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The Brookings Doha Center  
A Project of Saban Center for Middle East Policy

FORWARD OR BACKWARD?

THE 2008 ARAB SATELLITE TV CHARTER AND THE  
FUTURE OF ARAB MEDIA, SOCIETY, AND DEMOCRACY

Doha, Qatar  
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**Introduction and Moderator:**

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**Panel Presentations:**

IBRAHIM HELAL, Deputy Managing Director  
Al Jazeera English

SAAD EDDIN IBRAHIM  
The American University in Cairo

MICHAEL RATNEY  
Chargé d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy, Doha, Qatar

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. AMR: Good evening, everyone.

Ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen, good evening.  
Thanks to all of you for coming. Welcome to this  
monthly policy discussion of the Brookings Doha Center  
where we are going to be discussing the Arab Satellite  
TV Charter. We are privileged to have in addition to  
such a wonderful audience three great speakers,  
Ibrahim Helal, Deputy Managing Director of Al Jazeera,  
Saad Eddin Ibrahim, professor of sociology at AUC,  
American University of Cairo, distinguished visiting  
professor at Kultur University, and His Excellency  
Michael Ratney, Chargé d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy, Doha.  
And also I believe welcome to the viewers on Jazeera  
Mombashar who will be seeing this shortly.

My name is Hady Amr. I'm the Director of  
the Brookings Doha Center which is a project of the  
Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. The  
Brookings Institution is America's oldest think tank,  
born in 1906, and the largest of its kind. The Doha

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Center here was established in 2007 with an agreement with the Prime Minister of Qatar and Brookings. We do research and programming on the socioeconomic and geopolitical issues facing the Muslim world.

The purpose of the Brookings Doha Center is to be a convening body and bring together business, government, media, and non-profits, to address the social issues of the day. We will be looking at international relations, human development, security, culture, and I cannot think of, in a sense, a more important topic today, along with the crises in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, than Arabic satellite TV. It has really played an incredible role in transforming in my view this region, and am pleased to discuss it here today.

I should just also say that like Brookings in Washington, Brookings Doha is open to a broad range of views. We do not as an organization take positions on any views. We are like a house of academics, a house of scholars, and all of our in-house scholars and guests are free to have their own views and we do

not have a political litmus test. Our event today is officially titled "Forward or Backward? The 2008 Arab Satellite TV Charter and the Future of Arab Media, Society, and Democracy," and we will be done in an hour and fifteen minutes.

Before I turn the floor over to our speakers, I wanted to give a little bit of background on the charter which was signed on February 12, a little over a month ago, at a meeting convened at the request of Egypt with the support of Saudi Arabia. The final document which was adopted by all member states with the exception of Qatar and Lebanon requires broadcasters in the region to do the following things. First, not to offend leaders or national or religious symbols in the Arab world, not to damage social harmony or national unity, and asked them to conform with the religious or ethical values of Arab society, to refrain from broadcasting anything which calls into question God or the monotheistic religions, and to protect Arab identity from the

harmful effects of globalization, with penalties which include withdrawing permits from offending stations.

We are very pleased to have three distinguished speakers today. Before I introduce the speakers I should say quickly that we had invited the Minister of Information of Egypt who could not make it. He had planned to send a consultant Dr. Hussein Amin at the last minute, but he could not make it at the last minute for scheduling purposes. So let me quickly introduce the speakers and then turn the floor over to them.

To my left is Ibrahim Helal, Deputy Managing Director for News and Programming at Jazeera English. He's got 20 years of experience in international journalism including roles with Egyptian TV, BBC, and various roles with Jazeera. To his left is Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim, professor of political sociology at the American University of Cairo and currently distinguished visiting professor at Istanbul Kultur University. He is here on one of his stops between Turkey and Doha. And he is also the chairman of the

Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo and has a long and distinguished career in the service of the Arab world. And finally, Michael Ratney, Chargé d'Affaires, of the American Embassy in Doha. In 2004 Mr. Ratney served in Iraq as the first political adviser for the Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA, in Baghdad, and then as principal officer in the regional embassy in Basra. He coordinated economic affairs in the State Department's Office of Israel and Palestinian Affairs from 2001 to 2003. And in addition to his various accomplishments, I noted in his biography that he also has a B.A. in communications, so he actually has specific educational training in this regard. I am going to turn the floor over to Ibrahim Helal and ask you all to please turn off your cell phones or silence your cell phones. Thank you. And I am going to ask each of our speakers to try to speak under 9 minutes and 59 seconds.

