

Speaking Clearly:

What Should President Obama Say to the Middle East?



Project on Middle East Democracy

January 2009

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As President-elect Barack Obama prepares to take office this month, the world anxiously awaits the policies of the new American administration. Amid generally high expectations worldwide, many across the Middle East remain skeptical of the future of U.S. policy toward that region. The inaugural address on January 20 will be watched carefully and analyzed for signals of changes in policy. President Obama is also widely expected to give a major foreign policy speech in the Islamic world during his first 100 days in office. Until now, there has been more debate over where such a speech should be given than over what its content should be. But that content will be listened to intently and is critically important – when he addresses the expectant audience of the Arab and Muslim World, what should President Obama say?

To help answer this question, we at the Project on Middle East Democracy have asked a dozen respected American foreign policy voices to address the following question in 300 words or less:

At the outset of his administration, what would you advise President Obama to say to the people of the Middle East?

The selected contributors represent a wide spectrum of viewpoints and approaches to U.S. policy in the Middle East – Democrats, Republicans, and nonpartisan analysts; public opinion pollsters and academics; democracy promotion practitioners and human rights advocates. Unsurprisingly, their answers vary, in both substance and in form. Some write in the first-person, articulating explicitly what the new President ought to say to the region. Others speak in their own voice, addressing their advice directly to the incoming President. Most focus solely on the content of what should be said; a few also weigh in on how and where the message ought to be delivered.

While the dozen answers vary, there are a number of themes strongly recurring throughout them:

Partnership – Declare that America will work with the people of the Middle East toward common goals, rather than imposing its will on the region.

Modesty – Don't make lofty promises that cannot be delivered, raising false expectations; be realistic and close the gap between rhetoric and policy.

Peace – Acknowledge the suffering caused by the use of military force and by violent conflicts; affirm a commitment to the resolution of existing conflicts.

Human Rights – Offer clear support to those who seek to secure their own rights, reform their own societies, and broaden political participation.

Each of the individual responses articulates more fully these themes, and spells out more specific messages that our new President ought to direct toward the people of the Middle East.

On the following pages, the dozen responses are presented in full. As President-elect Obama prepares to address the people of the Arab and Muslim world and to repair our relations with that troubled region, we believe these contributions outline the key issues and approaches that he ought to consider.



Stephen McInerney
Director of Advocacy, Project on Middle East Democracy

Cooperation with your governments on security matters will continue, but I'll insist security not be a concept reserved exclusively for the state. Human security from the state is as critical.

Two key imperatives exist for all effective communication: the right message and the right messenger. During the campaign Barack Obama synthesized both, becoming the message of change. As President he combines this quality with an ability to speak over the heads of the world's governing elites directly to their publics. These rare, perishable assets should be used quickly and to effect in the Middle East.

Because Obama symbolizes change, he need not dramatically alter America's message. While emphasizing partnership, he should reiterate America's core objectives in the region: partnering with governments and peoples to create opportunity for political and economic success; partnering with Iraqis as they work to re-build a nation; partnering with Palestinians and Israelis as they pursue their quest for peace.

"Cooperation with your governments on security matters will continue, but I'll insist security not be a concept reserved exclusively for the state. Human security from the state is as critical. I am committed to dialogue with adversarial governments like Syria and Iran but will not abandon principle or cut deals that abandon those who yearn for freedom."

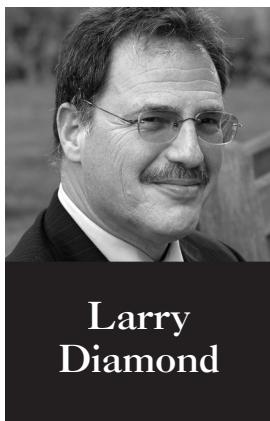
The President should banish the three-word phrase "peace and security" from his lexicon. Such words are code for a return to the so-called realist policies of yesteryear - policies inappropriate to the 21st century Middle East.

Message matters, but so do style and tone. Obama should consider making a well-advertised address to the people of the region on al Hurra or perhaps grant an exclusive, early interview to Hisham Melham of al Arabiya. Obama should not travel to the Middle East in his first year, but visit places like Indonesia and Kenya instead. Visiting the Middle East would require meeting with President Mubarak and King(s) Abdullah, sending an unfortunate message of continuity not change. If they want to see him, let the mountain come to Mohammed.



