

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

**PRESIDENT-ELECT OBAMA AND
THE MIDDLE EAST**

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ANDREW ALBERTSON: Welcome, everyone. If there's anyone else still in the hallway, if you can kind of come on inside and then if we could close the doors, we're going to get started here just in one second. Thank you.

MICHELE DUNNE: Hello, I am Michele Dunne from the Carnegie Endowment. I want to welcome you to today's event, which the Carnegie Endowment is co-sponsoring with the Project on Middle East Democracy. And the moderator of our session is going to be Andrew Albertson, who is the executive director. So I'll turn it over to Andrew to begin.

MR. ALBERTSON: Thank you. Hi, I want to welcome everyone. My name is Andrew Albertson, I'm the executive director of the Project on Middle East Democracy or POMED. POMED is nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3) here in Washington dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can emerge in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Today we are very pleased to be co-hosting this event with our friends here at the Middle East program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

If there was any thought that President-elect Obama's foreign policy might be allowed a reprieve from the tumult of the Middle East, that his early attentions might focus on the shifting balance of power in Asia, AIDS relief or other ongoing crises in Africa or elsewhere, I think the chances of that have closed even further with the events of the last few weeks. By necessity, Obama will have to turn much of his early attention to Iraq, Iran and the crisis in Gaza and the peace process, not to mention nearby Pakistan and Afghanistan. One can speculate that in his inaugural address a week from tomorrow, Obama might have something to say about the broad outlines of his approach to the world, to the Middle East. As Helene Cooper of the New York Times and others have reported, President Obama seems also to be planning to be giving a major foreign policy address somewhere in the Islamic world in his first 100 days in office.

The question we want to ask today is what should President Obama say in those early addresses to the Middle East? This question takes on particular importance in the wake of the failures of the Bush administration approach to the Middle East, largely encompassed under the label of the Freedom Agenda. That agenda included messianic rhetoric in support of democracy on the one hand – and we can all recall milestone speeches, including President Bush's speech at the National Endowment for Democracy in 2003 and his second inaugural address, in which he said, "All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know the United States will not ignore your oppression or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for liberty, we will stand with you."

But it also included a devastating lack of follow-through towards those goals and commitments. Far worse, the decision to link that agenda with the invasion of Iraq led many in the region to associate the American push for democratic reforms with the desire for chaos or other insidious goals. And I have to say, I think when we're talking about communicating with the Middle East, there was even a more recent statement which I found even more galling. Asked to comment on the shoe-throwing incident, President Bush said, "I don't know what his beef is, but whatever it is, I'm sure someone will hear it."

Today, I think alongside Americans, people across the Middle East are anxious to see a change in the way the U.S. approaches that part of the world. There is an opportunity and we fervently hope that President Obama will seize that opportunity to use these early addresses to signal a sharp change in U.S. policies. This is all the more an opportunity given President-elect Obama's

oratorical and personal skills – his capacity that’s apparent to listen and to empathize. So how will he use those opportunities? How should he? Will President Obama speak clearly in support of basic human rights and the democratic aspirations of the people of the Middle East? Will he follow that with an endorsement of the basic principle that democracy cannot be imposed by force? Will he speak in sweeping, idealistic tones that smack of insincerity or in a way more frank, more doable, linking a concern for democracy with other development goals and backing those words up with action?

And when he speaks, when he travels to the region, will he take time to listen, to meet with people in the region – not just government officials, but civic leaders – to learn about their frustrations and hopes? And finally, what should he say? At this pivotal moment, we at POMED wanted to take a moment to collect a handful of ideas from noted activists and scholars and policymakers about what Obama – President Obama – should say in those early speeches. And I believe everyone had a chance to receive a copy of this outside on your way in. Okay. Likewise, the Middle East program at Carnegie and the Arab Reform Bulletin, edited by Michele Dunne, solicited views of a number of distinguished Arab thinkers on, again, the topic of President Obama’s policies towards the Middle East. And I think those are also available outside.

And today we wanted to come together with you and with this distinguished group of panelists to discuss the ideas presented in those two publications and to have a broader conversation about presidential language – about the way it can be used by President Obama as he seeks to signal a change in our policies in the Middle East, including especially, with regard to our commitment to and our support of human rights and democracy in the region. We are absolutely thrilled to have this distinguished group of panelists speak. I’ll start with Hesham on the end: Hesham Melhem is the Washington bureau chief of Al-Arabiya, the Dubai-based satellite channel, and a correspondent for An-Nahar, a leading Lebanese daily.

His writings have appeared in publications ranging from the literary journal *Al-Mawaqif* to the *LA Times*, as well as in magazine such as *Foreign Policy*, *Middle East Report*, *Middle East Insight* and *Middle East Policy*. He is the author of “Dual Containment: The Demise of a Fallacy,” published by the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University. He is a regular speaker at think tanks and interest groups on U.S.-Arab relations, political Islam, intra-Arab relations, Arab-Israeli issues, public policies in the Arab world and other topics. And what is not on this bio is that he’s one of the most respected Arab analysts that we have the honor of having here in Washington with us. So it’s wonderful to have him here speaking today.

Scott Carpenter is the Keston family fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the director of its Project Fikra, which focuses on empowering Arab democrats in their struggles against extremism. Previously, Mr. Carpenter served as deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, from 2004 to 2007. Prior to that, he served in Baghdad as director of the governance group of the Coalition Provisional Authority. He also served as undersecretary of state Paula Dobriensky’s representative on the interagency executive steering group on Iraq. And he co-chaired the Democracy Policy Coordinating Committee with the democracy, human rights and humanitarian director at the National Security Council.

Michele Dunne is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and editor of the *Arab Reform Bulletin*. A Department of State official from 1986 to 2003, Dunne served in a variety of assignments related to the Middle East, including the National Security Council

staff, the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, the U.S. consulate general in Jerusalem and the secretary of state's policy planning staff. Among Dunne's publications are Carnegie Endowment papers on integrating democracy promotion into U.S. Middle East policy and also evaluating Egyptian reform, including "Democracy in Contemporary Egyptian Political Discourse," published in 2003. Dunne is also an adjunct assistant professor at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University.

And finally, Heather Hurlburt, who served in the Clinton administration from 1995 to 2001 as special assistant and speechwriter to the president, as speechwriter for Secretary of State Albright and Christopher and members – and also, was a member of the State Department's policy planning staff. She worked for International Crisis Group, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the congressional Helsinki Commission. She is, today, a senior adviser to the U.S. in the World Project of Dēmos and appears frequently as a commentator in print and new media and as a regular guest on Robert Wright's Bloggingheads TV. And she serves as the executive director of the National Security Network. We are very pleased to have all four of you here, and to answer what's going to be a tough question, here, and that's what should Obama say to the Middle East. And with that, I want to turn it over to Hesham.

HESHAM MELHEM: Thank you very much. The other speakers conspired to – set up to have me as the first speaker, I guess.

MR. Carpenter : You figured it out.

MR. MELHEM: I know, I know. Let me say a few words about the world, or rather the Middle East that Barack Obama is going to inherit from George Bush. After all the Middle East that Bill Clinton bequeathed to George Bush eight years ago – it was not perfect, it was not idle, but it was not as chaotic and as bitter as it is today. What President Bush will bequeath to Barack Obama on the 20th of this month is a Middle East that is more fragmented politically and socially, more alienated from the United States and more resistant to U.S. influence. America's stature has diminished and its ability to deter its adversaries and help its allies, particularly on the Arab side, has diminished and has decreased considerably.

In both the Arab world and in Israel there is a dearth of strong leadership. In fact, the fragmentation that we are talking about, which you can see it in Iraq and other parts of the Arab world, also manifests itself in a kind of – in bold relief in both the Palestinian relationship as well as the Israeli leadership. Who remembers who was the last Israeli prime minister who finished his term in office? In the last 10, 15, 20 years we've seen this deep fragmentation in Palestinian politics, between Hamas and Fatah in particular, which led to Hamas winning the elections, followed by Hamas' takeover and the bloodletting between the Palestinians in Gaza more than a year and a half ago.

