

## **US and the Middle East Conference**

Organized by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan  
and the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC

March 30<sup>th</sup>-April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007

Jordan Valley Marriott Resort, Dead Sea

The role played by the US in the Middle East has long been a topic of heated discussion among intellectuals, politicians and journalists in the region. But although numerous conferences on US-Middle Eastern relations have been held across the Arab world, there has tended to be an under-representation of Americans representing the influential neoconservative (some prefer the label "Reaganite") perspective. This conference was organized with the intention of creating dialogue between Arab and American analysts from across the political spectrum, with particular attention to ensuring the representation of neoconservative views.

The key theme that emerged from the various discussions was that of the exceptionalism, or lack thereof, of the Bush administration's approach to the Middle East, which is addressed in the first part of this report. The second part of this report deals specifically with the current regional issues discussed during the conference: Anti-Americanism in the region; the prospects for Iraq; the changing regional role of Iran; and finally, democratization.

### **US policy in the Middle East: Continuity vs. Change**

The extent to which the Bush administration's policy towards the Middle East represents a break from that of previous US administrations proved highly contentious, perhaps because the argument for continuity implies that this is a sustainable approach.

Reuel Marc Gerecht, of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), set out the argument that US policy towards the Middle East was "not revolutionary under Bush" but rather has been largely consistent since the 1970s. He argues that US policy towards the Middle East will not change significantly in the near future because of bipartisan consensus on two main planks of what is often described as the 'neoconservative approach' to foreign policy: the use of military force and support for democratization. Indeed, Gerecht challenges the use of the 'neoconservative' label to describe these policies, pointing to the support of many democrats for the war on Iraq. He suggests that 'Reaganite' may be a preferable, although also imperfect label.

In contrast, participants from the region perceive significant changes in US policy towards the Middle East under the Bush administration. Middle East policy under the Bush administration is perceived as being characterized by increased unilateralism and a lack of regard for the region's instability. It was argued by participants from the region, as well as more 'left-leaning' American participants, that the use of military force in the region is a not

sustainable policy, both because of popular domestic opposition in the US and because of the destabilizing effect such intervention is proving to have on the region.

### **The case for continuity**

*The use of military force:* According to Gerecht, the US has been at war in the Middle East pretty much consistently since the 1970s and this is unlikely to change, even if the US loses the war in Iraq. He draws a parallel with the Vietnam War which, despite its unpopularity and ultimate failure, was followed by only a short period of isolationism followed by renewed foreign military intervention.

Gerecht predicts that there will be no 'Europeanization' of US politics ('Europeanization' being defined as the belief that use of military force is unethical and amounts to an admission of failure in foreign policy). He argues that despite disillusionment with the US experience in Iraq, the 'European' attitude towards use of military force has not taken deep root in the US and remains uncommon. Gerecht cites anecdotal evidence that the American public largely continues to approve of the 1981 Israeli strike on Iraq, while the British public is split on the issue and the French and Germans largely disapprove.

*Promotion of democracy:* Gerecht argues that although this has been more central to Bush's Middle East policy than to that of other administrations, the promotion of democracy is a longstanding US policy which has long been pursued in other regions of the world. Because of the instability of the Middle East and the threat of fundamentalism, this policy has not been pursued in the Middle East in the past but Gerecht argues that this has now changed irreversibly and points out that there is now bipartisan support for democratization in the Middle East.

Gerecht asserts that opinion formers in Washington increasingly view autocratic regimes in the region as illegitimate and take the view that "Bin Laden was not wrong when he said that autocratic regimes were part of the [region's] problem". Moreover, the formerly influential idea that an enlightened elite can pave the way for westernization and democratic opening in the region, as with Ataturk in Turkey, no longer has currency in Washington. This model is no longer perceived as applicable to the Middle East, with recent events in Turkey challenging even the idea of Turkish exceptionalism.

Gerecht also stresses that it is important to understand the largely rhetorical nature of Bush's support for democracy in the region. For example, his promotion of democratic opening in Egypt has hardly been an arm-twisting exercise. Regardless, he argues that rhetoric does matter. Whether the US's promotion of democracy goes beyond rhetoric in any given country will depend on nature of that country and the incumbent regime, but even in the case of a country like Pakistan there will be a trend towards pushing for democratization. Gerecht suggests that the major debate around democratization policy in Washington today is how to maintain useful alliances with friendly autocratic governments without getting back into bed with dictators. Gerecht predicts that the tension between these two policy goals suggest that future policy will be characterized by hypocrisy and

inconsistency but that there will be a general trend towards pushing for democratic opening.

