



ISLAMISTS IN POWER: VIEWS FROM WITHIN

LUNCH SPEAKER

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MARINA OTTAWAY: So I know that we are all having great conversations, but I am going to put an end to that in order to introduce our keynote speaker. We spent the morning and we spent the afternoon discussing the, sort of, what is happening in the Arab countries now that Islamists are taking on positions of power. We see that outright in the government in some countries. But certainly, in the parliaments they are becoming increasingly important actors.

We have discussed with them the – sort of the views, what their plans are and so on. What we are going to do now is to turn to our keynote speaker who will talk about the reaction in Washington, how Washington sees the changes that have taken place. I have the pleasure of introducing David Ignatius, who is an opinion writer for the Washington Post. I think most of you – most of you know him.

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He has a twice-weekly column in the Washington Post. It, of course, is very well-read and very well-known. He joined the Post in 1986, is editor of its Sunday Outlook section, became foreign editor and various other position(s). And then he started writing his column in 1998. And he has been – and he has been writing it ever since.

He has covered the Middle East for many years, in addition to a lot of other issues. And he remains one of the most influential voices on issues concerning the – concerning the Middle East.

He is also a – he also writes mystery novels which I find very, very entertaining and I find it very reassuring that people can rip themselves away from these politics and do something else for a change. So it's my pleasure to introduce David Ignatius. (Applause.) Of course, I should add, he's also an old friend.

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DAVID IGNATIUS: So Marina Ottaway is an old friend, and David Ottaway is an old colleague. So it's really a pleasure to be here as Marina's guest and also just to have a chance to be with this group. Your visit to Washington is being closely watched by journalists like me, by policymakers as a sign of the future in the Middle East. And your interest in the topics that are the agenda for today, I think everybody sees as an important sign.

I thought the most useful thing that I could do for this group is to talk about Washington, and specifically about the Obama administration and its policies toward the Middle East – how those policies have changed since the president came to office and where I see him going, just because these are issues you will have to think about when you go back home.

The first important thing to remind you of is we're in an election year. The president is running for reelection. It's pretty clear now that his Republican opponent will be Mitt Romney. And so the country as a whole will be judging this president and his policies through the remainder of this year. And you'll hear a lot of noisy debate; you'll see headlines

in your local newspapers in Cairo, Tunis, wherever, in *Sharq Al-Ansat* – that will be really driven by this campaign.

And you should remember, as we'll try to remember as we watch events in the Middle East, that this – it's politics, that the things that happen in this public forum are shaped by the debate.

So my starting point is to remind you of where President Obama started when he took office and the basic problems in the Middle East that he was worried about.

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And at the top of that list I think was the simple fact of how unpopular the United States was. Under President Bush, we had fought two wars. The war in Iraq was especially unpopular in the Middle East and here at home. There was a feeling that President Bush had a go-it-alone policy, not always waiting for U.N. support to go forward with his policies.

And so Obama, I think, most of all wanted to change that and to reconnect the U.S. with its traditional allies in Europe and elsewhere – and also, something that has been increasingly true through the first three years of this administration, to work more closely with the institutions that have taken on a new life since the Arab revolutions – the Arab League and the GCC.

And in ways that I will discuss, these have become important alliances for the U.S. and I think will continue to be. So on that first broad goal, you'd have to say looking at the poll numbers that Obama has probably done a reasonably good job in improving the image of the U.S. vis-à-vis where it was under President Bush.

The one possible exception to that would be the Middle East, where Obama's favorability ratings are low for reasons that I'll discuss in a minute. Second key objective that he had was to get U.S. troops out of Iraq. There was a timetable that had been negotiated. The president was determined to stick to it. And I think the price of that was accepting in some very difficult political negotiations the renewed government of Nouri al-Maliki.

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The Iraqiya coalition narrowly won in the votes and there was some interest in Washington in working with a government that would be headed by Ayad Allawi. As you all have seen, that didn't work out. And the White House is happy that the troops are home and is trying to learn to live with an al-Maliki government that some in Washington and I'm sure some in Cairo, Tunis and elsewhere see as increasingly close to the government in Iran, and sometimes Iran's ally.

A third goal was to rethink the war in Afghanistan. That's been one of the hardest problems for this president. It's not directly in your region, but, certainly, the difficulties the U.S. has faced in Afghanistan shape our policies in the Middle East. One of the most interesting developments over the last year has been the fact that the United States has

begun secret negotiations with the Taliban – has sat down with our adversary, with an adversary that's killing U.S. troops every day.

