Muslims take from September 11? There has been much criticism of American policy. Is there any sense of introspection?

Ghabra: September 11 took everyone by surprise in America, but it took everyone by surprise in the Arab and Islamic worlds as well. We have seen a war in Afghanistan as a result, and we have seen some shifts in U.S. foreign policy. There is a feeling that perhaps the American psyche was injured in that event.

But when I look at the Arab world, I also see an injured nation, whose psyche is wounded at a deep level. The injury is historical. It is political. It flows from the complex relationship with the West. It flows from relations with Israel: defeat after defeat in war after war. And, in the Palestinian experience, occupation after occupation. In the end, Arabs are left with a feeling of helplessness and impotence.

When I look at the demonstrations in the Arab world today, I have never seen so much anger. I have never seen so much criticism -- even open defiance -- of Arab leaders and rulers. I hear words I have never before heard uttered

about Arab leaders by young people. This is a dramatic time.

Anger is there. Rebellion is there. Defiance is there. The need for change is there. The need for democracy is there. The need for peace and economic development is there. All the ingredients of bad and good, evil and non-evil, are there.

In terms of the cultural effects of September 11, Arabs have quite a load of work to do. We will have to deal with how we interpret and practice Islam, not in the religious sense, but in the political sense of how we debate with each other and manage the issues of the day.

These questions are, in essence, about modernity. They are central to where we want to be as Muslims and as Arabs. The answers have to come from within. Help from the outside is important, but the central factor will be internal.

Sometimes help from the outside is counterproductive. There are cases of human rights in the Arab world where outsiders making too much noise while the process is ongoing actually undermine that process.

Satloff: I was in Amman in the summer of 2001 with a group of American journalists. We had a lovely dinner party. In attendance were one former speaker of parliament, two former government ministers, and one former high-level member of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the middle of our dinner conversation, very nonchalantly, a kindly gentleman said, "You know, suicide bombing is perfectly legitimate against all Israeli civilians." Children, he said, are legitimate targets because they will grow up to be soldiers. Old people, because they once were soldiers. Civilians, because they might be in the reserves.

He said this in a matter-of-fact way, and I took him at his word. Dr. Akayleh, did September 11 cause any introspection among Jordan's Islamic movement?

Akayleh: It is very telling that we have strayed from the topic of democracy and moved into the Palestinian issue. Only after this problem is resolved can America effectively promote its democratic values. The Palestinian issue lies at the heart of the Islamic and Arab worlds, and while it persists, the boiling Arab street will drown out any announcement President George W. Bush will make about reform.

Palestinians have lived for about fifty-five years as refugees moving from camp to camp. They have been bombed, killed, and transferred from country to country. They find their land occupied. Their farms are gone. Their families are killed, and looking around the Arab world, they do not find any help. The psyches of some Palestinians have reached a state that says, "I have had enough of this life. I want to go to Paradise." It is as simple as that. They feel that this is the only chance they have to confront the military force that occupies their land.

Otherwise, no one could produce a legitimate answer for the suicide killing because Islam prohibits suicide.

September 11 did not change the Arab psyche very much. The major problem perceived by Islamists is that the United States stands against their interests, their values, and their cause. They do not believe the United States will give any Islamic society the chance to have realistic, fair, and free elections because Washington might think the results will be contrary to American interests.

So Arabs feel gypped. They feel oppressed. They feel that America treats them with a double standard. People on the street believe that the United States uses human-rights issues mainly as a stick against any country that might stray from American interests, not really as a tool to promote freedom.

Satloff: Ambassador Freeman, is it legitimate for Americans to focus on internal cultural affairs, including tolerance and education, in a place like Saudi Arabia? Have Saudis done any serious introspection on this set of issues since September 11?

