



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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**National Council on US-Arab Relations
19th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference
“Arab-US Relations: Going Where?”
The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center 1300 Pennsylvania Ave.
Washington D.C.
Thursday, October 21, 2010**

The National Council on US-Arab Relations held its 19th annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference on Thursday. Opening remarks were made by Dr. **John Duke Anthony**, President and CEO of the National Council on US-Arab Relations and Rear Admiral **Harold J. Bernsen**, chairman of the Board of Directors at the National Council on US-Arab Relations. The first talk on the agenda was entitled “Arab-US Relations: Misadventures Past and Present,” and was given by The Honorable **Chas W. Freeman Jr.**, former Ambassador and Assistant Secretary of Defense.

Freeman began his remarks by saying that the results of recent US policy in the Middle East have been negative: “**A clear conscience is a sign of a faulty memory.**” He recounted the losses suffered by the US military over the last nine years of war and reminded the audience that many more civilians in the region had died as a result of policy choices made in Washington. “We may justly be charged with inhumanity,” if we fail to remember them. He organized his critique of American policy towards the Middle East into three sections.

- The militarization of US policy has had negative consequences, often leading to more terrorism, not less.
- An explanation of why diplomacy is failing.
- Why the policy course chosen in the Middle East is fundamentally changing America.

War is traumatic, Freeman said, with 30% of US military personnel returning home from service overseas with mental health issues. He asked the audience to think about the numbers of people killed in conflicts in the Middle East as a percentage of the American population. Since the beginning of the Second Intifada, 850 Israelis have been killed. The equivalent number of Americans would be 45,000. Six thousand Palestinians have been killed, 315 of them children. The equivalent number of Americans would be 460,000 dead, 95,000 of them children. **Freeman asked what the human experience must be like, living through events that have killed so many. He described it as “not conducive to good will among men.”** The toll of the Iraq War alone is somewhere between 100,000 and 1 million dead Iraqis. Had Americans suffered this, religious scruples would not stop vengeance, Freeman said. **We are growing enemies.**

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have “shown the limits of American power.” In Iraq, we have failed to shape the country to our will, in spite of the over 4,000 dead, 30,000 wounded, and the \$900

billion dollars spent. The US successfully removed Saddam Hussein, but then allowed him to be put on trial in a way that “mocked the rule of law.” The political alignment of the new Iraq is still in question. How will its constitutional issues be resolved? Will the Iraqi Army emerge as the principal power in the country? Will Iraq balance Iran or collude with it? All of these questions remain unanswered after 7 years.

In Afghanistan, the lessons learned in Iraq will fail to translate, according to Freeman. Whereas much of the conflict in Iraq broke down along sectarian lines, Afghanistan suffers from a multifaceted conflict with ethnic and regional overtones. Freeman said that the US and NGO’s currently in Afghanistan are working to prop up and promote the central government. And he described the success of Counter Insurgency (COIN) as “implausible” due to the fact that it was derived from strategies used to defend colonialism and defeat irredentist movements, not rebuild a failed state. The Gross Domestic Product of Afghanistan is \$10 billion dollars a year. The US has spent \$350 billion dollars over 9 years. **Nowhere in the Islamic world is the US “really defeating the enemy.”**

With respect to Iran and diplomacy, Freeman warned of the “Neo-Con blackmail”: “Israel will drag us into an even worse war by striking Iran...but only if we don’t do it first.” This simply increases the Iranian desire for a nuclear deterrent. America’s recent foreign policy in the Middle East has actually helped Iran by removing two of its biggest enemies, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. **Freeman stated that Iran is essential to addressing many of the issues in the region, and that neither “humiliation nor invective” would be effective ways to confront the country.** Why should Iran “co-operate in legitimizing the use of force against itself” by helping to “check the box” of diplomacy, if the US is only going to attack it?

Freeman called the Peace Process between the Israelis and the Palestinians a “cynical ploy” that serves the interests of the parties involved but does little to address the underlying issues. Freeman then argued that the violent interactions in the Middle East were having a profound effect on “American Values.” Americans are “setting aside” the constitution for the illusion of “zero risk” security.

In conclusion, Freeman touched on the looming “fiscal heart attack” awaiting the US if a change is not soon made. Even if the US was achieving what it set out to do in the region, the course would be unsustainable. Change is coming to US foreign policy in the Middle East no matter what, according to Freeman. **Ending military “adventurism,” engaging in a serious dialogue with partners about Iran (particularly Egypt and Turkey), and a renewal of the respect of the rule of law in the US are all important steps to rebuilding relations with the Arab world, Freeman said.**

The Endgame in Iraq

The first panel discussion was entitled “Geo-Political Dynamics (I): The Endgame in Iraq.” The panel was chaired by **Charles W. Dunne**, Resident Scholar with the Middle East Institute. The speakers included **Michel Gabaudan**, President of Refugees International, **Michael Corbin**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq, **Manal Omar**, Director of Iraq Programs, Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stabilization Operations, United States Institute of Peace, and **Brian Katulis**, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress.