But even so, this administration has decided negotiation is essential – that, if Mark Grossman, our special advisor on Afghanistan and Pakistan, were here, I think he'd say that he's hopeful that the Taliban will open an office in Doha soon. Certainly, all the preparatory work has been done. That would mean the U.S. would transfer five Taliban prisoners to a kind of house arrest in Doha.

It's clear to me that the emir in Qatar very much wants this process to work. He's staked his personal prestige on it, and so we'll have to see. I think a lot of people thought that this deal might already have been done, and it hasn't. The other point I would remind everybody of, because I know Washington is just beginning to focus on this, is that in addition to the 2014 deadline for the departure of U.S. and NATO troops – most of them – from Afghanistan, 2014 is also the date for a political transition to a government after Hamid Karzai.

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And so the question: How to shape that transition, how to work with our allies – Saudi Arabia, other countries in the region that have influence in Afghanistan – I think is going to be an increasing subject of conversation. So when you think Afghanistan, don't just think about the issue of U.S. and NATO troop withdrawal. Think also about the issue of political transition, which in some ways may be even more important in the future.

The next goal for President Obama, obviously, was to find a way to deal with Iran and what we call the Iranian nuclear problem. And it's important to remember that the president's first thoughts on this subject, which have never really left him and his advisors, were that it's essential to reach out to Iran and seek the possibility of a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue.

Remember that from the first – one of the first things he did was to send a letter to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei – a secret presidential letter followed by a second, trying to make clear that the U.S. wanted engagement, wanted to find a diplomatic track. It appeared through the fall of 2009 that that might be possible. And as you remember, through Turkish mediation, a settlement – or what appeared to be a settlement – was reached on the enrichment of uranium outside of Iran.

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That deal seemed to have the support of President Ahmadinejad but did not have the support of the Supreme Leader and was shot down in October of 2009 – a lesson for Washington. There were a number of lessons, but one of them is if you want to think about a deal with Iran, you have to think about having a channel that connects with the Supreme Leader – that if you go through the government, the foreign ministry, that's just not going to get you there.

I'd be happy to speak in more detail about issues involving Iran. Obviously, we've just been through a period in which the president and his advisors have tried very hard to convince Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu that it would not be wise to attack Iranian nuclear facilities and that it's not necessary to do so to try to affect the program.

President Obama made a statement that is going to be really important if he's reelected, which is that he said publicly in a speech to AIPAC – the pro-Israel lobby – and in other contexts that he was committed to – and he used this word – prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

He had never used that word that I know of before. The typical U.S. formulation had been that an Iranian nuclear weapon is unacceptable. But then, there was a shift, the use of this idea of prevention and a statement that U.S. policy is not to contain a nuclear Iran but to prevent that from happening.

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When a president of the United States makes public commitments like that, you have to take them seriously. His message to Prime Minister Netanyahu has been the U.S. has weapons that are powerful enough that we can wait well into 2013 before there is – as the Israelis say – a zone of invulnerability for Iran so that Iran's targets could not – would not be subject to military attack.

So I think the president has bought some time. I've heard the Israelis say publically in the last several weeks that they think there are some additional months now on the clock. In other words, Netanyahu got the message and accepts it. But I would underline – even today, even after the visit of Netanyahu, even after the promises that I just mentioned, this administration still seeks a diplomatic settlement with Iran, is trying to find a way to pass that message through different channels.

And we'll see. I'm actually writing a column about that. You can see what I've discovered tomorrow. I'm not going to tell you. (Laughter.)

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The next point that I would mention, which is a painful one for the administration and I'm sure for most people in this room, is the issue of Palestinian peace negotiations.

On this, the president came out charging, as we like to say. The first interview that he gave as president, I believe, was to Hisham Melhem of al-Arabiya, and he used that first interview, that first message to the world to underline his desire to deal with the Palestinian problem, put – to find a settlement and put that behind us, the Arabs and Israel.

And he repeated that in his message in his first trip abroad which took him to Ankara, which was a stop that he added at his own insistence to an itinerary that was only going to focus on Europe. And then most obviously, he said it in his Cairo speech in June 2009. I'm curious whether there was anybody who attended that Cairo speech in the audience. Well, I see at least one – I see several hands.