Freeman: I urge anyone who has not done so to read the most profoundly self-reflective speech by a political leader

that I have seen in the last quarter-century: Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah's December 2001 address to the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Muscat. In that speech he calls for Arabs and Muslims to examine their own consciences and practices and to accept part of the blame for the sad state of affairs between them and the rest of the world. More to the point, concrete steps have been taken to implement his vision. Let me outline a few of these steps.

It seems to be a basic law of human knowledge that the less time people spend in Saudi Arabia, the more they know about its educational curriculum and social practices. I am not impressed by the conventional wisdom in the United States, even among so-called experts on this issue.

First, the Saudis have quietly conducted a high-level review of their curriculum under the chairmanship of Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister. The Saudis have eliminated about 5 percent of the material and placed another 15 percent under continuing review. The government has even suspended some teachers who were overstepping the bounds.

Second, Saudis and other Gulf Arabs were shocked by the level of ignorance and antipathy displayed by Americans toward them and toward Islam after September 11. The connection between Islam and suicide bombing is a false connection. Kamikaze pilots were not Muslims. And in the Palestinian arena, it is an issue of nationalism, not religion. Secular Palestinians are increasingly adopting this tactic.

Islam completely condemns the idea of suicide. Indeed, the ulama throughout the region, the Grand Mufti in Saudi Arabia, and other religious leaders throughout the Gulf condemned suicide carried out for this purpose and issued statements of sympathy to the United States and the American people within days of September 11. None of this was reported in the U.S. press.

Saudi Arabia, which has historically been much more difficult for journalists to get to than Tibet, has recently been quite open to journalists. Western journalists have turned from criticizing Saudi Arabia for imaginary faults to criticizing it for real faults. That is progress. We should not criticize people we know nothing about.

Crown Prince Abdullah's peace initiative -- which would not only normalize Saudi relations with Israel but would lead an Arab-wide effort to bring about full normalization in the Arab world toward Israel -- is also a result of this introspection.

And what of America's lack of introspection about September 11? Instead of asking what might have caused the attack, or questioning the propriety of the national response to it, there is an ugly mood of chauvinism. Before Americans call on others to examine themselves, we should examine ourselves.

Satloff: I find it difficult to accept that the people who were on the receiving end of the September 11 attacks should begin by focusing on what they did to deserve it.

Freeman: My point is that cause and effect work both ways. They exist in both directions, whatever the moral consequences might be.

Nafaa: I completely agree with what Ambassador Freeman has said, and he said it in a way that I could not dare to. There are two sides to what happened on September 11. The first one is the horrible attack, which everyone condemned.

Then it was a question of who did it. Americans have many unanswered questions. The American people, with their system of transparency, should know more about what happened. We still do not know exactly what happened.

I am not denying that Osama bin Laden might have been behind the attacks. But U.S. security also failed. This has not been dealt with properly. We still need to know more about exactly what happened, who was linked to the al-Qaeda network and so forth.

What about the role of the CIA? What about the FBI? How can the United States spend so many billions of dollars on its security and still have a September 11? We simply do not know exactly what happened.

Satloff: Dr. Nafaa, on behalf of all Americans, I appreciate your concern about the state of our intelligence agencies. (Laughter.) But I think that is what, in football, we call a "fake," where you are heading one way but pretend to move in the other direction.

Nafaa: Then I kick the ball to you.

Freeman: We should not dismiss this so quickly. I have been in the region five times since September 11, and I can tell you that there has been a complete failure to communicate facts. To the extent there have been legal proceedings in the United States, they have been closed. There are an enormous number of people still under detention who have not been charged with anything. They are not able to see lawyers, and their names have not been made public.

Nafaa: Eight of the so-called hijackers first identified on September 11 were later discovered to be alive and well.

Freeman: Some of the hijackers' identities do seem to have been stolen, but the point is that Americans need to treat people in the Arab world with respect and provide them with information.

Even on an official level, this has not been done. Arab interior ministries have not been presented with the prosecutorial evidence Washington says it has.

