



PROJECT
on **Middle East**
Democracy

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“Gulliver’s Troubles: The Obama Administration and the Middle East”
With Aaron David Miller

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

B-338 Rayburn House Office Building

December 8, 2009, 12:00 – 1:15 pm

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted a lecture by **Aaron David Miller** on the Obama administration and the Middle East. Miller served as a Middle East adviser to six secretaries of state and currently works as a Public Policy Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

Miller defined the purpose of government as an instrument to find solutions to problems. But in order for government to be successful, it must accurately assess the world and develop sufficient understanding. Unfortunately, the United States has not only failed to accurately comprehend the world abroad, but it has also misunderstood its role within that world. While Miller identified himself as a “profound believer” in American power and exceptionalism, he argued the United States has failed to recognize that our exceptionalism “stops at the water’s edge.”

As such, the U.S. should re-evaluate its use of military and political power in more realistic, more transactional, and less transformative terms. Because the United States has failed to do so, it has become a modern day Gulliver, wandering around the Middle East tied down by tiny tribes, by our illusions of transformative capability, and by our domestic politics. Miller argued the U.S. is not a regional hegemon, but by seeking to act as one in the Middle East, it has become stuck in an investment trap that it can neither fix nor leave.

Moving forward, the U.S. must make four realizations to recalibrate its foreign policy “software.” First, the U.S. must come to terms that it cannot force neat solutions upon all disputes, especially in the Middle East where there are so many existential conflicts between groups. History has shown that progress in the Middle East has only come when the local populations have led the effort. Only when there is indigenous willpower can and should the U.S. help the process along.

Second, the U.S. must disavow its belief that American enlightened self-interest can solve all of the Middle East problems. Americans too often forget that their country is geographically blessed, with no hostile neighbors to threaten its security. This geographical luck has allowed the United States to develop a system based on ideals and the notion that individuals can change the world. The American “unbridled sense of optimism” gives the country an uplifting world view. But it is a worldview that is “extremely dangerous” as well, as it not only assumes that America can transform the world, but that the world wants to be transformed.

Third, diplomacy is about leadership. Every success in the Middle East has been the result of leaders who mastered their constituents and were not held hostage by domestic politics. Fourth, the

government must look to the past to inform their foreign policy. They must define America's foreign policy objectives in terms of means, costs and how they line up with America's interests.

Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict specifically, Miller observed **President Obama** has been determined, empathetic, and knowledgeable. Nonetheless, he has failed to achieve any success on securing a full settlement freeze from Israel, partial normalization from the Arab states, and an agreement to negotiate from the Palestinians. These failures are compounded by the failure of the United States to provide consequences to these actors for saying no. Ultimately, with the current leaders in power, Miller does not see much chance for success in the near-term. Therefore, President Obama must question the importance of the peace process to American interests and determine how the U.S. can improve the odds for success.

When asked to identify any potential up-and-coming leaders in the Middle East, Miller responded that there are some future leaders who will show a greater respect for human rights. The question is, however, whether they will be powerful enough to master their constituents and enact change. Recently, there have been several leaders in Jordan, Syria, and Morocco who have gained power through their fathers. As a result, they are not powerful leaders but, instead, leaders who simply want to survive. They may be more enlightened than their predecessors and enact some political and economic reform, but will not achieve or seek to achieve transformative change. Finally, he emphasized how "excruciatingly" difficult it is to build a real democracy. He cited a recent Freedom House report that showed since 1950, there have been only 22 countries in the entire world that have upheld democratic principles continuously. As such, the democratic club is "very tiny" and hard to grow.

When asked about Arab perceptions of the United States, Miller asserted that while words are important, deeds matter much more. However, Arab (and American) expectations were "outrageously excessive" after President Obama's election, and the Nobel Peace Prize only widened the gap between reality and hope. Currently, the U.S. is neither admired, respected, or feared.

Finally, Miller commended Palestinian **Prime Minister Fayyad**, whose plan to build the institutions of a nascent state has given the Palestinians a sense of purpose and independence, making virtue out of necessity. Miller explained that legitimacy stems from three sources: elections, morality, and success. While **President Abbas** has electoral, and to a lesser extent, moral legitimacy, he has few successes to show the Palestinian people.