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The Saban Center for Middle East Policy

PRESS ROUNDTABLE
A PREVIEW OF PRESIDENT BUSH'S TRIP TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Washington, D.C.

Thursday, January 3, 2008

Discussants:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

SPEAKER: (In progress) -- Saban Center, and served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for the Near East and South Asian Affairs at the NSC from 2001 to 2002, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs from 1995 to 1997, and is a former CIA officer. So we will start with comments from Bruce and Ken, and then we will open it up to your questions. Bruce?

MR. RIEDEL: First, thank you for coming, and I know some of you at least have probably come from the briefing at the White House, so you will have a chance to correct any mistakes that we make.

I think the first thing I would say about this trip is there is a paradox. Never has the Middle East been as important to Americans as it is today. We have after all two wars underway in the region and somewhere approaching 200,000 American soldiers on the ground in the region. The price of oil reached \$100 a barrel right after New Year's, the highest it has ever reached, and three times what it was when the President came into office. Yet I think the President is going to struggle to get on screen in the United States over the next several days as he travels to the region. I thought "The Washington Post" yesterday demonstrated this quite vividly. On page 1 was Iowa, Iowa, Iowa, and buried under the fold on page 2 was the report that the President has an agenda for 2008,

and barely even got it into the paper, and I think this trip unfortunately is also going to struggle against Iowa and New Hampshire. But the good news for those of you who are traveling with the President is it really is an extremely important time in the region and there is much going on, and the President has an uphill fight to accomplish his agenda. I do not know what Steve Hadley laid out as the priorities for the trip, but I imagine high on the list had to have been Arab-Israeli issues and particularly moving the Annapolis process forward.

There has been not a whole lot of activity on the peace process since Annapolis. There have been continued meetings, a lot of procedural discussions, but certainly nothing approaching a breakthrough. The settlement issue has once again reared its head with the expansion of settlement activity around Arhoma, with a lot of Arab unhappiness with that. But I think the big issue that remains out there and has remained out there throughout the Annapolis process is the ticking time bomb of Gaza and Hamas.

The good news in 2007 is that Israeli-Palestinian violence was at an 8-year low. Thirteen Israelis died in 2007. That is the least since before the start of the *intifada* in 2000; 373 Palestinians died in Israeli-Palestinian violence, and I am not counting Palestinian-Palestinian violence, but even with 373, that is down 45 percent from the year before.

Also in the good news category, there was only one suicide bombing inside Israel in the entire year.

But Gaza being controlled since June by Hamas is simmering and bubbling. There have been in the last week intense clashes between Hamas and Fatah supporters in Gaza as Fatah tries to undermine Hamas's control. There has significant trouble at the Egyptian-Gaza border over the return of Hajjis who went to Saudi Arabia, and I will say more about that in a minute. And since the beginning of 2000 to the end, over 3,000 Kasim rockets and mortar rounds were fired into Israel, a little bit over eight firings of projectiles a day. The number of Israelis killed as I said has been so far relatively small, but that is luck.

Today for the first time, a Katyusha rocket was fired from Gaza into Israel and struck at the Israeli city of Ashkelon, 16-1/2 kilometers from the Gaza border. This if you run a circle as to what 16-1/2 kilometers means around the Gaza strip, means a quarter of a million Israelis are now within range of these rockets fired from Gaza, a significant increase if they have substantial numbers of Katyushas available. The Israelis responded with an air strike that killed guns.

All of the problems of the Annapolis summit still remain out there. I will just summarize them briefly. There are two very weak leaders in Ehud Olmert whose popularity has gone up a little bit but remains very

low, and then Abu Mazen whose popularity remains very low and who controls nothing outside of Ramallah. We have no serious Palestinian security force on the West Bank that is capable of providing efficient and effective relatively uncorrupt security activity. We have the Hamas problem in Gaza which I have already discussed. But we also have a Hamas problem in the West Bank which is becoming increasingly active. And overall we have little Arab confidence in the process, in particular, little Arab confidence in the President's commitment to the process. The trip is surely intended to be the statement of the President's commitment, but he is going to have to prove to Arab leaders that he is really serious and that this is not just an extended photo op to the region.

Nowhere is that question going to be asked more than in Saudi Arabia and in the other Gulf States that he visits, but especially in Saudi Arabia. If you remember back to our briefing before Annapolis, we stressed that one of the primary purposes of the Annapolis summit was not just to advance the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peace, but to try to bring together a coalition of moderate Arab states working with the United States and by extension with Israel to contain Iranian meddling in the region. Since Annapolis there has been very little sign of the development of that coalition. On the same day as the famous or infamous NIE came out in the United States, the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Doha,

Qatar, welcomed President Ahmadinejad to the summit, the first time an Iranian president had ever been invited to a GCC summit. The picture that was broadcast across the Middle East was of a smiling Ahmadinejad hand in hand with King Abdullah entering into the audience chamber. If ever there was the picture of the cat who had swallowed the mouse, that was certainly it. This was followed by the unprecedented gesture of inviting Ahmadinejad to do the Hajj. No Iranian president, no senior Iranian leader, had ever performed the Hajj before while in office. This is evocative of the fact that the Arab moderate regimes are not lining up enthusiastically in an anti-Iranian coalition. Egypt sent its deputy foreign minister to Tehran in December with the purpose of restoring diplomatic relations.

