

America in the 21st Century: A View from the Arab World

[Public Affairs](#)

[Marwan Muasher](#)

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us.

Today's lunch is the second program in a series of lectures we are hosting in the run-up to the 2012 election. [*Editor's note: The first was "[A View from Europe](#)" with Martin Wolf.*] The purpose of these discussions, entitled "America in the 21st Century—Views from Around the World," is to explore what many pundits have been saying for some time now, which is that American economic, military, and geopolitical primacy, which existed between 1945 and 2000, is no longer.

To explore this issue we have invited respected individuals from various regions of the world to respond to this premise by sharing their thoughts on such issues as how they see America in the years ahead, their vision about how they would like America to conduct itself on the world stage, and whether they believe it is still feasible for the United States to remain the most innovative and influential nation in the 21st century.

Today we will be listening to the Arab view. Marwan Muasher, our speaker, is a seasoned diplomat who has served as a foreign minister and deputy prime minister of Jordan, as well as Jordan's first ambassador to Israel. Having recently returned from the Middle East, I believe his observations will provide a better understanding about how those in the Middle East, at this pivotal moment in history, see America.

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In many countries, the first stage of the political tumult that swept the Middle East and North Africa is over. The dictators have fled, the tyrants have been captured, and in some cases are even dead. But even as we see the beginning of democratic steps being taken in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, questions remain. Most significant is how to redefine America's role in the aftermath of the [Arab Spring](#).

The consensus has been that the United States is morally obliged to align itself with revolutionary movements in the Middle East. However, after [yesterday](#)'s killing of the U.S. [ambassador](#) in Libya and the storming of the U.S. embassy in Cairo, America needs to ask whether these fragile governments who are forging new alliances while marginalizing the social network which shaped the early beginnings of the Arab Spring want a strategic relationship with America; and, if they do, what should that relationship be—economic aid, military support, or something else?

To provide a more nuanced understanding about the prevailing conditions on the ground and how we are seen through Middle Eastern eyes, please join me in welcoming our guest today. Marwan Muasher, thank you for joining us.

Remarks

MARWAN MUASHER: Thank you so much. I'm so glad to be back here again.

It's never easy to talk about the Middle East, and today has been a particularly difficult day. I want to share with all of you both my sympathy but also my indignation about what happened in Libya yesterday and the killing of the U.S. ambassador.

I also want to say that I hope this will not really color the views or take away from the fact that there is no alternative to engagement in the Middle East, knowing and realizing that this is a different Middle East, quite different from the one that we used to know two years ago.

In fact, when I [addressed](#) this group at Carnegie four years ago when I was promoting my book, [The Arab Center](#), I made the point then in the book that Arabs cannot talk about the center that is focused on the peace process alone. The Arab moderates of the time—Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt—were moderates only when it came to peace; they were not moderates when it came to reform. I made the point then that unless Arabs also give reform what it needs in terms of trying to address a longstanding challenge in the Middle East, that the status quo would not be sustainable. And indeed, we are witnessing today the changing of the status quo in the Arab world.

The Arab world used to belong to what I call one category only, and this is countries that thought that they had an infinite amount of time before they gave reform any attention. The argument has always been in the Arab world, until January of 2011, that, because of one reason or the other—whether it is the [Arab-Israeli conflict](#), whether it is economic development, or any number of reasons—that countries needed time and needed to move very slowly and very gradually on reform.

That of course was shattered two years ago, and now we have two groups of countries: those who have some time left and those whose time is up.

Those whose time is up we all know about. These are countries where people finally said, "Enough is enough. You have promised us so many things in the past. You have neither solved the Arab-Israeli conflict nor addressed the reform issues. If you cannot do it, we are going to at least try."

But then there is another group of countries—countries like my own, like Morocco, like the Gulf countries—that, for one reason or another, still have legitimacy, or some legitimacy, for their rulers, which other countries, like Egypt, Syria, Libya, or Tunisia, did not have. As a result, they still have some time left, but it's not infinite anymore.

The question is whether these countries are using this time wisely to finally internalize the realization that absolute power is no longer sustainable and that the only way they can survive from now on is to share their power with the public; whether they realize this or whether they are reading the time—or misreading the time—that they have left into thinking they don't need to do much because they are not witnessing the kind of uprisings that other countries in the Arab world are.