Having said all that, it is very difficult for me as an American to go to the region and hear such high levels of skepticism about the facts of September 11. I have a lot of confidence, more confidence than Hassan, in our institutions, and I accept that al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden almost certainly perpetrated the September 11 attacks. Fifteen of the hijackers probably were recruited in Saudi Arabia. I accept that, but I can tell you, it is not accepted in the Arab region. The polls show that overwhelming numbers of people do not accept the official U.S. explanation of September 11.

Satloff: Is that because regional governments are not doing a good job of explaining?

Freeman: No, it is because the U.S. government has not provided evidence. Americans receive a lot of information from the press, and it is very convincing to us, but there has been no evidence provided to Arab ministries of interior or to their national police. Washington has not briefed Arab governments. I meet prime ministers, deputy prime ministers, crown princes, and rulers. I ask them, "Have you had a briefing on this, since you express skepticism?" The answer is no. All they have is a paper that British prime minister Tony Blair released to the British press.

There is a problem here that has to do with the conduct of American foreign policy and diplomacy in the face of deep suspicion, even paranoia, in the Arab world.

Nafaa: I want to differentiate between what happened on September 11 and how Americans reacted to it. Was the U.S. response the right response to terrorism? What is terrorism? How should it be dealt with? What is the world's responsibility in addressing terrorism?

People in the Arab world do not understand why the United States insists on going it alone, or almost alone. Egypt suffers from terrorism and has been fighting it for years. But the United States has dealt with Egypt as if its terrorism results from a lack of democracy. Washington offers no concrete help at all. President Mubarak once called for an international conference on terrorism. No one listened to him. So, when the United States reacted as it did on September 11, Arabs remembered how America did not react when we were suffering from exactly the same problem.

Also, making the comparison between the Palestinian resistance and terrorism was a mistake. Nobody in the Arab world will buy statements equating Yasir Arafat with Osama bin Laden.

Satloff: I do not understand the statement that the United States did not have a great deal of sympathy and support for Egypt's fight against terrorism. If anything has motivated U.S.-Egyptian policy over the last fifteen years, it is a profound American sympathy for that struggle. If a critique is appropriate, it could perhaps be said that America exhibited a lack of commitment to democracy in Egypt because Washington wanted the Egyptians to stamp out their terrorism problem.

Nafaa: The facts do not at all substantiate what you have said. For example, when Egypt asked the United States to hand over Omar Abdel-Rahman, Washington consistently refused to do so. Many others received asylum in the United Kingdom and other countries.

Satloff: We have a good number of issues on the table. I would like to open the discussion to questions from the audience.

Michael Stein, The Washington Institute: It has been a long time since I read *Alice in Wonderland*, but I must say there has been a through-the-looking-glass quality to some of the things we have heard here. The Saudis have eliminated 5 percent of their educational material. What of the other 95 percent? What of the Saudi-financed madrassas that teach hatred of the West? I read the newspapers avidly, and I have yet to see a report from an objective journalist coming out of Saudi Arabia. By the way, I served in the navy in World War II; I seem to recall that even kamikaze pilots attacked military targets, not civilians. Perhaps I am not reading the program correctly; I wonder whether Ambassador Freeman was the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, or the Saudi ambassador to America. (Laughter.)

It seems as though everything wrong in the Arab world is Israel's fault. That is a wonderful excuse, but suppose for a moment that Israel did not exist. How would the Arab-Islamic world, where so many hatreds run so very deep, transform itself from the only region in the world that resists democracy, tolerance, and human rights, and where virtually every regime is authoritarian and corrupt, into democracies that do not make war against their neighbors and do not violate the human rights of their own peoples?

Satloff: Make believe that Israel did not exist. Would there be democracy in the Arab world?

Ghabra: There is a lot of miscommunication. I hate to use the phrase "clash of civilizations." I do not believe in that theory. It must not happen. But there is a clash of communication. There is lack of understanding on the part of each culture about the other.

