

His Excellency

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Winds of Change in the Middle East

Eighty-three years ago, after World War I, a conference took place in Cairo, Egypt chaired by the Colonial Secretary of Great Britain. At that conference the final touches were put on the reconstruction, or the remaking, of the Middle East, following the change in Turkey—the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire. Basically, this was an agreement between two world powers, as they were then, Great Britain and France, with the United States acting in the shadows and making sure that its interests, mainly in the field of oil, were preserved.

The British and the French had negotiated for quite some time. They had begun their negotiations in the middle of World War I; they completed them after the war was over and, as I said, at the Cairo conference in 1922, the final touches were put on the new Middle East as it was to be. The Middle East was divided up between the British and the French. Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine were to be part of the British sphere of influence; Syria and Lebanon were to be part of the French sphere of influence. Egypt was to be a country that would ultimately gain its independence. The Arabian peninsula would be given its independence under the dynasty of the family of Saud and that's why the Arabian peninsula became Saudi Arabia—a rare instance in which a country was accorded the name of the dynasty which was ruling it. In keeping with British tradition, some of the British parts in the Middle East were declared monarchies. A monarch was found for Iraq, a monarch was instituted in Jordan. Palestine would become a mandated area without a monarch because there was a religious Arab community and a Jewish community there and therefore the fate of Palestine was not yet to be decided. Syria and Lebanon were not to be monarchies because France was not a monarchy, so why should Syria be a monarchy and, therefore, Syria was to become, under the rule of the French, an independent state. Lebanon was to be ultimately a Christian state because in the eyes of the French, it was only fitting that there should be a Christian state in the Middle East.

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I think that the events of the Middle East over the last 13-15 years, as of 1990-99, as of the first Gulf War, are putting into question whether the agreements that were forged 83 years ago would stand the test of time—whether the borders, the frontiers which were then decided, not just because of the merits of the people involved, but because of the interests of the world powers, whether these frontiers and interests would prevail today. In the case of Iraq—there was a big discussion between the French and the British as to whether the northern part of Iraq would be part of Syria or part of Iraq. Ultimately it was decided it would be part of Iraq. Why? Because in the delicate balance between the British and the French, the oil resources of northern Iraq should be under British control, but there would be a French interest for French oil companies which would also have their share.

Needless to say, this had little or nothing to do with the interests of the people living in the region. It did not correspond nor in any way follow the pattern of tribes, of religions, or cultures, or the people who were living there. The question arises today whether the region, which is now being buffeted with winds, the type and velocity of which have not been experienced in the past, can survive in its original form. There have been changes in the frontiers of the Middle East. About 20 years ago the

Jordanians and the Saudis negotiated a considerable exchange of territory in the south, which was conducive to the interests of both of these states. So, the question is whether the borders are

I say this because as we look at the situation today I do not want to dwell necessarily on the immediate issues. I will refer to them briefly. I want to take this opportunity to speak about more fundamental issues. For instance, the fact that ever since Syria reached its independence and Lebanon reached its independence, the Syrians have never recognized the independence of Lebanon. The relations between Lebanon and Syria are not just relations resulting from the fact that in 1976 Syrian troops entered Lebanon at the request of the Lebanese government at

important event. People voted freely and an Iraqi parliament was elected. By the way, a third of the members of the parliament are women—a great departure from the past. But how were they elected? How were they divided up? What was the platform of the various parties who were competing there? Mostly these were platforms based on region—the Shiite parties, the Sunni parties, the Kurdish parties in the north. The divide was not a divide on policies—foreign policies, security policies, social policies—the divide was a tribal divide, a religious divide. Therefore, the semblance of democracy in Iraq is very problematic because if all of us believe that there is a way with democratization in the Middle East, and that one of the big messages which is being brought to the Middle East as a result of the war of 2003 is to bring democracy to the Middle East, then how does this democracy translate itself into the practicalities of the Middle East? If Iraq is an example, we see how it translates itself there.

The winds are very, very fierce in the Middle East at the moment. These winds of change also relate to the question of the future of the Muslim world, the future of the Arab world, the



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sacrosanct. The borders, which if you look on the maps of the Middle East are very straight lines, were drawn by British and French draftsmen who sat with maps and drew the lines of the frontiers with rulers. If the ruler, for some reason or other, moved on the map, because of some person's hand shaking, then the frontier moved, ten, 20, 30 miles in one direction or another. There was a famous story about a British consul, a lady named Gertrude Bell, who drew the map between Iraq and Jordan, using transparent paper. She turned to talk to somebody and as she was turning the paper moved and the ruler moved and that added considerable territory to the Jordanians.

the time. Long before 1976 there was never a Syrian recognition of Lebanon's independence. There are no diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria. There's no Syrian embassy in Beirut, there is no Lebanese embassy in Damascus. These deeply-engrained aspects of the situation are now becoming more and more important as we look to the future because the forces in the region today are not necessarily forces of nations. They are forces of religion, they are forces of tribes and these have a stronger influence on events than nations and national identity.

Just recently there was an election, a general election in Iraq, a very

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future of the neighborhood where we are living. It's a very tough neighborhood, it's a very unpleasant

neighborhood. There are some parts of that neighborhood that are very, very dangerous and some of our neighbors are very dangerous neighbors.