I say all this because when I talk about the U.S. role I think that the United States can play an important role, maybe not as much with the countries that are already undergoing transitions but the countries that still have time to, hopefully, put in place a reform process so that they don't witness the kind of chaos that countries like Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia have.

The other observation I want to make before I get to the U.S. role is that in this country there has been a romantic notion. As soon as the Arab uprisings started, immediately they were called "the Arab Spring." It's a totally Western construct. No one in the region called it an Arab Spring, except here, because somehow people romantically wanted the demise of dictatorships to immediately transform into functioning democracies overnight. That of course is just wishful thinking. It ignores all transformational processes, particularly in a region that has not witnessed a culture of civil society, of pluralism, of political parties, et cetera.

The romantic period I guess is over now and people now realize that this is not the case. That is not, though, a defense of the status quo—far from it—because I think the status quo in the Arab world, as I said, was simply not sustainable. But it may be an injection of reality into making the point that transformational processes need time, and that if one is to judge what is going on in the Middle East through the prism of two years, then all of us will get heartaches with the developments that are taking place, including the tragic developments yesterday.

But if one is to take a longer-term view and understand, as I believe, that this is a battle in the Arab world that should have been waged decades ago but has not been waged and is being waged today, then one has to accept that battles are going to result in ups and

downs, in challenges that will not move the democratization process along a linear line all the time. This is what we are seeing today.

The Arab world, while it succeeded to get rid of colonial rule less than 100 years ago, did not succeed at developing pluralistic societies, and the Arab world was left after independence with only two forces, which to this day still exist: either Arab governments that have ruled without any system of checks and balances and have come up with all kind of excuses for not developing such a system; or an Islamic opposition that has used the mosque for political purposes, that has promised the moon to people without having to prove their promises because they were artificially kept out by Arab governments of the system.

These were the only two alternatives that were available to people: either an unaccountable ruling elite or an ideological opposition that could threaten political, cultural, and religious diversity. This is the situation that the Arab world finds itself in today.

If there are fears because of the rise of political Islam, fears that exist both in the region and here, they are in my view the result of decades of keeping Arabs' political systems closed rather than open. As you open political systems in the Arab world, which is being done in many countries, one will have to accept that in the process political Islam is going to, of course, be at an advantage over others because it was the only force that was allowed to function while all others have not. The only way to level the playing field is to bring the Islamists in—and I'll talk about the different Islamists because they are not monolithic—and see whether indeed they can prove what they are preaching to the public or not.

Remember, in Tunisia, Islamist [Ennahda](#) had about 15 percent of the popular support, but it was translated into 43 percent electoral vote. Popular support in Egypt for the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) was at 20 percent; it was translated into 48 percent electoral vote. Why? Because these are the people that are organized. With Arab governments denying the opportunity for other political parties to act as alternatives, it has basically dug its own hole in now having to deal with ideological forces.

Political Islam, though, is not monolithic, as many people think, because most people in the West when they think of political Islam have [al-Qaeda](#) immediately in mind, or [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon, or [Hamas](#) in the West Bank. In fact, most of political Islam today in the Arab world, most of it, is peaceful, is the Muslim Brotherhood. We might fundamentally disagree with their views, but it is a fact that the Muslim Brotherhood, whether in Egypt, An-Nahda in Tunisia, [PJD](#) [Justice and Development Party] in Morocco, or the [IAF](#) [Islamic Action Front] in Jordan—all are offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood and all operate peacefully.

The [Salafis](#) is a different situation. This is a sort of new phenomenon that has emerged in the Arab world. The ones that conducted the killings yesterday belong to the Salafis, probably linked to al-Qaeda, although we don't know for sure yet. But these are people

that are ideological, that don't believe in pluralism, that don't believe in democratic norms, and these are people who are in my view very dangerous.

But I think if one is to differentiate between the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood, I think the United States, as do Arabs, will have to deal with political Islam in a way that it has shied away from before. These are people who are democratically elected. They don't carry arms. There is no excuse not to deal with them.