So the president laid down a clear message in that speech – a message about peace talks – and also, as I noted several weeks ago, a specific message to members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were invited to listen to the speech. It's interesting. I believe 10 members of the Brotherhood were invited. Hosni Mubarak was not invited.

And in the speech, the president had a specific sentence that was crafted for the Muslim Brotherhood. I believe they were briefed. This – we're speaking here specifically about you. And the message was one that has been at the center I think of discussions today, which is, Muslim Democrats, as they seek justice, won't find interference from the United States. We don't oppose that and you should be – you should be assured of that.

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You'd have to say looking at this part of Obama's agenda, a desire to find a solution to the Palestinian problem, that he has failed in a very dramatic way. The visible evidence of his failure was his last speech to the United Nations General Assembly, in which he in effect publicly disavowed, I think, elements of his own policy.

I'm sure it was a painful moment for him as president. He felt that he had no alternative in that situation. And I think all of us would say, if we're being realistic in our analysis, that for the moment, peace negotiations are – I don't want to say dead – are on life support. They're being kept alive by the notion that someday some real process might return.

When you think about President Obama's – the possibility that he'll have a second term, I think you should think that that – this issue would go back to the top of his agenda. I don't know how it will proceed but I know that this is still painful and important.

I just would make one more comment about the Palestinian issue. When the president came to office, he faced a choice between two strategies. One strategy was to state clearly the summation of all of the negotiations that had gone on in previous administrations. You all know how close a deal seemed to be with Arafat and with Abu Mazen at the end of the Bush presidency.

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And so one possibility was to lay out a set of principles that incorporated the basic elements of the settlement that I think that most people know is the one that would work, if we were ever to get there.

And whether lay it out in the beginning or – and this was the tactic he chose – or whether to have a direct political test with Bibi Netanyahu over the issue of settlements. Because that's what they were doing; they were going right at it politically. And they thought they could win. And they thought if they won on settlements, their credibility in the Arab world, and credibility generally as a mediator, would be enhanced.

And that was obviously not successful. I'm going to just quickly summarize a few other thoughts and then turn to you for questions. Obviously, when the president thinks about the Middle East, when he takes office in 2009 he thinks about the danger of al-Qaida and what he's going to do as president to keep the country safe.

That led to very aggressive actions on his part in authorizing attacks on al-Qaida in the tribal areas in Pakistan and finally in the raid on May 2nd that killed Osama bin Laden. I just had a chance, as newspaper readers know, to review some very small sample, but some of the documents that were taken from bin Laden's compound in that raid on May 2nd. And I'll just tell this audience that the thing that struck me most – in what I read.

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Osama bin Laden, in his last year – I can't be more specific than that because I don't – I don't know precisely the date – was honest enough about what had happened to al-Qaida to believe that because it had been involved through its affiliates in the deaths of so many Muslims – especially in Iraq but in other places too – its image had been tarnished with Muslims.

He also hated the fact that its full name – al-jihad al-Qaida – or whatever the precise Arabic would be, jihad al-Qaida – had been shortened so it was just al-Qaida. And he said in one draft memo to his Libyan-borne aide, Atiya Abdul Rahman, we need to – President Obama has changed the name of his war.

So he doesn't talk about a war on terror that sounds like a war against Muslims. He talks only about a war on al-Qaida. And we need to change our image also by changing our name. And he listed 10 alternative names for al-Qaida. Those of you who have roots in the business world know what rebranding is, when we decide that we want to change the name of our organization because for whatever reason – it's tarnished, it's lost its appeal, it doesn't speak to a new generation.

And amazingly, Osama bin Laden alone, isolated from his advisors in that compound, came to the conclusion that it was time to change the brand. He said over and over in the memos that I've looked at: We have got to stop our affiliates from activities that kill Muslims in mosques, in places where they gather. He was deeply upset about this.

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But he never, in truth, could find a way to do that. So briefly, what has the president done as the revolution that you're part of dawned in the Arab world? I think it's safe to say, given that in his June 2009 speech in Cairo, tried to speak to Muslim Democrats, to the Muslim Brotherhood specifically, that he did understand that change was coming in the Middle East and should come, and that he wanted the United States on the side of that process of change.