The Saudis are not only making overtures to the Iranians, but they have also been giving strong hints of trying to repair the rift between Hamas and Fatah, exactly contrary to the administration's desire to keep Hamas isolated. The Saudis arranged for 2,000 Gazans to make the Hajj this year to Saudi Arabia, and for that to be arranged through Hamas circles rather than through Fatah circles, outraging Abu Mazen. The Egyptians were clearly partners in this arrangement since they came through Egypt to go into Saudi Arabia.

On all these fronts, I think the President will face a tough act convincing the Arabs and the Palestinians that this administration has the answer to their problems, is serious about getting heavily involved in the Israeli-Palestinian process, and has an answer to the problem of either Hamas or Iran.

The last thing I would say before Ken talks about Iraq and more about Iran is that the shadow of Pakistan will lie over this trip. It is clearly not a stop on the trip at least that we know of, but it is very much on the minds of everyone in the region, and particularly on the minds of the authoritarian Arab rulers in Riyadh, Cairo, Amman, and the Gulf States. They look at Musharraf as one of them, they see his political problems as evocative of what happens when the word democracy is uttered in a Muslim state, and they fear very much that this strong ally of theirs is going to be deposed in 2008. I have heard from several Arab leaders their concern over the last several months at the problems Musharraf is facing and their deepest fear is that at some point the United States might go from being Musharraf's cheerleader to being the one that pushes him down the stairs or under the bus because all of them fear that at some point in the future some day the same thing could happen to them. So they will be looking very much at what the President says and does about Pakistan in the weeks ahead, while I think at the same time

the President is likely to come under increasing pressure here at home to dump Musharraf and to endorse a democratic process and free and fair elections. Already if you look at what the Democratic candidates are saying in Iowa and New Hampshire, they are calling upon him to do that, and since they now control the Congress, their ability to limit U.S. military assistance to Pakistan has now been transformed. Just to give you one example, Bill Richardson today has an op-ed in "The Boston Globe" that explicitly calls for the President to dump Musharraf. So this cloud will be hanging over and could produce some unexpected news during the course of the trip. With that I will turn it over to Ken to talk about the 300-pound gorilla in the room, the Iraq problem.

MR. POLLACK: Thank you, Bruce, and thank all of you.

The first point I would make is that in just watching the run-up to the trip I was struck by how large this trip is looming in the minds of many in the press. What strikes me is it is kind of unfortunate that that is even the case. It is looming large because this is the first time that President Bush has done this, but in point of fact, it should not be that laudable. The problem is that they have not done it before and I think that coming around to this is part of this administration's very slow maturation and recognition of the reality and that the reality is that the President does need to be more involved and the President does need to be involved in day-to-day

diplomacy. So you heard Bruce lay out a whole series of things, I am going to lay out some things as well, which are not earth-shattering events. These are not major summits. No one is talking about having a signing ceremony on the White House lawn or anywhere else. These are just are another element in the day-to-day diplomacy. But because this administration has been so reluctant to engage in that type of diplomacy over the course of time, this trip is standing out in a way that it probably should not, and I think one of the difficulties that we are having coming to grips with it is that most of what is happening is at a relatively mundane level but because it is the first trip that the President has ever taken like this, it seems somehow unusual, it certainly is unusual, but somehow extraordinary, and I mean that in the colloquial sense and not in the literal sense.

Let me start with Iraq. First, Iraq remains in the background of all of us. Iraq has kind of disappeared from the radar screens of the American media, but it has not disappeared from the White House's radar screens. It is still their first priority. They understand that President Bush's legacy is all about Iraq and I think that they believe that they might be able to pull something off with the peace process, but I do not think that any of them thinks that it is a high probability. They all know that history is going to judge the George Bush administration on what happens in Iraq,

they also feel like they have turned things around in Iraq, they feel like things are headed in the right direction, they have the chance to pull off a major coup and leave the (inaudible) Iraq situation to the next president that is really viable, sustainable, on a path toward success, and what we hear them talk about at the highest levels of the White House on a regular basis is that 20 years from now people are going to look back and realize that we did the right thing and that is absolutely what they are playing for.

The first element in that, not the only element, but the first element in that though is Iraq. So Iraq is in the background is in the background of all of this and pretty much everything that they are doing either is because of Iraq or has an Iraq element to it. As I said, I think that there are other reasons why they are trying this bid at the peace process, but there is also no question in my mind that one of the reasons that they are doing so is because of Iraq, because they have now finally recognized that pushing the peace process helps them garner support all across the Muslim world with Iraq. Again, that is not their only reason for doing so, but it is an important element of what they are doing.

I think part of the reason for this trip, again there are lots of different reasons, is that it will help shore up regional support for what is going on in Iraq. As you are all aware, there is certainly progress in Iraq, but that problem is far from solved. That war is not won, there is still a lot

that can go wrong, the whole process could fall apart, and they do still very much need additional regional support. They have actually had some fairly significant regional support on Iraq in the past, very quiet stuff that no one is talking about, but it is there and I think that part of what is going on with Annapolis and the peace process is actually the quid pro quo for that very quiet support for Iraq that they have.