Scott
Carpenter

J. Scott Carpenter is Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute and Director of its Project Fikra, which focuses on empowering Arab democrats in their struggles against extremism. He previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.



**Larry
Diamond**

Larry Diamond is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, where he coordinates the democracy program of the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. He is also founding coeditor of the *Journal of Democracy*, and codirector of the International Forum for Democratic Studies of the National Endowment for Democracy.

The United States seeks a just, stable, and secure political order in the Middle East, not hegemony. I renounce the use of force as a means to promote ‘regime change’ in the region.

“First, the United States seeks a just, stable, and secure political order in the Middle East, not hegemony. Thus I reaffirm my commitment to withdraw all U.S. combat forces from Iraq within 16 months. And I renounce the use of force as a means to promote ‘regime change’ in the region.

Secondly, I deeply regret the abuses that have been committed by American security forces at Abu Ghraib, and I will immediately ban the use of torture by American security personnel, ban the practice of ‘extraordinary rendition,’ and shut down the detention facility at Guantánamo.

Third, I reaffirm America’s commitment to a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, recognizing both the right of the Palestinian people to a viable state and the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state within secure and defensible borders. Engagement with all parties in the quest for such a settlement will be a priority of this administration.

Fourth, I call on the people of the Middle East to reject extremism, prejudice, hatred and violence, which contradict the principles of all great religions and have only deepened misery in the region. And I affirm my administration’s readiness to engage any group or party that rejects violence and commits to democratic principles, including the rights of women and religious minorities.

Finally, I reaffirm America’s commitment to human rights and the development of democratic governance in the region. These cannot be the only goals the United States seeks in the Middle East, but they are enduring interests and values, and we believe they are necessary foundations for justice and long-term stability in the region. My administration will support democratic forces in the region and work to encourage gradual democratic change.”

Four goals will inform my administration's policy toward this region: peace, justice, prosperity, and democracy.

"Four goals will inform my administration's policy toward this region: peace, justice, prosperity, and democracy. These principles are linked: there can only be peace with just resolution of longstanding conflicts and there can only be prosperity with accountable and transparent government. The American people extend their hand in friendship to the peoples of the Middle East, and the United States government stands ready to cooperate with all peaceloving governments in the region that work for the welfare of their people."



**Michele
Dunne**

Michele Dunne is Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Editor of Carnegie's Arab Reform Bulletin. She was previously a specialist at the State Department and White House on Middle East affairs, and has also served as assistant professor of Arabic language at Georgetown University.

Be optimistic as to the future progress of democracy in the region.

Be optimistic as to the future progress of democracy in the region – a key part of U.S. backing for Middle East reformers is public moral support. In your comments, acknowledge that the United States didn't "create" reform in the Middle East - it began there before the Bush Administration, among indigenous political parties, civil society, and media.

President Bush and President Carter recently visited the Middle East, and both discussed U.S. efforts to promote reform. Be clear in telling the governments of the region that support for democratic movements is a longstanding bipartisan policy of the United States that will continue in an Obama Administration.



**Tom
Garrett**

Tom Garrett is Regional Program Director for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the International Republican Institute (IRI). He has worked at IRI since 1994, and in that time has worked on election observation missions in numerous countries, including Egypt and Afghanistan.



**Stephen
Grand**

Stephen Grand is the Director of U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution. He was previously director of the Middle East Strategy Group at the Aspen Institute, and director of programs at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

A new relationship must begin with greater education, mutual understanding and respect.

“The time has come to chart a new path in our often troubled relations. Faced with global threats that know no boundaries, we must focus on collaboration rather than confrontation. My Administration will bring a new style of American foreign policy, grounded in international law and institutions and consonant with America’s core values. America has no quarrel with the Middle East; no interest in being the region’s next imperial power; no desire to have our sons and daughters engaged in unending conflict in the region.

The United States does have enduring strategic interests in the Middle East, but the most fundamental of these should be the welfare of the region’s citizens. We as Americans share the same aspirations as you do: to be able to live in a safe and secure environment, find meaningful employment, feed our families, send our children to good schools, and to be free to pursue our own human fulfillment. Our own security as Americans will be advanced immeasurably if we can help citizens of the region realize these basic needs. We should be partners in advancing human development in the region and creating vibrant knowledge societies capable of unleashing their citizens’ full potential so as to compete successfully in the global economy.

