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**U.S. Grand Strategy in the Middle East: Is There One?
Wednesday, January 16, 9:30am-12pm
Middle East Policy Council
Rayburn House Office Building, B338/9, Washington, DC 20515**

On Wednesday (1/16), the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC) hosted its 71st Capitol Hill Conference entitled “U.S. Grand Strategy in the Middle East: Is There One?” Moderated by **Thomas R. Mattair**, Executive Director of MEPC, the event featured **Chas W. Freeman Jr.**, Chairman of Projects International, former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and former President of MEPC; **William B. Quandt**, Professor at the University of Virginia and formerly of the National Security Council; **John Duke Anthony**, founding President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations; and **Marwan Muasher**, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment, former Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Jordan, and former Ambassador of Jordan to the U.S.

Thomas R. Mattair opened the event by suggesting that “to formulate a grand strategy one should have clarity about national interests and policy objectives, and plans for achieving them.” He asked if the U.S. can find a complimentary set of policy objectives. He noted that the post-World War II grand strategy of containment was largely successful in preventing adversaries from dominating the region, preserving access to oil, and protecting Israel. Then, after 9/11, the Bush administration’s strategy was liberal hegemony. Mattair posed the question of whether the Obama administration is attempting to have a pragmatic, non-ideological strategy or pursuing selective engagement. He concluded that the administration will be judged on its success in addressing issues like terrorism and Iran. He later noted that the Ambassadors to the U.S. from Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the Arab League were in attendance.

Chas W. Freeman Jr. described the U.S. as pursuing two contradictory objectives over the last 50 years: economic and strategic advantage in the region, and support for the Jewish settler-state. This led the U.S. to engage with Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, but the relationships have either fallen apart or become complicated. Meanwhile, the U.S.’s abandonment of the peace process has given Israel freedom to expand its settlements and decreased American influence in the region. Freeman said, “US policy currently consists of ad hoc actions,” focused on sheltering Israel with no clear objective. He added that “Israel has consistently demonstrated that it craves land more than peace.” Freeman observed that future governments in the region will listen less to the U.S. and demand more from Israel. He said, “Populist Egypt’s passivity is unlikely to be secured.” He predicted that Syria will be democratic, but Salafist, and that the “Arab Awakening” has turned out to be a Salafi awakening. He stated that no Islamists are comfortable with expansionist Zionism or America’s drone wars, and that America’s Islamophobia has damaged its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Freeman’s bottom line was that U.S. support of Israel, antagonism of Islamism, and drone strikes strategy have precluded broad-based cooperation with Middle East countries. He concluded that America’s interests in the region require rethinking, not just of policies, but of strategic objectives these policies should be designed to achieve.

William B. Quandt expressed suspicion of grand strategies for the Middle East with so many balls in the air. He recounted two past major strategies. First, from 1991 to 2000 the U.S. sought to contain Iran and Iraq and form an international consensus for the Oslo Accords, which could have succeeded and

might have stabilized the region. Then, post-9/11 the Bush administration ambitiously attempted to recreate the region by effecting a quick, clean regime change to establish a Western-leaning, moderate government that would make peace with Israel and be a model for change. Quandt said that any current approach must stem from a “real appreciation of what American interests are, and it must reside in an understanding that we are not all powerful.” He emphasized the need for multilateralism and said to “think of balancing, not winning, persuasion, not détente.” Quandt made three recommendations. 1) Repair U.S.-Iranian relations—the framing of a deal is apparent, and John Kerry must find an effective channel. 2) Keep close to Turkey—Obama has done well here and it remains a model for the region. 3) Think of new ways to engage Egyptian leadership, as that relationship remains important. Additionally, Quandt noted that Saudi Arabia’s generational leadership transition will have it focused internally. He said the U.S. cannot fix Syria on its own and must support a political solution and offer inducements to end the violence. Finally, Quandt asserted that the U.S. cannot pretend the Israeli-Palestinian the conflict no longer matters. Kerry must do due diligence engage with all interested parties quickly. Quandt said that confidence building and merely getting parties back to the table is worthless. He said failing is not the end of the world, but success would have significant benefits.

John Duke Anthony initially reviewed the tenuous founding and history of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its relationship with the U.S. The U.S. has land forces in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, naval forces in Bahrain and Oman, and air capacities in the UAE and Qatar. The GCC has voted with the U.S. in on some key international issues, and generally peg its currencies to the U.S. dollar. He described the GCC’s primary interest as clarity about the U.S.’s real interests. The GCC countries’ primary goal is the continuation of political stability, which they link with security. Without it, they would not play their largely unnoticed humanitarian role. Anthony confirmed that there is concern about Iran, but said the greater concern is over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He closed by suggesting that those concerned about human rights in Bahrain should consider America’s own social problems.

Marwan Muasher began by describing the popular movements as “a positive development that puts the Arab world back on the right side of history” but said it would be wrong to judge based on the last two years because institution building will be a long process. He said the U.S. has a stake and must remain engaged, but doing so will require more patience because “fluidity now rules the day.” U.S. influence has declined because of constrained economic resources, reduced military power, and Arab frustration with U.S. failures to advance the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The states in transition will need US encouragement, understanding, tough truth-telling, and when appropriate, economic assistance. Muasher offered five recommendations: 1) Focus on performance, not ideology, when it comes to democracy; 2) Have realistic expectations for the U.S. role; 3) Do not try to pick winners—visible US efforts to encourage liberal democratic developments will be counterproductive; 4. Recognize that political Islam is neither monolithic, nor static. “The U.S. must be ready to challenge Islamist governments to strengthen and institutionalize the democratic processes that brought them to power;” 5) Break the regional deadlock on Syria. Muasher called Iran one of the biggest losers of the Arab Awakening. He closed by addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying its continuation has consequences for Palestinian rights and Israel’s long-term future as a democracy. He said that the choice is between the difficulty of achieving peace today, and the impossibility of doing so tomorrow.

During the Q&A, Muasher and Freeman agreed that the two-state solution was nearly dead. Freeman expressed concern that Israel is headed toward an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, and that if Syria falls apart the region’s borders may be in doubt. Anthony said the U.S. should allow someone else to take a leadership role, and to make sure elected extremist groups do not overestimate the U.S.’s commitment to them. Quandt said, “The kind of Middle East we should be hoping for is one where sectarian leaders cease to be so important,” and that the U.S. should not encourage Sunni-Shia polarization.