As part of that, I fully expect to see the President in Baghdad as part of this trip. I think it highly unlikely that he will go to the region, that he will visit all of these other countries and that he will not stop in to Baghdad to see General Petraeus, to see Prime Minister Maliki, to see the troops, and to do a few other things. I think that is also important not just again because it is about this larger building of support for the Iraq issue, but it is also important for some Iraq issues in and of themselves. There is as you are well aware a logjam in Baghdad right now, but friends inside Baghdad tell me that there are a number of issues that they feel like they are right on the brink if they can just bring around one or two key partners in this, one or two key actors, in Iraq, they feel like they could make some major breakthroughs, and I would be willing to bet money that the President is going to go to Baghdad in part to see if he can't push on those issues and make some of those breakthroughs. These are the kinds of breakthroughs again that can have a (inaudible) effect. If they can get

some breakthroughs on things like provincial powers law, that opens up greater decentralization which makes possible great progress at local levels which becomes a kind of self-reinforcing cycle that they are trying to create in Iraq that will ultimately produce success if it is successful. So I think that one of the reasons that you are going to see the President go there is to push on those things.

When we get back to the regional angle, as you are aware, we are not the only ones who have qualms about the Maliki government. Pretty much everyone in the region has problems of one kind or another with the Maliki government and I think that the President is going to go there to try to push on some of those issues as well, to try to convince Maliki and people around him to take some additional steps that will make it more palatable for people like the Saudis, the Kuwaitis and other Gulf States to be more supportive of Iraq, to make this government less like a bunch of vicious Shi'a warlords and more like something representative of all Iraqis which would make it easier for them to come through with the various pledges that they have been making all along.

I think the other issue that obviously is in the background, and Bruce has already started to talk about this, is obviously Iran. I would start with Iran by saying that I think that the NIE, as you saw when the President spoke, really put the administration on the defensive and really

put them on their heels. It confused a lot of people in the Gulf. As always, and I know some of you have been in the Gulf recently, what you immediately heard afterwards were all conspiracy theories. No one could understand what the heck we were doing, no one would believe that the U.S. intelligence community was simply acting independently, all the conspiracy theories came out, and even our long-time friends, the rulers themselves, were left wondering exactly what it was that the U.S. government was up to. The NIE also obviously undermined the administration's support for sanctions. They had been making real progress with the Chinese, they have made huge progress with the Germans, and it pulled the rug out from under both of those legs. As a result, many people in the Gulf, and again let's set aside the average (inaudible) on street, even the rulers as well were left wondering what did this mean for U.S. policy. U.S. policy toward Iran is built on the idea of progressively tighter sanctions on Iran to put greater and greater pressure on the regime to force them to change their policy on the nuclear program, and here we have an NIE that came out that clearly dealt a major blow to that. I think that one of the things that the administration is going to have to do, and one of the things that the President is going to have to do on this trip, is to sit face to face with all of these different rulers, reassure them that the NIE has not destroyed U.S. policy toward Iran, that that

policy remains viable, that it is still possible to put together an effective sanctions regime that can put enough pressure on the Iranians to force them to change their ways, and to lay out exactly how it is that he is planning to do that. Right now it is very hard I think for many of the Gulf states to really understand how U.S. policy can remain viable in the light of the NIE, in the light of the confusions created in the U.S., and also the undermining of support internationally for their Iran policy. To that end, and Bruce was getting at exactly this point, which is that in particular, in King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia you have a Saudi king who is very independent, who has a different approach to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and Saudi Arabia's approach to the United States than his predecessor King Fahad. This is someone who has never believed in relying on the United States to solve his problems for him, and as a result, that always made him somewhat more independent, and I think that you are increasingly seeing that.

Bruce made reference to a number of different points including the warm embrace at least metaphorically given to Ahmadinejad last month, and I think that is part of this entire trend. Remember as Bruce points out, Ahmadinejad was showing for the GCC summit the day the NIE was released and had no advanced warning that the NIE was going to be released or what was going to be in it, so the decision to invite

him preceded the NIE and was a clear sign that whatever the U.S. was doing in terms of sanctioning Iran, King Abdullah was going to make sure that there were a variety of different levers available to him and his allies to handle the Iranians. And the NIE is of course I think exacerbated a problem from the American perspective and has reinforced King Abdullah's tendency to see foreign policy problems as his own that Saudi Arabia needs to solve and not simply blindly follow whatever the U.S. lead is. So I think that part of what President Bush needs to do in particular in Riyadh is convince King Abdullah that the U.S. approach really is the right way to handle Iran and that he needs to throw his full weight behind that U.S. approach. I think he is going to have his work cut out for him both because of where Abdullah starts from and because of where I think the NIE has further pushed him.

Let me stop there, and we would love to answer questions.

SPEAKER: (inaudible)

MR. POLLACK: Again I think it is very hard to imagine that he is not going to show up in Iraq to meet with Maliki to seek to try to push his agenda and to meet with some of the troops. I guess it is possible, but again I think it highly unlikely. As always, they tried very hard to camouflage the President's actual agenda. It may be that they announce that Petraeus is going to Kuwait, and maybe Petraeus is going to Kuwait

as a way of convincing people that he is not going to Iraq for security reasons. Again, could I be wrong? Sure, I could be wrong. But I think that if you were to line things up from the White House's perspective (inaudible) my guess would be he will be in Baghdad.

SPEAKER: Just my question is also the administration was talking about trying to get the Arab states some kind of reconciliation with Israel and I am not quite sure what they mean by that. Do you see the Arab states basically trying any diplomatic relationship with Israel considering the situation that you explained and the administration (inaudible)

MR. RIEDEL: I am not unless they are convinced that the administration is making a full-court press on the peace process. Certainly, what they have seen since Annapolis in their eyes is renewal of the settlement activity had undermined the credibility of this process. I think that is why you saw today the President say something to the effect of settlement activity is an impediment because he recognizes that his sales job in Cairo and Riyadh is going to be very hard to pull off as long as there is new construction activity going on. Is he prepared to go and tell Olmert no more concrete? I will believe it when I see it. But that is the litmus test that he is going to face.

