

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Obama's Middle East Trip: Teleconference with Carnegie Experts in the Middle East and D.C.

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Ahead of President Obama's Middle East trip and highly anticipated address to the Muslim world, Carnegie experts in the Middle East and D.C. discussed regional expectations for his speech, the administration's approach to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and the significance of his stops in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. A transcript of the teleconference follows.

Marina OTTAWAY: To a large extent, while there are a number of issues Obama might touch upon, the speech is going to be judged mostly on what he has to say on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I think a general statement about goodwill towards the Arab world is going to be taken as a let-down by most people. There is a tremendous desire in Europe as well to have the Obama administration define more clearly what its Middle East policy is. The Europeans have been very favorably inclined to support the U.S. in the Middle East, but they are also rather puzzled about what the policy really is. So there is quite a bit at stake in this speech.

Nathan BROWN: Essentially, I agree with Marina. Had Obama delivered the speech at the very outset of his administration, I think what people would have expected would have been a sort of very general, thematic, reaching out to the Islamic world. Now that it's already June and he's already gotten some foreign policy initiatives underway or at least hinted at, and the fact that he's doing it in Egypt, will make people read two issues very closely. One is his stance towards political reform generally, and second,

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the Arab-Israeli conflict more broadly. Particularly I agree with Marina on that second. The administration's been trying very carefully to balance expectations with both. There's only so much you can do in this speech on either front. If he simply confines himself to platitudes, I think that would probably be regarded as a disappointment. But, any sort of very detailed proposals or delineation of policy will probably have to come in the days and weeks immediately following the speech. So the immediate reaction will probably be tempered, partly by seeing what kind of follow-up this administration is able to give.

Paul SALEM:

I think it's important that this speech will be looked at in the short-term as well as the long-term. I think there is little doubt that the general public will be disappointed. They do expect strong positions, they do expect a more elaborate vision, and I think it's quite clear that Obama is not ready to present that and will not be presenting his peace plan for the region. He might do that in a few months. So I think there will be some let down. But I think what's also important is to situate the speech in a longer-term future. I recall President Bush's speech in April 2002—a very strong speech about a two-state solution, and settlements, and a whole range of rather strong positions at the time, but six months after that speech, very little was left of the content of that speech, and that's where the very deep disappointment with the Bush administration set in very early. So I think this speech will be very cautious, it will be a bit disappointing to the general public, but if it's followed up with steady steps in the weeks and months moving forward, I think people will look back on this speech as the beginning of setting a foundation for the Obama administration in the region.

My sense is that Obama's going to try to use this as he did his visit to Turkey, and his visit to Saudi Arabia before going to Egypt, to build on the alliances that the U.S. has in the Muslim world, and to try to

marshal momentum in the Arab and the wider Islamic world and bring that soon to bear on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To find a way to use his influence, his popularity, some common interests with a wider Arab and Muslim World, and bring that to bear to bring progress on the narrow one. So I agree with Marina and Nathan that there will be disappointment, but I think perhaps it will also be judged in the medium-term as well.

Amr HAMZAWY: Let me add two points. One on disappointment. If we read recent public opinion surveys correctly, and I've been following Arab debates in the press primarily, there are very high expectations, great expectations, but there is also sort of an initial positive tendency. People are expecting Obama very positively, and regardless of how deep he is going to elaborate on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, whether he will be able to give a vision, a clear vision, a road map, a new road map for the two state solution, no matter how detailed he is going to talk about resetting America's relations with the Arab-Muslim world, people are waiting positively for what he is going to say. I have been reading different readers' comments in different websites, newspapers, and blogs in the region, and clearly there is a very positive attitude toward the speech.

Second point, Marina and Nathan arrived in terms of centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian issue, but I guess the issue of political reform—especially since the president will be addressing the Arab-Muslim world out of Cairo, and out of Cairo University—is on many people's minds as well. Cairo University has been throughout its history a place, for a very long time, a liberal voice for freedom, later an Islamist voice for freedom. Egypt itself has been a country in which American democracy promotion was tested several times over the last years. The interaction between the Bush administration and President Mubarak is still present in many people's memories. So I guess the

president, because he will be talking out of Egypt, out of Cairo University, will be judged not only based on what he is going to say about the Israeli-Palestinian issue but on political reform as well. The expectations here are quite low when it comes to activists. Egyptian opposition politicians, Arab opposition politicians, as a general feeling, as the new administration dropped democracy promotion for strategic interests, dropped democracy promotion for strategic alliances with countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. And if he manages to address the issue broadly—government, human rights—he doesn't have to use the word democracy. I guess it will be received very positively by opposition movements in the region, Islamists and otherwise.

