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The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

“McCain, Obama, and the Middle East: The Influence of Domestic Policy on U.S. Policy”

Monday, October 20, 2008

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars held a panel discussion entitled, “McCain, Obama, and the Middle East: The influence of Domestic Politics on U.S. Policy” on October 20, 2008. Participants included **Graeme Bannerman**, Adjunct Scholar at the Middle East Institute, and founder and President of Bannerman & Associates, LLC; **Hussein Ibish**, Executive Director of the Hala Salaam Maksoud Foundation for Arab-American Leadership and Senior Fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine; **Richard Strauss**, editor of the *Middle East Policy Survey*; moderated by **Aaron David Miller**, Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

Hussein Ibish began by reminding everyone of times when public policy affected foreign relations in the Middle East: 1) The U.S. Saudi relationship, the “friend or foe” discussions in the wake of 9/11; 2) The Dubai Port World Scandal; 3) Iraq—in reverse. That is, events on the ground in Iraq influenced the outcomes of both primaries in the U.S. elections, and therefore is an example of foreign politics impacting domestic policy.

He then spoke of the lack of a Palestinian lobby on the Hill, and any future overwhelming opinion for a 2-state solution is “the most powerful weapon” yet to be deployed.

Richard Strauss’ comments focused on the American Jewish community. Highlighting the high voter turn out (**90% of the Jewish community votes**), and disproportionate representation (**2% of the population, yet 5% of the House of Representatives and 13% of the Senate**), Strauss nevertheless says there is an exaggerated perception of influence of the Jewish lobby which inevitably works in its favor.

Graeme Bannerman said there is **no question that domestic politics influences foreign policy, that lobbies are a relatively recent phenomenon in Washington beginning 30 years ago, and AIPAC remains the standard** by which all other lobbies are judged.

He also said that no matter what, a president will prevail on policy so long as he makes the case that it is vital for the national security of the country. Ultimately, then, as grave as the issues are in the Middle East, they are not terribly critical to the national interest. Therefore, Congress will not fall in line behind the president and is free to listen to its constituents (i.e. lobbies).

Aaron David Miller saved the most interesting comments for last when he **said no new president with such high expectations** (an obvious allusion to Obama) **can survive a major foreign policy failure in his first term. Therefore expect not an Arab-Israeli peace deal, but a U.S.-Syrian peace deal to be more likely.**