On the Israeli side, we have seen the inability of the so-called major Israeli parties to form governments and hence their reliance more and more on small religious as well as right-wing parties, including parties that call unabashedly for the transfer of Palestinians from the West Bank to the Arab world. Transfer is a kind of, you know, euphemism for ethnic cleansing.

So this is part of the Middle East that Barack Obama is going to inherit from George Bush, and the fighting in Gaza is going to force itself on the president on his first day in office. This is a president who is already saddled by truly historic challenges: the economy, not to mention South

Asia, particularly what's happening on the Pakistani-Indian borders, as well as in Afghanistan. In a way, the Gaza tragedy is similar to a classic Greek tragedy, in that sense that everybody knew that a tragic event is going to happen, but neither men nor gods were willing to intervene to stop the tragic event.

We all knew it and I would argue that the unwillingness and the inability of the Bush administration to engage fully and seriously in the last eight years – not to stand in the occasional talk about the two-state vision and all that, as if the president itself – I mean, this is like I said it, therefore it happened. As well as the Bush administration's almost unqualified support for Israel is in part – I don't want to exaggerate – but at least is in part responsible for the unfolding tragedy in Gaza today. Obviously, there is enough blame to go around. What Gaza represents today is really kind of a breathtaking lack of imagination and creative thinking on the part of the Palestinian leadership, Israeli leadership, the American leadership and you can go beyond that to the Arabic leadership, too – in dealing with the challenge represented by the last Palestinian election, as well as Hamas' takeover of Gaza more than a year-and-a-half ago.

Anti-Americanism is rising in the Middle East; it has reached new heights. In fact, today anti-Americanism has its own high priests, its own doctrines, its own religious texts. It's spreading like a wildfire; I've never seen it as bad as it is today. Now, historically Arabs have two main grievances vis-à-vis U.S. policy in the Middle East. One, obviously, is Palestine: the support for Israel, the ability to see that the Palestinians have legitimate national grievances. And the other one was America's traditional support for Arab autocratic repressive regimes.

I would give the Bush administration credit for essentially admitting, as he did in his second inaugural speech, that we Americans, through Republicans as well as Democratic administrations for the last 60 years, looked the other way when our Arab friends in charge in the Arab world as well as in the Muslim world were repressing their own people. And we did that in the name of stability, free flow of oil and alliances against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. That was an incredibly important admission on the part of an American president, and he was – George Bush was the first American president to do so.

The tragedy was that his freedom agenda and the way it was executed lead to tragic developments and created the exact conditions that he wanted to avoid or America should want to avoid: when the whole democratic approach was reduced to elections, without any thought to creating the right necessary environment and conditions that allow for the rebirth of political life in Arab societies, given the fact that political life was snuffed and destroyed and pulverized in most Arab societies.

The Arab world is not arid when it comes to democracy. Anybody who knows anything about Iraq in particular as well as Egypt during the First and the Second World War, the so-called liberal era – there was experimentation with democracy, there was a semblance of political life, there were political parties, syndicates, groups – all of the groups that we put under the rubric of civil society. There were elections, there were parliaments. And one of the reasons they did not develop well is that the colonial powers did not allow them to develop well, and there were of course other inherently, you know, political reasons why not did that happen.

So we have Palestine, support for repressive regimes. And since the early '90s Iraq was added to the list of Arab grievances. The war on terror, the way it was conducted, was added to the

list in 2001. Instead of focusing on the war, on waging a relentless, merciless war on al Qaeda and every affiliated group with al Qaeda, the president engaged in an incredibly confusing, muddling of issues. There was a conceptual muddle in Washington, when the president of the United States put al Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah and other Islamist groups in one group under one tent.

At least Barack Obama intellectually knows how to make a distinction between al Qaeda on the one hand and the problems that are represented by Hamas and Hezbollah and other Islamist groups. Obama has been sending subtle and not so subtle messages that he intends to pursue a new approach to Iran, as well as to the Arab-Israeli conflict, arguing that what is required really is a fundamental shift in the paradigm. I mean, there has to be a new paradigm for the United States in the Middle East if the Obama administration wishes to avoid the tragic mistakes made by the Bush administration.

I would argue that a man named Barack Hussein Obama will definitely look at the world in a fundamentally different way than George W. Bush looks at the world. The world in the Obama era is not going to be necessarily Western-centric or Euro-centric; we are all talking about the rise of the BRICs: Brazil, Russia, India, China. This is a man who understands that the world is beyond Europe and beyond the West. This is a man who lived in Indonesia, this is a man who had roots in Kenya and therefore his outlook on the world will be different or at least I'm hoping that it will be different.

And just as the new world should not be necessarily Western-centric, his approach to the region should not necessarily be Israel-centric. I'm not asking him to abandon Israel. That's not the issue. We are asking him or he should be – at least on the Arab side – should look at the Middle East in total as a regional center, if there is such a term. Policy should be based on the regional reality, on the fact that the problems of the region are interconnected, that Palestine influences Iraq, that Iraq influences Palestine. A resolution of Palestine helps the United States in Iraq. A failure in Palestine emboldens Iran. The Sunni-Shia tension in Iraq influences Sunni-Shia tension in Beirut and in Bahrain and in Kuwait and in Saudi Arabia and in Syria.

I think Obama sees these connections. Just because he's – as he sees that a resolution of Afghanistan requires a broader picture of South Asia, it requires a resolution or at least creating a peace process of some sort between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. He understands these things; he's not intellectually lazy, as some – (laughter) – I can't resist – (laughter). That's why, I mean, the approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict should be comprehensive. I'm not fond of the regime in Damascus, but peace between Israel and Syria is not a reward to Bashar al Assad. Peace is good because it's inherently good, particularly if there's a just peace.

And therefore the United States should take a new look at the whole region: encourage peace between the Israelis and the Syrians, Lebanese and the Israelis and definitely go back to the Palestinian-Israeli fundamental problem. I think Barack Obama should show both the Israelis some tough love and the Arab and the Muslim world also some tough love. If he's going to address the Muslim world in his first 100 days, he should say simple I understand what happened, I understand 9/11, I understand that your religion sometimes is misunderstood in my country or that there are some people in the United States who malign Islam and Islamic history, even the prophet and others, as we've seen in the last few years. This will not take place under my watch. I want to open up a new chapter with the Muslim world. I understand the complexity of the Muslim world and I

understand that the Muslim world does not necessarily speak in one voice. I understand the cultural nuances and richness of a whole world we call the Muslim world.

But I want you to understand, too, that you are also in part responsible for this sorry state of affairs in your own societies. And I want you to understand also, that while there is a legacy of colonialism, while there is a legacy of problems – created, maybe, by the West – but in the end you have to take out those elements in your societies that are using religious grievances to justify that political ends that are not acceptable to us and should not be acceptable to you. In other words, let's have a serious discussion about why we have this sorry state of affairs in most Muslim countries, why we do not have democratic institutions and values in many Muslim countries. And that is not due only to what European, Western colonial legacy in the Muslim world. Or to America's policies in the Muslim world, notwithstanding the fact that the United States did commit blunders in many parts of the Muslim world.

And I think he should level with the Muslim world in that sense. And he has enough capital to do that, something that George Bush did not have, something that even another internationalist like Bill Clinton did not necessarily have, although Bill Clinton did try to do that in his major speeches when he visited the Middle East earlier on. So Barack Obama should show the Israelis some tough love with that we are not a disinterested third party, the United States. The United States is really involved up to its neck in the problems in the Middle East. It can't walk away from the Middle East; you walk away from the Arab-Israeli conflict and you end up with Gaza, you walk away from the Arab-Israeli conflict and you end up in 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah and the destruction that that war brought.

And then let's have a serious discussion in the United States. I mean, during the current discussions about Gaza what was lacking was the context. And while I'm talking about a comprehensive approach to the region and while everybody watching the Israeli debate about peace with Syria, they want peace with Syria not necessarily because Syria is very important in and of itself. Like Egypt, they want peace with Syria because they want to win Syria away from Iran. Fine, but part of the problem with the debate here is that somebody will tell you – they look you in the eye and insult your intelligence and tell you the reason we have a fight in Gaza today is because of Iran.

