



WATSON INSTITUTE

INTERNATIONAL & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

BROWN UNIVERSITY

The Middle East and the Next Administration
Remarks Prepared for a Middle East Policy Council Capitol Hill Conference

Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr. (USFS, Ret.)

Senior Fellow, the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University

13 October 2016, Washington, D.C.

Osama bin Laden surely died happy. He devoted the last third of his life to creating animosity between the West and Islam and to driving a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Today, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey are all estranged from the United States. And, as an unexpected bonus, so is Israel. The U.S. is making enemies all over the Muslim world. And every day here at home, millions pay homage to the memory of Osama as they remove their shoes to pass through metal detectors and are stripped of their dignity by body-imaging devices at airports. Americans are less secure, less prosperous, and less free than we were as this century began. In life, Osama was transformative. In death, he continues to shape the world he left behind.

Can a new administration change this? Will it?

I have a political confession to make. I do not believe that we are about to elect a president able to govern effectively and end dysfunction in Washington. Whoever we choose as our president seems certain to be regarded as illegitimate and opposed by supporters of her or his rival. These opponents will be just as determined to discredit and oust her or him from office as diehard Republicans have been to thwart and discredit President Obama over the past eight years. This means that indecision born of political gridlock, the sequester, and other illnesses of our body politic will continue. It might even get worse.

After careful analysis of Mr. Trump's inconstancy on the Middle East and other matters, I have come to suspect that he is actually five guys sharing a single, oversized orange wig. Meanwhile, Mrs. Clinton presents herself as the pitiless goddess of air strikes, drone warfare, and dead tyrants. But, at heart, the two candidates faithfully reflect the narratives, prejudices, and conventional policy approaches of the nation they propose to lead. This gives them so much in common that it is more efficient to discuss them together than separately. So, I will refer to Candidates Clinton and Trump as one gender-fluid person: "Candidate Clump."

Candidate Clump is on the payroll of the Israel Lobby's major donors, wants to isolate Iran, and loves sanctions and other forms of economic warfare more than trade and investment. Clump was for the invasion of Iraq before heshe was against it. Heshe is more interested in poking at the Middle East than in

understanding it. Clump thinks terrorism is a function of theology rather than a violent response by misfits to humiliation and social marginalization. Heshe is convinced that bombing is the best antidote to what heshe imagines is a religious onslaught. Heshe is not fond of Egypt and wishes Saudi Arabia would go away. When elected, President Clump will give Israel whatever it must have to fend off political tantrums by it. In short, the next president will concentrate on keeping the lid on the explosive mess the last few presidents have made of the Middle East and America's position in it, not on defusing or dismantling the mess.

All this means that the next administration, whoever heads it, is very unlikely to lead an intelligent interagency or national discussion about what must be done to dig ourselves out of the deep, many-sided sinkhole we have fallen into in the Middle East. The only part of our government policy apparatus now capable of planning and with the money and moxie to act on its plans is our armed services. The easiest path for the next president to follow will therefore be to double down on the militaristic policies that have brought our relations with the Middle East to their current deplorable state.

But, in the interest of our discussion here today, I propose that we suspend disbelief in contemporary American politics and politicians and do our best to imagine a return to intelligent and competent government in Washington. Close your eyes! Take a deep breath! . . . Come on! We can imagine that! Yes, we can!

What situations will our next president, Congress, and Supreme Court inherit in the Middle East? What should they do about them? What new challenges will they face?

Well, to begin with. . . there are at least twelve distinct but overlapping wars going on in Syria. Maybe more. Saudi Arabia is at war with Iran; foreign-backed insurgents with the Asad government; Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militias, and Iran with the insurgents, Islamists with secularists; foreign-backed forces with Daesh; Shiites with Sunnis; Kurds with Arabs; Kurds with Kurds; Turks with Kurds; and the United States separately with the Asad government, with Daesh, and with Russia. The United States is directly or indirectly involved in about half of these Syrian wars, aligned with *and against* Asad, with *and against* the insurgent forces, sometimes with Turkey and sometimes with the Kurds, but always against Russia. Oh, and Israel continues to bomb Syrians whenever it feels like it. Notwithstanding all the humanitarian crocodile tears, one-sided anti-Asad narratives, and public relations exercises masquerading as diplomacy, the net effect of U.S. policy has been to perpetuate the anarchy and slaughter in Syria by feeding ever more weapons into it.

This is a policy that is congenial to Israel, which openly prefers chaos to competent but hostile government in Syria. It frustrates or horrifies everyone else. Asad remains in power; the Gulf Arabs feel let down; sectarian strife swells; foreign interventions wax and wane; Iran retains a preeminent political role in the Levant; Turkey turns this way and that; Kurdish self-determination looms, then recedes; Turkey and Europe drown in refugees; the U.S. and Russia are ever-closer to war; all sides, including the United States, remorselessly violate both international law and the basic canons of human decency; Daesh revels in its martyrdom; and the slaughter continues. The disgusting effects of lawless outside intervention in Syria (as in Libya) have driven a stake through the heart of the so-called "responsibility-to-protect" principle.