### **The case for change**

In contrast, a number of participants expressed the view that there have been significant changes in US policy towards the Middle East under the Bush administration, and that these changes are unsustainable.

Gamal Soltan, of the Ahrum Center for Political and Strategic Studies (Egypt), argues that since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire the defining characteristics of the Middle East have been regional instability, and the inability of weak states to deal with this instability. Because of the fragility of the region, Soltan argues that US foreign policy in the region has historically focused on attempting to help strengthen states (sometimes misguidedly) in order to maintain regional stability. He contrasts this with current US policy in the region which he argues acts as a destabilizing force.

Furthermore, Soltan argues that there are three main sources of instability in the Middle East. First, there is the issue of state illegitimacy. Second, there is the issue of identity crisis and the tension between subnational, national and supranational identities in the region. Both of these issues threaten regional instability because they weaken nation states in the region. The third destabilizing factor in the Middle East is the region's relationship with international hegemonic powers (such as the US, Israel and Iran) and in particular whether other actors in the region should deal with these powers through integration or confrontation.

Soltan argues that there have been two main responses to these sources of instability. On the one hand, the moderate response has been to attempt to maintain the status quo of the fragile nation state. On the other, the radical response has focused on the creation of a regional identity to solve these issues. Soltan argues that as the Middle Eastern territorial nation state continues to disintegrate (with failed states such as Somalia, and arguably Sudan, becoming more common), it is becoming more difficult to pursue the moderate option. Although the increased instability of the region may suggest a need to handle the region with greater care, Soltan argues that the Bush administration's approach has been in the opposite direction. Instead of working towards strengthening Middle Eastern nation states, the administration has destabilized a strategically important state through its "reckless" use of military force in Iraq.

Soltan argues that US military action in Iraq has made it more difficult to pursue the moderate option because it has contributed to the disintegration of the state system in the region. He further argues that US actions in Iraq have encouraged the "golden moment of radical forces in the region". He points out that military action in Iraq has had particularly harmful consequences because of Iraq's strategic importance as a counterbalance to Iran and a buffer between Iran and the heart of the Middle East.

All this suggests that in order to achieve stable, moderate regimes in the Middle East, consolidation of the state and regional system is required. Soltan argues that policies to promote democracy can contribute to consolidating the state system because democratization helps address the problem of the illegitimacy of Middle Eastern states (one of the three main sources of

instability in the region). However, Soltan stresses that this requires real progress towards democratization rather than mere lip service.

A similar perspective on the changes in US policy towards the Middle East was put forward by Khalil Shikaki, of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. Shikaki compares the 'regional balancing' approach of the US towards the region which dominated from the 1950s to the early 1990s, to the 'direct intervention' or 'neoconservative' approach which has been dominant since. Shikaki argues that the latter approach is unsustainable for two reasons.

Firstly, he argues that this approach will quickly be abandoned when it becomes apparent that regime change is a path which will inevitably lead to Islamic extremism in the Arab Middle East because Islamists are currently able to mobilize Arab publics in a way that no other political movement can. Instead, Shikaki advocates the adoption of a modified, progressive form of regional balancing which aims to create stable, moderate and legitimate regimes in the region. This would involve a gradual and holistic approach to political liberalization that embraces a broad conception of democratization. In particular, he argues that it is important to ensure the inclusiveness of the political system (that is, the integration of excluded actors in the political process, including women) and the establishment of good governance in the region. Shikaki argues that this would not only legitimize regimes in the region but would also encourage the emergence of moderate regimes. He further argues that efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would be essential to a progressive regional balancing strategy as resolving this conflict is necessary to the creation of a moderate and legitimate regional order. Indeed, several participants from the region stressed that resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is central to the establishment of a stable regional order. Prominent Saudi journalist and pro-democracy advocate Jamal Khashoggi asserted that without resolution of this conflict, Arab public opinion will never allow leaders to incorporate Israel into the regional order or even to overtly cooperate with Israel on issues of regional concern.