Israel's existence has galvanized the Arab world and has been used to stop some liberalizing processes in Arab countries. I see the same phenomenon occurring in Israel as well. If it persists, the region is doomed, and if the region is doomed, so is Israel. Suicide bombing is born out of despair and out of helplessness. Some young Palestinians have been arrested and interrogated by Israel; I am sure that Israelis are quite familiar with their despair.

If we address this issue clearly, on the basis of self-determination for the Palestinians, and security and normalization for Israel, the whole region can transform its destiny from one of bloodshed and despair to one of peace and tranquility. Then people can start thinking about liberalization and openness.

Israelis and Arabs are in a war, but it is not a war only between states. This conflict is like a civil war. During the Lebanese civil war, those on one side were as vicious as those on the other side. Yet now in Lebanon there is none of that. So I have hope for the future.

Anderson: I agree with much of what Professor Ghabra just said. But on the question of what the Arab world would look like if it were not for Israel, look at North Africa, which is not intimately involved in the rhythms of the conflict with Israel. The Arab world clearly has problems that are independent of Israel. The informal economy of Egypt now

covers at least half of all economic transactions; the same is true in Algeria, and Morocco is not far off. The Arab region as a whole has recorded a negative rate of economic growth over roughly the last twenty years.

The fact that Americans have not paid attention to Arab problems is partly attributable to the geostrategic view from the United States after the Cold War. Washington said, "The Cold War is finished. We need not worry any more." And yet, there was a whole set of trends that had been set in motion as a result of the fight against communism.

The millions of people who have taken to Arab streets are not demonstrating because they all think of themselves as being in the same boat as the Palestinians. They know they are not, but many of them feel that same sense of despair and alienation. They live under governments that do not serve their needs.

Merryl Tisch, The Washington Institute: I proudly live in New York City. But listening to this panel, I feel very much a victim, rather than an aggressor.

Last night, I listened to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon deliver his evidence against Chairman Arafat in a speech to the Knesset. Ambassador Freeman, you spoke so eloquently about the issue of evidence in the cases of those who are detained by the United States. What do you see as a next step for Israel, now that they have collected this evidence against the chairman?

Freeman: I did not see the broadcast you refer to, but it is hardly a secret that there is a struggle going on between Palestinians and Israelis. Israel is at war, in my view, not against terrorism, but against Palestine. And Palestine is at war against the Israeli occupation, and increasingly against Israel itself. I would not be at all surprised if Israel had all sorts of evidence linking Chairman Arafat to actions against Israel, including terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. There is probably also evidence linking Ariel Sharon with political assassinations and excessive use of force against civilians in the occupied territories.

The fact is that in the absence of an electoral process on the Palestinian side, for better or worse, Arafat is the closest thing to someone who can speak for, and sign an agreement on behalf of, the Palestinians. You cannot get around that fact.

I would also note, since we are talking about terrorism, that terrorism is inexcusable under any circumstances. But it has a long history, and it has been crucial to the establishment of many states, including the state of Israel and what is now the Irish republic.

Satloff: It is fair to say that Palestinians have a legal right to fight occupation -- except they gave up that right in 1993, in the context of the Declaration of Principles when there was a commitment to renounce all violent activity. If the Palestinians have renounced that renunciation, then the other side also has the legal right to fight.

I would like to refocus on the issue of Arab democratization.

Robert Freedman, Baltimore Hebrew University: What has most struck me about this forum is the lack of communication between sides. I would like to ask our guests from the Arab world whether they think the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan has made the situation of the Afghan people better than it was before September 11?

Akayleh: After September 11, the Arab and Muslim worlds saw that the United States had been wounded. But unfortunately, Arabs got the feeling that America was carrying out something ugly, a chauvinistic campaign of striking out indiscriminately.

The United States claims to have broken down the infrastructure of terror, but how many thousands of civilians were killed without having any link to the so-called evidence against Osama bin Laden, or al-Qaeda, or their Afghan allies?