I myself, as a Christian secular Arab, will argue that the only way to level the playing field and allow people such as myself and allow secular forces to finally at some point in time be present in the political scene—we will have to accept that the only way to do that is through a path of turmoil and is through a path where political Islam is a participant in the political process. Keeping them outside by force has only strengthened political Islam rather than made it weaker.

How does the U.S. role fare in all of this? Joanne, I think, said it very accurately when she said that the U.S. role around the world has been on the decline. I think that's something that one has to realize. But in the Middle East, in particular, the United States's clout, influence, image, has been declining probably faster than it has in other regions of the world. Why? Three main reasons:

- Its military power is not seen or feared in the region as it used to be because of Iraq. For the average Arab, the [war on Iraq](#) has shown that it is possible to defeat the United States military, and that 10 years after the war on Iraq, the United States is picking up its army and leaving without being able to declare victory.
- The economic power of the United States has been on the decline in the Middle East, particularly after the [global financial crisis](#). Once again, the super-mighty United States now is seen in the region as very vulnerable and as a superpower that is not able to use its money as it used to to affect positions. Therefore, today, for example, you talk about help to Tunisia or help to Egypt, the United States is simply not able to provide much financial help to these two countries, and what it can provide it has to coordinate with the International Monetary Fund, with the World Bank, and the European Union. But on its own, it has its own domestic financial crisis, as well as a global financial crisis, to deal with that does not allow it any more to play the economic role that it used to in the past.
- The third important area is political. The United States' political role in the region has been also on the decline for two reasons. Its support of Arab dictators is now seen as not having served its interests and the Arab public in [Egypt](#), in [Tunisia](#), has been able to topple their leaders despite U.S. political support to these leaders. But more importantly, it is because of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The United States, which is seen in the area as the only power today able to bring the two sides together, is not doing so.

As a result, the average Arab looks at the United States and says, "If you cannot help me on the Arab-Israeli conflict, if you cannot help me on reform, if you cannot help me on the economy, why should I listen to you as I used to?"

Remember last year here in New York the Palestinians came to New York in defiance of the United States' position, not just the Israeli position, and attempted to enter the United Nations. This is the weakest government on earth defying the United States and coming to New York to try to gain membership in the UN despite what the United States thinks. Ten or 15 years ago, this was unheard of in the region, for an Arab country, an Arab entity, to defy the United States in such a manner, even when it was regarded as an ally, not an adversary, of the United States.

This brings me to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I think that the Arab-Israeli conflict, the peace process, the two-state solution, is already in trouble, has already been in trouble, even before the Arab awakening. Why? Because we have reached a stage where settlement activity and the demographics of the conflict can no longer be ignored.

Let me cite some statistics for you. Today the number of Arabs and Jews in areas under Israel's control is exactly the same. It's not comparable; it's exactly the same. I am quoting now official Israeli statistics, not Arab or Palestinian statistics. In Israel proper, the West Bank and Gaza, today you have 5.9 million Jews living in that region and 5.9 million Arabs. So the demographics issue can no longer be postponed, even without the Arab awakening.

If there is no two-state solution today, the only viable alternative, after a period of no solution and turmoil and conflict for a protracted time—but the only viable solution after that is going to be Palestinians asking for equal rights in the country they live in, because that's the only recourse they have.

Which of course means the demise of the Israeli state. That is something that is totally ignored until now. Today Israel talks about Iran as an existential threat. I don't want to belittle that, even though I have another point of view. But I don't want to belittle it because it is true that the average Israeli does have a genuine fear from an Iranian threat.

What I am claiming and posing to you is that the real threat to Israel's existence in my view is domestic, not foreign. It is not coming from Iran. It is coming from the fact that they will have an Arab majority very, very soon if there is no two-state solution.

The fact today is that both Arabs and Israelis, both Palestinians and Israelis, are not in a condition to bring themselves to an agreement, even though such an agreement or parameters of an agreement have already been negotiated over 20 years.

So what is needed is not the agreement, but the path towards it and the catalyst towards it. This is where the United States can—but is not—play a role. With the Arab awakening coming into the picture, when you are having now emerging Arab governments that are going to be more responsive to their publics than the old governments were, and therefore

will be far more critical of Israeli policies than their old governments were, can you imagine a situation today if Israel invades Lebanon again or if Israel goes into Gaza again? Can you imagine that the Egyptian government will have the same reaction as the Egyptian government of three or four years ago?