Secondly, Shikaki argues that the direct intervention approach is not sustainable for US politicians for domestic political reasons. The latter view is shared by Philip Gordon, of the Brookings Institute, who argues that initial domestic political support for the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq was the product of a particular national context in the immediate post-9/11 US; a context in which Americans felt atypically vulnerable and exceptionally powerful (that is, threatened and able to do something about it). Gordon argues that the factors which created this context (the public's emotional reaction to 9/11, the government's financial surplus, and optimism that the Middle East could be changed) have now dissipated and given way to an environment in which both political actors, and the public as a whole, are much less disposed to allow military (mis)adventure in the Middle East.

### **The future of US policy in the Middle East**

Gerecht concluded that there has not been a paradigmatic change in the US's approach to the Middle East under the Bush administration but rather a change in the degree to which the US is willing to use military force and to push for democratization in the Middle East. Similarly Fred Kagan, also of AEI, asserted that US policies towards the Middle East will not change in the long

term as they are based on strategic interests and not ideology or pressure from special-interest groups.

More specifically, Gerecht argues that US policy changes are determined by unfolding events in the region and the US. He portrays 9/11 as a watershed event in US-Middle East relations which necessitated a stepping up of options involving the use of military force. Gerecht predicts that the US will remain very committed in the region and willing to use force. He argues that although there may be a short period of isolationism in the event that the US loses the Iraq war, there will quickly be a return to military intervention, even under a Democratic administration.

Gerecht and Kagan's arguments US policy towards the Middle East is not ideologically driven were, however, challenged by Mustafa Hamarneh (Director of the Center for Strategic Studies, Jordan). Hamarneh argued that while it is undoubtedly the case that US foreign policymakers see their policy choices as being shaped by pragmatic strategic concerns, rather than ideology, the distinction between ideological and strategic concerns is not clear cut. Hamarneh argued that neoconservative ideology acts as a distorting lens through which policymakers view America's strategic interests in the region. For example, the idea that there is a deep-rooted Muslim antagonism towards the West stemming from a century-old conflict between Islam and Christendom has had such a distorting effect. Although this idea is highly contentious and ideologically loaded, it is clear from reading neoconservative literature on the Iranian threat, that acceptance of this idea has played an important role in the conceptualization of Iran as an existential threat to the US which is unlikely to be resolved through diplomacy.

Hamarneh's analysis implies that there is more room for change in US policy towards the Middle East than implied by the analyses presented by Kagan and Gerecht. Indeed, Soltan and Gordon argue that some changes in US policy can already be observed. Soltan points to increasing US movement towards multilateralism especially with moderate partners, although he admits that this movement has so far been shy and reluctant. Similarly, Gordon points to the move towards a more diplomatic approach in handling Iran. Both point to the Bush administration's recent emphasis on the Palestinian/Israeli peace process as a sign of change. Interestingly, even Gerecht concedes that if the situation in Iraq deteriorates significantly there is likely to be a move back towards the traditional approach to Saudi and Egypt as the moderate anchors of the region.

## **Current regional issues**

### **Anti-Americanism in the Middle East**

The prevalence of negative perceptions about the US in the Middle East has garnered much attention from American and Middle Eastern analysts alike. This session discussed the nature of anti-Americanism in the Middle East with a view to evaluating its implications for US policy in the region.

Mohammed Masri, of the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS), argues that empirical evidence from opinion polls carried out across the Middle East suggests that anti-American sentiment in the region is based on negative evaluations of American foreign policy in the region, rather than on social or

cultural grounds. This undermines the idea that Arabs perceive themselves as being in a 'clash of civilizations' with the West. Masri argues that a number of findings indicate that anti-American feeling in the region does not stem from antipathy towards Western cultural practices or values. For example, in a survey carried out by CSS across Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and the Occupied Palestinian Territories during 2004, a large majority of respondents were found to have a positive perception of France. Conversely, a large majority of respondents were found to have negative perceptions of the UK and US. This finding is particularly interesting considering that this survey was conducted at the height of the dispute over the banning of the hijab in French schools.

Moreover, Masri pointed out that in polls conducted by the BBC, Arab publics asked directly about the relationship between Muslim and Western cultures were considerably more inclined towards the opinion that it is possible to find common ground than the opinion that violent conflict is inevitable. Moreover, clear majorities in the all Arab countries surveyed (Egypt, Lebanon and the UAE) believed that tensions between Islam and the West arise more from conflicts about political power and interests than from differences of religion and culture.