QUESTION: What kind of engagement do you think they've had so far? Do you feel like these bilateral meetings that President Obama has held at the White House on the Israeli-Palestinian issue have actually made any strides, or if there's something that perhaps they've come to some kind of an agreement that he hasn't announced yet and that's what he'll talk about in the speech? Or do you think they were more photo opportunities?

OTTAWAY: Well let me try to come in here. Certainly Obama has focused in his consultation on the Arab-Israeli conflict and that's why in the speech he has to address this issue. If you look to the people he talked to—he consulted with Netanyahu, he consulted with Abbas, he would have consulted with Mubarak, I'm sure if Mubarak had not been forced, for family reasons, to cancel his trip, and so on. And although discussions have really centered on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, now has he made up his mind? There have been some strong statements on the settlement issue, but certainly so far there is no overall approach that has emerged clearly and I think that is the issue that he will have to address there if he wants to maintain kind of the goodwill that has been

developing in the Arab world, and the goodwill that has been developing in Europe as well.

QUESTION: So, if I could just follow up on that question. You said he has to address the issue, but others have made the point that it is very unlikely that he is going to come out with a full-fledged plan. So, what can he say exactly? I mean, if he just sort of says—this is an important issue, the U.S. needs to be engaged on it, we need a two-state solution, if he just sort of repeats the things that we know he believes—is that enough?

OTTAWAY: No, I think he has to give some indication of what is going to be the next move by the administration. We are opposed to settlements, well what happens if the settlements continue? He has to put pressure on Israel on the issue of settlements. He has to ask for something from the Arab countries in return, and I expect that he will. In other words, he needs to be seen asking for specific moves from all sides and he has to be fairly specific. It's not an overall solution, but certainly what the steps are going to be in the next couple of months.

QUESTION: Can I ask one other question? On another point, which is, there's been some discussion about whether this is a speech to the Arab world or the Muslim world. Obviously, some of the issues we've been talking about are Arab world issues. Do you think there's any tension there or that he will be able to both address the issues in the region and also the larger Muslim world?

SALEM: I think that the location is significant on a number of levels. Certainly, part of it is addressing the Arab world, and the Arab world is the main party to the 60-year old Arab-Israeli conflict, and he has not yet gone to the Arab world or addressed it. The trip to Turkey did not do that. So coming to the Arab world is very significant for the Arab-Israeli conflict. Of course the Arab world is also the heart of the Islamic

world in the way that Turkey or Indonesia is not, historically and religiously. And hence one can address the Muslim world very effectively from the Arab world. Thirdly, he's doing it in Egypt and Egypt is the largest and historically the most influential, although it has fallen back in recent times. But that is significant that he is centering his presence in the Arab world in Egypt. Now of course he's hedging that a bit by visiting Saudi Arabia briefly before coming to Egypt, because Saudi Arabia certainly has been playing a very major role in the last twenty years at least. But it's significant that he's considering Egypt a major ally and a major player, of course that partly to counteract Iran. He visited Turkey first, and Saudi Arabia, Egypt. All of that indicating that the U.S. considers these states pillars of alliance for the U.S. in the region. And I also think he is beginning by making these very public outreaches to populations and so on because I think he knows he's going to have to use those relationships, he's going to have to use his influence, his popularity, a couple months, two, three months down the line, once he's put his plan in place. The Arab-Israeli conflict, if anything, is more complicated than the economic collapse, and he knows there is going to be a lot of homework to be done before he comes out with a plan. Recent polling data shows Barack Obama very popular in the Arab world in a way of course that Bush was not at all and that's capital that he can use in the Arab world and the Muslim world and try to use that to solve problems.

HAMZAWY:

Can I add two points here? If you look at the schedule of the President's speech in Cairo, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar will be introducing him. Which is a clear sign of Obama's inclination to—and probably what he's going to do, in terms of addressing general Muslim issues, otherwise he would have picked a different person to introduce him. So he will be introduced by the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, which is a well-known, well-respected religious institution in the Muslim

Sunni world, which has generally played a very significant role in terms of creating, generating, and disseminating religious knowledge –

QUESTION: I'm sorry, the Grand Sheikh of who?

HAMZAWY: Of Al-Azhar, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, which is a religious university and knowledge institution in Egypt. Sheikh Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, who is the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, will be introducing him.

QUESTION: I'm not sure I understand the significance of—what is the message that this sends?