The [Arab Peace Initiative](#) has attempted to provide both sides with an umbrella that would make it easier for them to make the compromises needed. Israel would know that in return for what it will regard as very painful compromises it is not getting peace with half the Palestinians but peace with the whole Arab and Muslim world. The Palestinians will know that in return for what they will regard as painful compromises they are not going to be called traitors by the Arab and Muslim world. That was the whole idea behind the Arab Peace Initiative. Who is going to talk about an Arab Peace Initiative today when the Syrians are having a [civil war](#), when the whole region is not thinking in such terms?

For the United States, which has basically acknowledged that its old policy of prioritizing stability over democracy in the region needs to change, the United States is not going to be able to regain its credibility in the region if it tells the Arab public that "If you are Egyptians or Tunisians or Syrians or Libyans yearning for freedom, we are with you, but if you are Palestinians yearning for freedom, it's complicated." That's an agreement I and you understand here, but it is not going to be understood in the region.

But, for all kinds of reasons that you and I know, I am not sure that the United States today is prepared to take the lead in saving the parties from themselves, frankly. The United States has on a number of occasions said—General [Petraeus](#), President [Obama](#), others have said—that the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a U.S. national interest. But if you really believe that, you cannot in the same breath add that "we cannot want peace more than the parties themselves," because you are basically holding your U.S. national interest hostage to someone other than you.

If there is a role for the United States in the region, I would just offer the following thoughts.

On the Arab-Israeli conflict, I think that the new administration can move quickly with the parties, with the international community, to put a package on the table through an international conference—a package that has already been negotiated among the parties, so this is not an imposed solution by any means—can do that if it wants. It's not cost-free, it is not easy to do, but to me it will be far less costly than not solving the conflict and facing the fact that we might not have a solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict at all.

On the Arab awakenings, I think the United States should not attempt to micromanage the awakenings. This is a process that will have to go on its own largely.

You do have a role to play—maybe, as I said, an economic role with others. You need to emphasize that U.S. support will be linked to the parties adhering by democratic norms but without giving preferences for these parties. Whether they are the Islamists or the

seculars, as long as people are elected and they adhere by democratic norms, then they deserve U.S. support—but, as I said, without preferring one over the other, and understanding that in the end the world has changed, the U.S. role has changed, and there is a limit to what the U.S. role can do alone.

Libya has shown us this. The United States could not move on [Libya](#) except with UN cover, except with Arab League cover.

Syria is showing us this. Despite all the horror that we are all looking at, the United States is not able to move on Syria in the absence of an international cover.

Let me end by this, to say that the United States needs to be more realistic in what it can achieve; understand that this is a long-term process, not a process that is going to unfold through years but rather decades; work with all forces in the region, including the Islamists, but insist on democratic norms.

Thank you very much.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: John Hirsch with the International Peace Institute.

First of all, thank you very much for your insights. I have two questions on points that you either didn't touch on at all or you touched on very, very briefly.

Briefly was what you called the "Syrian civil war." You didn't say much about that. But that seems to be at the center of international relations now. The way you put the first two-thirds of your remarks, the United States is no longer the *deus ex machina* to solve all these issues.

So, putting aside for a moment the three recommendations at the end of your remarks, what is it in the new Arab states that you think can do something about Syria, given that that's sort of the center now of so much of what's going on?

My other question is about the [Arab Human Development Report](#), which you didn't talk about any of that in your remarks. But are these new states going to be able to address the deficit in education, in science, in technology? This is of course [Tom Friedman](#)'s theme, that everybody in this room is enormously familiar with, where he has kind of excoriated the Arab states for not doing more over decades to deal with those issues. So I wonder, putting the United States aside a little bit, if you could comment more on where you see the energies in the Arab world right now.

MARWAN MUASHER: Thank you so much. This is a very important question indeed.

In my view, if this—I call it the second Arab awakening, because I compare it to the first [Arab awakening](#), which took place again, like I said, 100 years ago and failed miserably

in developing the kind of society that you talk about, succeeded in getting rid of despots only to replace them with other despots.

The question today is: Is the second Arab awakening going to result in pluralistic societies or not? I can't answer that. I don't know. I hope that it will. I maybe have some wishful thinking that it will.