Perhaps most importantly, Masri argues that negative attitudes towards the US largely evaporate when respondents are asked to evaluate specific aspects of American culture or the American system. For example, in the CSS poll cited above, the US was generally perceived as a democratic society with a just and fair judicial system which ensures gender equality, respects minorities' rights, and has a highly credible media. Moreover, compared to the UK and France, the US was chosen as the country to which respondents would most like to immigrate, go for medical treatment and for education. According to Masri, this undermines the notion of a generalized anti-American attitude in the Arab world.

With respect to foreign policy, however, Masri points out that evaluations of the US are unambiguously negative (in contrast to French foreign policy which is generally perceived positively). Importantly, the publics in these countries perceive support of Israel to be a major component of American foreign policy. This is indicated by the fact that in all of the countries polled, the Zionist lobby is seen as the most important player in formulating US foreign policy, with the exception of Egypt where it comes a close second to President Bush. Moreover, around 90% of respondents in all samples in all five countries are not satisfied at all with the US's handling of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

However, Reuel Marc Gerecht challenged the argument that anti-Americanism is based on political, rather than cultural factors. Gerecht argues that it is clear from Salafist literature dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that anti-Americanism is rooted in a rejection of Western cultural values. He further argues that it is important to put Arab anti-Americanism in historical perspective and particularly, in the context of what he perceives as a major trend towards Islamism in the Middle East. Gerecht argues that although it may be tempting for Arab liberals to argue otherwise, election results across the region show that the liberalism in the Arab world has lost the high ground to the Islamic fundamentalist critique, which is driven by a rejection of

Western cultural values. Moreover, Gerecht perceives anti-Zionism as a subset of anti-Americanism, rather than a cause of it.

In response to this, Mustafa Hamarneh presented an alternative historical analysis of Arab anti-Americanism, arguing that over the past sixty years anti-Americanism in the region has been draped in various ideological guises and that the Islamic phase is only the latest of three incarnations of anti-Americanism which have swept the region over this period. Importantly, he argues that religion did not play a role in the two phases of anti-Americanism which preceded the current Islamic phase: the secular Arab nationalist and the leftist phases. Hamarneh further argues that underlying anti-Americanism throughout the past sixty years has been consistent opposition to America's support for authoritarian Arab regimes and Israel. He stresses the fact that opinion polls carried out in the region consistently find that the Israeli factor is important. Hamarneh voiced disappointment that although American analysts and policymakers show considerable interest in the phenomenon of Arab anti-Americanism, they are often disinclined to take account of empirical evidence about this phenomenon if it challenges their perceptions of Arab societies.

Addressing the implications of anti-Americanism for US policy in the region Michael Rubin, of AEI, argued that in responding to Arab public opinion the US is faced with a dilemma whereby Americans are "damned if we do, and damned if we don't" interfere in the Middle East. Rubin argues that given this scenario, the US might as well just act according to its strategic interests. With respect to the Israeli issue, Rubin argues that the US's seemingly unconditional support for Israel is merely a pragmatic decision based on the fact that the US's alliance with Israel is more important on a higher strategic level (rather than just a regional level) than an alliance with a country like Syria. He cites as an example the fact that the US's close relationship with Israel was important in resolving the dispute over Israel's sale of arms to China.

This argument was met with severe criticism from participants from the region. Hasan Abu Nimah, the Director of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith studies and a former Jordanian Ambassador to the UN, challenged the idea that the US had to pander to Israel's violations of international law in order to maintain a strong strategic relationship with Israel. In particular, Abu Nimah criticized Rubin for reducing the issue to a question of the US either supporting Israel or the Arabs/Palestinians and argued that it is not in the US's strategic interests to completely support any one party completely against the other. Indeed, several participants from the region expressed their frustration with what they perceived as the conflation of US with Israeli interests in the eyes of American policymakers. Abu Nimah asserted that the problem is not with US support of Israel per se but with its support of Israel as a violator of international law.