Americans are in denial about the significant role we have played in destabilizing and immiserating Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan. We accept no responsibility for the 450,000 or more Syrian dead or the eleven million displaced from their homes. Our politicians and public oppose taking in refugees from the anarchy we continue to help foster. That is craven, dishonorable, and a reproach to our moral standing and prestige. But let's leave such quibbles aside. This is, after all, Washington, where both common sense and moral accountability come to die.

Our attempts to oust the government of Syria have produced another backfire for attempted regime change. Syria has also served up a further demonstration of the limited capacity of armed intervention to impose the U.S. government's will abroad. Bombing and support for insurgents are feel-good actions. They are not substitutes for coherent strategy. We and those who have followed our lead have gained nothing and lost much from our latest, thoughtless lurch into the Levant.

Part of our reason for joining Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.A.E. in attempting to overthrow the Assad government was to show solidarity with them. Instead, an erratic U.S. performance has irreparably damaged all these relationships. Complicity in the Syrian catastrophe, in Israel's assaults on Gaza and Lebanon, and in Saudi Arabia's brutal attempt to bring Yemen to heel have earned the United States outrage abroad and no plaudits at home. As U.S. influence has receded, Russia has reemerged as a diplomatically skillful great power in the Middle East. Meanwhile, there is no silver lining to be seen in the dark cloud of Syria's agony.

Parallel contradictions are at work in Iraq, which our 2003 invasion and occupation also thrust into anarchy. By marked contrast with Syria, where we are working with Sunni Islamists to oppose Iran and a pro-Iranian, Shiite regime, in Iraq we are working in parallel with Iran to suppress Sunni Islamists and resistance to Shiite exclusion of Sunnis from a role in governing the country. Ironically, given our support of it, Iraq's government participates in a joint intelligence headquarters with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, Hezbollah, and Russia. As in Syria, our policies appear to align every which way.

Not to worry. There are fewer wars going on in Iraq than in Syria – by my count, only five or six. In various combinations, the Iraqi government, the United States, and Iran are each fighting against Daesh. The Shiite Arab majority is against the Sunni Arab minority and vice versa. Daesh kills secularists, Shiites, and selected Sunni Arabs and Kurds. The Kurds (with American support) stand against Daesh and sometimes against the Iraqi government. The Kurds kill Turkmen and the Turks kill them.

Occasionally, presidential candidates hint that they have a plan that diagrams how Americans can end our misadventures in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. But the last box on their plans appears to read: "A MIRACLE HAPPENS HERE." It's the Middle East, where miracles are said to have occurred in the past, so presumably anything is possible. But it is hard to consider this much of a probability. The next administration needs to give our Iraq policies a hard scrub. But, with the cult of the warrior ascendant in our culture and few Americans dying, the Washington playbook is likely to prevail. We will continue on autopilot but deploy more firepower. Anti-American terrorism with global reach will continue to grow.

Our counter-terrorism policies need a fundamental overhaul. We are not being assaulted by religious

fanatics so much as by young men (and the occasional woman) who fit the murderous profile of misfits like Dylann Roof, Timothy McVeigh, or Ted Kaczynski. Whether homegrown or foreign, our attackers see themselves as humiliated, persecuted, bullied, or otherwise victimized. They're looking for a cause larger than themselves in which to cloak their criminality. Like the perpetrators of gun massacres from non-Muslim backgrounds, they are boastful and crave attention through spectacular violence. Sometimes they act to get such attention. All too often, we give it to them. We mistake their terrorist doctrine for their motivation. But they are psychotic, not pious. They are gangbangers, not theologians.

Bombing the so-called Islamic State and snuffing Muslims from the air with drones don't help cure anti-American terrorism with global reach. They feed the paranoid delusions on which it thrives. Eliminating the "Islamic State's" control of parts of Syria and Iraq will not eliminate the causes of terrorism directed at the West.

It's time for a different approach. The place to start is Syria.

In Syria, the combatants have all relied on external support. They have not needed to court popular support by avoiding atrocities against civilians. Cutting off overt and covert aid to combatants would help restore their incentive to do so. Syrians, Turks, Saudis, the other Gulf Arabs, Europeans, Iranians, Lebanese, and Russians would all be better off if we and all other external parties agreed to mutual restraint and an end to the supply of weapons and fighters to Syria. Syrians need to sort out their differences among themselves. Curtailing the proxy wars in Syria would remove major obstacles to Syrians doing this. It would also bring the world back into conformity with the principle that one should do no harm, and mark a return to respect for international law, something now rarely mentioned but which we all have a stake in preserving.