MR. HELAL: Thank you very much, Hady. To organize my input I would like first to note that as

far as I understand, the main title of our meeting today is not to curse what we received from the Arab information ministers, but to try to analyze, try to understand, and try to make the next move forward, so I will divide my talking into four main points. One is a bit of background, then would have to make three main distinctions, two guidelines, and one conclusion.

The background of this is I don't know why are shocked. This is the main duty of the information ministers. As this job became nearly obsolete but only in the Arab countries and Arab governments, the main job of the Arab information ministers is to try to curb, try to control information. Maybe it took them a little bit more than we expected to take this step, but this step was the only thing we can expect from this title Minister of Information in 2008.

The second point in my background is if you read through this charter you will discover how much whoever drafted this charter is not proficient enough in our satellite broadcasting field because of the vague way of putting terminologies. Actually, had



they used more experienced and more professional staff, more professional experienced people to put this together, we would have done it in a different way to restrict our work in a more professional style.

The third point is I think we should read through the Egyptian media scene more than outside Egypt because the initiative came from the Egyptian Information Minister and the Egyptian scene is changing very rapidly. I have been to Egypt last Christmas and discovered that the satellite broadcasting field became beneficial, became profitable, for the first time last year and that is why the mushrooming of a lot of satellite channels in Egypt became a worrying element in the Egyptian government's mind. When they allowed the Egyptian private sector to intervene in the TV business, they gave them satellite licenses not -- but in 2007 mainly one of the statistics showed that 69 percent of Egyptians are watching satellites. So it is not like before -- is safe, satellite, they can leave satellite channels to say whatever they want, now satellite

channels in Egypt became equivalent to -- penetration. They penetrate 70 percent of Egyptian homes, and the discussion on talk shows on the Egyptian satellite channels became equivalent to news bulletins on other channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia. So when they restricted the private sector in Egypt from making news bulletins, now the private sector deviated from making news and to putting news in a different context, in the context of talking shows. So it is an element of worry for the information minister in Egypt they needed to control.

Also we need to understand how much the satellite penetration became equivalent to the internet now. The satellite broadcasting in the Arab arena, every day you have new channels, every day I think we have more than 500 channels now and available on all Arab receivers. So it is not -- we do not have to defend the fact that we shouldn't have more of that because we don't have to defend this, we don't have to summarize it into Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, BBC, it's not only that. It's there are channels promoting

violence, there are channels promoting bad ideas, they are penetrating the fabric of Arab societies.

So this is the background. My three distinctions, there are three different categories of satellite channels. News channels such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, our newborn sister the BBC -- the general channels which I can say MBC and other channels. And the channels I was just talking about, the channels who are like the below standard channels. So we need to understand as well the below standard, below assessment, there are channels who are actually below any assessment. We cannot put them into one basket when you are defending the satellite broadcasting field.

So I come now to the two guidelines before we go into more discussion. We as media stakeholders should have regulated ourselves a bit earlier than that. We shouldn't have let information ministers to come to us after like 10 years of the satellite boom and to tell us you have this below standard level of broadcasting. After September 11th and after the war

in Iraq we had this -- Iraqization and Lebanonization style of broadcasting channels and it's really dangerous for us as professionals. We should have had come to this conclusion earlier that we needed to deregulate ourselves, we need to come together to meet and talk loudly about what kind of standard we should stick ourselves to. Why we didn't do that? Because we are competing badly, we are very divided as satellite broadcasters, and actually now we are exposed to such punishments. These punishments could be for the gate for us to sit together and talk loudly about what kind of regulations we should put as professionals because I believe regulations should come from us and not from the information ministers.

The second guideline is that history proved that any official interference always fired back and the official interference now I expect fire back because of two main reasons. The first reason is the amount of difficulty to prevent any broadcasting now because of the internet, because of the fact you can transmit from outside the Arab government control, you

can broadcast on other new satellites in the future. So any official interference will immediately fire back. And it will fire back for another reason. Once you interference, you encourage fanaticism to grow more than it is now on some Iraqi channels or some Lebanese channels and the division between opinions not on a professional basis will grow more and more.