Now, granted, Iran today for all intents and purposes unfortunately has become somewhat of a Mediterranean power because of its extensive military, financial relationship with Syria, its sponsorship of Hezbollah and its support of Hamas. But to tell me that the problem in Hamas today or even 2006 is due only to Iran is really to engage in analytical wishful thinking. My god, I have only one minute. (Laughter.)

Let me say a few words about democracy and Iraq and Iran – in one minute. (Chuckles.) The Obama administration should abandon the grandiose rhetoric of the Bush administration and the militant action of the Bush administration. Democracy cannot be imposed by force. The problem now: Democracy has become a dirty word in the Arab world because those anti-democratic forces in the Arab world would like to tell their own people, when Americans talk about democracy they are talking about Iraq. And you know this is not true. The president at one time was engaging in historical analogies that have no basis in reality. Iraq will become a beacon of democracy in the Middle East the way Germany and Japan after the Second World War.

When you engage in historical analogies, buddy, you should know something about history. There is nothing comparable between what happened in Germany and Japan and Iraq today. Germany and Japan are homogenous societies, they had experimentation with democracy – at least Germany, they were highly industrial, they were highly developed. None of this can be said about Iraq. Everybody in the neighborhood around Germany and Japan wanted the Americans to succeed. At one time practically everybody in the neighborhood around Iraq wanted the Americans to bleed. And after the Second World War the Germans, the Japanese, the Europeans all had one enemy in common, was the Soviet Union, which brought them together. None of this exists in Iraq. None of this exists in Iraq.

But that does not mean the American president should abandon the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. And there has to be some consistency. When a human rights violation occurs in those countries that we consider our friends, we should speak as forcefully as when they occur in Sudan or in Syria. If they occur in Egypt or Morocco, speak forcibly too. Talk about empowerment, talk about basic respect for basic human rights, but don't expect Iraq in the next 10 years to become Sweden – ain't gonna happen. And don't expect the Iraqis to burn the Iraqi flag because we have the right in this country to burn the American flag – ain't gonna happen. And nobody in Iraq should be expected to talk about same-sex marriage the way we talk about them in this country – ain't gonna happen.

But live with it. And those experimentations in empowerment and opening of the political horizon, political process – encourage them as much as possible and stay away from the grandiose rhetoric. The new administration should be clear we made mistakes. And I'll tell you, when we talk about anti-Americanism – just give me one minute – in the Middle East, you know, you don't have to come up with a coherent argument. Those anti-American forces in the Muslim world, in the Arab world – all they have to do now to make a point, unfortunately, is to mention the names of certain locals: Abu Ghraib, Haditha, Guantanamo. That's it. That's it. So there has to be some sort of an admission that morally we were not on the high moral ground in the last few years.

And the United States should abandon – clearly, explicitly – the Bush Doctrine. We cannot engage in regime change, whether in Iran or any other place. And one thing on Iraq: Just say I will deliver on my promise to leave in 16 months, there will be no permanent military bases in Iraq and on the war on terror we will wage a merciless war on al Qaeda and we expect you, Arabs and Muslims, to be in the same trench fighting these dark forces. But we are not going to put Hamas and Hezbollah and all the Islamists there and every Islamist groups who's willing to engage in the political process, renounce the use of violence and terror, should be welcome. Thank you.

MR. ALBERTSON: Thank you very much. (Applause.) Thank you. Scott? Do you want to take it next?

SCOTT CARPENTER: I think I'll speak from here. Well, it's always difficult to follow Hesham.

(Off-side conversation, laughter.)

I was just saying, it's always difficult to follow someone like Hesham, who's so eloquent and passionate and intelligent all at the same time. It's part of the reason, in my written recommendation for what President-elect Obama should be saying to the Middle East, that I suggest rather boldly

that he in his first few months have an exclusive interview with Hesham on Al-Arabiya – (laughter) – to allow him to question. And Hesham assures me that the check is in the mail. (Laughter.)

Well, you know, honestly following such a tour de force presentation, I think the temptation when one listens to this – and if I were Barack Obama’s advisors listening to this, especially on the whole issue of democratization, which is what we came here to discuss, I think the temptation would be to say nothing, only because of the lack of the credibility that the United States seems to have given the presentation that was made here. What I argued in my brief piece was that President Obama symbolizes change, and it’s a point I’m going to come back to, to indicate what the implications of that are for rhetorical policy.

But before I do that I want to simply thank the Project on Middle East Democracy for organizing this event, for not facing the temptation to do nothing and yielding to it, but assembling us all together to ask the question, if we believe it’s an important objective of American policy to continue with a policy that seeks to advance political and economic freedom in the Arab countries of the region, then how best for the president to do that? Now, there are two questions obviously buried in that. One is, should you be doing it and, B, how to do it. If you declare or decide that you shouldn’t be doing it, then the second question – (chuckles) – is obviously completely irrelevant.

I hope that each of you were able to pick up, you know – I’ll use it as a prop here – the publication that Andrew mentioned. In it there’s a fantastic summary, I think, or condensation of what most of the people who were asked to make remarks said. And it was boiled down essentially into four common messages. First, that all of the writers in one way or another said that the United States and President Obama needs to emphasize partnership, that we are not doing something to you – (chuckles) – we are doing, hopefully, working together with you. And not only with the governments of the region, but with the peoples of the region, with other players in the region, whether it’s the United Nations or the European Union, et cetera.

Modesty: Adopt a more modest approach, in the sense that your rhetoric should not be filled and overheated with rhetoric that clearly cannot be achieved because it undermines your credibility. Obviously, the whole question of peace was raised by everyone. It’s something you can’t ignore; no one wants the conflict in Iraq; no one wants to see the Palestinian-Israeli violence continue; that he would work in some way toward peace. And the final point that was made by seemingly all of the people who were asked to comment related to human rights, to continue to stress that the United States has a continual, perpetual, consistent policy of supporting human rights around the world and it will continue to do so in these areas.

That’s as far as the summary goes, but there’s another point that I hear, and I’ve heard already today in two specific contexts, that we either need – I think Andrew said – a sharp change in the policy and rhetoric toward the Middle East. I think Hesham said a fundamental shift in the paradigm toward the Middle East. And I think I’m concerned about that for a couple of reasons. One is that when I think about what a sharp change means – and I think when most people think about what a sharp change means – it means going from going in one direction to turning 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

And I think that has two implications for what people then expect. One is that, look, you have to acknowledge, as Hesham says, the Bush freedom agenda failed. Get over it, it’s over, done with, you tried, you couldn’t do it. It’s not something that the United States should primarily be

concerned about. This is a problem in the region for Egyptians, for Jordanians, for Saudis, for Iranians, for Iraqis; the United States should stay the hell out of it. It doesn't have a direct bearing on our national security interests. And the fact is, we have to acknowledge what those interests are: they're oil, they're protecting Israel, they're ensuring that Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon. They have nothing to do with political freedom or economic opportunity or choice for people in the Arab world – what does that have to do with us?

And so go back, recognize that if you failed, if your two plus two equals five, go back to the original concept and two plus two equals four again. Which is to say: We have core interests, they're realistic interests, the formulation that sixty years of pursuing stability in the region at the expense of democracy ended up producing neither, is fundamentally wrong. Stability for its own sake is what should be done. The second implication of that significant and fundamental shift that I hear in it typically is that we need to abandon Israel, we need to not be so Israel-centric – is another way of saying it, in a way – there has to be more balance in the policy toward Israel.

I don't think, in the many people I've spoken to in the region, especially with anti-Americanism at the all-time high that Hesham references, that when you say anything about Israel, negative about Israel, it is never, ever, ever, ever enough. You can't say anything that is negative about Israel that is sufficient and that is an issue that concerns me. In fact, part of the reason, I think, that this is so – is because when it comes to talking about – and this is a perversion that I would like to see addressed somehow – is that there seems to be and was a tradeoff between the pursuit of Palestinian-Israeli peace and the so-called freedom agenda.