The most frightening possibility is that Muslims or Arabs everywhere may come to see the United States as an enemy and blame what happens to their family here or there in the American fight against terror on the American

people, rather than on American foreign policy.

Satloff: Most Americans look at the last decade and see the United States fighting to liberate Muslims in Kuwait. They see America fighting to help Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. They see America bringing education back to girls in Afghanistan. Americans say, "If Muslims do not want to thank us, they could at least recognize that the United States has fought all around the world, sometimes against Christians, to help Muslims." Does that register at all in the Muslim world?

Akayleh: Dr. Satloff, you must be joking when you talk about America protecting Muslims all over the world. Surely you do not mean it.

Nafaa: I am not convinced that you can describe these activities as fighting for Muslims. Do you really believe that when the United States intervened in Kuwait, it was fighting for Muslims? America fought for Muslims against some other Muslims. At the time, the Arab world was divided.

I do not accept anyone saying, "You have to be grateful. The United States fought to save the Muslims." U.S. interventions have not been carried out in order to save one religion or race. Washington intervenes when doing so serves America's strategic, political, or economic interests.

There are a lot of questions about U.S. motivation regarding the intervention in Afghanistan. Only two Arab countries -- Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates -- recognized the Taliban regime. When the Taliban came to power, they were aided by the United States and Pakistan. So the United States was responsible for what happened in Afghanistan. Once the Soviet Union was defeated, America abandoned Afghanistan rather than staying to help promote democratization and economic growth. Perhaps what happened in Afghanistan later would not have happened at all had the United States not walked away at the end of the Cold War. Washington intervened in Afghanistan after September 11 to protect its own interests, not to help the Afghan people.

Hawthorne: People in the Arab world are well aware of what the United States has done on behalf of Muslims around the world, but I think that it is only natural for them to interpret U.S. policy on a local basis, in terms of how it affects them personally. The overwhelming perception in the Middle East is that U.S. policies have not played a positive role in terms of democracy and human rights.

Fred Schwartz, The Washington Institute: Going back to the issue of Arab introspection following September 11, could a conference like this one, with its implicit and explicit criticism of Arab governments, be held in the Arab world?

Hawthorne: Yes. In fact, in several countries, a discussion like this one could take place. The region has changed to a great extent in the last fifteen or twenty years. Most Arab states are far more open now than ever before. The problem is that the process is just beginning. A discussion like this could take place, but no one would be certain of what might happen to them the next day. (Laughter.)

Satloff: So we could hold a one-day conference, but maybe not a two-day conference. (Laughter.)

Hawthorne: It is important for Americans to understand that there is a process of change occurring in many parts of the Arab world. It does not always manifest itself in ways that are easy for us to understand. The process is slow and painful, but political development is taking place. For most in the region, the Arab world is not a happy place. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one reason for that, but it is not the only reason.

The sooner the United States begins to understand this, the better off Americans will be in the long term -- and the better off Arabs will be as well. Washington is not the arbiter of what happens in the Arab world, but neither is the United States a neutral actor in the region. It can either be on the wrong side of these issues, or try to be on the right side.

Fred Lafer, The Washington Institute: I would like to turn the calendar back to 1948 for a moment. At the time, Arab states had an opportunity to create a Palestinian state. Indeed, the West Bank was then occupied not by Israel, but by Jordanian forces.

For nineteen years, Arabs had the opportunity to deal with the Palestinians. And Arab states have had an ongoing opportunity to improve the lot of the Palestinians in the area of human rights and dignity ever since, in spite of all the blame that can be assigned to Israel. Arab states had the power to offer Palestinians a free choice of citizenship -- a home or sanctuary -- in their respective countries. Instead, Palestinians were kept in refugee camps.

I do not deny that there is enough blame to be shared by the whole world when it comes to the plight of the Palestinians. But perhaps you could comment on whether this particular history affects the wider Arab situation today.