The final conclusion out of my analysis over the current scene is that you can put all channels on one side and maybe Al-Jazeera on one side. The rest of the channels are more or less controlled by commercial reasons or mainly one government which is the Saudi government. More or less you can say if they want to interfere, they could have interfered. Al-Jazeera is standing alone in front of all channels in this fight and I believe that's why Al-Jazeera is more concerned about this charter and we are really thinking deeply about how can we move forward. The first option is to set together with other broadcasters and try to find our kind of like -- style of regulations. Or we should think of more creative

solutions, how to broadcast, how to carry on broadcasting without being under this governmental control. Thank you very much.

MR. AMR: Thanks, Ibrahim, for your remarks. Before I turn to Saad Eddin Ibrahim, I wanted to ask you, I was looking on the internet and I saw that the minister of information of Morocco said that Al-Jazeera was playing an important role in the media but that some of its work was "worrying." What do you think he meant when he said that some of your work was worrying?

MR. HELAL: Yes, because if he converts between us and the Iraqi channels, it's a known phenomena that happened after the invasion of Iraq after 2003 that each sect had its own channel to represent itself and the Iraqi government channel Al-Arabia, I'm not accusing anyone here, but it's obvious that they are not as objective as everyone expected. They are representing the government, not the society. They are not public funded, but they are a government-run channel. So in an environment like that you have

sectarian channels and you have the government main channel, everyone will perceive Al-Jazeera as -- because if you go -- and I've just received a recent email from an Iraqi official, I cannot mention his name, accusing Al-Jazeera English of inciting violence just because we had a couple packages about the situation in Anbar and this was the first time on Al-Jazeera English to show the situation in Anbar. It was about the Awakening groups working against the American occupation of Iraq and it is just a factual report but it was badly perceived by the Iraqi official because of the environment. This is the danger. We are living in an environment of division. If you are not with me, you are for sure against me because of the scene in Iraq, the scene in Lebanon. The ideological division in the Arab media scene is inciting more fanaticism in thinking.

MR. AMR: Dr. Saad Eddin?

MR. IBRAHIM: Thank you. Good evening.

Thank you all for inviting us. I would like to take an issue with Ibrahim on the real motives of the -- of

information -- Arab ministers of information. I doubt very much if the deteriorating standards or the substandard quality is really worrying. I think what basically seems to worry them is that the satellite television, at least a few of them, the star ones, the ones that have impact, are becoming very critical and critical of core issues that the influential regimes in the Arab world do not want anybody to touch or to report. So that's just one disagreement with Ibrahim.

Because many of these things have been there for quite a while. Why not? First time ever in the history of the Arab ministers of information did they convene an emergency meeting. In the Arab League every minister, social affairs, labor, defense, they have an Arab council of ministers in that field. Never did the Arab ministers of information before this meeting convene an emergency. What was the emergency? They never even took the trouble to tell us why the emergency and why now.

However, being the suspicious social scientists we are and that is probably something that



interrogative journalists should have done, I had to dig a little bit around that meeting and what preceded it. What preceded it was two other meetings. One was the council of the ministers of interior who never really met in emergency I guess because they make everybody nervous, but they are nervous themselves. They are very cool. These are the ministers of interior. And then a summit meeting between President Mubarak and King Abdullah. These two meetings came immediately before the Arab ministers of information convened their emergency -- issued their declaration of -- so that is in a way of background to just put things in context.

My second point, and here I think there is no disagreement with Ibrahim, is that the truth of the matter is that the Arab public space is getting out of control of Egyptian and the Arab regimes. The Orwellian story "1984" when you have the reformer, the Big Brother, who wants to control everything, even what you think about, what you wish to have and all that, this is the legacy of the 1950s and 1960s

authoritarianism elsewhere but also in the Arab world, and all of a sudden they have discovered that their authority to control is -- eroding partly because of these satellites, partly because of foreign competition, partly because of the spread of -- and in my own country of origin, Egypt -- have been taken to prison, have been arrested, have been tried, have been sentenced and so on which gives you a clue of where the concern is.