When people gathered in Tunisia first and then in Tahrir Square, as you all know, the administration was slow to really understand what was going on, slow to figure out precisely what U.S. policies should be. So, I have to say, was the Muslim Brotherhood. It took the

Muslim Brotherhood leadership a while to decide what this was, should it be supported or not.

But as I stand back and look at this, I guess I'm surprised at how quickly the administration moved when it made that decision; within a matter of several weeks, Hosni Mubarak was gone. And I think the president's decisions were based on – I've been told that when he talked to his staff in the White House what he would say, and I think we can extend this to what he would say to the Muslim world and the world in general.

First, that he grew up as a boy in Indonesia under a regime that was very much like the regime of Hosni Mubarak. He grew up in the Jakarta of President Suharto. His stepfather was a sort of petty functionary in that regime. And he writes in his memoirs what it was like to see his father come home frightened – in a sense his life misshapen by this regime.

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So the first thing that he said was this process of change that's happening in the Muslim world is right. I've seen this. I've seen this kind of authoritarian regime with my own eyes and I know it's unjust. So it's right to support those who protest against it.

And that was important because, as you know, at this time some of our important allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia, others – were saying, for heaven's sake, don't support change, support Hosni Mubarak, support the forces of order. And Obama decided otherwise.

The second thing that he told his aides, and that the world should understand, is that he felt that even if you wanted to stop this process that had happened now in Tunis and was happening in Egypt, you couldn't, that it wasn't possible to put this back in the box through repression. So what has he done since that process of saying to Hosni Mubarak, even after Mubarak had made a statement that he would not run for reelection and his son, Gamal, would not run for reelection. The president said the time to go is now. We're not going to wait. We're not going to provide the interval that was being requested.

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In Libya, you all know the story probably much better than I. But I just would note that although the president's advisors were sharply divided on what course to take with Secretary Gates, who was then secretary of Defense, cautioning against military commitment. When the Arab League made its decision that Gadhafi should go, that military interventions to support the rebels in Benghazi was justified, the White House quickly joined in that consensus.

And it shows something really important as you think about the future. I think this administration does want to act with its allies, with its allies in the Arab League, with its allies in the GCC. And when they make a decision, that's an important signal. President Obama stated what we sometimes call in the press the "Obama doctrine" at the end of March, after U.S. planes had been in action in Libya and taken out the Libyan air defenses, and then that long war was underway.

And the “Obama doctrine” said we will intervene militarily in countries where our interests are not directly threatened only when we have international support and legitimacy. And that position has continued obviously in Syria.

I’m going to close with Syria, but I want to just say a word about Yemen because it’s easy for people to overlook. But I think it’s an example of the kind of process that the U.S. would like to see happen more broadly and specifically in Syria.

And that is to say it was a managed transition. President Saleh was extremely clever in moving in and out, back and forth with unmatched skill and playing tribes off against each other, and playing the United States and playing on fears of al-Qaida’s strength in the south.

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But with the help of the GCC and its secretary-general, a process in which Saleh did leave office – an election was held with really only one candidate and then a new president in Yemen took over with the details about change in leadership, the security services and some parts of the Army getting the Saleh relatives out was kind of left for later.

But it was an example of diplomacy behind the scenes. This is an administration that, it’s obvious, is much happier doing things privately than publically. This president is better a secret commander than he is the usual commander-in-chief.

So finally, to get to Syria, the most painful chapter for me and I’m sure – I suspect for everyone in the audience to watch in this story of Arab revolution and struggle for dignity.

The U.N. estimates now put the death toll in Syria close to 10,000. We hear calls almost every day to arm the opposition. The administration has resisted, as you know, resisted even a call from Prince Saud al-Faisal, a very emotional statement when he met with Secretary Clinton last week that it was morally right to do this.

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And the reason, I think, the U.S. has said pretty consistently that it opposes this is a fear that militarization of the conflict through pumping in weapons will only get more civilians killed, that while the emotional appeal of arming the rebels is obvious to anyone with a heart, anyone with a head knows that this country is just a very volatile place.

I just had – teach a course at Harvard at the Kennedy School on the Arab Spring. And I had a young member of the Syrian opposition who spent much of the last eight months in the country traveling around, come talk to my class.

And the point he made over and over again was that however attractive it sounds to arm the opposition, that might have the effect of driving more Syrians who are on the fence towards the regime, not away from it, just because they fear what Syria would look like if a civil war like the one in Iraq that almost broke out happened.