Putting the facts regarding Arab anti-Americanism to one side, Fred Kagan argues that it is perceptions of anti-Americanism in the region which are a large part of the problem. He points out that while public opinion polls may find that there is a moderate majority in the Arab world, another message emanates from Al-Jazeera and fundamentalist religious groups. He argues that states control the messages sent out by their civilizations and warns that

unless the message coming from the Arab world changes, Arabs may become the victims of American anti-Arabism, rather than vice-versa.

### **The prospects for Iraq**

Discussion of the future prospects for Iraq hinged on the question: Can the US still win in Iraq? At the crux of this question lies the issue of how best to define victory. In discussing this issue, Fred Kagan focused on the prospects for establishing a stable and secure Iraq which does not pose a threat to the stability of the region. But while it was generally agreed that establishing stability and security in Iraq is important for both Iraq and its neighbors, Gamal Soltan argues that one should adopt much broader regional criteria for a definition of victory, especially given that military intervention in Iraq had wide-reaching regional aims beyond just regime change.

Kagan gave an overview of the US's new strategy in Iraq. He attributes the change in the US's Iraq strategy to the confluence of a number of events: the Democratic victory in the Congressional elections, the lack of progress made under the former approach and the publishing of the Baker-Hamilton report. Kagan argues that towards the end of 2006, it became apparent that the US strategy in Iraq was not yielding results. In particular, attempts make more use of the Iraqi police proved problematic. The constant quoting of T.E. Lawrence in Washington ("It is better that they do it imperfectly than that you do it perfectly") did not seem to take account of the fact that the Iraqi police are still far from the professional non-sectarian organization that is needed to improve the security situation in Iraq. Moreover, Kagan argues that the Baker-Hamilton report did not provide the administration with any useful recommendations. He argues that the report's first main recommendation, that the US engage with Syria and Iran and gain their cooperation to secure Iraq, is unacceptable to the administration both on practical and principled grounds. In particular, the administration is not willing to seek Iran's assistance so as not to give the regime leverage over the US. Kagan also argues that the report's second main recommendation, that counterinsurgency operations should only be carried out when absolutely necessary, was redundant as this policy was already in place. All this suggested the need for a drastic change in policy direction. To this end, AEI brought together a number of stakeholders to consider the feasibility of increased US intervention in Iraq and proposed a number of recommendations on which the new Iraq strategy is largely based.

Kagan argues that the key feature of this new strategy is not the increase in the number of US troops but the change in approach. There have been some important changes in the US operation in Baghdad and beyond. For example, until now US troops had no permanent presence in Baghdad and had been commuting to Baghdad from bases outside the city. This had severely limited their ability to interact with the local population and obtain intelligence through them. An element of the new strategy involves establishing joint US-Iraqi bases in each of the 10 districts of Baghdad. US forces have also been working towards gaining the trust of the local population and communicating their mission of improving the security situation to them. Kagan argues that this new approach is already paying dividends, with a decrease in violence in Baghdad over the past month.

Importantly, Kagan points out that the new strategy is not a purely military approach but rather a comprehensive plan with social, political and economic elements. However, he argues that because establishing security is a necessary precondition for social, political and economic progress in the country, the initial focus has had to be military.

Apart from America's new strategy in Iraq, Kagan points to a number of other developments that bode well for the country. Firstly, Al-Anbar province has gone from being Al-Qaeda's major stronghold to hostile terrain for the organization. Kagan argues that Al-Qaeda's loss of Anbar province has been behind the recent increase in Al-Qaeda attacks in Iraq and suggested that there should be a decrease in militia killings and Al-Qaeda attacks by the end of the year. Kagan also argues that there have been a number of positive developments on the Sadrist front. The Mahdi army has been subdued and the Interior Ministry (which had been dominated by Sadrists) has been purged. Moreover, many Sadrists have been captured as has Sadr city itself. Kagan also argues that progress is being made on the political track pointing to a number of developments in Iraqi politics which may be interpreted as a move away from sectarianism and towards reconciliation.

Kagan's interpretation of what it means to win in Iraq was criticized by Soltan as representing no more than a successful exercise in damage control. Indeed, Shikaki asks if a weak, but stable, Iraq should be part of our definition of victory. He argues that it should not, and that a strong, rather than merely stable, Iraq has an important role to play in stabilizing the region.