We also have a shared interest in working together to resolve the major conflicts roiling the region: to bring a just resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to bring stability to Iraq and Afghanistan, to ensure that any Iranian nuclear activities are strictly for civilian uses, and to counter the growth of violent extremism.

Finally, we must strive to learn more about each other. Too often raw emotion and ignorance — about our respective values, religions, and ways of life — have colored how we see one another. A new relationship must begin with greater education, mutual understanding and respect.”

Our emphasis will be on building the institutions that will enable the people of the region to secure their own rights and freedoms.

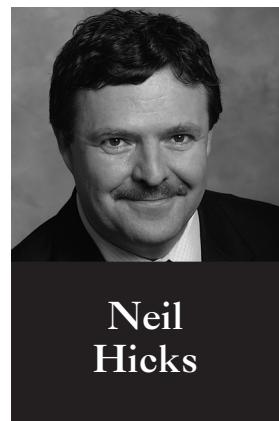
“My hope for you during the years of my presidency is the same as my hope for the people of the United States: I will do all in my power to secure a future of peace, prosperity and freedom for you and your children.

The primary responsibility for creating a better future for the people of the region rests with you, but I have three promises to make to you:

First, the government of the United States will be an active partner in finding a peaceful resolution to armed conflicts throughout the region. As the war in Iraq is brought to its end, the United States will not neglect its responsibility for Iraq’s reconstruction, which will include finding durable solutions for the millions of refugees and others displaced by the conflict. Finding a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians will be a priority of my administration from the outset.

Secondly, in our relations with governments throughout the region we will promote mutually beneficial trade, assistance for economic and social development where it is needed, and economic justice leading to sustainable growth. The current global financial crisis reminds us again of our interconnectedness and interdependency, and the people of the Middle East must share in the benefits of global economic recovery.

Finally, my administration will press for greater freedom, greater respect for human rights, and more democratic governance. President Bush was right to call for the “non-negotiable demands of human dignity” to be respected throughout the region. Repression is no longer an acceptable form of governance and the imperative of democratic reform cannot be ducked for any pretext. Our emphasis will be on building institutions that enable the people of the region to secure their own rights and freedoms. These institutions need to grow at the local, national and regional levels and we will foster their development both through our bilateral relations and multilaterally with our allies.”



Neil
Hicks

Neil Hicks is an International Policy Advisor at Human Rights First on issues related to human rights promotion in the Muslim world. He previously worked on human rights in the Middle East for Amnesty International and at Birzeit University in the West Bank.

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Gerald
Hyman

Gerald Hyman is president of the Hills Program on Governance at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and serves on the Advisory Council to the Center for International Media Assistance of the National Endowment for Democracy. He was previously director of the Office of Democracy and Governance at USAID.

The Government of the United States, including me personally, will work with the UN, the EU, the Government of Russia, and the governments of the Middle East to achieve a just and durable peace.

“We do not seek a military role in the Middle East, although we reserve the right to defend our citizens and our partners militarily if necessary, but only as a last resort. We will pursue peace and prosperity through cooperation, through diplomacy and, whenever possible, through multilateral efforts. We understand very well that we cannot achieve these goals alone.

We want help and partnership and we offer both to confront problems like poverty, health, and education. We believe their solution requires both domestic reforms and international cooperation. Domestic reform is for the people of the Middle East to embrace, not for imposition from abroad. Yet without those reforms, international cooperation is insufficient.

The most immediate threat to peace in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We understand fully the frustrations of the past 60 years. Ironically, the elements of its resolution – peace, borders, security, refugees – have been clear to everyone for many of those years. The political will to reach that resolution has been missing. The Government of the United States, including me personally, will work with the UN, the EU, the Government of Russia, and the governments of the Middle East to achieve that resolution and a just and durable peace.

Notwithstanding what some say, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not part of some anti-Muslim aggression by the United States. We have no grievance against Islam or Muslims and we are not part of any religious crusade. But a marginal number of extremists have grievances against us and against their fellow Muslims. They pursue those grievances, falsely, in the name of Islam, a religion of peace. So all of us must stand together against violence and intolerance and for human rights and peace. We welcome the opportunity to cooperate in that endeavor with all the people of the Middle East.”

Encourage democracy in the Middle East—not through wars or even through the threat of sanctions – but by rewarding those governments that take measurable steps towards genuine democracy.