I think Michele will talk about how all this needs to be integrated, but one of the concerns I have is – that I've noted empirically – that you are able to pursue a policy where you are seeking to influence governments to open their political system and begin to reform economically when there wasn't a peace process for them to play with as a political football. As soon as the political process started again in Annapolis, all of the sudden you need Egypt, you needed all these countries and all the sudden they were working in some fashion against their own interests and participating with us on a peace process, which is something I fundamentally don't believe you can walk and chew gum at the same time if you choose to.

My view, in terms of what President-elect Obama should say, is practically exactly the same as Hesham's. I think there has to be a modesty. I think there has to be a sense that violence is not the way, I have to say that there has to be, in terms of listening and saying what it is that we hope to help them fulfill their own aspirations, but also to point out that where there is opportunity there is also responsibility. And to say, look, you know, we want to partner with you but you have to be a partner on the other side. I think it's very important that he convey that message and as Hesham says – and this is a point that raised in the beginning, I've come back to now – is that he has credibility that President Bush didn't have, especially after 2005, the Hamas elections in 2006, even after Iraq, you know, the heyday of the quote, unquote, “Arab spring” was 2005. It was the elections of Hamas in 2006 where I think the Bush administration lost all credibility on the issue of the freedom agenda, for better or ill, and there are reasons and rationales.

But the point is, Obama has credibility, and in order to be able to convey a message – any message, you have to have credibility. Now, do I think – and the challenge is – do I think his credibility is sufficient to overcome all of the things that Hesham outlined for us as the challenges in terms of the perception of the United States that we face? On that I'm not certain. So the question

to me is whether or not we perceive this as an interest for the United States to pursue. If it is in our interest to pursue and advance democracy, working in partnership with people around the region, then we should do it and he should talk about it. If we feel that it's important and critical to stand with Israel at a time of crisis, then he should say so.

I think that is the other issue – the one other consistent theme that ran through all of the pieces that are in the bulletin that was not included, and that is honesty. Speak honestly to people, tell them what your interests are, explain to them what the tradeoffs are, be clear with them on both the good and evil, do not lift the rhetoric to such heights that everyone understands that there's no way for you to actually fulfill it.

So it was not precisely what I had stood up here to say, but I think that that pretty much captures the spirit of what I think that the Obama administration, especially in the post-conflict in Gaza timeframe, with an inaugural speech coming up, with a State of the Union speech coming up, it's very difficult to see how he could incorporate very lofty rhetoric in this regard. So thank you all very much.

(Applause.)

MS. DUNNE: Good afternoon. Okay, I'm going to try to build on some of the themes, actually, that Hesham and Scott have already raised. Again, returning to the question of what President-elect Obama should say, we're all getting drawn into what he should do policy-wise and so forth, but to return a little bit to the idea of sort of the initial messages that it would be useful for him to deliver, I want to focus on what I think would be a very useful effort to kind of rebuild relationships between the United States and the people of the region, as well as the governments. And for me this involves connecting with the aspirations of the peoples of the region for a number of things. I'm going to crystallize them into four key issues: peace, justice, development and democracy.

And I'm going to differ here with my good and respected friend Hesham a little bit on this question of democracy having become a dirty word in the Middle East. I think the United States didn't create desires for democracy; I don't think the Bush administration did. And despite all the failures that we've already discussed, the Bush administration also didn't destroy those desires in the Middle East. I think polling data clearly shows that, so I do think the United States can still talk about promoting democratization in the Middle East, although in a different way, making some modifications.

Now, turning to this question of rebuilding relationships with the peoples of the region, on the positive side of the ledger, as we know, President-elect Obama – his election has inspired a lot of people in the Middle East and I think he has a unique ability to do this at this point, to connect with people over the heads of their governments, so to speak. This is very useful and I also think it can help Obama get greater cooperation from the governments in the region if he uses it wisely.

On the negative side, I think that President-elect Obama is not going to say what a lot of people in the region most would like to hear from him. And this is what Scott and Hesham have already mentioned: a shift away from the special U.S.-Israeli relationship. I think this is not going to be what he's going to say when he first speaks to people in the region and that's perhaps – there's

going to be some inevitable disappointment and it probably will be felt evenly more sharply because of Gaza – because of the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza.

So what can he say? Now, I think one thing that would be really useful for Obama to do is simply to show that he's aware of people's concerns and aspirations. Scott just mentioned honestly and I think that that is perhaps underestimated as a tool of public diplomacy, simply indicating that you are aware of the concerns and the problems of the region, even if the United States doesn't necessarily have the immediate ability to solve those problems. After the U.S. election in November, Carnegie commissioned a series of commentaries that Andrew mentioned at the beginning from Arab authors about their advice to Obama. And we published them in the November Arab Reform Bulletin and then also as a series of Web commentaries and they're available on the publications tables here.

Now, just to boil down some of the key messages that came through: Many of them were phrased in terms of avoiding mistakes that people in the region believed that Obama's predecessors have made or in avoiding what they fear Obama might do. One of the key pieces of advice that kept coming up was don't disengage from the region, including Iraq, but engage with it in a more realistic way. Don't just let the pendulum swing far in the other direction as a reaction to the Bush administration. Pursue long-term objectives with greater modesty but also with greater consistency than the Bush administration did. Don't miss opportunities that are coming in the region. Don't be so determined not to do what Bush did that you miss some opportunities that come. And don't delay becoming involved in mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict and so forth. And of course the one heard most often is adopt a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

So, I mean, these are some of the key things that we heard coming from the region. So now to go back to this approach that I started with: if Obama were sort of had these four pillars in approaching the region in peace, justice, development, democracy. I think it would help a lot for Obama to show that he understands that these issues are connected. There won't be any peace in the region without justice, without a just resolution of grievances. Actually, I think justice has been a very underused word in U.S. policy toward the region.

And there will probably not be economic development and prosperity without accountable, transparent governance in the region. In other words, that's going to require progress toward democratization as a long-term goal. Scott started to talk about this and I want to expand a little bit on this issue of prioritization. And I think that some of the mistakes that, in my view, the last two administrations have made maybe by prioritizing issues a little bit too harshly. And I think people will be very alert to what Obama says in the early days to hear if he has some sort of clear priority. Now, in my view the Clinton administration gave this clear priority to Arab-Israeli negotiations – that was after the Gulf War – believing that peace would allow the region to overcome other issues

Now, unfortunately as we know, the negotiations failed and the U.S. failure to promote democracy during that time – during the 1990s, particularly in Palestine – I think had some very disastrous long-term results that we're living now. The Bush administration went in the other direction – too far in the other direction to give a priority to democratization, believing that that would allow the region to sort of leap over the other problems. But clearly, you know, the reemergence of sectarianism in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as Israeli conflicts with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and so forth have show that progress – even when there is progress

toward democratization in some ways, even when there are elections and so forth – these cannot on their own resolve bitter, long-standing conflicts.

So what I'm saying is that sometimes just choosing one central goal and pursuing that kind of single mindedly to the exclusion of other goals can be damaging, I think. We sometimes believe that one issue, one goal, whether it's Arab-Israeli peace or democratization can sort of solve everything else – everything else will fall into place once this one goal is reached. And I think it's – I think that kind of approach has run its course.

Now, I do see – I'm a little concerned – I see a tendency, in some of the statements of President-elect Obama and those close to him, to fall victim, once again, to this sort of harsh prioritization. I think there's a tendency to react to the Bush administration's under-emphasis of Arab-Israeli peace and return to the Clinton administration's overemphasis of Arab-Israeli peace as the central and only goal and the thing that would then solve all the other problems.

Regarding the issue of development and democracy, I see some tendency, in the statements of Obama and others, to believe that here, too, there's some kind of a clear sequencing that's possible. The United States and other outside actors can promote economic prosperity and institutional development without, at the same time, promoting freer political contestation. And for reasons that I've discussed at length in a recent article, which is also on the publications table here, I think this is unrealistic and unproductive. I don't think you can just, as I said, take any of these things, whether we're talking peace, economic development, democratization, and say, okay, we're just going to do this one thing right now and that's going to open up the doors for the others. I don't think that's how it happens.