HAMZAWY: If you're picking up a religious authority, a Muslim religious authority, to introduce him, you're not picking up a politician to introduce him or someone from Mubarak's cabinet, definitely it's a clear sign that he will address most issues of relevance to the wider Muslim population, moving beyond simply focusing only on political crises, political conflicts, regional conflicts. Otherwise, he probably could have been introduced by the foreign minister, or the prime minister, or the president. The fact that you are picking up a religious authority to introduce, or co-introduce him, as I am reading right now, is an indication that he will address wider Muslim issues.

Secondly, the expectations are that he will not focus only on Arab issues. You are right; there was some discussion about whether it is the speech to the Muslim world that was promised, a second one after the Turkey one, or whether it would focus only on Arab issues, but expectations are that it will address some wider issues as well—redefining America's relations with the Muslim world. He will assign some time to it to move beyond the legacy of the war on terror to

make it clear as he did in Turkey that he is intent on redefining, resetting the relationship.

OTTAWAY: If I could just add perhaps on that point, or perhaps look at it from a somewhat different angle. By asking the Sheikh of Al-Azhar to introduce him, he is essentially making the statement that the United States does not have any problems with Islam as a religion; that the conflicts that have taken place have nothing to do with the religion. There are political conflicts that have taken place with a certain brand of Islam, but certainly not with the mainstream, if you like, and nothing represents the mainstream more than Al-Azhar, historically as well as now.

QUESTION: How important is it for Obama to put out a timeline when it comes to dealing with the Mideast peace process? Do any of the experts on the call think that it's important for him to specifically discuss the problems with trying to close Guantanamo and trying to deal with the people that have been detained by U.S. forces to date?

OTTAWAY: Well, let me have a first crack at that while everyone gathers their thoughts. I doubt that Obama is going to put out a specific, precise timeline. I don't think that the administration at this point has such a well-defined project. And he keeps talking also about the importance of bilateral negotiations. I think what is important is that he sets out a timeline for the next couple of months, not a specific timeline on everything.

Concerning Guantanamo, somehow I would be surprised if he addresses it, because I think on one level that it is an internal issue in the United States, or it's an issue to be discussed bilaterally with the governments whose citizens are in Guantanamo. At this point the question is are they going to take them back, how are they going to

be—you know, what are we going to do with these prisoners and what role do the countries these people originate from have in solving that problem. I doubt he will address it in such a general speech addressed to the entire Arab world and more broadly to the Muslim world.

SALEM:

If I may add, I think we need to look at this speech as adding a brick onto the house Obama is trying to build rather than anything like a whole room of the house or the whole house itself. In that context it's important that this brick that he lays be positive, be reasonably well-received, lays a bit more of a foundation. I do think his emphasis will be on broad relations, on changing the relationship with the Arab and the Muslim world. I think he will go back to history and talk about Arab and Muslim contributions to civilization, and to advancement in the West and science.

And of course that same brick will have to also take one step forward on the peace process; you know, what is the next month or two looking like? But keep in mind that Obama is very careful, a very strategic politician. His election campaign was a carefully thought-out two-and-a-half year thing, and the peace process is not at all any easier. So I think it will be very careful, very step-by-step, efficient, but certainly not rushed.

QUESTION:

If I could have a follow up on the Guantanamo question, is there concern in the region about the continued operation of Guantanamo? Today Omar Khadr may be starting his military tribunal, which has been a controversial process within the U.S. I'm just wondering the president needs to address that concern, if there's any need to respond to any localized concern on that topic.

SALEM:

I agree with Marina; I don't think the Guantanamo issue in its details is an issue the general public follows in detail. I think they're pleased that President Obama announced two months ago that he's going to close it, but I don't think it will be a major expectation or part of the speech. The Guantanamo issue is of some relevance to particular countries—Yemen, for example, and others—but that's more bilateral. I think President Obama may mention issues like Guantanamo and others as ways of expressing challenges that the U.S. has itself, mistakes it has made, breaches in human rights, to encourage its partners in Egypt and elsewhere as well to look critically at what they've done and to move forward gradually, and hence this is the same thing that they sort of did in Turkey when they were talking about the Armenian issue and things of that nature, he couched it in humility to say that, well the U.S. of course has its own problems, that he himself would never have been elected president previously, the issue of slavery and Guantanamo, and that was the way that he, Barak Obama felt that with humility and credibility he could raise the issues in Turkey. I think he will try to do something similar in Egypt and to other Arab countries, to talk about reform participation and change, but to do so unlike Bush and perhaps Secretary Rice: not in a sort of a strident tone or that we will bring democracy, but rather that all countries in the world struggle with these issues, the U.S. has struggled and made mistakes, the U.S. is trying harder and other countries should try harder as well.