“While the United States has been built on universal principles of equality, justice, freedom, and dignity for all, I recognize that our government has supported repressive regimes across this region that have abused the rights of their citizens, imprisoned and tortured those who criticize them, and prevented participation in even the most peaceful political and civic activities. After 9/11, the Bush administration promised to end decades of U.S. support for tyranny and instead to stand by those who are fighting – peacefully – for freedom, democracy, and dignity.

But our policies have failed to live up to those promises. Particularly since December 2005, the United States has returned to the ‘realist’ approach of openly supporting ‘friendly’ dictators and tyrants. This not only destroyed the credibility of the United States and emboldened extremists, but also sent a powerful, anti-democratic message to authoritarian regimes.

My administration will encourage democracy in the Middle East – not through wars or even through the threat of sanctions – but by rewarding those governments that take measurable steps towards genuine democracy. President Bush relied on the use of ‘sticks’ to threaten governments, an ineffective approach that in many cases backfired. I will also encourage governments to take effective steps toward democracy through the use of ‘carrots’ such as increases in economic assistance, trade relations, exchange of science and technology, and an overall stronger partnership with the government of the United States and its people.

Further, I recognize that although the United States has a moral obligation to support democracy as a process in each country, we do not have the right to interfere in domestic politics or take sides between the various political and/or religious groups. The United States will support the basic human rights of all Middle Easterners – including moderate Islamists – to express grievances and to participate nonviolently in the political process.”



**Radwan
Masmoudi**

Radwan Masmoudi is the Founder and President of the Center of the Study of Islam & Democracy (CSID). Previously, he was Editor-in-Chief of the Center's quarterly publication, *Muslim Democrat*.



Tarek Masoud is an assistant professor of public policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he teaches courses on the modern Middle East. He is the author of numerous articles, including "Islamist Parties: Are They Democrats? Does It Matter?" in *Journal of Democracy*, July 2008.

The grand project of democratizing the region can no longer be our own, even as we wish success and offer support to those who undertake it.

We are entering an era of limited capabilities, and our ambitions must narrow accordingly. Talk of grand designs in the Middle East, of imposing outsized American plans for democracy and peace, must to some degree give way to the baser language of interests. The president should note that the options available to us fall short of the towering promises that the previous administration could not deliver, and that our actions are constrained by enduring interests—in oil, in Israel, in eradicating anti-American violence. The grand project of democratizing the region can no longer be our own, even as we wish success and offer support to those who undertake it.

Some may balk at the suggestion that as historic a president as Barack Obama should squander an opportunity to inspire the peoples of the region with his soaring rhetoric, but I suspect that cold, hard-headed logic will go further in restoring our reputation in that world. We have long suffered a credibility problem in the Middle East—torn between heart and head, we spoke tenderly of democratization while cutting backroom deals with the kinds of corrupt autocrats we claim to disdain. For us, this was a genuine tension, but it is experienced by the peoples of the Middle East as hypocrisy. President Obama has an opportunity to finally shrug off this legacy, to bring a new modesty and honesty to our encounter with the Muslim world. I hope he takes it.

Like you, the American people want change—a new way to engage the world built on the values we share: fairness, compassion and mutual respect. Our security and your security are inseparable.

“To our brothers and sisters of all faiths in the Middle East, the cradle of civilizations, the birthplace of religions, one of history’s greatest sources of science, philosophy and poetry: We must harness our common humanity and shared values to overcome the challenges we all face. We have all suffered the consequences of a misguided war and the horrors of violent extremism. We have all suffered a global economic crisis, soaring food and fuel prices, and a warming planet.

Like you, the American people want change—a new way to engage the world built on the values we share: fairness, compassion and mutual respect. Our security and your security are inseparable. The violent extremism which threatens us also threatens you and is a flagrant violation of every faith. The problems we all face have no national boundaries, and do not distinguish based on color or creed. Our shared challenges cannot be solved by any one of us alone. Our children’s future therefore depends on our ability to cooperate. This spirit of partnership must guide us in our shared desire to see peace in this pivotal region of the world.