SPEAKER: How engaged do you think that the President is in the Middle East peace process, and what is the view in the Middle East of how much he is willing to invest himself?

MR. RIEDEL: In the region and in the Arab world, he is seen as having been a spectator. This is probably unfair, but it is a reality. When he stood up at the microphone in Annapolis and had difficulty remembering or pronouncing Ehud Olmert's name and then Abu Mazen's name, that sound bite has been shown over and over and over again. That is unfair, but it symbolizes to most Arabs that he is disconnected from this process.

Ken alluded to this, this President's style has not been in 7 years to become directly involved in the negotiating process. He has tended to hand that over to others. The one case where he directly involved himself in the negotiations process that I am aware of was the famous dinner between President Karzai and President Musharraf in the White House which by all accounts was a disastrous event. But in the Arab-Israeli conflict, for good reasons or bad reasons, the parties expect the President to get directly involved. They have been spoiled. Every president since Nixon has been directly involved in the negotiating process with the exception of Ronald Reagan, that is looking for, and something that is remote does not persuade them that he is serious.

SPEAKER: Aren't they going to be disappointed then? Isn't this a set up for --

MR. RIEDEL: It could well be. I fear that he is going to find that he cannot convince the Arabs that he is really serious.

SPEAKER: Steve Hadley seemed to suggest that the goal is simply showing up and providing moral support for things. I wonder what do you think he could do that would be more than something concrete? You say he has to persuade the Arab states (inaudible) for example.

MR. RIEDEL: The one that people are going to look at is does he get something on settlement activity, does he get a commitment out of Olmert that is specific and hard. A lot of the other things are now not anywhere near the salience that that issue has. To be fair, this is a very, very hard issue and every president since Nixon has had difficulty dealing with settlement activity and trying to figure out how to advance peace while concrete is poured, and it is going to be a tough, tough test. Just showing up is not going to convince anybody. He is a lame duck. He has 1 year to go. Just showing up you do in the first 6 months. You don't do it in January of your last year. At that point people's expectations are going to be at a higher level. They may privately doubt you will meet their

expectations, but they are looking beyond something that goes beyond just showing up at this point.

MR. POLLACK: The question as to what can you do, I agree with Bruce that I think it is very hard, but one thing is come back. I think that is another thing that is part of this. Again (inaudible) you already know, everyone is looking at this with a very jaundiced eye because they have not seen the President in the region and nobody does believe that Bush is really committed certainly to the peace process (inaudible) some of these other things. They know he is committed to Iraq, beyond that, nobody thinks he is committed to very much of anything.

If he goes and has a bunch of meetings, comes back and that is the end of it, they will see this as that was a one-of (?), that he felt he had to do it for different reasons, everybody criticized him for not making more of an effort in Annapolis, so he did it, but as we have with this President, he does not have the staying power or he does not have the attention span and he is not going to stick with it. He has got to stick with it because as Bruce is suggesting, it is highly unlikely that anything meaningful is going to come out of this trip. The only prospect is repeated pressure or repeated engagement, and even then it is going to be extremely hard as Bruce is suggesting because he is in his last year.

SPEAKER: Mike, did you have a question?

SPEAKER: On Saudi Arabia, two questions. One, can either of you address the current relationship between Bush and the king and just tell us a little bit about that and how it has evolved over the years? Number two, on Iran, what is the true Saudi feeling about Iran? On the one hand you guys are saying that they welcomed the Iranian president, they are trying to play footsie with them, on the other hand, the administration officials say time and time again both publicly and privately that we feel confident that the Sunni Arabs are concerned about Iran and are going to be with us in some kind of coalition that you alluded to, so I am confused about what the true nature of their feelings are.

MR. RIEDEL: The king has had a difficult and conflicting relationship with the President almost since inauguration. Part of that is exaggerated expectations pre-inauguration. I will put it simply that the Saudis thought they were getting the father and were very surprised at what the son turned out to be. They thought they were going to get a return to a Madrid level of activity, full-court press, a tough posture on settlement activity, and instead they got a President who was disengaged from the Palestinian issue from day one. If you recall, in the first year of the administration, the king snubbed the President repeatedly and said I am not coming. Over time, the Saudis have come to the conclusion that we may wish we have the father, but have to live with the son we are

going to have to make the best of the situation. I do not think there is any warmth there, and in private, Saudis are scathing in their commentary.

On Iran, the Saudis genuinely fear, detest, and hate the Shi'a and Persians, and with the combo platter there is particular hatred. Wahabiism has no place for the Shi'a, and Persians have been the enemy for 2,000 years. But as Ken I think rightly pointed out, this king has a track record of preferring to deal with his enemies by co-opting them rather than confronting them and he has tried repeatedly since he became crown prince and was de facto ruler to see if he could not work a deal with Tehran which would be live and let live. He received such a deal in 1990s with Khatami and I think he is now trying to see if he can get such a deal with Ahmadinejad.

SPEAKER: So that suggests that he is operating at cross-purposes with us.

MR. RIEDEL: I think so, yes. I think so. I think there is a great effort on both Riyadh and Washington's part to obscure that because they do not want the public spat, but I think that they in fact have a different emphasis on how they deal with the Iranians.

