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Project on Middle East Democracy and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
“Speaking Clearly: What Should President Obama Say to the Middle East?”
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1779 Massachusetts Ave., NW, January 12, 2009

The Project on Middle East Democracy along with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a panel discussion based on the following question: in the wake of the failures of the Bush administration’s freedom agenda in the Middle East, what should President Obama say to the region in his first address? In answering this question, the Project on Middle East Democracy has gathered ideas from a dozen policy experts and compiled them into a publication which served as the basis for the discussion. The panel included **Michele Dunne**, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Editor of the Arab Reform Bulletin; **Scott Carpenter**, Keston Family Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; **Hesham Melhem**, Washington Bureau Chief of Al-Arabiya; **Heather Hurlburt**, Executive Director of the National Security Network, and was moderated by **Andrew Albertson**, Executive Director for the Project on Middle East Democracy.

Hesham Melhem began the discussion by highlighting the challenges Obama will inherit from President Bush in the Middle East. He explained that the “fighting in Gaza will force itself upon the president” during his first days in office, and it is important to remember the interconnectedness of problems in the region; from Iraq to Palestine to the war on terror. In encouraging a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem Obama should take a “tough love” approach toward both sides, calling on all parties to accept responsibility for the part they have played in this problem. He should also work to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Syria and Israel and Lebanon. On a more general level, Melhem urged Obama to abandon grandiose rhetoric and calls for regime change and instead speak of empowerment and encouragement of human rights. The new administration should be clear that the U.S. has made mistakes in the past but is committed to helping the region progress.

Scott Carpenter argued that Obama should avoid the temptation to say nothing on democracy promotion, even though the U.S. currently lacks credibility on this issue. Additionally, the U.S. needs to acknowledge its regional interests and the fact that, at times, they have run counter to the principles of democratization. While Barack Obama possesses more credibility than President Bush in the region, Carpenter asked – is it enough to overcome the challenges? An important step in reaching that point is for Obama to exude modesty and honesty. Carpenter emphasized that the new administration will need to proceed with democracy in the region as a long-term U.S. interest and to always maintain a level of frankness about that interest.

Michele Dunne argued that the new administration should rebuild relationships with the people and governments of the Middle East through peace, justice, development, and democracy. It will be crucial for Obama to pursue long-term objectives with greater modesty and consistency, fight the urge to shift too far away from current policies (do not disengage), and adopt a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Obama must remember that “peace will not occur without justice” and economic prosperity cannot exist without transparent governments. It is unrealistic to focus on one issue and expect it to open the door for the others. Dunne urged Obama to indicate that there will be no strict priority placed on a specific issue, but instead there should be a blended approach that will reflect the needs of each country in a realistic way.

Heather Hurlburt strove to compliment the above discussion by offering advice on the mechanics behind this type of presidential speech. She urged Obama to keep in mind that speeches are not blunt objects, they are not given in a vacuum, and words matter but deeds matter more. Additionally, she suggested that a speech of this kind should not be given too early (and should probably not occur before a Gaza ceasefire), claiming that waiting will allow Obama time to use actions to back up his words. Hurlburt also cautioned against the use of inflammatory rhetoric, which will certainly increase media coverage but will not help to further the notion of a change in policy.

Overall, calls for honesty, modesty, and a meaningful partnership were recurrent themes throughout the debate. All agreed that Barack Obama epitomizes the notion of the “American dream” and he should use this to remind the world of the values that America holds dear. In order to elevate the status and influence of the United States in the Arab world, Obama must be clear and realistic in his goals, invest in long-term solutions, actively engage and listen to the concerns of the people of the Middle East, and reaffirm America’s commitment to lasting freedom and the right of all peoples to choose their own path.