Satloff: I would like to place this question within the current political framework. What is the Islamic movement's view of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's plan offering full Arab normalization with Israel? Can there be peace with Israel under any circumstances?

Ghabra: When Saddam Husayn invaded Kuwait, it had nothing to do with the question of Palestine. Kuwait continues to be appreciative of U.S. efforts. We talk on this panel about regimes and peoples, as if Arabs and Americans are polar opposites. This is not the case. No, the Arab world maintains many different levels of relationship with the United States. With Arab governments, but also with Arab societies; there are good elements of U.S.-Arab relations. The issue today is that there is anger in the Arab street. That alarms Arab peoples as much as it does our governments -- and as much as it should alarm Americans. The question is how you reach that street. What hope can we offer it?

On the issue of Palestinians, 200,000 Palestinians left Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation. Another 120,000 left after Kuwait was liberated. It was a sad chapter for Kuwait. I do not look at it positively, and today, Kuwaitis and Palestinians have reconciled. We look at this as part of learning to live together in the Arab world.

The issue of Palestine in 1948 is a broad topic. I could debate a lot of details representing the two different sides. However, quite simply, there is today an occupation. It is immoral. It is unjust. I believe in the ability of people around the world to awaken their consciences to the need to address the Palestinian issue, so that we can all move beyond it. Perhaps, when the worst of all conflicts occurs, the hope for peace evolves. People learn, and I hope we will get to that point. (Applause.)

Anderson: Professor Ghabra's statement probably should have been the last word. I only want to say that the most important question really is, "And then what?"

That is to say, what are we going to do when the guns stop firing? It is an important question for Afghanistan. It is an important question for Palestine. How are we going to think about international responsibility, American responsibility, local responsibility for peoples who lack a government in which they can participate constructively.

This panel represents the beginning of that conversation. It is a conversation we need to have about Afghanistan and Palestine. And, over time, we also need to have it about some of the other countries in the Arab world that have been far too neglected.

Akayleh: America must push Israel to pull out of the occupied territories and back to the borders of 1967. If that happens, the whole region will see stability and peace. America wants to open a new page in the region and develop good relations with Arab publics, rather than regimes, because the people, not their current governments, represent the Arab future. Regimes come and go. If you favor freedom of choice, you have to convince the people that you are sincere about the values you have spoken about. If Washington really pushes for change, it can succeed.

Nafaa: The question of the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the democratic situation in the Arab world is very important. Three factors are related to this.

First of all, if you look at the rise of political Islam, especially in Egypt, you will find that it is closely connected to the evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Political Islam has developed in part as a response to the perception that the existence of a Jewish state could be a danger to Islam.

Second, many of the Arab regimes have been able to emphasize the question of security over the question of democratization because of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

Third, because of its policy toward Israel, the United States cannot talk credibly about democracy with Arab regimes. If the United States can do something to get the parties back to the peace process, or even join with the international community to impose a sustainable settlement, it would help create the right environment for democratization in the Arab world.

Freeman: I want to underscore Professor Freedman's point about the need for dialogue. Much of what has been said on this panel, as some in the audience have stated clearly, is not music to everyone's ears. I suspect that the discussions many of you have among yourselves would not be music to the ears of those on this panel. There is a certain utility in exchanging views. In fact, at the root of the Israeli-Palestinian problem is a failure by both sides to apply empathy to the position of the other. It is a failure to listen and to understand, and, thereby, to deal respectfully with the other side.

Satloff: My thanks to everyone here for participating in this conversation. As Ambassador Freeman said, much has been said that may have been jarring to the ear. But that is the value of dialogue. It is important to know what people in the Arab world think, and, perhaps, how different their views are from those in Washington.

This kind of discussion may not lead to any policy conclusion, but it is important to know what challenges face America, whether on Arab-Israeli issues or on the promotion of democracy. You have to know where you are and where you want to go before you can determine how to get there. ❖

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