MR. POLLACK: I would like to put in a slightly different way (inaudible) what is going on in King Abdullah's head. Bruce is absolutely right that there is no question that Abdullah has been trying to (inaudible)

with the Iranians for years (inaudible) in the first instance (inaudible) I think you are right that the administration -- mortally afraid of the Iranians. They are. The problem is that fear can evoke many different responses. Fear does not make you automatically fight back. Sometimes you flee. Sometimes you co-op, you flatter, especially if you are an Arab ruler who is accustomed to a long tradition of dealing with other countries of varying power, you are going to have a whole variety of different ways of dealing with them. To a certain extent I think we had gotten a little complacent with King Fahad who saw the world very much through our eyes. Abdullah is not like Fahad, and Abdullah is much more like previous Saudi rulers, certainly like his own father in terms of his willingness to use the British but also to try to keep them at arm's length.

It may be that he is simply telling us, yes, of course we agree with your policy because that was the traditional response by Arabs, never to say no, never to say to the United States that is a stupid policy and we are not going to support you on that. It may also be alternatively that he actually sees it in his interests to have the United States taking a very hard-line position in Tehran either because it gives him options, he can try the reconciliation route and if that does not work, he can then help us to confront Tehran, or because it allows him to play good cop to our bad cop.

I can take this decision train in a dozen other directions, but he has a wide range of options open to him because of how he sees things and because of the position that he occupied. I think part of our problem is that we have locked ourselves in to a set of assumptions about Iran, about what Iran wants, about the threat Iran entails for the region, and what about the right response is. I think that the Saudis do not necessarily share any of those assumptions. They may agree with us about the fact that Tehran is a threat, I suspect that they may disagree with us about the nature of the threat and how best to respond to the threat, and I think that is what you are seeing with the Saudis.

SPEAKER: John?

SPEAKER: It sounds like you do not think there are going to be a lot of concrete results from this trip. I am wondering to what extent you think it is designed for domestic U.S. consumption, to show the President taking his grand tour of the Middle East where there has been so much strife and turmoil and he is at least talking about peace the whole time and seeming to advance it however incrementally.

MR. RIEDEL: I do not know how the White House came to this conclusion to go now. I cannot give you the inside, but what I can say is that that question is being asked in the region, why now? Some are comparing it to Richard Nixon's trip to the Middle East. For those of you

who do not remember, shortly before his impeachment and resignation, Nixon made a very high-visibility trip to the region which was interpreted by many as a desperate attempt to say I am still relevant, I am so important, how could you possibly throw me away? Obviously this President is not going to be impeached in the 12 months he still has in office, but the parallel is being raised in the region by people saying is this an attempt to prove relevance in his last days.

But there are also good reasons to go. As Ken laid out, there is work to be done in Iraq. If the President and the Secretary of State want to try to advance the Israeli-Palestinian process even just to turn over an active process to their successor which would be an important legacy, they have to keep working on it. And this is the President's first trip as President to Israel. It is almost extraordinary when you think about it that he is 7 years in and has not been to Israel before. So there is work to be done, but your question is being asked by people in the region.

SPEAKER: Bruce, may I follow-up on that very point?

When you say what you just said in the last sentence, I assume you are referring to the Arab side of the trip as opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian side. Are the Israelis and Palestinians asking the same question, why are you coming now?

MR. RIEDEL: The Palestinians are definitely asking the question. The Palestinians are extremely skeptical that this administration is serious and they have been from day one, but when you have the weakest hand in the region, you take any hard that people are going to give you.

The President is much more popular in Israel. He is seen as a good friend of Israel, a close friend with former Prime Minister Sharon who has done a lot for Israel in 7 years, and I think that many of them say that the first trip is way overdue and I expect that he will be welcomed pretty warmly by many Israelis.

MR. POLLACK: If I could just add to this issue of why now, just a couple of quick points. First, to go back to your question on Iran, it is one of the reasons why I do think the President is going to go to Baghdad because as Bruce points out, all the pressing issues that I can see out there are Iraq issues where, again, people in Baghdad are saying we have gotten to close and if we can just push a couple of actors into the right place, we could really start to open things up in a very important way and make additional progress. And that again says to me that it would be remarkable to me if he did to Iraq to try to do that work (inaudible)

The other point I want to make is to reinforce the point that I started out with which is that in talking to senior officials, very senior

officials in this administration, they seem very much to have in mind that what they want their legacy to be is that they went out on the right foot, that they were doing the right thing. They want to be able to say that they handed over viable policies all across the board to their successors. Again, we may smirk, anybody else can smirk, but they seem to really believe this and they really seem to believe that again one of the reasons why they believe that history is going to remember them well is going to be the professionalism that they showed, their self-sacrifice and devotion to the national cause, that they showed in their last year. So it may be, and one of the things that is going on in my mind, that they simply believe that they are going to start having the President going out to the region on a regular basis to just start pushing this agenda bit by bit by bit because it is the right thing to do because they want that to be part of their legacy.

SPEAKER: So you think he may go again?

MR. POLLACK: It will obviously depend on what happens with this trip, and it will also depend I think a lot on how this President reacts to this trip. If it is a horribly frustrating experience, no, I do not think he is going to want to do it again, like the Musharraf-Karzai dinner. On the other hand, simply speculating on why they are thinking of this trip, again, what I have heard from very senior administration officials is this very strong sense that they want to be seen as having done the right thing. We

substantive experts can make the case that let's set aside everything that has gone on in the past, that is all water under the bridge, if you are going to sit down with the President right now and say Mister President, you have 12 more months in office, what can you do to make the country better, slowing pushing the boulder uphill, making the effort, getting engaged in all of these things, that is exactly the right thing to do, and so at least it is very much consistent with this theme that I am hearing from these senior administration officials.