So let me close there. I'd love to take questions from the audience. There are many subjects I wasn't able to cover. And I'd be happy to come back to them – in particular, say more about Iran, about the prospects for negotiation or military conflict there, and also about U.S. policy toward Egypt.

So are there any questions? I've saved a good deal of time. So if there are no questions, I'm going to have to sing a medley of my favorite show tunes. (Laughter.) Yes, sir? Perhaps you could identify yourself and if there are – I don't know if there's a microphone but I hope somebody can bring one to you.

Q: I don't need any microphone. Can you hear me, David?

[00:30:35]

MR. IGNATIUS: Yes, I hear you well.

Q: My name is – (inaudible). I'm an Islamic banker but I don't work for the – (inaudible). My question -- I mean, it was very well the way you put the way the Arab Spring came together and where the U.S. is coming from with regards to basic human rights, and we all have a say on the issue.

And when the president said history is in the making and we should stand with the history, you forgot an important thing when talking about your allies in the GCC. When you talk about allies in the GCC and the Arab League, you're talking about governments. You're not talking about the people. So we are missing the point of the people.

And using Bahrain as a good example which you missed out in that – in the discussion, which is like in a way what's happening in Syria but in a different way. It's a problem. And as the Muslim Brotherhood, of course I will not talk about Bahrain for obvious reasons.

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But Bahrain has an issue, and that's its problem with the U.S.'s position, where it's looking for the 400 million all together rather than saying – what – we go with Egypt, we go with Libya, we go with Syria. But this will get some of the other real autocracies in that part of the world. I just wondered if you would comment?

MR. IGNATIUS: I'm glad you raised Bahrain. That was one of the subjects that I skipped. But I really should say a word about it. There's no question that in terms of perceptions that the United States stands with the forces of change. Bahrain is an embarrassing example of the other tendency. I do always think of foreign policy, whether it's Egypt's or the United States', as a balance between your values as a country and your interests, more narrowly defined.

And when the Saudis made clear that they felt that the process of negotiation the U.S. had encouraged in Bahrain between the crown prince and al-Wefaq was not heading toward an acceptable outcome.

They were not prepared to see a constitutional monarchy emerge from that process of dialogue and were prepared to intervene. I think the U.S. decided – or I should say recognized – that its interest in maintaining a good relationship with Saudi Arabia were an overriding reality and interest for U.S. foreign policy.

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And so we acceded as the troops moved over the causeway, and everybody knows what happened. One outcome in Bahrain that I think was important was that a process of investigation by Judge – by Sunni (ph) – I hope I'm pronouncing his name right – went forward. And if you read that report, it is amazingly honest.

I mean, it's the kind of document that any country would be proud of. Has there been action taken to fulfill the recommendations? No. Does the U.S. continue to think that a process of dialogue with the opposition is the right way forward? Yes. Have we made much progress? No.

So, you know, the honest answer to your question is that the reality of foreign policy is that it is a balance, and in the case of Bahrain, that balance clearly tilted one way. In the case of Egypt, you could argue the balance tilted the other way towards our values, not toward the traditional definition of our interests.

Just a final word. People who want to think about this should read a piece that Henry Kissinger, our famous former secretary of State, wrote last weekend in the Washington Post. It's a very important article. This administration listens to Henry Kissinger as much as any that I've ever seen. Yes, please?

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Q: I'm Bob Pastor, from American University and also the Carter Center. On Iran, there seems to be somewhat of a debate between the Israelis and the U.S. government as to the retaliatory capacity of the Iranians if there was a strike by Israel. I'd like your sense as to which is, in your judgment, is more likely. If Israel does strike Iran, what will Iran's response be?

MR. IGNATIUS: What I'm going to say obviously is a guess and not all that well-informed a guess at that. I've heard it said by people who study these things very carefully in our government that they see signs that Iran might choose to ride out a limited Israeli attack, in the hope that this would rally support for the regime both domestically and with Arab countries which have pulled away from Iran in these years of growing Sunni/Shia division, and that the Iranians would see a restrained response as their best strategic option. Take the punch and you'll be better for that.