Now, therefore, what I would recommend is that Obama should indicate in his early statements that he will use the influence of the United States – not its military might – but the persuasive powers of public and private diplomacy, as well as assistance, in the service of these goals, of peace, justice, development and democracy. And I agree with what Scott said about honesty and also, what I think Hesham and Scott both said about modesty. I think Obama should make clear that that doesn't mean that the United States can make these things happen – absolutely not. We should be talking about what will inform the many decisions the United States will have to make about how it conducts its relations with the region.

I think you should indicate that we're not going to have some sort of a strict priority, that, you know, we're simply going for Arab-Israeli peace or we're simply going for democratization or whatever, but that these things will be blended into approaches that make sense in the way that we conduct our relations with each country in the region. And that's where, I think, a real change can take place in U.S. policy – not in grand initiatives toward the entire region, but in the way that the United States walks the walk in its relationship with each and every country.

(Applause.)

HEATHER HURLBURT: So, I always like to refer to myself as a recovering speechwriter. And so I want to congratulate Andrew and the Project on Middle East Democracy, because any time you can get this many people to come out to listen to people talk about the mechanics of speechwriting, something really interesting is going on. So having said that, I want to provide a little bit of a counterpoint to the three presentations we've just heard by introducing some considerations

about what you can and can't actually do with a speech of the kind that we're talking about, based on what we know from recent history and not-so-recent history, because I want to start off with a wonderful anecdote that now is almost 20 years old.

So not everybody will remember that shortly after the end of the Reagan administration, Peggy Noonan, who was one of President Reagan's more celebrated speechwriters, published a memoir about her time writing speeches for Reagan, including some of his very celebrated Cold War speeches, called "What I Saw at the Revolution." And she got in a lot of trouble for comparing a president of the United States giving a speech to a hot air balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. And she, as I say, was roundly criticized for undermining the seriousness of the presidency – I guess you can tell that was 20 years ago, that we still thought that sort of thing was undermining to the seriousness of the presidency.

But it was a marvelously true and correct characterization, for reasons that I'm going to bring out in my talk, and so if you think about a president giving a speech as like a very large balloon several stories high being maneuvered down a crowded street by hundreds of handlers, that gives you a good idea of both the possibility and the limitations of the genre. And so I want to introduce three categories of limitations that I would encourage everybody to keep in mind. First of all, as you can tell from the metaphor, speechwriting is a blunt instrument. Second, speeches aren't given in a vacuum; in this day of global communications, we no longer, if we ever did, have the ability just to speak to whoever we imagine our target audience to be. And third, even when you are as talented a speechmaker as Barack Obama is, words matter but deeds matter more.

So to go through each of those a little bit, there are only so many speeches you can give in a day. And having worked for people who would try to give five to six different sets of public remarks in a day, let me assure you, there are only so many speeches you can give in a day, which, consequently, means there are only so many issues that you can jam into any given speech, or there are only so many messages that you can expect the media to cover out of any given speech, which is perhaps more important, because very few of us actually hear any given speech and many more of us see the little clip of it or read the media report of it. And I've had the experience, as many of you may have had, of going to these kinds of meetings on a number of different issues over the last few months as we contemplated the possibilities that a new president with such great rhetorical skills would bring.

And I have sat through meetings that talked about a speech on nonproliferation in the first hundred days, a speech on changing terrorism policy in the first hundred days, a speech on human rights in the first hundred days, a speech on democracy in the first hundred days, a speech on Iraq in the first hundred days, a speech on Afghanistan in the first hundred days. And I'm sure there are some I've left out. And that's just, by the way, within international issues, and I feel quite confident that, all over town, there are people planning Barack Obama's major speeches on education, health policy, Social Security, not even to mention the economy.

So a great deal of modesty is called for in terms of what we're going to get in the inauguration – I hear that referred to a lot. And I think we will get some terrific rhetoric about the U.S. place in the world that will be relevant to the Islamic world and to other parts of the world as well and I'm really looking forward to that. But I don't think that we will get anything specific along the lines that we've talked about here, and my reasons for this cynicism hark back to the one year that I worked on the president's State of the Union and, first, had the joy of having maybe 200 or

300 pages of books, manuscripts and memos delivered to me that people had sent to the White House, and these were just the ones that the president's staff thought were serious enough that somebody should look at them. And I then went through the somewhat chastening experience of having my fabulous three-page section on my part of the international agenda whittled down to one half of one paragraph. So I just – I mention that as a cautionary note.

A second point that I would come back to is that there's a difference between what goes in a speech and what gets covered. And when you are thinking about speechmaking from the writer's – or giver's – perspective, the first question is, what's the media story? What's the headline? What's the sound bite going to be? And this means two things: one, that you can give a speech with an awful lot of really great stuff in it and most of that stuff gets covered. I always advise aspiring speechmakers that if you just make the first two pages the way your bosses want, you can pretty much put anything you want into the rest of it, so that's where to sneak in your subtle policy changes. But the other piece of that is, several of the previous speakers mentioned, quite correctly, the problems and the damage that's been done by inflated rhetoric, and not just in the past eight years.

It's one of the interminable (ph) temptations of the genre, the temptation to talk about "what could be" instead of "what is" with the knowledge that the power of the person speaking can make the "could be" a little closer to "is." The downside of that is when, actually, the reverse happens and you lose credibility. But the other reason that you do that is because that gets media attention. And, you know, you just imagine the headline, "Barack Obama gives Sober, Humble, Quiet, Limited Speech on Middle East to Wildly Cheering Crowd." (Laughter.) So there's a permanent kind of pressure for rhetorical inflation, and that gets us into trouble every time.

And that pressure is not magically going to be lifted off of this administration; in fact, in some ways, this administration is going to have it worse because it's going to be under so much pressure to produce results in a short time. And I think there's a real danger that, by putting so much importance on this speech from inside our community, we create the mistaken impression that Obama can go somewhere and give a speech and, by magic, people will be throwing down their Kalashnikovs and beating them into ploughshares. And, I mean, we all know that's not going to be what happens, but it's important to limit those expectations.

Second, something that I think hasn't been stressed enough: Speeches are not given in a vacuum. When you give a speech – and this is true on the Islamic world, but it's true of anything – you are talking as much to Americans as you are talking to your target audience. And you will have at least as much of an impact, and probably more of an impact, at home than you do on your target audience. And this issue area – I actually think that's an opportunity because, as bad of press as we have had in the Islamic world, we have failed equally in explaining the Islamic world to our fellow citizens, and in explaining why U.S. policy might be this way or that way in the Islamic world and why it might actually work. And there's a desperate need – a parallel need – to develop among the American public a more complex and less fearful understanding of what the Islamic world is.

And I think you will find – and I think my fellow panelists would confirm – that that's actually understood, at least, in some swathes of the Islamic world. And, Hesham, I believe you referred to this as part of what people chafe at is not just what the president of the United States says; it's what other Americans say. It's what military leaders – the sort of incredibly ignorant things that military leaders have been allowed to say in public over the last eight years; it's our Hollywood

and TV culture and the way the Islamic world is portrayed. So I would encourage that we think about this opportunity for one speech, but also a longer-term engagement, as what can a President Obama go to the Islamic world and say that also turns a different vision of the Islamic world back home to the U.S.? And that, I think, goes to some of the cultural points that Hesham and Michele both touched on a little bit, but that I will come back to and emphasize even more.

And the third, just, caution I want to make to us is, as I said, even if you're Barack Obama, words matter but deeds matter more. And one of the great pieces of advice that fiction writers are given, but which applies to speechwriting as well is show, don't tell. And there's a real risk, if you do this speech too early, that you're going out and you're making a long list of promises. And one thing you have to say about the U.S. relationship with the Islamic world is that folks have heard long lists of promises from American presidents before. So one way, I think, that you can most effectively differentiate yourself from recent history is not to do that.