SPEAKER: Two questions, one on the Israeli-Palestinian question. This trip just was not announced yesterday, it has been known for a while, and so I am wondering, and you have sort of answered this, but what it says you that in that time and since Annapolis that it says that they have not -- they could have taken steps, they could have done more in terms of really naming the monitors for the roadmap or something. They could have taken steps, they could have done concrete things, but really nothing has been done since Annapolis. So what it says to you that they have not done, any things that they could have done, to be able to say this is what we did?

Then the second one is Hadley talked about, and neither one of you mentioned, the President's focus on democracy and freedom in the region and that that has been his push since the beginning or at least

since 9/11. Hadley talked about and tried to make the case that in fact we have seen progress, but neither one of you mentioned that. I am wondering, also I would like to hear what you say as to why you did not mention that, what it says to you that -- some people talk about the administration has gotten realism or whatever, but I am just wondering what it says to you that that does not appear to be the emphasis (inaudible)

MR. RIEDEL: One of the interesting questions about this trip is why it was not announced at Annapolis, and I do not have an answer to that. In an event which badly cried out for news, if they were planning this trip, certainly if I had been in the administration I would have said this is the perfect place where we announce that the President is not just going to come up Route 50 for one afternoon event, but he is going to the region. For some reason they did not do that and it is evocative of they have been slow to put out what they are doing on the Palestinian and Israeli issue. I think that comes down to the fundamental question of how serious are they.

What I hear from Secretary Rice and others is that they want to be supportive of a process but they are going to leave progress in that process in the hands of the Israelis and the Palestinians. They do not want to seem to be like Clinton or like Carter or, surprisingly, like Bush the

father pushing, prodding, and using pressure. They have been anathema to do that from day one, and so far it still looks to be anathema to do that. So they will host events, they will encourage, but they will not push and prod.

The democracy question, I am interested that Hadley raised that and I am sure Ken will have something to say about this as well. The democracy question though in the region right now hangs over the specter of Pakistan. If you are serious about supporting democracy in the Islamic world, here is a country of 170 million Muslims who are crying out for it, who desperately want free and fair elections, you have two political parties pressing every day asking for a military dictator to allow that process to go forward, and the President is going to be torn. If he goes around the Middle East talking about democracy, people are going to say the rubber meets the road today in Pakistan. Do you support free and fair elections? Are you going to put pressure on Musharraf to allow genuinely free and fair elections? And why have you stood by Musharraf so far in the past? That is going to be a tough one to play and it would have been in any case because democracy is not a big seller in Riyadh, and you do not see a lot of people in Kuwait jumping up and down. In Bahrain, one of the shorter stops I am sure, you have a Shi'a majority who is now showing almost nightly rioting and violence against the Sunni ruling elite. If you want to

talk about democracy in Bahrain, you have 80 percent of the population who is all for it. The problem is that they are not our friends, they are all Shi'a.

MR. POLLACK: If I could just add a little bit on the democracy and democratization question, is it possible that we are wrong and that the President will go out to the region and every place he lands will start shouting democracy and freedom from the rooftops? It is possible. Certainly if this were 2003 or 2004 when this administration was very unpredictable I would say I cannot think what they were going to do (inaudible) it seems unlikely in large part because of how they advanced or they tried to advance their democracy agenda going on. Again, this is something that I have heard from senior administration officials very recently in terms that they do still believe that this will be one of President Bush's legacies. They do believe that in the long-term, the long-run, that people will recognize that this is the right thing to do and that they will be vindicated.

I think that they have a lot of difficulty going beyond that. I think that what they are confident of, what they truly believe in their heart of hearts, is that the history books will give George Bush credit for being the first one to sound the liberty bell in the Middle East. What is unclear is what his legacy will be beyond that. And I think that what we would all

say, the most generous assessment that you can give, was bright idea, horrendous execution, and that is about as generous as you can be. I am not certain that administration officials who believe that ultimately Bush will be credited with having sounded that first note of freedom in the region, I do not know that (inaudible) come to grips with that. But I think it is very clear that whether or not they could actually say it to each other or even think it in their own minds, they do understand that they cannot keep pushing democracy the way that they have tried to in that very brief period of time in 2004 and 2005, that the steps that they were taking proved to be counterproductive I would argue because they were misguided from the start, and that the things that they have to do right now, the reasons for doing to the Middle East, run very much counter to really pushing this democratization agenda as we have already been saying.

Think about the reasons that we have laid out for why you go, think about the reasons why Steve Hadley gave you for why they should go, if you want to actually get some movement on the Arab-Israeli process, if you want to shore up containment of Iran, if you want to help progress in Iraq, none of those things is helped by demanding greater openness and freedom in Saudi Arabia or Egypt. All you are going to do is piss off their rulers and get them to be less supportive of you.

So given what it is that they do seem to be trying to do, and again I think that this is part of that realism, that recognition that first you need to actually dampen down some of the real big problems of the region because it is highly unlikely you are going to be able to get anyone to embrace, let's forget about democratization, let's just call it political reform, you are not going to get anyone to praise any form of political reform as long as all these fires are burning and as long as there is a real likelihood that you start stirring up trouble and you start creating instability for reform and you just simply are creating kindling which gets lit by these fires burning, in Iraq, in Palestine, in Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region. So whether or not they can actually express this, whether they have it in the forefront of their minds, I cannot tell you, but I think that intuitively they recognize that right now is not the time to be pushing hard for the democratization agenda even though they do still believe that that is going to be one of the President's ultimate legacies.