That said, I find it hard to imagine, when you have IRGC operatives so widely deployed, when you have South Lebanon bristling with weapons aimed at Israel, that there wouldn't be some significant retaliation. As you know, I think, Bob, the CENTCOM – our military command for the region – has had a serious war game trying to think, well, how would this process go – and that there are various forks, apparently, in their analysis.

But the judgment is that if the Israelis struck, it would be extremely unlikely that the United States wouldn't be drawn in. And so one question I would have is – and that's the decision the Iranians have to make.

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Are their interests better served by drawing the United States in and then being able to stand up against the United States or by some more limited and contained conflict. And I'm going to stop guessing because I think it's a key question and the honest answer is I just think it's hard to forecast. Yes, sir?

Q: David, thank you. Chuck Dittrich with the U.S.-Libya Business Association. I wanted to get your thoughts on going forward – what do you see as the appropriate role for the U.S. and its allies in the region – and I would include Europe as being in the region – both in Libya in the political process and in restoring security with demobilizing the militias, and in Egypt, as far as economics is politics and the need to stimulate jobs and, sort of, an alternative future for many people there. Thank you.

MR. IGNATIUS: The degree of disorder in Libya at present worries everyone, including people in the administration. I guess the only insight that I'd want to share with this group that pertains to Libya and other key countries is this.

One of the worst mistakes that the United States made in Iraq – and we made a lot of them – was that after overthrowing Saddam Hussein, who wasn't really all that popular with Iraqis – after doing that, the United States proceeded to basically shatter the state structure of Iraq which had been kidnapped, in my view, by the Ba'ath Party in the 1960s, and shatter the Iraqi military.

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And I think both national institutions should have been seen as transcending the regime and being important to the future stability of Iraq. And when we knocked down the state structure and the Army, we opened – the Iraqis had nowhere to turn for protection but to the most traditional sectarian and tribal-based organizations, just to get through this period of disorder.

So the lesson for me is that the United States and its allies need to be very careful to preserve the basic institutions that provide security in countries. That's why when I look at Egypt, I think the most important thing that the new government in Egypt could do is to get some help – I'd say from Eastern Europe – in building modern democratic police and security services. There's nothing that Egypt could do that would be a better guarantee to Egyptians and the region that Egypt's moving forward, that it will have an orderly transition,

that it will have police who are not going to abuse citizens but who are going to respect their rights.

Eastern Europe went through this. Think of all of those Communist-led secret police organizations that in East Germany, Hungary – every country brutalized the citizens. And Eastern Europe learned how to make a transition to democratic police and intelligence services. That's something that I really hope – that it's in line with this observation about what happens when you create a vacuum.

I hope that's what's being done in Libya. Libya, you know – Libya resisted the Ottomans, the Italians, Gadhafi himself. I mean, you know, you could argue there's never really been a state structure and security structure that worked in Libya. So that's the project going forward.

Sir?

[00:40:59]

Q: My name is Samir Chebil (ph). I'm from the World Bank. Thank you, Mr. David. I really appreciate that you are doing such a complex exercise. I think you are covering the Middle East in half an hour; it's impossible, sir. It's a full semester course.

MR. IGNATIUS: (Chuckles.) It is a full semester.

Q: But I wanted first to – one is a comment, and I hope that since you play a very influential role that you throw your role to emphasize this point: that the Arab Spring showed once more that it was not about America. There was no slogan during the Tunisian or in Egypt or in other countries against America.

In fact, it was, “yes, we can” – the only thing we have seen. So I hope that through your influential role that it's this would be an opportunity to make clear that it's not against – it's not against America. It was really something for freedom of speech, the major principle that America has stood by.

The second thing is what's your reading about should – should the Republican Party win the election? What stand would you think that – not that I'm hoping for – to what extent do you think that support to the Arab Spring might change?

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MR. IGNATIUS: Those are two good questions. Just a brief comment about your first observation, that it's not about America. I think that idea is written on the minds of every senior official in this administration.

Part of their policy, and a lot of people are criticizing them for this, has been to take the United States out of the lead in events in the region, to let the Arab League, the GCC, other partners take the lead – to let Egyptians write their own history – not to be seen to be dictating outcomes.

And I think that goes to a basic feeling that Obama and his advisors have, that this period that the United States has lived through, 10 years of wars far away – the period that began for us on September 11, 2001. This president says we need to turn a page and get to a new page where people write their own history, make their own futures.