So those three cautionary points lead me to a set of thoughts about what I would advocate, were I in the position to do so. And the first one is, don't be in too much of a hurry. And as far as I'm concerned, and I would welcome discussion by those who know the situation on the ground better than I do, the tragedy in Gaza only makes that more true. I wouldn't want to see a President Obama trying to give this speech before there's a ceasefire because it's hard for me to imagine what he could say, given the constraints on what he's going to say that Scott and Michele have mentioned, that would be positively received.

So I would almost say that you want to be 100 days into a ceasefire, but that may be too pessimistic. But waiting a little bit also gives you time to put a down payment on withdrawal from Iraq and show that he is going to be serious about that, to take some real concrete steps toward closing Guantanamo and make it clear in public what the timetable is and, again, show that you actually are going to do that and to take some steps that show that the U.S. is going to return to engagement in the Middle East peace process and that there are going to be structures in place for the kind of sustained involvement in the Middle East that previous speakers have talked about.

So you set those as preconditions for giving a speech and then you have something to say. Then you have the ability to say, we've turned a page and you can see that we've turned a page because of X, Y and Z. And then at that point, I think, is one of four messages that you then offer to both U.S. – you very consciously offer to both U.S. and global Islamic audiences. And the first one, as I say, is a message of action – we've turned a page and you can see that we're turning a page. You know, we don't – we aren't going to come and give the promises first; we're going to do some things first, and these are the things that we've already started to do.

Second – and as I said, I think this was implicit in some of your remarks and I want to make it explicit – is an explicit message of cultural understanding and cultural mutuality. And, you know, this, as has been noted, you couldn't ask for somebody better than Barack Hussein Obama to give this message, but it's a message that there are people in America who understand the depth and richness and complexity and learning and historic contributions that Islamic society has made, that the U.S. has benefited from. And there are just wonderful kind of little bits of speechwriting craft that you could imagine doing, whether it's quoting the Koran and some of the ways the Koran talks about Christian figures, which most Americans have no idea of, or talking about early Islamic emissaries who came to the U.S. in the times of the American Revolution, which, again, most Americans have no idea of.

But lots of ways of saying, look, some of us understand your culture and we understand that more of us need to know more about your culture. And we are interested, again, in the idea of mutuality and a relationship between the two cultures, which is a much more profound way of saying, we don't believe there's a clash of civilizations than just getting up and saying, we don't believe there's a clash of civilizations. Third, I was very attracted to the tough love – the dual, tough love messages – that Hesham mentioned, if only because that's the kind of thing that gets headlines. So I would, frankly, want to think very carefully about whether that's the headline that you want in the Muslim world, but that would be a fabulous headline in the U.S. context. And I would love that a lot and find it very interesting.

And then I think last, just to pick up on a theme that I think each of the other three speakers mentioned, is this notion of modesty, which circles you back to my initial concern that it is going to be very tempting for an American president to go out and make a new and grandiose set of promises. And instead, there's a real need to downshift rhetoric in a way that creates a much more modest engagement – not modest in scope, but modest in ambition for what the U.S. will do for other societies, as opposed to one that tries to leave scope for other societies to do things for themselves.

And that's, again, a rhetorical shift that we need to leave some time to work, both with respect to the rest of the world and with respect to the U.S., because we're very conditioned to immodest rhetoric. And when we hear modest rhetoric, at first, we're not going to know what to make of it. The media's going to have a hard time with it and some of us in the community are going to have a hard time with it. So that's a real cultural shift that I think this issue area is, of necessity, going to be the first test of. Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ALBERTSON: Thank you very much for all of those presentations. I think we all have a lot to chew on. We do have microphones we're going to be passing around so that we have an opportunity to ask some questions, get to, maybe, some more specificity. And – okay. We'll take three questions at a time, here, so if – go ahead. If you could please identify yourself, your affiliation, and also, if you have something specific that you'd like to –

Q: Mohammad Shina (ph), Voice of America. My question is to Mr. Carpenter. How could President-elect Obama spread a message of hope among the skeptics in the Middle East and demonstrate the change he promised?

MR. ALBERTSON: Yes, right behind you, Tarik (ph).

Q: Thank you. Scott Edelman (ph). Mine is for Mr. Melhem, and it refers a little bit to that. We've talked a great deal about what the president might say, but the minute he says something, it will then be interpreted by the Arab media, which runs the gamut, as you know, from anti-American to fanatically anti-American. And it will be – everything he says will be pulled apart, there'll be a search for misstatements, they'll be accused of both arrogance and being overly humble, insufficiently anti-Israel and so forth. So the question is, how can the United States, both in the president's speech and then afterwards, in follow up, reach beyond the Arab media to the Arab people, or is there any way of doing that?

Q: Ali Alyami from the Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia. Thanks for organizing this very timely discussion here. With due respect to all the speakers, I find these speeches are same of what has been happening in Washington for many years. My unsolicited advice to Obama is never talk the Arab-Israeli conflict, because if he does, the Arab dictators, including especially the Saudis, will only focus on that issue and ignore the deeper problems that are plaguing the Arab and Muslim countries, terrorism, violations of human rights, oppression of women, lack of a judicial system, exploitation, unaccountability, lack of transparency and disseminating hate for non-Muslims and Muslim minorities. I will tell him, forget about this Arab-Israeli conflict, because he's not going to be able to get out of it once he gets in it.

MR. ALBERTSON: I have to ask that we frame this in the form of a question.

Q: The question – I agree with a couple of people here, actually, Heather and Michele – and I still owe Michele, thank you for taking me from the jungle during that conference, brought me to Washington. My question, actually, is to Hesham Melhem, a man I respect greatly. And it is based on what I have just said, Hesham. If every Jew, if every Zionist, and if Israel sank into the bottom of the ocean tonight, what improvements in human rights, women's rights, religious freedom, tolerance of non-Muslim, would come out in the Arab and Muslim countries? Thank you.

MR. ALBERTSON: Okay, we'll go ahead and take those questions, or the ones we want to take. And, Hesham, would you like to start?

MR. MELHEM: Well, let me just note a friendly objection to the characterization of the Arab media as "anti-Americanism to fanatically anti-Americanism." That's a very simplistic, inaccurate understanding of the Arab media. As someone who's a practitioner in the Arab media, as someone who, for more than a quarter of a century, tried to interpret America, with all of its complexities and problems to the Arab world and tried to interpret the Arabs, with all their yearnings and problems to the American audience, I have a long list of critique that I level at the Arab media, just as I have a long list of critique that I level at the American media, although I have to tell you that both the Arab media and the American media, in the last 25 years, have went through a great deal of changes and many of these changes are positive.

And so there is a spectrum in the Arab media. You have journalists who are living off of the powers that be and journalists who are being harassed, imprisoned, beaten and yes, assassinated. And I have friends – very close friends – who were killed. So I take really a great deal – I get a bit passionate about this whole thing. So be – let's be fair about this whole thing. There's a great deal to be criticized in the Arab media, but I can give you a long list of people who were killed because they were trying to do their job professionally and honestly. What Obama should say? Should he tackle the Arab-Israeli conflict? Look, Obama can talk about certain principles.

One of the biggest critiques of U.S. foreign policy over the years is that certain great American values that I decided in a moment of bliss, when I wanted to become an American citizen, these are my values. And I always say, I became an American citizen because of what I would call the secular bible, and that is the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Federalist Papers and every word uttered by Madison and my fellow Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, and of course, my secular saint, Abraham Lincoln. The problem, sometimes, is that these great values stopped at the water's

edge, especially during the Cold War. I want the American president to say certain principles – to talk about a set of principles that us, as Americans – Barack Obama and others – we will not accept.

I cannot ask him to fix the judicial system in Egypt or in Saudi Arabia or in Morocco. But I can say, there is no way under the sun we will tolerate a regime like the Sudanese when it is doing what it is doing to its own people in Darfur. Now, I'm not naïve enough to tell you that a resolution – a just resolution – of the Arab-Israeli conflict is going to be in and of itself a panacea in terms of ending violence and extremism and terrorism in the Middle East – it's hogwash! That's not true.