SPEAKER: Ken, can you defend one thing you said about you think it has been badly executed, just flesh out that for us nonexperts?

MR. POLLACK: I have a book that will be appearing in the spring which is going to lay that out in great detail.

He went out and screamed for democracy. They demanded that Mubarak and other people make changes. They were perfectly willing

to accept changes that in fact were wrongheaded, reforms that were wrongheaded. They were glad to have Mubarak do what he did even though the changes he put in place ultimately made it less likely that you would greater freedom in the future. They embrace elections now in places like Iraq and Palestine at a time when who knew anything about actual democratization was saying that moving to elections now will only set back the course of democracy in any of these places. That is the tip of an iceberg -- the most generous you could be to them is to say right idea, horrendous execution. Again if you really want a long discussion, Mike, on how they executed democratization badly and how they might have done it better, I will be glad to have that conversation with you, but let's save it for another time.

MR. RIEDEL: Two places to look for on this trip for the democracy issue is when he goes to Egypt and what does he say about Ayman Murano, what does he say about Saad Eddin Ibrahim? These are Egyptian dissidents who the administration embraced in the past, does he say anything about them? The other we have not talked about at all is Lebanon. Does he say anything about Lebanon on this trip? If you want to add an element of surprise and you wanted to do something that would get people's attention, a stop in Beirut would be newsworthy. What it would accomplish and how much of the Secret Service hierarchy would

have to be ridden over in order to get there are other questions. But those are two things to look for.

SPEAKER: That was actually in a sense my question. You had talked a lot about Baghdad, but I was wondering whether either of you think there would be other surprise visits, namely, Lebanon and the possibility of Afghanistan as well, and whether you have read anything into the pit stops and the duration of those pit stops on this trip with particularly spending a couple of nights in Riyadh, spending a couple of hours in Egypt, the spots that he is picking in the Gulf region whether there is logic -- questions we could have asked weeks ago, but whether there is any logic, whys and wherefores as to where he is going and where he is not going.

MR. RIEDEL: A lot of people have looked at the 3 days, I think it is 3 days in Jerusalem, seems like that has got a day trip somewhere that is not on the list. I think as to the Saudi thing, the king was finally persuaded to come to the United States with the lure of going to Crawford and being at the farm. I have a strong suspicion that part of the deal then was that whenever you are out in the region, you are going to spend the night at my farm too and that those promises have a way of coming back to haunt in the last year of an administration.

SPEAKER: Do you have any thoughts on whether Afghanistan might be in the offing? No?

MR. RIEDEL: It would raise the Pakistan issue.

SPEAKER: I have a question probably for Bruce, but Ken please chime in if you like. Given the skepticism that both of you have suggested about Bush's actual commitment to getting in and digging deep on the Middle East peace process, is this really now starting to emerge as the first significant discernible policy difference between Bush and Condi Rice? We are led to believe that this is some sort of legacy priority for Rice. It certainly does not seem so on behalf of the President. Is there a lot of daylight between the two at this point on this issue?

MR. RIEDEL: People are going to be looking at that particularly in the region. Some Israelis, for example, think that Rice is prepared to go too far and they think that they see in some of her statements the first signs of putting pressure on Israel and they say that the President has been a brake on her. Obviously people in the region and I think people in Washington are going to be looking at is there any sign of a disconnect here. I think they are going to go out of their way to say that this trip is a sign that the President is in lock-step with Condi in trying to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. But any missteps, and certainly if he goes to a podium and has trouble with Abu Mazen's

name again, no matter what else they do, that will be the signature photo moment of the trip. The irony about Annapolis was that the administration over and over again said this is not a photo op and in the end produced a photo op which is not the one they wanted.

SPEAKER: There will be at least one public statement early on. There will be a joint press (inaudible) with Bush and that comes very early in the trip. I assume that is a podium at which people are going to be waiting to hear something because (inaudible) kind of low-ball expectations as well.

MR. RIEDEL: Anybody in Hadley's position is going to lower the bar.

SPEAKER: What would be the most important thing he could practically say within these realistic options at that juncture for consumption in the region? What would be the one thing that he could do (inaudible)

MR. RIEDEL: I there are two things that he could do. One is if he could say that he and Olmert have reached an agreement on settlement activity which appears to be consistent with what is perceived in the region as an Israeli commitment to no more settlement activity while this process moves forward.

The other thing, and this does not require Olmert quite so much to be on board, is to flesh out the vision. Many people were expecting this in Annapolis. Say more about what you mean. Talk about borders in more depth. Talk about Jerusalem in more depth. The administration has made already commitments to the Israelis in the past in the famous letter to Sharon. You could balance those now with some commitments to the Palestinians. But that would require a willingness to step deeper into the briar bushes, but that would be one signal, a huge signal. If he does not do that, then in the Arab stops after Israel he is going to have a tough time convincing Abdullah and Mubarak that there is something real here.

SPEAKER: You are implying that the Saudis basically want the U.S. to be staying, there is no way we are going to pull rug out from under Musharraf, but in the last couple months it has been interesting because it seems like in some ways the Saudis were working at cross-purposes to the U.S. I was told that Sharif -- deal with Musharraf (inaudible) happened behind the U.S.'s back and the Saudis were saying this guy is not going to be around, we do not want Bhutto in there, we want our guy in there and that they are already kind of preparing for the post-Musharraf Pakistan and they want their person in there and that there is friction now between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia on Pakistan.