But if it does, it is going to (1) take decades and (2) cannot be left to chance. There are certain things that one needs to do before we indeed reach such pluralistic societies, including education—and I'll talk about education for a while.

But the Arab world still today is struggling with trying to get out of this bipolar monopoly that is straitjacketing it, of what the Egyptians call "the deep state" or "unaccountable ruling elites," and the Islamist opposition. The Arab world is trying to get out of this—not with much success of course, because, as we all know, noble ideas alone are not enough.

When the Egyptians called for social justice and dignity and freedom—who doesn't want these? But how do you translate that into forces that are able to get you these? You need money, you need programs, you need organizational capacity, you need all of the things that do not exist in the Arab world today.

Third forces in the Arab world are what I say are being conceived but not born yet. We have seen glimpses of third forces in the Arab world in Egypt—5 million people voted for [Hamdeen Sabahi](#), 3 million people voted for [Amr Moussa](#), 4 million people voted for [Abdel Fotouh](#). These are people who were presenting alternatives other than the deep state or the Islamists. In the end, of course, the machinery of the deep state and the Islamists brought [Shafik](#) and [Morsi](#) against each other and forgot about the others.

But these are votes for individuals still; they are not votes for programs, they are not votes for parties. To translate this into votes for an organized third force is still something that will take decades. In Tunisia the same thing is happening.

It is still a question whether these third parties are also pluralistic or not. One of the things that, frankly, continued to shock me—and I observed the elections both in Tunisia and Egypt as part of an international observers' mission—I was shocked by the lack of commitment to democracy that exists in both camps.

The Islamists talk about a commitment to a civil state, to minority rights, to women's rights, to rule of law, et cetera, but they have not translated that convincingly in their practices.

The secular forces, who talk about their fear that the Islamists will come to power and then deny it to others, are the first to practice what they accuse the Islamists of doing. So the secular forces in Egypt were triumphant when I was there, when SCAF, the armed forces, basically dissolved parliament and dissolved the constituent assembly. Why?

Because their short-term interests were served, because parliament had a lot of Islamists. The very thing they were accusing the Islamists of hypothetically doing in the future they are actually doing it today.

This should be a battle—and I've said this before—not between the secularists and the Islamists in the Arab world. If it is to be successful, it should be a battle for pluralism, it should be a battle between those who believe in pluralism, whether they are Islamists or secular, against those who do not. If we don't make it such a battle in the Arab world, we will lose, and you will just see, as I said, the replacement of despotic leaders by others.

Education is a big thing, and nothing is being done about education—nothing. Education in the Arab world—you know, we spend a lot of money on education. It's not the lack of financial resources. Five percent of GDP in all Arab countries is spent on education, as opposed to 6 percent for OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries. So it's not that.

But all of that money goes towards the quantity of education and not the quality of it. All that money goes toward building schools, towards closing the gender gap, towards putting computers in schools. They are all needed, but nothing is being done about the content of what we teach our kids.

Do we teach them tolerance? Do we teach them to accept different points of view? Do we teach them diversity and the appreciation of it? Do we teach them critical thinking? Do we teach them scientific reasoning? None of this is being done. I am of course exaggerating, but not by much, not by much. There are individual projects here and there, but none at the national level—none—in any Arab country that looks at this.

So yes, while the Arab Development Reports have been, a lot of people say, the precursors for what is happening today—they at least diagnose what the problem is—it is too early to tell whether the emerging governments, in Tunisia or Egypt for example, or Morocco, are actually seriously looking at these issues. It's too early for that.

Syria: On one hand, it's clear that this regime is over. This regime has lost all its legitimacy, if it had legitimacy outside—it did inside. [Bashar al-Assad](#) went from being one of the most popular leaders in the Arab world three years ago, in polls that you can all look at, to one of the least today. There is no question that Assad lost a lot of legitimacy, not just inside Syria but outside.

But there's also no question that this regime is stopping at nothing to stay in power. It's a zero-sum game today. It's not a regime that is interested in reform.

Arab reaction to this regime is, to be brutally candid, less about democracy and more about self-interest. So when the Gulf states are against the regime it's not because of their love for democracy; it's because of their fear of a Shiite regime or area around them.