In a similar vein, Anoush Ehteshami, of the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University, argues that although the US has won in Iraq according to one set of criteria (having destroyed the military threat from Saddam, discredited the Baathists and deposed a loathsome regime), it has lost in terms of the bigger picture. Firstly, Ehteshami argues that US policies in Iraq have considerably weakened the multi-ethnic, multi-faith nature of the state. He argues that Allawi represents the "last beacon of secular sanity" in Iraqi politics and that his poor performance in the Iraqi elections is an indicator of the extent to which the secular Iraqi identity has been damaged. Ehteshami argues that Iraq is likely to continue as a weak state in the near future and that there is a real danger that it will become a failed state with no central authority, porous borders, a weak socio-economic base and identity derived from local (rather than national) sources. Perhaps more importantly, Ehteshami argues that the 'War on Terror' has been an overall failure because it has led to the militarization of regional relations and thus the hardening of paranoid politics in the region, as exemplified by the rise of politicians like Ahmadinejad.

The specter of a failed Iraq was a grave concern on all sides with participants from both the US and the region agreeing on the pressing need to prevent this. Mustafa Hamarneh indicated that governments in the region were greatly concerned by the instability of Iraq and wanted to contribute to stabilizing the situation there. However, he argued that their ability to overtly support American troops in Iraq was highly constrained because of hostile public opinion towards the US occupation of Iraq, which has been greatly exacerbated by the long string of American blunders there. Hamarneh suggested that non-military assistance from neighboring countries was more

politically viable at the moment and could potentially pave the way for overt military/peacekeeping involvement in the future.

### **The Iranian dimension**

The increasing importance of the Iranian dimension in Middle Eastern politics, and particularly its implications for the role of the US in the region, was another major issue addressed during the conference.

### **The role of Iraq**

The changing role of Iran in the region was generally seen as closely linked to the situation in Iraq. Whereas Iraq has historically been an important counterbalance to Iran and a buffer between Iran and the heart of the Middle East, some analysts now see it as an important asset to Iran. Gamal Soltan, for example, argues that Iraq has now become a safe corridor through which Iran can influence the heart of the Middle East (particularly, Syria, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories). He further argues that Iranian influence in Iraq gives Iran leverage over the US which will prove disadvantageous in disputes over Iran's nuclear capabilities and its support of Hizbollah and Hamas.

However, Gerecht argues that it is premature to believe that Iraq provides an opportunity for Iran to dominate the region and that with improved security in Iraq, Iraq may emerge as a threat to Iran as differences begin to emerge between the two regimes. Anoush Ehteshami also suggests that the 'new' Iraq could pose a threat to the Iranian regime, in particular by challenging Iranian control over Shi'a doctrine. He points to the fact that Sistani, who is considered a *marja* (religious authority) by many Iranians, has now raised his head above the parapet to remind Iran of the historical importance of Najaf. This raises the possibility of future polarization of Shi'a doctrinal control.

### **Diplomacy and the US-Iranian relationship**

Participants also expressed various views on the extent to which it is possible for Washington to pursue a diplomatic option with Tehran. Gerecht argues that if Iran had been willing to engage with the US efforts at diplomacy (even under Bush), it would have been possible for the two countries to reach a grand bargain. However, he argues that the Iranian regime will not countenance such a bargain with the US because it is threatened by the US's insistence on democratization, which threatens the very basis of the current Iranian regime. Mahjoob Zweiri, of CSS, agreed that Iranian elites (both conservative and reformist) perceive democracy as a tool for US interests and perceive Iran's system of 'Islamic democracy' as adequate.

However, Zweiri also argues that the idea that there is no room for diplomacy with Iran is based on a failure to grasp the nuances of domestic Iranian politics. He argues that two groups of actors currently control foreign policy in Iran. Zweiri labels the first of these the 'Iranian neoconservatives'. This group currently defines the right-wing in Iran and has close ties to the voluntary militia and revolutionary guards. Zweiri argues that the neoconservatives' attitude towards the US is encapsulated in a statement made by Ahmadinejad at his first press conference as President when he said "we do not need the US". Zweiri notes that although the Iranian neoconservatives do not pursue a pragmatic foreign policy towards the West, they are pragmatic in their dealings with the East.