MR. RIEDEL: I think there is. Let me try to be more explicit here. I think the Saudis very much would like Musharraf to stay in power, but when they saw Benazir go back they felt that they were put in a very awkward position. They were in effect holding Nawaz Sharif in exile against his will and he was their guy and even in an autocratic absolute monarchy, that was an untenable position. So they went to Musharraf and said you decided to let her in, you have to let our guy in too. You have to level the playing field here.

I do not think that meant that they wanted to see the end of Musharraf, they were just in an untenable position, but you are absolutely right that it was very much at cross-purposes to what the administration was trying at the time to achieve which was this shotgun marriage between Musharraf and Benazir in which Nawaz would be left not only out of the picture but literally out of the country. This is another reflection that the Saudis are not singing from the same tune. They are pursuing their own independent interests there.

SPEAKER: Do both of you get a sense on how Lebanon is going to play into this trip -- going to Annapolis, the Saudis and the Americans (inaudible) and in return get some common purpose on Lebanon -- within weeks after that another general got killed and things seemed to be unraveling and in a sense the Syrians screwed us

(inaudible) do you get a sense on how -- because it does seem particularly within the Arab states in this whole issue of trying to isolate Iran, Lebanon and Syria are sort of (inaudible)

MR. RIEDEL: I thought the fact that this backgrounder symbolized the situation. Lebanon did not get on the table until very, very late, and I have not heard anyone in the administration talking about Lebanon. Again maybe it is a surprise. Maybe they have something there that they are going to pull out, but I would certainly be among those surprised if they did something like that.

MR. POLLACK: Yes, and I think for the administration that Lebanon falls into (inaudible) I think to a certain extent to the Arabs does as well. No one has a good answer for what to do about Lebanon right now. Part of the problem is that it is very hard for this administration to think about Lebanon in a strategic context because (inaudible) requires some kind of a bold step. You are either going to have to really endorse Lebanese democracy and be willing to put the screws to the Syrians and shut them out which is going to require breaking a lot of crockery. The United States is very angry at Syria right now, and the Saudis are very angry, but by the same token, they are not necessarily looking for that.

SPEAKER: Nor are the Israelis.

MR. POLLACK: Exactly. And obviously as you were pointing out there are ramifications for the peace process, there are ramifications potentially for Iraq, there are ramifications for other things that we want to do. Embracing the Syrians, selling out Lebanese democracy, A, is not something that they want to do either because they actually still do believe in Lebanese democracy and, B, because they still just have this absolute blind spot with Syria that they cannot stand the Syrians, they want nothing to do with the Syrians, they are never ever going to embrace the Syrians.

What I am suggesting is that Lebanon right now is kind of from their perspective they have boxed themselves in on Lebanon. They have no real room to make any kind of a significant move on Lebanon without giving up something that they consider very, very important. As a result, I think it is why they are simply avoiding the topic for the moment. When you talk to administration officials about Lebanon, what we hear is very tactical, and also it is very much talking out of both sides of their mouths, obviously we want to move the process of democratization forward in Lebanon, the following things need to happen, we are looking for this to happen, we are looking for that to happen. But by the same token, we need to see it in a regional context, and again what we hear is a lot of very, very small steps which even if they were taken would not

amount to very much. Again, I think in many cases it is simply an alternative to some kind of a strategic leap which they do not want to take because any strategic leap on Lebanon would require them to give up something they do not want to give up right now.

SPEAKER: (inaudible)

MR. POLLACK: There are plenty of Lebanese who think that the administration blew their chances a long time ago, they cannot stand the administration, they are waiting for the next one in hopes that something will happen there.

SPEAKER: Anyone else?

SPEAKER: I was going to ask about Syria, but actually just on that question also, are you sensing or hearing any indication that Israel is looking (inaudible)

MR. RIEDEL: There are certainly elements of the Israeli establishment particularly in the defense community and particularly Defense Minister Barak who believe very much that that is the track that Israel should pursue and that at a minimum Syria should be tested to see whether it is interested in going forward. They have been constrained up until now very much by the administration which was not eager to give Syria the Get Out of Jail card on Lebanon by advancing the peace process forward with Damascus. But there is certainly a sizable

constituency particularly in the defense establishment that would like to put Syria first and if that means selling out Lebanon, they have sold out Lebanon so many times before, it will not stop them for a nanosecond. Because it is a strategic advantage to end the Syrian conflict, hopefully breaking the Syrian-Iranian alliance, and having an impact on Hizballah and Hamas. So far this administration has not bought. It has moved from being actively against to a kind of posture of if you want to do it, pox on you, but we are not going to stop you. For Israel to make peace with Syria though it needs an active American partner. It cannot do it on its own, and this administration does not look like it wants to be an active partner on Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

SPEAKER: Do you think that the Israelis really believe that the Syrians can deliver? They are not even in Lebanon anymore. How much control do they really have?

MR. RIEDEL: That is the great paradox of having encouraged Syria to leave Lebanon, and now the Syrians cannot deliver on Hizballah anymore. Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it. But Syria could still put significant constraints on Hizballah, and a Syrian-Israeli deal also has advantages for Israel just vis-à-vis Syria that are strategically very attractive to people like Ehud Barak.

SPEAKER: Thank you all for coming out.