The fact of the matter is there is no appetite in the international community to do anything about them militarily. There is no domestic U.S. appetite to do anything. Other than, frankly, [John McCain](#) and *The Wall Street Journal* and Fox News, I don't see people pushing the U.S. administration, on both sides of the aisle. I don't see people pushing the administration to do anything. The Russians, for all kind of reasons, are not also interested so far in changing the situation.

So the bottom line is while this regime has no way out, it is not going to be quick. I'm afraid we might see at least another year of this before something develops.

In my own view, the solution (1) cannot have Bashar or his regime stay in power; (2) has to assure the different communities in Syria on top of which are the [Alawis](#), that they have a future in the country, that they are not going to be massacred, because, frankly, I'm afraid we are getting to that point.

And somebody has to put a political process—I don't want to say a [Taif Agreement](#) because Taif has its own problems in Lebanon—but somebody has to have the political process to assure all the communities that they have a future so that they, frankly, turn against Assad.

A lot of people, including the Alawi community, are not happy with what is going on. But they are not ready to give up on the regime because they are afraid of what might happen to them otherwise.

Turkey played a very important role. But Turkey's role has limits also because without UN cover, without Arab cover—I just looked at a poll today that said 57 percent of Turks don't want a Turkish military intervention.

So there are no easy answers for Syria. When we say "Arabs," sir, I'm afraid that there is no such thing as a common Arab position on Syria—or on any other issue for that matter, for good or worse.

QUESTION: Bob James. I'm a businessman in New York.

Before you talked here, I was looking at the United States and I thought, "Why, we have unparalleled military in the area," and I was pretty sure we were the smartest and the most understanding in ethics, that we knew what was good for them. Now I'm not so sure. [Laughter]

Just looking around, I think there are only two of us here that can remember when the United States was not involved in the Middle East, and that was 65 years ago.

So my question is this: Would the Middle East be able to handle itself if we weren't there, or should we be the world's policeman? Maybe I'm wrong, maybe we are the smartest; maybe you're wrong, that we know what's right? Should we pull out?

MARWAN MUASHER: What I attempted to do, frankly, is not to couch it in such a framework of what's right or what's wrong, but rather what's possible and what's not.

I am not suggesting that the United States does not have the most superior armed capability in the world. What I am suggesting is that this has not translated into victory—as you define it, not as the Arabs define it—in Iraq. It has not translated into victory in the peace process. It has not translated into victory economically with the emerging Arab countries. So what I am saying is that, despite all your military, economic, and political power—and they are tremendous—they have limits.

We are living now in a multipolar world. We are no longer living in a bipolar, or even a unipolar, world after the demise of the Soviet Union. It is a multipolar world. If the global financial crisis did not make this very clear, I don't know what will. That's what I'm saying.

How can you interfere in what is going on in the transformation that the Arab world is going through? I don't know. You tell me if you think there is a way in which you can interfere positively, because many times, even when you do want to interfere, it actually backfires and is looked at as—if you remember the [Bush](#) days, it was looked at as Big Brother trying to impose its views of reform on a region without its acquiescence. That's all I'm saying. There are limits.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Two questions. First, what are your views about Iran? You said you had a different opinion? And also, do you think, if the United States tries to be more actively involved between [Netanyahu](#) on one side and Hamas and the [PLO](#) [Palestine Liberation Organization] on the other, is it really possible?

MARWAN MUASHER: I think Iran is a failed state. It's a state that has not been able to live up to the expectations of its own people, let alone others in the region. I think that the [2009 revolution](#) in Iran showed that very clearly.

Anybody who visits Iran—and I have many times when I was in government—will see immediately that this is not an oil-producing country, or not what an oil-producing country should look like. Extremely shabby—you wouldn't know that they have oil if you go and visit.

But that does not mean Iran is irrational all the time, or stupid for that matter. To infer that because they have a [president](#)—who, by the way, does not call the shots in Iran—who is highly rhetorical on Israel, to infer from that that Iran is going to develop a nuclear bomb and hit Israel with it is a stretch in my view.

First of all, all American military experts will tell you that Iran has not yet developed a bomb, is at least two years away from developing a bomb if they take the decision to develop a bomb. So there are lots of milestones that we haven't crossed yet.