QUESTION:

What are you guys looking for out of the bilateral meeting in Saudi Arabia?

OTTAWAY:

Well there are certainly two issues that are going to be brought up, I think the two principal issues, one is going to be concerning Iran and sort of how to move that agenda forward and what is the role that Saudi Arabia and probably, the members of the Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) can play in that. And the second one is going to be the Arab-Israeli issue because the position that the Saudis have taken for many years now—certainly it was very clear under the Bush administration, whenever the U.S. administration asks for cooperation on Iran, the Saudis turn around and ask the United States to do more on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, so I think those are the most important issues that are going to be on the table. There may be some discussions about oil prices yet, you know oil prices have been going up, the Saudis would like to stabilize oil prices around 75 dollars a barrel, but the United States considers that too high. We are still far short of the \$75 a barrel but the prices are going up so it's quite possible that that issue is going to be on the agenda.

HAMZAWY:

Let me add one point here., I agree with what Marina said. Apart from discussing the peace process and of course Iran, I guess issues like the oil prices, as well as the present situation in Yemen. At present, Ali Abdallah Salih, the president of Yemen, he is visiting Saudi Arabia, meeting with the Saudi King and with the Saudi government. The deteriorating situation in Yemen is of great concern, security concern, for the U.S. and definitely what's going on in Yemen in the north and the south will be part of what Obama and the Saudi King will discuss. Secondly, on the Arab peace initiative or the peace process, Saudi Arabia has played a crucial role in coming up with what was a Saudi peace initiative, which was endorsed by the Arab league in Beirut in 2002 and became the Arab peace initiative. Right now we have talks that Arabs are asked to revise the Arab peace initiative—at least regarding the right of return for Palestinian refugees—and Saudi Arabia is key in case of revisions of the initiative or new discussions on how to make it, how to activate the, how to make it more of a peace offering to the Israelis. Saudi Arabia is key and definitely it will be discussed.

QUESTION: And on Iran, do you feel that the issues for Saudi Arabia are a concern that the U.S. will be reaching out too much to Iran, nervousness about the diplomacy that Obama has talked about?

OTTAWAY: Well the Saudis are not quite sure what they want on Iran, because the Saudis are very concerned about the, about the possibility of Iran, about the possibility of a rapprochement between the United States and Iran. There is the fear which appears to be quite unfounded but which is very real among the Arab gulf countries that somehow the U.S. is going to make too many concessions to Iran, and that in exchange for Iran's stopping its nuclear program or at least bringing in the nuclear program under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Commission, that in exchange for that the United States will give too much of a free hand to Iran in maintaining security in the Gulf. This seems to be a very unfounded idea. At the same time the Saudis and all the other Gulf Countries have been extremely worried about the possibility of conflict between the United States and Iran because they are afraid that they would be the first victims of an Iranian retaliation so that essentially Saudi Arabia is not quite sure which way it wants to turn on that issue.

QUESTION: So they're concerned that the US will both be too close and too far away from Iran?

OTTAWAY: Exactly

QUESTION: Any thoughts on the Arab peace initiative? What those discussions may be like while Obama is in Saudi Arabia?

SALEM: I mean there is no doubt that the Obama administration is looking for ways that Saudi Arabia and for the Arab countries, and in addition the Islamic countries, can take initiatives, as was mentioned

by Marina earlier, towards Israel that would help create momentum, help change the mood, the mood which was, which started very terribly with the Gaza war. I'm sure he is going to be looking for partnerships there and gestures. Of course Egypt already has relations with Israel as does Turkey. Saudi Arabia might be the one that Obama might try to nudge in order to show more positivity towards Israel. King Abdullah of Jordan had mentioned the idea that the 57-state solution with the idea that Obama could try to rally the Arab countries as well as the countries of the Islamic world to sort of engage more positively with Israel. That would create trust and a much more open mood from the Israelis which would facilitate progress on the Palestinian track and maybe the Syrian track as well. I'm sure Obama will be looking to see in Riyadh, he is looking to see how much he can nudge the Saudis. My feeling is that the Saudi king, he is not so much in a position to make a gesture of that nature at this point. But they could discuss at maybe what point such a gesture could be made, what would be the nature of that gesture, and how it would fit into a timetable that Obama might need to devise for the coming months.