But it so happens, ladies and gentlemen, that as I speak to you of the problem of imprinting democracy on the Middle East, the problem of how to take events to the future, it so happens that three main problems confronting the world as a whole today all have their origins in the Middle East. The problem of the threat of Islamic fundamentalistic terror was born and bred in the Middle East. The roots of this Islamic terror are in the Middle East. The fighters, the warriors, whether they were in Afghanistan or in Iraq, come mainly from the countries of the Middle East. Yes, here and there you find an American or a British subject, or a Frenchman, but mainly these are fighters who come from the countries of the Middle East.

The second problem that we are confronting today is the problem of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—the nuclear, biological and chemical threats. Here again, the sources of this challenge, of these threats, are in the Middle East, from Pakistan to Libya. There is where the problem has been.

And the third problem—the problem of the steep rise in the price of oil and the growing shortages of oil. Here again, the problem rises in the Middle East with Saudi Arabia being a major factor because more than 25 percent of all oil reserves in the world are concentrated there Saudi Arabia, as

I am sure you realize, is today a country which is going through a very difficult period, as stability is not the main feature of that country as we see it today.

On these three issues, ladies and gentlemen, it so happens that Israel finds itself in partnership with the principal countries of the world, whereas many years ago, on many subjects and issues, there were differences of opinion—and not only differences of opinion: interests were different. The interests of the United States and Israel did not always

coincide or those between Israel and Europe, or between Israel and the countries of Asia. Today on the three threats which I mentioned, we and the world as a whole see eye-to-eye. We have common interests in the ultimate results of these battles which are being fought. This, of course, is a source of great strength to Israel and the relationship between Israel and the United States has never been stronger than it is today. The fact that the prime minister of Israel is coming next week to Crawford, Texas to meet with the president is one more sign of this.

But there is another aspect to this situation. Given the fact that we are part of a partnership, we are to take into account the interests of our partners from time to time. We have to be in this mutually. Israel has to be very considerate to the interests of the United States just as we expect the United States to be considerate to our interests. And therefore, from time to time we have to make decisions in Israel which take into account what the

United States' interests are or what the interests of the West are in a given situation. It's not one-way traffic.

One of the main problems which I think you will agree with me that we have today is, how can the issue of Islamic terror ultimately be taken care of. The two other problems I mentioned are clear in their dimensions. We know where they are. We can locate them geographically. We can even plan how to deal with them in a serious way. The third issue, the issue of terror, is a much more elusive issue. We don't even know from time to time where the terrorists are. We hunt them around the world and we don't always find them and even when they're found and we cut the head off the viper it doesn't mean to say that the snake is dead, because the whole composition of this terrorist phenomenon is a different composition to the wars which we have experienced in the past. This is a war which has no frontiers, which has no clear lines of battle. Sometimes we don't even know the identity of our enemies, and even if we know identities it doesn't mean to say that knowing some of the identities is tantamount to knowing all of the identities.

On the issue of the future of the battle against Islamic terror—the likes of which you have suffered from in this country, the likes of which other countries in the world have suffered from, whether in Madrid, Spain, or Bali, Indonesia, or Bangkok, Thailand—this particular battle has to be fought in a different manner, in a different way. It is my contention that this battle will be finally decided and laid to rest as a result of a struggle from within Islam. This is not something that can be determined outside Islam. Islam will have to take this problem and will have to wrestle with it and ultimately will have to take the necessary steps within Islam to take care of it.

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I think we must recognize that on this issue we have our limits and our limitations. Neither Israel nor the United States can ultimately believe that they can insert themselves into the Islamic world and to determine inside Islam what the result might be. Yes, the United States can help from without just as Israel can help from without. There are certain things that the United States can do to improve the chances for the good guys inside Islam to overcome the bad guys, but the battle itself, the battle royal, will have to be fought from within. And I believe that this battle is now raging and I think that if we help in a wise way and in a discrete and intelligent way, I think there is a good chance that the battle will be fought and won by those who deserve to win it.

One word on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. I do not wish to enter into all

the details of this here this evening. The Palestinians' dispute with us is superimposed by the larger issue of the future of Islam. It so happens that they have been catapulted into a situation in which the future of their nationalist desires depends, in no small measure, on the ultimate result of the war within Islam, and the Palestinians have to take a stand. They can't waffle in-between—they have to be on one side or on the other.

Up until recently they were going in the wrong direction. They had a leader who was exhorting them to violence, who was talking about a million martyrs who would converge on Jerusalem, who spoke of this as a battle, as a struggle, which could go on for generations. The Palestinians were going in a direction which is very dangerous for Israel but also very dangerous for them because it could

consume the Palestinian national movement and bring about its demise. That person is no longer with us. He made a timely departure and now the Palestinians and their new leadership have the opportunity, a golden opportunity, to identify themselves not only in relation to their desires and attitudes to Israel, but also to identify themselves and to be counted on in the big issue of where they stand within Islam. And it's difficult for them, very, very difficult. They have to make very difficult decisions and it won't be easy for them. There are certain things we can do to make it easier. I believe that the government of Israel is acting, and will act, to make it easier for the present leadership, because ultimately they will have to bite the bullet. We can only hope that they will bite the bullet and not swallow it.

Thank you.

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