That is why I say—not because I agree with the Iranian position; I don't—I think that an Israeli strike on Iran is going to resurrect Iran back from the dead. I'm speaking now as an Arab.

Just as Bashar al-Assad lost a lot of popularity in the region, so did [Ahmadinejad](#). Today Ahmadinejad is nowhere to be seen in Arab polls either. A big part of it has to do with Iran's support for a regime in Syria that is today seen by the majority of Arabs as brutal, as a regime that needs to go.

To hit Iran at this point will not achieve a stoppage of their nuclear program but will resurrect them back from the dead. As an Arab, I don't like this. I don't want Iran to be resurrected from the dead. That is why I say it.

Can the U.S. president convince Netanyahu of a peace deal? I think what the U.S. president needs to convince is not Mr. Netanyahu, frankly, but the Israeli public. Mr. Netanyahu, and I've dealt with him—you know I was Jordan's first ambassador to Israel. I've dealt with Mr. Netanyahu many times and I know him well. I am convinced that he is not interested in a deal. He is not interested in taking things beyond the status quo. So trying to convince him might be very difficult, if not impossible.

But if you look at all the polls today, you will see that there is a solid majority on the part of the Israeli public that supports a two-state solution. There is also a solid majority of the Israeli public that does not believe such a solution is possible. And by the way, the same exists on the Arab side: a solid majority on the Palestinian side that believes in a two-state solution but also a solid majority that believes such a solution is not possible.

It takes only the United States to prove that it is and to put a package on the table that both publics can see is possible. But to wait until the stars are aligned—okay, the stars will not be aligned in time, if ever, and to wait even a few years is going to mean, as I said, the death of the two-state solution.

So while I am suggesting—it is difficult, I'm not naïve—it is at least a better option for me than the option of not trying a solution now and being faced with no solution very, very soon.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. A very enlightening talk.

As you suggest, any U.S. influence would have to be exercised through a realistic engagement. As I think you imply, the United States does have an interest in seeing a pluralistic set of cultures and governments and societies evolve.

So the next question becomes: What are the elements we would have to work with in the potential development of pluralistic societies? Are there explicit positive advocates of that kind of political culture that have influence? Are there specific latencies that you would point to that need to be developed, and how would that happen? I'm asking for a little bit of detail basically.

Maybe one way to get at it is—as you referred to what you called the failed first awakening—were there elements that were overridden that perhaps are still around?

MARWAN MUASHER: If by talking about "elements" you mean forces—people, individuals, groups—I would not do this, because you do not want to be in the business of choosing who to rule in the Arab world.

The elements in my view are principles. You talk about principles, about pluralistic norms, about democratic norms, but don't choose the players, and encourage the process, encourage the development institutionally of such principles. But that's all you can do. You are not going to create a democratic Arab world. That's something that only Arabs can do.

You can help the process, but don't think you can do it yourself. You or anybody else cannot do it. That's something that I believe only Arabs can do.

Another issue is you cannot underestimate or overstate the effect that a solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is going to have on the U.S. credibility in the region. The Arab-Israeli conflict is neither the source of all problems in the Arab world nor the solution to all problems of the Arab world. But if you talk about U.S. credibility in the region, you know you've gone through many issues in the region—you've gone through the Iraq war, you've gone through the [Afghanistan war](#), you've gone through Libya, Syria—all kinds of issues. None has replaced the Arab-Israeli conflict as the number-one issue on people's radar screens in terms of how they view the United States.

Again, the average Arab person looks at the United States and sees a huge injustice done by talking about freedom for everybody except the Palestinians and—not necessarily in my view, but the view of the Arab average person—by blocking the emergence of the Palestinian state. I cannot overstate this.

To the extent that the United States can play a very positive role in this—I'm not going to claim that this will totally reverse the position of Arabs vis-à-vis the United States, but it will help a great deal regain the credibility that you had.

I remember talking to a senior U.S. administration official—I don't want to name names—at the beginning of the uprisings. He said, "We don't want to repeat our mistake in Iran. In Iran, we [stood by](#) the [Shah](#) in the 1950s against [Mosaddegh](#) because we looked at this in terms of communist versus . . ." And he said, "To this day the Iranians have never forgiven us for that. We don't want to repeat the same mistake."