And yet, if you have a just resolution to the Palestine question, at least in the vicinity of historic Palestine in Lebanon and Syria and Egypt and others, you know, even all the way back to Iran, you have a different environment. And you will deal the terrorists and the extremists and the nuts and those who engage in metaphysics and all that crap – you will deal them a serious setback.

That's why I said, I always hold Arab governments and Muslim governments responsible, in the main, for the sorry state of affairs that exists in their countries in the last 50, 60 years since the beginning of the end of the era of decolonization, as we call it. A resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is not going to stop the bloodletting in Algeria, is not going to stop the civil wars in Sudan, is not going to stop the tribal problems in Yemen, is not going to prevent the Lebanese from remaining sectarian. I mean, let's be honest about this, obviously. And when I said that he should show the Israelis some tough love and when I talked about the paradigm shift, I was not saying abandon the Israelis. I have, really, a serious, honest question: Do you guys, anybody see a potential Israeli prime minister at this stage or a potential coalition of forces within Israel capable of making the serious decisions that are required for any peaceful resolution of the Palestine issue, whether on Jerusalem or on refugees or others?

And I'm not saying that the Palestinians are necessarily in that position; all I'm saying is that the United States is the only country that the Israelis listen to. I know and you know that American civil society, American media, American political institutions will not allow any president in any time in the foreseeable future to abandon Israel. That is not the issue. The issue, again, is to talk about those certain principles.

You don't resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, that is going to be felt by the United States. That is going to allow people to demonize the United States. I mean, that is something important. We see it in Iraq; we see it throughout the region. And that's why when we say this is not necessarily going to be a panacea in and of itself, but is going to bring, you know, a degree of peace and stability to an area that is extremely crucial, even if you frame it the way my friend, Scott, is framing it, in terms of stability.

I mean, there is a relationship between stability and democracy. The shah of Iran is a great example. The Iranian Revolution is a great example. Iran, under the shah, was one of the pillars of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and in the Gulf. Iran was a despotic, autocratic regime – my god, the shah used to think of himself as the king of kings – I mean, he bought it literally. And his father was an upstart. The usurper – (chuckles) – I mean, you know, talk about the descendant of the Greeks. And because of that autocratic – the nature of that autocratic regime, you had the revolution and we're still paying a price for that revolution; the Iranian people are still paying a huge price for that revolution.

MR. ALBERTSON: Hesham, if we – we're going to have to – sorry.

MR. MELHEM: That's it. I'm sorry, that's it.

MR. ALBERTSON: Scott, you had –

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, the question to me was, how can Obama demonstrate that hope is something that can be achieved in the region. I'm taken with Heather's point that it's all about action and what he does and not what he says, especially in the short to medium term.

And here, again, I'm skeptical that the expectations that have been raised in the region can be achieved. I think it's very difficult, because of the interpretations of, again, through the perception of the Arab media and what they expect from Barack Hussein Obama, how they expect him to be like them or not like them. And I think that reducing those expectations is pretty key before he says anything that would deflate them in such a way that the situation actually becomes worse, because he does signify this – and symbolize – this possibility of change and a new direction.

If he were to try to do something or say something that raised expectations or dashed them precipitously, I think that it could be very difficult. But it's interesting to me, for instance, that when President-elect Obama is asked about Gaza or any situation like Gaza or any part of foreign policy in the Middle East right now, he says, I can't talk about that. I won't talk about that because we only have one president at a time. On domestic policy, it's slightly different, but on foreign policy, he's been fairly consistent about this. Well, that's a problem, because every time that you're asked, the expectation that you're actually going to come forward and say something fairly dramatic goes up. And I think that the challenge now is that he says – and he said over the weekend – that I'm going to have a lot to say about these issues.

Now, you know, in Washington, in – the statements that you make, as others suggest, are more important when they're actions than when they're rhetorical. I want to stand up for rhetoric; I think rhetoric is extremely important and I'm sure, as a speechwriter, Heather would agree with that. But the point is that action is important, and one of the ways that I think that he will either confirm or dash hopes is in his appointments. When he talks about his Middle East team being ready, that he will use the team as the statement. Who he puts together and who he sends out, and does he send somebody immediately to Jerusalem and Ramallah on the day after. Does he send Richard Haas, does he send Dennis Ross back in with, you know, on the silver horse and to save the day?

There are dangers implicit in that, in terms of raising or dashing expectations. None of this is easy. So what I think, just to conclude, I would say that the skeptics will always have a reason to be skeptical. The question is, what does the United States believe is in its best interests, and how does it pursue them? That's it. Then talk about them. And I think that's very important when it comes to the issues that are currently pressing on his agenda in terms of the Middle East. Thanks.

MR. ALBERTSON: Great. We have time, I think, for a couple more rounds of questions. We'll look in the back, here, Tarik – it's fine right there.

Q: Hello, my name is David Dixon, and I work with the Lyndon La Rouché political action committee. This question is more addressed towards Hesham, mainly just because it's more of a policy question for the incoming administration than a question of speechwriting, per se. But it's,

how would you see the new administration handling the problem of the financing, especially the Saudi and London-centered financing, of the various – (inaudible) – Islamic terrorist groups in the region, because I don't really see any possibility of addressing a stable peace or policy for the region without addressing that, especially in light of what is happening in Afghanistan, Pakistan and so forth? I mean, I could elaborate, but for the sake of time, I think I'll cut it at that.

MR. ALBERTSON: Thank you. Yeah, Tarik, right behind you.

Q: Hi, my name is Ron from the Iran Visual News Corps. What I noticed missing from your policy recommendations was Obama's – what Obama should say on Iran. What are your comments on that question?

MR. ALBERTSON: Okay. I want to sneak in one question, because I have the opportunity to do that with the mike, but – (laughter). Heather, I wanted to ask you, there's some talk, also, about a listening tour that Obama or Cabinet-level officials might go out and not just make an effort to speak to the region, but to listen to the region. And I just wanted to ask, kind of, how that actually works in practice and what might be gained from that, and if you think that might be part of a, kind of, first-hundred-days strategy of communication, also. And, maybe we can take one more question, because – right here, oh great.

Q: Hi, Kristin Lord from Brookings. Presumably, any speech that President-elect Obama gives to the Middle East will be most effective if it's followed by – reinforced by a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy and a well-conceived set of public diplomacy activities. I wonder if the panel could talk a little bit about this follow-on to his speech. What should those activities look like?

MR. ALBERTSON: Great question. Okay. Would you like to start? Yeah.

MS. HURLBURT: Well, Kristin, I actually feel like we should make you come up here and actually answer your own question. (Chuckles.) But it is relevant, and it's quite relevant, to the question Andrew raised, and in some sense, it's relevant to the question that was asked about Iran. And I'm going to cheat a little bit and on Iran, I'm going to say the same things I said on some other issues, which is, give yourself a couple of months to start whatever set of confidence-building measures, whatever set of quiet outreach you are planning to start with Iran. I'm not going to pretend to know what that is; I'm sure there are people who do, but I'm not one of them. Go ahead and do whatever your first opening steps with Iran are, whether it's re-engaging with Russia and the Europeans, whether it's direct flights, consulates, all that kind of thing, and then that becomes another action-item in your speech where you say, we are changing our approach and we've started with this. We're waiting for Iran to respond.

Also, I think something we haven't mentioned is that there are a number of countries that are relevant to this that are having elections in the next six months, which do make it a little more challenging for an Obama administration indicate a change in tone. And then I'm going to run Andrew's question and Kristin's question together, because the listening tours and the indication that there are people who have Obama's ear who actually want to listen, seems to me like a critically important – maybe the most important – thing you can do early on, on the public diplomacy piece. And there, I think, the Bush administration actually did attempt to do this once, if you remember the Karen Hughes listening tour.