Zweiri labels the second group of actors influencing Iranian foreign policy the 'professional diplomats', and argues that this group is willing to engage positively with the US (and in fact, did so from 1987-1995). Zweiri argues that the professional diplomats' agenda is to enhance Iran's status as a regional player, and ensure that this status is recognized -- as is evident from their use of the discourse of the "Iranian nation" and "Iranian interests". Importantly, Zweiri argues that this group of actors believes that Iran can secure this role by working with the US. However, he also notes that this group does perceive the current US administration as a threat to the Iranian regime's stability.

## **Democratization in the Middle East**

This session aimed to discuss the prospects for democratization in the region and in particular, the roles that indigenous movements and the US can play in this process.

### **Is there an indigenous democratic movement?**

A key issue to address in examining the prospects for democratization in the region is the role that indigenous democratic movements can play in this process. In answering the question 'Is there an indigenous democratic movement?' participants presented a broad range of viewpoints ranging from a confident yes to a firm no. But despite their diverging viewpoints on this issue, participants were generally optimistic that there is some space for democratic reform in the region.

In a historical overview of governance in the region Michael Oren, of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, argues that the Middle East is a region with no history of democratic participation. Although this perspective has currency in some circles, it was considered as representing a classical Orientalist perspective on governance in the region by some participants. Oren points out that although some notions of consultative governance in (such as *ijma'* and *shura*) can be traced back to the pre-modern period, the region did not have proto-democratic institutions during this period in the sense that Western societies did. The first proto-parliamentary institutions in the region were introduced much later during the reformative *tanzimat* period of Ottoman rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but even then, there were no real elections in the region. Moreover, he argues that although the European colonial powers did introduce constitutional parliamentary systems into the region after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, these were more often than not designed to rubber stamp colonial officers' decisions. Finally, rapid decolonization saw the emergence of autocratic regimes across the region. Although some of these regimes had parliaments, they were effectively powerless. Oren compares this history of governance to those in Western societies where democratic governance has developed over a period of 700 years and asks whether it is realistic to expect democratization to develop in the Middle East over a short period of time.

However, it was argued that the lack of an indigenous democratic tradition in the region does not necessarily preclude the development of democracy. According to Mustafa Hamarneh, there is no indigenous democratic movement in the Middle East but it is possible for one to develop over a short space of time. He argues that Spain and Portugal did not have strong

indigenous democratic movements in the 1950s and 1960s yet they successfully adopted democratic systems of governance over a short period of time. He further argues that the same is true of most Latin American countries. Similarly, Gamal Soltan argues that the experience of other countries shows that democracy has often been adopted as a way for different elites to settle their differences and not necessarily as an expression of democratic values. Soltan argues that this suggests an indigenous mass movement is not necessary for the development of democracy.

In contrast a number of participants contended that the region does have an indigenous democratic movement. Jordanian Senator Taher Al-Masri argued that there is an indigenous democratic movement which is getting stronger and building up its support base. However, he argued that this movement still has a long way to go in terms of institutionalizing itself (by strengthening political parties) so that it can become an effective vehicle for the silent (moderate) majority to express itself. Jamal Khashoggi also argued that there is an indigenous democratic movement in the Middle East. He points out that the traditional interpretation of the idea of a democratic movement implies a movement that is liberal and progressive and while such a movement does exist in the region, it is not a major player in the political process. For example, the Al-Wafd and Al-Ghad parties in Egypt are democratic movements in the traditional sense and while most Egyptians have heard of them, the vast majority has no idea what their political platforms are.

The significance of political Islam as the only contemporary mass political movement in the region today was a recurring theme of debate. Khashoggi argues that while such movements may not accord with liberal definitions of a democratic movement, mainstream Islamic movements do want to use the democratic process to gain political power which suggests that they can have an important role to play in the democratization process. Khashoggi expressed his opinion that it is unfortunate that liberals tend to dismiss these movements as undemocratic rather than encourage them to become more democratic. He suggests that in order to encourage Islamist movements to become more democratic, it is important for political elites in the region to make them feel respected rather than belittling them. Khashoggi argues that political elites in all Arab regimes, with the exception of Jordan, take a patronizing attitude towards Islamist movements and that this only serves to alienate and radicalize Islamists. Taher Al-Masri also draws on the Jordanian experience to illustrate the way in which the inclusion of Islamists in the political process can foster their commitment to constitutionalism and democratic reform. He argues that it is telling that in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front<sup>1</sup>, has played an active role in the government's political liberalization agenda.