But if you don't want to repeat the same mistake, you better start changing the policy, because it's one thing to state that from now on the United States is going to adopt a policy that prioritizes stability through reform rather than stability over reform. It's one thing to state this, but in reality it is not always easy to do this. Your response in Libya was far different than your response in Bahrain, for obvious reasons. Gaining credibility

with people of the region is a long-term process. But it needs some careful steps along the way that are different from what the United States has done so far.

This is why I'm saying don't take sides. Take sides on behalf of your principles, not on players. Don't say, "I want to work with Marwan and not work with Milwaf." You can't say it. And you have said this before, you have said, "I want to work with [Mubarak](#) and I don't want to work with the Islamists." You can't say this anymore. Be true to your principles and let the players emerge on their own.

QUESTION: Jeff Laurenti, The Century Foundation.

Marwan, Prime Minister Netanyahu, in his extraordinary intervention in this year's election campaign, going for broke on betting against Obama, appears to be creating the opening for a political realignment within the United States on how people view Israeli politics and ambitions and the potential for a larger constituency to be ready to face down the [Likudite](#) political agenda.

But let me just ask you in a very narrow way, since you've expressed a confessional attachment during your remarks: Why have the Christians in the Arab world—in those pieces that had been Byzantine they are still large minorities—been so unsuccessful at creating some traction for an understanding of Arab concerns in Christian circles in the United States? That would appear to be a potential constituency that has been ceded to another side that has defined the issue in Likudite terms. Is there any prospect on that side for evening the score so that this domestic American political realignment might play itself out a bit?

MARWAN MUASHER: It's a good question. I frankly don't have an answer—well, I do, but I mean . . . [Laughter]

The number of Christian Arabs in Jerusalem today is less than 4,000. Jerusalem today is a city of half a million, or more than half a million, maybe 700,000. You have 450,000 Israeli Jews, you have 200,000 Muslim Arabs, and 4,000 Christians. In a generation there won't be any Christians left and the Christian holy sites will be museums.

When I was foreign minister, I, among others, tried to point out this fact. You know, people such as you in this room would open their eyes, it's a revelation to them, something they did not know about, and it's upsetting. But that's as far as it goes. No one is willing to do much about it. For many in this country they don't even know that there are Christian Arabs.

When I was ambassador, I remember I gave a talk on politics. The first question somebody asked me was, "We understand you are of the Christian faith. Can you tell us please when you converted to the faith and what it meant to you?"

I said, "Wow! With due respect, sir, I want to ask you this question, because I'm the original Christian." [Laughter]

In all seriousness, it goes beyond that, because you have a Judeo-Christian sort of culture where people identify more with this culture than—I mean they don't look at Christian Arabs as Christians; they look at them as Arabs in a faraway land that got distracted or—I don't know what. I don't have an answer. But you are right.

In recent years, frankly, Christian Arabs for the most part have been preoccupied with maintaining their diminished population everywhere in the Arab world rather than with this issue. The Christian community in Iraq took a terrible blow. The Copts, who immigrated largely to this country, have spent their energy basically attacking the Mubarak regime here and in fact collaborated on the film that caused all this trouble.

The Christians in Syria are petrified that they will end up having the same fate as the Christians in Iraq did. I strongly disagree with their view. What they are saying is that in return for the regime protecting us we are going to look the other way as it massacres our people, our own people, and our fellow citizens. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if you adopt that line. But that's a fact.

The Christians in Palestine—of course, the effect of the occupation has meant that they have to deal with it more than with this issue.

We have brought a number of American churches to Jordan in my time. We have attempted to come here and discuss the issue. There are many who understand. But domestic politics in the end take over.

JOANNE MYERS: Marwan, I want to thank you for adding your voice to our series on America in the 21st Century. We are grateful for your comments. Thank you very much.

Audio

The key is still the Arab-Israeli conflict, says Muasher. "The U.S. is not going to be able to regain its credibility in the region if it tells the Arab public that 'If you are Egyptians or Tunisians or Syrians or Libyans yearning for freedom, we are with you, but if you are Palestinians yearning for freedom, it's complicated.'"

Video Clip

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