Focusing on calling off the proxy wars in Syria could also facilitate exploration of how to dial down the increasingly dangerous geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Unless that is done, there can be no return to peace and stability in the region. As part of a search for regional détente, the United States needs to have a serious discussion with the Saudis about a war termination strategy in Yemen. Riyadh traditionally managed Yemen with money, not military operations, an approach in which it enjoyed and continues to enjoy many advantages over Tehran. We need to help the Saudis find a way to replace warfare with less ruinous ways of pursuing their understandable interest in the strategic denial of Yemen to Iran.

Working with Saudi Arabia to reduce armed conflict in its region would also help detoxify the US-Saudi relationship. It has become politically poisonous in both countries, as illustrated by the blossoming of American Islamophobia, Saudi vituperation against America, and the recent override of President Obama's veto of JASTA – the cynically named "Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act." This is actually the Shysters' Relief Act of 2016. (I mentioned the Supreme Court. This is where it comes in.)

Neither country can afford to make an enemy of the other. The United States needs Saudi Arabia's cooperation not so much for its oil – which we once again produce in abundance ourselves – but for other compelling reasons. These include Riyadh's capacity to influence the religious orientation of the world's Muslims for better or ill, to condone or refute Salafi Jihadism, and to promote or subvert tolerance among the

various schools of Islam and between Muslims and the adherents of other religions. The U.S. also has vital interests in the Kingdom's facilitation of air and sea travel between Asia and Europe, its economic and military support rather than opposition to U.S. policies and interests, and its continued reliance on conventional rather than nuclear weapons for self-defense. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has no alternative to the United States as the ultimate guarantor of its security.

The next administration should strive to restore US-Saudi relations so that they permit exploration of how to advance interests that both countries share with Iran, like the stabilization of Afghanistan and Iraq. To be sure, doing this would not be at all easy. It would require buy-in from the Saudis, the Emiratis, and others in the Gulf as well as cooperation from Iran. It would also demand understanding from Israel, which remains a potent, if declining force in our domestic politics.

Despite decades of efforts by the United States to broker peace between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab and Muslim worlds, the so-called "peace process" is now dead and buried. It cannot be exhumed and will not be resurrected. This means that, under the next administration, the United States will have no international political cover at all for its ongoing subsidies to the Israeli settlement enterprise or for its protection of Israel from international condemnation and punishment for gross violations of the rights of captive Arab populations, illegal territorial expansion, and intermittent military assaults on neighbors.

The U.S. relationship with Israel is becoming increasingly unbalanced and costly. Israel has become one of the wealthiest countries on the planet. It dominates its region militarily. Yet U.S. taxpayers will pay – or more likely borrow – \$3.8 billion each year for the next ten to subsidize it. This, despite the fact that Israel contemptuously opposes most U.S. policies in its region, goes out of its way to demonstrate its defiance of U.S. and international opinion of its policies, and seems to many to be hell-bent on doing itself in.

Unconditional U.S. support for Israel does grave harm to Israel by enabling it to behave in ways and take risks with its future that it otherwise would not. Of greater importance to Americans, it also greatly reduces the credibility of the United States by causing Arabs, Muslims, and many others to see U.S. attempts to advocate human rights, oppose racism, promote the rule of law, empower women, or support the democratization of government as insincere, hypocritical, or duplicitous. Americans speaking out for our values in the Middle East now persuade no one there. We just remind them of our unflinching complicity in Israeli policies and practices that mock the ideals we claim to champion.

On its way out, the Obama administration has begun speaking more honestly – and therefore harshly – about the extent to which Israeli statements and behavior now trouble Americans (including the great majority of American Jews). But, in the region, this just comes across as: "Who you gonna believe, America, or your lying eyes?" We're a bit late and \$38 billion short. Nobody believes that the United States will curtail its enablement of Israel or that our politicians will put the national interest ahead of their personal security in office.

To sum up, despite the shambles present and previous policies in the Middle East have produced, the next administration is likely to ratchet them up, not change them. They serve too many vested interests and resonate with too many entrenched narratives to be discontinued. But the probable result of doing more of

the same is more of the same. That's really too bad both for us and for everyone in the Middle East.

The region is ripe for new approaches. The opportunities for imaginative statecraft that could secure a long-term place for Israel in the region, share the burden of protecting access to the energy supplies of the Persian Gulf, dial down anti-Western terrorism with global reach, phase out the slaughter in Syria, restabilize Iraq, and channel Saudi-Iranian and US-Russian rivalry away from proxy war are there to be found, if only our leaders have the political courage to look.

I look forward to hearing the views of my fellow panelists and those of you have listened so patiently to me.