While Khalil Shikaki also advocates 'inclusion for moderation', he argues that it important to make a distinction between two categories of Islamists in the Middle East. On the one hand, there are groups which can be described as representing a violent radical Islamism, such as Al-Qaeda. On the other, there is political Islam which represents the remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Hamas. Shikaki argues that the US clearly differentiates between the two in Iraq and Palestine, allowing the latter but not the former to participate

---

<sup>1</sup> The political wing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood

in the formal political process. Shikaki argues that this approach has proved successful in moderating Hamas and should be pursued.

### **Models for democratization**

In discussing the way forward for democratization in the region, participants from the region placed a distinct emphasis on the importance of taking a holistic approach to democratization, rather than focusing narrowly on elections. Taher Al-Masri argues that it is important to realize that although even among those Arab countries who are engaging in democratic reform, measures towards democratic opening are largely superficial. He argues that behind the façade of reform, the inside workings of the state continue to be undemocratic with the Chief of Intelligence, for example, continuing to be an important position in most regimes. In a similar vein, Anoush Ehteshami warned against peddling the dangerous idea that democracy is merely about winning elections.

Hamarneh points out that although polls in the region tend to show that democratization is not perceived as a priority by Arab publics, when democratic governance is broken up into its components (such as rule of law, accountability etc.), democratic reforms tend to come top of the list among public priorities. Indeed, a number of participants suggested that the good governance approach has great potential to contribute to democratization in the region. To this end, Ehteshami points out that democracy can be seen as serving a number of different functions. It can variously be conceptualized as a mechanism for empowerment, a system to achieve efficient state management and a mechanism for creating competition for power. Ehteshami argues that these functions can be unpackaged and reformulated according to a 'good governance' framework which is politically useful because it is more depoliticized and less explosive than the language of democratization. Moreover, Ehteshami argues that the good governance framework presents a more holistic approach to democratization pointing out that democracy is about more than majority rule.

In discussing the way forward for democratization in the region, Khashoggi points to an important distinction between reformable and non-reformable Middle Eastern regimes. He argues that most regimes, including Saudi Arabia and Jordan, are reformable and that democratization can be achieved in these countries through gradual political liberalization. However, the question of how to affect political change in brittle regimes is far more difficult.

With respect to the issue of brittle regimes, Hamarneh argues that the occupation of Iraq has demonstrated that regime change is not a viable democratization strategy for these states. However, Michael Rubin argues that the situation in Iraq may not be as bleak as it seems and that it may be useful to draw parallels between the Iraqi and South Korean experience. Rubin argues that there are many similarities between the Iraqi and South Korean cases. First, as Paul Wolfowitz has argued, Korea did not have any history of democratic participation before the Korean War. Secondly, Rubin points to the fact that Truman's intervention in South Korea was extremely unpopular at the time and widely considered to be naive. Although the transition to democracy in Korea was slow, Rubin points out that the US is now much more comfortable with the South Korean regime than the North Korean. However, Ehteshami questioned Rubin's positive evaluation of the South Korean experience, pointing out that democratization in South Korea

only came after a long line of very corrupt dictatorships and that this did not offer a model to which the Middle East should aspire.

## **Conclusions**

The discussions held during this conference clearly illustrated that mainstream Middle Eastern and 'neoconservative' American analysts hold fundamentally different perceptions of the role of the US in the Middle East. On the one hand, analysts from the region often viewed US policy in the Middle East as being informed by ideologically-based convictions about the region and the influence of special interest groups, such as the Zionist lobby. On the other hand, neoconservative analysts perceived US policy in the region as being pragmatic and based on the legitimate strategic interests of the US. The participation of more 'left-leaning' American analysts helped to shed light on the important role that domestic political pressure and competition play in influencing US policy in the Middle East.

However, although participants held diverging viewpoints on many issues, the conference was characterized, in the words of Fred Kagan, by a "high plane of debate". While the conference established little in the way of consensus between the two poles of opinion, it did help to lay bare the different frameworks and assumptions which inform these different analyses, thus fostering more constructive debate between the two sides. Indeed, in their closing comments both Reuel Marc Gerecht and Mustafa Hamarneh expressed the need to take this dialogue forward with smaller, more focused and more regular discussions.

Report compiled by Thoraya El-Rayyes, Research Assistant, Center for Strategic Studies