And the United States is not always the convenient enemy. We want to get out of that role. If you read our commentary in the U.S. starting with the Kissinger piece I just mentioned, that position – you know, I mean, people have called it leading from behind. And it's become a real criticism of the president, the fact that he is acceding to – letting Egyptians and other Arabs shape their future without a strong U.S. guiding or manipulating hand, that's come to be a criticism of him.

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And I think you can expect to hear that criticism made more forcefully during the general election. I think Mitt Romney is already saying that the United States has stopped being a leader in the traditional sense that Americans expect. He's said President Obama doesn't believe that we're an exceptional nation, uniquely gifted with a responsibility to lead the world and to shape events everywhere.

And President Obama's going to have to respond to that and say, no, we think – I think American security is better served by working with our allies, by being on the side of this process of change and not trying to stop it. But you'll see a great debate about this issue. I think it's going to be the heart of the foreign policy part of the campaign.

And that's really what it will be about. What would the Republicans do if Mitt Romney got elected? Part of the mystery of this campaign is finding out more of the answer to that question.

It's often said that Mitt Romney took very conservative positions on issues involving Iran, Israel, other foreign policy issues because he was trying to win a nomination where the Republican primaries are dominated by very conservative people who he had to speak to – and that, you know, as has happened often with candidates, he moved more toward the center.

[00:45:40]

We'll have to see. The more the campaign has gone on, the less likely I believe that it would be that Romney would really change course and move sharply back towards the center. But I could be wrong. And you know, job one for me as a columnist is to go out and to try to give you a better answer to that question over the next few months by talking, I hope, to Romney. Yes, all the way in the back?

Q: Yeah, thank you. My name is Ghaith al-Omari from the American Task Force on Palestine. My question is about Egypt, and as the administration engages the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in your view, what are the two or three top issues, from an American perspective, that would determine how far and how successful this engagement will go.

And put aside the peace treaty for a minute. But other issues, domestic issues that from our point of view will affect how far we can take this process. Thank you.

MR. IGNATIUS: So it's a great question and it allows me to, I hope, give you a very quick, simple answer. I can go one, two, three. The next government with the Muslim Brotherhood dominating it – whether you have a Muslim Brotherhood member as president or not, they will be the dominant force – has to think first about the economy.

I mean, you know, Egypt's economy really is getting awfully near the edge of a cliff. And the revolution came to pass in part because people wanted more economic opportunity.

[00:47:14]

And the Muslim Brotherhood's going to have to find ways to get foreign investment coming back into Egypt, I think. I don't see how you can do it without that. It's going to have to find some way to reassure foreigners that it's going to be safe and fun to come to the new Egypt as tourists, if you want the tourism revenue to come back. And that raises all sorts of lifestyle questions.

So that's job one, is to find a way to, you know, pull the economy from what looks to me like it's going to be a car wreck. Number two, I've already mentioned, and that's security. I went to Egypt four times last year. Every time I went, I found people more frightened in the neighborhoods about letting their wives out after dark – let alone their daughters – about simple security. When I would go to police stations, I wouldn't find anybody there. So that worries me.

And I already said what I think this next government should do. Work with people who've been through this transition, ideally in Eastern Europe, and say, we have a national project to build democratic police and security services, will you help us. And I think that would be an important step.

[00:48:32]

And the third thing that I'd mention – you talked about, I think, in your discussions about a constitution. I hope this new government will find a way to build tolerance for all Egyptians into the political process, ideally in a constitution. America became a real country that was going to make it and prosper the moment that we added 10 amendments to our constitution, which we call the Bill of Rights.

And the Bill of Rights said each individual has certain things that the state can't take away from them. They have them, and they're the right to speak and say what you want, the right to assemble with your friends and people who you agree with. And I could go down the list, but you all know.

If Egypt could do those three things – the economy, security and some way of guaranteeing tolerance – I would feel like Egypt had turned a corner and this whole story

would be heading towards a good outcome. I mean, the benefits to Israel and the whole Muslim and Arab world from that would be, I think, enormous.

So I really hope that happens.

So I think this is the time for me to get off the stage. (Laughter.) Thank you very much. (Applause.)

[00:49:53]

MS. OTTAWAY: To my justification, I was asked to interrupt him at 2 o'clock. And he does not take a subtle hint. Clearly, you have to (inaudible). (Laughter.) Thank you very much, David.

MR. IGNATIUS: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)