



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## “Major World Powers and the Middle East”

### Middle East Policy Council

U.S. Capitol Building, Room HC-6

October 23, 2009. 9:30 - 12:00

The Middle East Policy Council (MEPC) hosted a discussion panel on major world powers and their strategic interests in the Middle East. The panel included **Shibley Telhami** of the University of Maryland and the Brookings Institution, **Ambassador Robert E. Hunter** of the RAND Corporation, **Mark N. Katz** of George Mason University, and **Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr.** of Projects International Incorporated. **Thomas R. Mattair**, MEPC’s director of research, moderated the event.

Telhami began the discussion by examining American interests in the Middle East. According to Telhami, **President Obama** inherited a “very tough hand” from the previous administration. Despite two wars and an economic crisis, a first term president has declared the pursuit of peace in the Israeli-Palestinian an American national interest for the first time in history. At Camp David, both Israel and Egypt clamored to improve their strategic relationship with the U.S. at the expense of the other party – and **President Carter** was able to take advantage. By the end of the Cold War, the U.S. established a *pax Americana* in the region, bolstered by the overwhelming show of force in the Gulf War. But for the past decade, the Iraq War transformed the U.S. relationship with the region in three ways. First, the U.S. can no longer balance Iran with Iraq and must rely on American forces. Second, the U.S. lost its aura of perceived dominance. Third, regime change theory angered governments while the war itself angered civilians, aligning these typically adversarial groups against the U.S. Meanwhile, Arabs will continue to view American foreign policy through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, Arabs do not place much emphasis on democracy or any other issue. Therefore, the U.S. will find success difficult until it makes progress in the Holy Land.

Hunter differed with Telhami, arguing that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only constitutes a derivative issue, not a central strategic interest. The U.S. only needs to work for peace to the extent it needs help in other areas, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is especially the case since the end of the Cold War, when an Arab-Israeli escalation no longer risks a confrontation between nuclear powers. Hunter contended that America overemphasizes the importance of the Middle East compared to other issues, such as global warming, the global economy, China, Russia and India. Therefore, the U.S. needs to find a way to defend its interests in the region while expending less blood and treasure.

Hunter suggested that the Europeans supported the Iraq War with the tacit understanding that the U.S. would pursue Israeli-Palestinian peace, as a way to bolster support amongst their large Muslim populations. Nor is Europe as concerned as the U.S. about the potential threat of terrorism if the mission fails in Afghanistan. They are worried, however, that an American defeat in Afghanistan will result in decreased U.S. involvement with key European issues, concerning Russia, Georgia, the Balkans and energy. Thus for this instrumental reason, they continue to support the NATO effort.

Katz then delineated Russian interests in the Middle East, which both coincide and clash with American interests. During most of Bush era, Russia worried about the U.S. gaining too much influence, but over the past four years they are beginning to realize how a decline in U.S. power might hurt Russian interests as well. In Afghanistan, Russia has a clear interest to cooperate to stem the spread of Islamic radicalism in their backyard. But such cooperation does not carry over to Iran. Because Moscow does not fear a nuclear Iran as other countries do, it can position itself between the two sides. In fact, Russia fears a rapprochement between Iran and the United States that will end Russia's unique ability to benefit as a go-between. In Iraq, Russia was initially critical, but now that the U.S. has agreed to withdraw, Russia worries that Sunni extremism will spread to the Caucasus. Al Qaeda in Iraq has already targeted Russians and demanded a Russian withdrawal from Chechnya, a frightening prospect for Russia. As a result, Russia is not overly concerned about growing Shi'ite Iranian influence in Iraq. Relations between Russia and the Gulf countries, with the exception of Qatar who is a natural gas competitor, continue to improve. Saudi Arabia has often tried to buy off Russia to stop its support of Iran, but Russia is content to seek relations with both the Gulf and Iran. Finally, Russia prides itself on good relations with all governments, including Hamas and Hezbollah and seeks a mediation role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, none of the parties seem particularly interested in relying on Russia. Importantly, Israel has seen a mass influx of Russian immigrants that has markedly improved relations between the two countries, exemplified most recently by a growing Russian military-technological dependence on Israel. In sum, Russia always pursues increased business connections with all countries while simultaneously seeking good relations with any actor that can help their fight against Sunni extremism in the Caucasus.

Freeman rounded off the discussion with an exploration of Chinese interests in the region. According to Freeman, the Muslim and Chinese worlds have shared good relations since the Caliph Uthman first sent an emissary to Chinese court. However, these ties were temporarily severed during the colonial era, and they are only now beginning to strengthen once more. With at least 25 million Muslims living in China and hundreds of thousands of Chinese working in the Middle East, educational and economic exchanges have increased dramatically. However, difficulties persist as well, especially given the vast cultural divides between the two civilizations. From the Chinese perspective, the Middle East not only hosts 60% of the world's oil, but it is also a geographic center where communications and trade routes converge. Thus, China seeks to develop economic development while avoiding political entanglements at all costs – much like the U.S. during its own rise to power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 2020, China will likely conduct between \$350-500 billion in trade annually with the Middle East (the U.S. currently does \$70 billion). However, as American power recedes in some places, China has been left with no choice but to fill the vacuum. While China's economic influence will continue to expand, it is unlikely that they will replace American political or military hegemony. Meanwhile, all countries, including Iran, will seek to use China as a hedge against the U.S. and European influence.

During the question and answer session, Freeman elucidated on the accusation that Gulf countries fail to protect the *ummah*, especially in Palestine. In this light, the legitimacy of the government is put into question, especially when compared to Hamas that has combined Islam and democracy. It is through this mechanism, Freeman contends, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict acts as a central motivating force for global terror.

**Congressman Jim Moran** (D-Va.) delivered impromptu remarks during the question and answer session. He lamented how the American political system perverts rational foreign policy. Speaking specifically about the Middle East, he bemoaned: “We don't get it. And even if we did get it, we won't be able to do the right thing.”