And, yeah, it did a lot to discredit the whole notion of listening tours. It should be possible to do a listening tour where there's actual listening that happens and where the principal doing the listening isn't quite so unprepared for what she or he is going to hear, which seemed to me like it was the big problem with that one. But given, as I said, the press of things that Obama's going to be dealing with, I, if I were him, I would be asking some combination of my secretary of state, my national security advisor, my special envoy, and frankly, I would ask a couple prominent members of Congress, because several of these issues are going to be as much a congressional problem as an executive-branch problem.

I would love to see Secretary-designate Clinton or Vice President-elect Biden going around the Middle East with a group of people and sitting and listening in meetings, and sort of starting out every time with a statement that says, "we're not here to give a speech; we're here to listen and we're going to give a speech when we get home to the U.S." Something else that I would want to be able to announce fairly early on would be some review of visa policy and academic policy to indicate that, as I said, we are interested in reopening the academic and cultural piece.

I would want to look, specifically, at whether I had things to announce about encouraging more young Americans to learn Arabic and other relevant languages, encouraging more young Americans to spend time in the region and in the relevant countries. And those would all be little things, you know, comparatively little things – not that expensive, not requiring major turning-the-ocean-liner-around that you could do early on that would indicate some kind of difference and that you could imagine doing in a way that would – someone raised the question of how you jump over the media – and those are all initiatives that, if done right, can jump over the media to one degree or another.

MR. ALBERTSON: Just go down and address the questions, if you'd like.

MS. DUNNE: Just to say something briefly on public diplomacy and the idea of a listening tour, Heather, I think the way you sketch it out, possibly including the vice president or the secretary of state makes sense, but I also think, probably, in all the comments that we're making today, we're really overestimating the amount of control that the new administration is going to have. And if there's one thing we all know about the Middle East, it's that stuff happens. And that, you know, it's already happened – Obama's already under pressure to, you know, react to a crisis in the Middle East before he's even been inaugurated. And this is going to go on.

So I think it is going to be important for the new administration to have some principles in mind that are going to govern its reactions. And this is, again, one of the reasons why I argue against, you know, a sort of a policy framework where issues are prioritized and so forth and where we say, oh, well we're not going to care that much in this administration about things related to democracy, human rights and so forth – not that we're not going to care, but that's a concern for a later day – because things are going to happen in the Middle East. Elections are happening in the Middle East all the time. It's totally unrealistic to say we're going to be less interested in elections, now, than the Bush administration was, because they're happening in almost every Arab country.

And so, you know, we're not – I think the Obama administration is going to face a lot of decisions early on about, you know, whether or not it supports aspirations of peoples in the Middle East for change, or, you know, I just think it's not really going to be a realistic approach to say, well, yes, but that's not high on our list right now.

MR. CARPENTER: I would not do a listening tour with any senior American official to the region. I would start with our ambassadors. Our ambassadors don't do listening tours. So you can imagine, when you don't – when you have so much pent-up demand to say something, right? And we've done this in the Arab-American community at the State Department, I remember, after like six years, someone thought, hey you know what, why don't we bring in representatives from the Arab-American community to talk to us about foreign policy in the Middle East. It was like a riot, because no one had asked these people what they thought and so everybody wanted to speak, and you're not letting me speak and I need to speak, you know. And it wasn't speaking, by the way. (Laughter.) There were no dulcet tones of one human voice speaking to another; it was – everybody was screaming and yelling.

I would not do a listening tour. It would be a disaster. Maybe encourage our ambassadors to do more in terms of outreach. I'm really interested in Hesham's answer to the question about how to go over the heads of the – over the heads of the government, in a way, is more my phrase. I think that the Arab media is actually – presents a tremendous opportunity for the president, and that's why I consciously thought of an interview more than a speech. It gives him a chance to sit and talk about a series of issues over a longer period of time, where he can share his views in an honest way. He comes across as a very serious, thoughtful, sincere person. He's not going to get asked powder-puff questions, but – and it doesn't even have to be, like, highlighted as this big thing. But I think that if he could have an opportunity to go over the heads of the government-controlled media, it's not a bad thing.

I think one of the failures, in terms of public diplomacy strategy writ large is, policy and public diplomacy just don't – they don't come together; they're completely divorced, one from the other. I remember – well, I can't tell that story. (Laughter.) The point is, it's not what the assistant secretary of the Near East affairs bureau thinks about, oh, you know what, I really need to get the public diplomacy people in to think about how we're going to build off of this speech. It just doesn't happen. It just doesn't happen. And in the end, the public diplomacy people, at least in this administration, were always thinking about events – you know, we're going to build up to an event – as if it were some sort of campaign that they were running. So I think that policy and public diplomacy need to be much more closely integrated in some way.

MR. ALBERTSON: Okay, unfortunately, we've burned through our Q&A time, and I do want to let everybody out on time, but Hesham, if you could make a – answer that last question about whether it's possible or whether it's useful or how to go over the head of the media or the governments and speak straight to the people, and that will be our final words.

MR. MELHEM: Well, I mean, in general, the Arab media did not treat Bill Clinton the way it treated George Bush, you know, for obvious reasons. And sometimes the Arab media, in general, I mean not only Al-Jazeera by Al-Arabiya and others, they carry live debates in the Congress and speeches and panel discussions and whatnot. So sometimes, the word reaches a large number of listeners. But sometimes the context is lacking and the follow-up is lacking. One of the problems that George Bush faced with Arab audiences is that he appeared to be looking down at them, lecturing them and not engaging them in a dialogue. And I think Barack Obama already may have transcended this. And I think he will be given, at least, you know, the chance.

And I would argue that there will be some sort of a, you know, a grace period – maybe a honeymoon – and it's going to be, initially at least, difficult for those people who want to demonize Barack Obama. I mean, it's got to be difficult for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to demonize a man whose full name is Barack Hussein Obama. I mean, I pity the guy. Not really, I want to see him squirm. (Laughter.) But I think the tone is important and I think there will be a tremendous interest in a speech. I fully agree with Scott; I'm not into listening tours. And I think really, are we listening to what? If you look at the samples that you know – a colleague's Web site – from those Arabs who were asked to tell us what they would expect from the new president, I mean there was really nothing that surprising.

Everybody's talking about peace; everybody's talking about partnership; everybody's talking about mutual respect; everybody's talking about, you know, don't do the regime change when it comes to Iran and others. But there is nothing really new. I mean, we are not going to reinvent the wheel. I mean, it's, you know – that reminds me of somebody who tells you, I have new political ideas. Hey, wait a minute! Since Plato and Aristotle, there was a dearth of new political ideas. (Laughter.) So we are re-hashing the same things and we're talking about the same principles.

So I think the president will be given a chance, and I think a lot will depend on what he says and the tone that he uses. And so in that sense, I'm somewhat hopeful that, at least, he can contribute to changing the, at least for a period of time, the political discourse – the nature of the political discourse. Now, obviously, as we've heard, there's a lot of passion, there's a lot of emotion, there's a lot of anger, there's a lot of high, unrealistic expectations from this new president. And I think he shouldn't fall into the trap of promising too much. And Heather is absolutely correct. You know, start with some symbolic but important decisions. Guantanamo is extremely important. And beginning the withdrawal from Iraq is extremely important, because that enhances his credibility.

So I don't see, at this stage, a problem going over the head of the Arab governments. And if he shows that tough love, he will allow people like me, who've been talking about these things for a long time, that, yes, you're going to have a different approach now at the White House. You will have someone who understands your yearnings and your problems, but he also understands that you have – you are also extremely responsible for what's taking place there. So I'm not for listening tours. We've had that and it's ridiculous and it doesn't mean much. But I think Obama will be given a chance to speak his mind.

MR. ALBERTSON: Okay. On that hopeful, but modest note, we will close out. (Laughter.) I do want to say a couple of thank-yous, first of all to Carnegie Endowment and the staff for arranging this and for being so gracious in co-hosting, Amanda Katlick (ph) for arranging the event on POMED's side, Steven McNerney, who gets the credit for putting together our publication, which are, again, available outside. And especially, I just want to thank, one more time, our speakers for all of their very interesting remarks.

(Applause.)

(END)