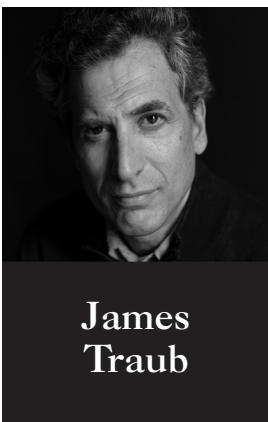
I am committed to making this a top priority of my presidency from the beginning, but America cannot work for peace without regional partners. We must build a robust and lasting peace together, understanding that peace is not simply the absence of war. Peace is a people’s shared commitment to a better future built on the solid foundation of a just resolution of conflict. America is committed to the security and independence of Iraqis, Israelis and Palestinians and will work with regional partners to make lasting peace a reality. The mere fact that I am standing here today is testimony to the possibility of people coming together, even those whose conflicts spanned centuries.”



Dalia
Mogahed

Dalia Mogahed is a Senior Analyst and Executive Director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, and co-author of *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. She is also a member of Women in International Security, and the Crisis in the Middle East Task Force of the Brookings Institution.

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**James
Traub**

James Traub is a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine*, and has written for publications including *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New Republic*. He is the author of several books including most recently *The Freedom Agenda: Why America Must Spread Democracy [Just Not the Way George Bush Did]*.

We will promise less, and deliver more. We now know what others long understood—that we cannot impose, or even deliver, democracy or social justice. But there is much that we can do.

“The United States wants for the people of the Arab world what they want for themselves—a life of freedom, justice and prosperity. We know very well that too few people in the Middle East enjoy such a life. And we recognize that in recent decades the United States has done as much to frustrate those hopes as to assist them. The Bush Administration was admirably blunt about this failure, conceding that we had long sought stability at the expense of democracy, and found neither. That was right—but the prescription was wrong. The war in Iraq discredited the policy of democracy promotion. But so did our disengagement from the peace process between Israel and Palestine. And so did the glaring discrepancy between our sweeping vows and our hesitant and often timid policies.

We will promise less, and deliver more. We now know what others long understood—that we cannot impose, or even deliver, democracy or social justice. But there is much that we can do.

We will work steadily with the progressive forces of the Middle East—with moderate Islamist parties which accept democratic principles; with media outlets seeking to expand freedom of speech; with groups working to raise the status of women, to increase access to education, to teach citizens about their rights. We will not only help support such groups, but we will stand with them when they are embattled. We will press regimes, sometimes publicly and sometime quietly, to expand the space available for public and political expression. And we will push both Israel and Palestine to make painful concessions, offering to each the support which will, we hope, make those choices less perilous.

This is a program of incremental change, not overnight transformation. And that, my friends, is the kind of change you can believe in.”

Acknowledge that we have created regional traumas, setting back the goals of reform, putting our allies under great stress, and emboldening extremist currents.

Recognize the general context: Eight years of callous neglect and dangerously reckless policies have roiled the region, leaving emotions quite raw. Events in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine only reminds many of their feelings of powerlessness and their inability to control their own history. The mood is volatile.

Recognize the specific context: Expectations for an Obama presidency are high, maybe too high. After the Bush years, Arabs, too, long for “change they can believe in.” But this could prove dangerous. If expectations are let down abruptly, the resultant negative mood swing could spell new trouble.

Words can matter: When people feel you understand them, they will listen. Given all that has happened in the region, President Obama should demonstrate compassion, speaking evocatively of the profound personal suffering endured by Iraqis, Lebanese, and Palestinians. Demonstrating understanding is a prerequisite to being understood and trusted.

Words matter, but deeds count: Arabs have been taunted with visions of two states and roadmaps that lead nowhere. The Bush administration spoke of its respect for Islam, but promoted policies and tolerated behavior that violated the rights and compromised the security of millions of Muslims. Although expectations are high, many have become jaded. So make promises, if you must, but only promises you can keep, beginning with “bite-sized” deliverables that establish bona fides.

Respect your friends: It is important to call on governments to open their societies and respect the rule of law and human rights, and it’s doubly important not to undercut this by engaging in reprehensible behavior ourselves. It is also important to acknowledge that we have created regional traumas, setting back the goals of reform, putting our allies under great stress, and emboldening extremist currents. So work with allies toward change, recognizing that as our regional credibility increases, our ability to promote change will be enhanced.



James
Zogby

James Zogby is the founder and president of the Arab American Institute (AAI). He also serves on the national advisory board of the American Civil Liberties Union, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Additionally, he is a Senior Analyst for the polling firm Zogby International.



The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we aim to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support human rights and political reform in the Middle East.