Dunne introduced the topic by presenting a series of questions to the speakers. How will the US and Iraq navigate the transition from a military to civilian relationship? Will Iran play a significant role in

influencing Iraq? How will the issues of internal and external refugees affect the normalization of Iraq? And how will Iraq re-integrate into the international community?

Corbin began by saying that things are changing “quickly” in Iraq. **He took issue with the dominant media narrative that there is “paralysis” in the government formation process. All of the major parties are engaged in the process and it is constantly evolving. All the major parties agree that an inclusive government is important.** Iraqis voted for the blocs that cared about series governance and the results made the electoral math “complex,” Corbin said. He added that there is “no evidence” to back up recent reports that Awakening Council members are returning to the insurgency. Corbin described the transition from a primarily military mission in Iraq to a civilian-diplomatic mission as not an “endgame,” but the beginning of a “new relationship.” He concluded by saying that **“Iraqis are seeking Iraqi solutions for Iraqi problems.”**

Gabaudan spoke about the refugee problem both within and without Iraq. At the height of the war, as many as 4 million Iraqis were displaced. Roughly 2 million were in other countries, primarily Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. Currently, the best estimates put the internally displaced at 1.5 million, with 500,000 Iraqis still living as refugees outside of the country. **Gabaudan explained that one third of the internally displaced are “squatting” in garbage dumps, under bridges, and in abandoned buildings. If the country is going to be truly stabilized, this issue must be addressed.**

Omar expressed optimism about the political situation in Iraq, but said that her optimism does not carry over to the refugee situation. **She said that the true number of internally displaced people is likely higher than reported, and that the political undertones of the counting are worrying.** Omar noted the growing exploitation of desperate Iraqis in other countries, especially widows. **She also pointed out the “lost generation” of Iraqi young people coming of age with little or no education and a life of uncertainty and humiliation which Omar said leaves them “boiling.”**

Katulis began by saying that there are “three tests” in Iraq. First, how the Iraqi leadership responds to the current challenges; second, how the Middle East as a region reacts to Iraq’s reintegration; and third, how US policy will be used to help or hinder the process. With regards to the first test, Katulis described the March elections as a “stress test,” with the most important part occurring now. There are many questions left unresolved, Katulis said. How will the Iraqi leadership share power? Will Iraqi politics continue to evolve? Will there be an inclusive coalition? Will the opposition to any coalition be democratic, peaceful, and outside the patronage network of the ministries?

Next, Katulis described the regional test. **He said that Turkey has played a constructive role in Iraq and that while the US should watch the role of Iran, it should also temper its analysis. “Iraqi nationalism is alive and well” and the US should remember that.** He also described the recent trip by Nouri al-Maliki to Cairo as a “good sign” of progress.

Finally, Katulis called Iraq a “test case” for the use of American “smart power.” He said that while the US is executing on a tactical level extremely well, the overall strategic plan was unclear, and needed better definition. He ended by reminding the audience that they have an opportunity to positively affect the situation.

The Iran Conundrum

The next panel was entitled “Geo-Political Dynamics (II): The Iran Conundrum” and was chaired by Dr. **John Iskander**, Chair of the Near East and North Africa Area Studies at the Foreign Service Institute of the US State Department. The speakers for the panel were Dr. **Flynt Leverett**, Director of the Iran Initiative and Senior Research Fellow at the New America Foundation, **Thomas Delare**, Director, Terrorism Finance and Sanctions Policy, Economic Bureau, United States Department of State. Dr. **Trita Parsi**, Founder and President of the National Iranian-American Council, and Dr. **Kenneth Katzman**, Senior Specialist in Middle East Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. Dr. **Thomas R. Mattair** acted as commentator for the panel.

Leverett framed the Iranian issue with two questions: Is Iran becoming a more consequential actor in the region? And will Iran be a flashpoint for a military conflict? Leverett contended that Iran is becoming a more consequential actor in the region for several reasons. First, the US eliminated Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, regional rivals of Iran. **Second, Iran has developed significant “soft power.” They have chosen political “winners,” according to Leverett.** Hezbollah in Lebanon is now a true political power. Hamas won elections in 2006, and has since cemented its control over Gaza and is arguably more popular than the Palestinian Authority. In Iraq, Iranian-supported parties have done well in elections. **Iran’s success has been due to “smart politics” and not “hard power.”**

Delare gave an update on the new sanctions passed by the Obama Administration. Delare said that the sanctions have been widely adopted and followed by countries and corporations. He described the ban on selling jet fuel to the Iranians as “bring(ing) home a message of isolation.” The European Union sanctions are coming on line and the international community has reached a consensus on pressuring Iran. The choice is Tehran’s, Delare said.