HAMZAWY: One additional point, on what the Saudi king can do, and cannot do, and of course there some discussion in DC and even here in the region, as Paul said, about modifications of the Arab peace initiative, either in the direction of dropping the right of return for the Palestinians refugees, or making it more of a Muslim peace initiative, one billion Muslims offering Israel peace, in exchange for land: Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. However, if you look at how the Arab world, Arab public opinion, has been debating the issue of peace with Israel, there is definitely, since the Gaza war, a very critical moment, and the Saudis and the Egyptians, will not feel secure enough to move ahead without having positive signals from Israel on settlements, on restarting negotiations with the Palestinians, and an Israeli commitment by the

current government—which is yet to be heard—the two-state solution. So Arabs, who are in favor of peace, the peace camp, which is sometimes confusingly described as a moderate camp, but the peace camp is not in a position to move further without receiving positive signals from Israel, from Tel Aviv. And so I do agree with Paul that the Saudi king, he will listen to the what the president will say, but he is definitely not in a position to offer more without appearing, and getting, positive signals from the Israelis.

OTTAWAY: One of the problems that Obama is facing now is that he has taken, at least in words—we will see if whether if there is any follow-up—but so far he has taken a fairly strong position, stronger than the U.S. usually has done, on the issue of settlements, the language that has been used, particularly by the Secretary of State, when they say there has to be a halt to settlement development, and that means the natural growth, it means not just illegal outposts, but any other activity in all settlements has to stop, of any kind. That is very strong language for the United States. Now, in order to move forward, he has to get some concessions from the other side, he has to get some concessions from the Arabs, and also he needs to get some clear concessions from the Palestinians. So far there is no outline of what he really wants from the Arab side, because some of the rumors that are circulating in Washington that the Arabs might be asked to take steps, and all the steps that have been mentioned that are quite extreme from the Arab point of view: beginning to issue some visas to Israelis to visit the countries that don't have diplomatic relations with Israel, almost amounts to an indirect recognition of the legitimacy of the state of Israel, opening an interest section in Tel Aviv that is another issue that, is another possibility that has been raised, again it is an indirect form of recognition of the state of Israel. So the question is whether Obama can get other concessions from the Arabs. He has to get something from the Arab side in order to show that he is being even-handed. The questions is, are there

concessions that are acceptable, that can be made acceptable to the Arabs, in so far, at least I have not heard, in terms of what is circulating, what is coming out of the State Department, I have not heard of any demands at this point that appear to be acceptable to the Arab side.

QUESTION: Marina, can you give a couple examples of what might be considered, in your terms, real concessions, from the Israelis?

OTTAWAY: Well the problem is there are two concessions that without which I think there is not going to be much progress. One is a statement by Netanyahu, that he, that the Israeli government, accepts the two-state solution. I don't see how there can be a resumption of negotiations at this point if there is no recognition of the two state solution. And the other concession I think he is asking for, of course, is the halt to the building in the settlements, and that is a major concession.

QUESTION: I am curious, if Nathan like to add anything to that as well, on where we find ourselves in the process?

BROWN: Sure. What I would say is a couple things. Number one, as Marina said, the position of the Obama administration on settlements, is very very striking, not so much because any specific measures have been spelled out, but there is a strong pronouncement of the American position, one that is done in public and one that is fairly unyielding about no growth whatsoever. I'm not sure that's going to make a huge difference in the political atmosphere in the Arab world, where people have grown quite cynical about it. My hunch is that foreign policy elites, however, in the Arab world, will notice that and they will of course wonder what is going to be coming next and how the Obama administration plans to follow up. But in a sense, by having the speech come immediately in the wake of this demonstrated willingness of the United States to move a dispute with Israel into public view, will probably give the

administration a little bit more breathing room there. The second thing, in terms of the concessions that Obama will be looking for from the Arab world, I don't have that much to add to what's been said. It's very clear that the Obama administration is pursuing what it sees as an integrated regional policy and that some kind of Arab buy-in to an American sponsored peace process is an essential part of that strategy. But it's just not, its an equivalent in the long term, that may mean far friendlier American engagement with the Arab peace initiative, far stronger expectations of Arab diplomatic. But it's not clear if there are any immediate steps that can be taken there. There is also some expectations of the Palestinians, and what we've seen thus far is that it has do primarily with, what the American refer to, euphemistically I think, as security reform, and what means essentially is a Ramallah government, that is willing to crack down on Hamas in the West Bank. That is something that they are looking for, but again, beyond that, there is not that much that the Palestinians, a very weak Palestinian Authority, can do at this stage.

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