Parsi organized his critique of US policy towards Iran into seven recommendations.

- Do not turn confidence measures into preconditions: Talks on human rights, Iraq, and Afghanistan are all on the back burner because the nuclear talks are now seen as a precondition to talking about these issues.
- Embrace a larger agenda: Reducing 30 years of tension to one issue is counterproductive. Expanding the agenda can create political space and opportunities to work constructively on important issues.
- Do not avoid the human rights issue: Parsi said that taking a strong stance on human rights abuses does not constitute “interference.” **The US relationship with Iran cannot resemble the relationship the US had with the Shah, when security issues trumped everything else.**
- Trust is in short supply, so utilize other countries: The P5+1 structure is a poor forum for talks with Iran due to Iran’s strained relations with most of the group. Other countries, such as Turkey and Brazil, have been successful in dealing with Iran, so bring them into the process.
- Do not let the search for “leverage” over Iran compromise talks: Iran will use the American hikers as leverage, similar to the use of sanctions by the US. Neither produces good results, they only strain an already tense situation.
- Talk to everyone in Iran: Talk with every potential group with power including the clerics, the Majlis, the Guardians Council, etc.

- **Play the “Long Game”:** If the political capital to make long term talks work does not exist, create the capital. Patience and perseverance are keys to a successful long term strategy towards Iran.

Katzman claimed that there is “no momentum for war” in Washington, due to the understanding in the Department of Defense that there could be catastrophic unintended consequences. **He also said that Washington understands that any military action will hurt the Green Movement and alienate young Iranians.** Greens are in all levels of Iranian society and the sanctions are reinforcing their message on international integration and its benefits. He emphasized that sanctions are working and are the best track to pursue.

Mattair’s commentary began by agreeing that the sanctions have been more effective than expected. However, he did note that President Obama recently claimed that the sanctions would be lifted if and when the nuclear issue was resolved. Mattair pointed out that this was untrue, because an earlier round of sanctions on Iran passed under the Bush Administration were a result of Iran’s support for Hezbollah and Hamas. He also said that the sanctions did not seem “smart” because they will inevitably affect the citizenry and the Green’s have repeatedly asked that sanctions not be imposed. Mattair also agreed with Parsi’s idea of expanded negotiations.

Keynote Address: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker

The Keynote Address was given by Ambassador **Ryan C. Crocker**, former US Ambassador to the Republic of Iraq (2007-2009), former US Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2004-2007) and previously US Ambassador to Syria (1998-2001), Kuwait (1994-1997), and Lebanon (1990-1993). **Crocker** began by saying that the media refrain of “why can’t they get their act together” in Iraq, is unfair. **“Iraq is hard, and will continue to be hard,” Crocker said.** He recalled being asked shortly after the election about when he thought a government would be formed. He answered “before Ramadan” and now considers himself a victim of “irrational exuberance.” **Crocker did predict that Maliki would retain the position of prime minister, saying that he believed that Maliki is genuinely seeking a broad based, inclusive coalition in order to avoid being “held hostage” by smaller parties.**

Iraq still faces many challenges and those ahead of the country are actually greater than those it has already faced, according to Crocker. The relationship between the Kurds and the Arabs is “replacing the sectarian issue” as a flashpoint. The key question: what are the rights and responsibilities of the Kurdish regional government to Baghdad and vice versa? Crocker called it the Iraqi equivalent of the “States Rights” issue in America, saying that we should be humble when criticizing the Iraqis when we have only to look to our own past to see the difficulties in forming a coherent state. He also called attention to a lesser known “Kirkuk situation” in the south between Al-Anbar and Karbala provinces.

Crocker called the question of civilian-military relations in Iraq “profound.” There is currently a significant imbalance of power between the security forces and the civilian government. This disparity must be dealt with swiftly and decisively, especially considering Iraq’s historical lack of civilian control over the military.

Crocker claimed that Iraq will not “go off the rails” but will still need significant US support in order to succeed. **With regards to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), Crocker predicted that the Iraqis will come to the Americans late this year or early next year to ask that they stay on in a**

military capacity past the agreed upon timelines found in the SOFA. He said that he hopes we say yes to this request.

Crocker then moved on to Iran's role, saying that Iran has something the US lacks; "strategic patience." The Iranians are telling the Iraqis that "the Americans are going home, but we are going to be here and we will remember who does what."

He concluded by saying that Iraq is not "going away" and that moderate Arab regimes need to support the country. On August 31, President Obama said that the US was "turning the page" on Iraq, which Crocker said is fair. But Iraq cannot think we are "closing the book" on it while the story is "still being written."