Having said all of that, I felt reading through the coverage of the ministers and the aftermath of the ministers that probably Al-Jazeera was the big ghost in the room. I know Ibrahim didn't want to talk about that especially because it may sound like self-serving, but as a neutral observer, you always ask why and why now and what is really behind it -- Al-Jazeera was the big elephant in the room of those ministers when they met in the Arab League and every attempt is made to either hit it down, to cut it down, to encircle it, to put it under siege, do something to tame it, the taming of the

shrew, that is Al-Jazeera which is considered by many of the officials as a wild, wild, wild west.

I remember -- represent among other things something called the Arab Democracy -- which was created 10 months ago. At this time we had our board meeting -- invited by His Highness Sheik -- the Emir and that was the first question he had with us. We sat around lunch. He said, gentlemen, I want to ask you a question. Al-Jazeera had already alienated at least eight Arab governments who either cut off relations with us or threatened to do so. How many regimes is the new foundation going to alienate? Very interesting. And the answer came from the former Sudanese Prime Minister -- and he said, 22 regimes, Your Highness. He said, 22? Including Qatar? He said, yes, including Qatar. Because in every Arab regime there is a real state security establishment that really controls things and these are the ones who will be offended by not only the free media but they will also be offended by any activists for democracy.

Anyhow having said all of that, I want to move on to we know what the Arab ministers are worried about. We know that they are their masters' voices and they have done what they did on instructions I believe from heads, from kings, from presidents and so on. And therefore what we are about to witness is really an epic battle to control Arab minds. So one thing to control the Arab public space is basically to control the Arab mind. And attempting to close the Arab public space is another way of saying wanting to close the Arab mind again and to condition it in the same Orwellian Big Brother manner.

What I'm going to do? People like myself who owes a great deal of at least getting his voice heard vis-à-vis Arab autocrats, I owe a great deal to Arab satellite, Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, MPC. When I was in prison, when I was on trial, these were the channels that will take my voice out to the world. Therefore we, all of us, the freedom fighters, have a real stake in defending the few windows that are still open before the Arab autocrats close them down. We

have another battle with Arab theocrats who are trying to close the minds by putting the fear in everybody of the hereafter and therefore try to control us through religion. So here the Arab autocrats are trying to control us through closing the windows and closing our minds.

We have to fight and we have to fight as freedom fighters. We have to use every method. And I am going to suggest to Ibrahim and to Al-Jazeera and to other satellites that are keen in preserving the freedom that they have, one is to take the lead for central regulation in order to preempt anything that the ministers may do. By the way, they are going to meet in June to implement the guidelines or to -- them into real restrictive measures. So before they do that I hope Al-Jazeera and the other major Arab satellites will take the lead for a self-regulating charter of their own. Second is to use also their access to the Arab public to ask the Arab public to get involved and to get involved by making its voice heard. Al-Jazeera is one of the -- it is the grounds

for anyone who doesn't have a voice. Let us get the Arab public involved by at least one or two days or three days before the forthcoming ministerial meeting in June, maybe once every month, once every week, is to just put a black flag outside their windows for -- and activists and action by the Arab public, peaceful but action that will show that Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, any of these, MPC, are not just hiding alone, that there are others who have a stake, who have an interest in defending them.

The other thing that they may also advise their viewers to do is to turn out the lights on the night or the two nights before the ministerial meeting and again announce that this is one way of getting their voice or their opinion known to those ministers, the ministers that call themselves ministers of information, and they are really ministers of disinformation as I called. I called them in Arabic, if you pick up my article -- so pick up the article in Arabic which is published -- it's simply an article that was published in Al-Jazeera on March 5 and of

course it is really my own opinion, it doesn't -- anybody, but I feel that I have a stake and all of you have a stake in keeping those few windows left open. So be prepared to put your black flags and to turn off the lights the night of the meeting of the ministers. Thank you.

MR. AMR: Thank you, Dr. Saad. Before I turn to Michael Ratney, I wanted to ask you a question as well just to play devil's advocate, and not necessarily my own view. But isn't in a way the charter in line with state sovereignty? I'm sure many countries around the world regulate things on TV, pornography or things like that. Again just to play devil's advocate, why shouldn't the Arab world come together like this to -- you've explained it, but isn't this in line with state sovereignty?

MR. IBRAHIM: That is what they say, that the U.K. has regulation, the U.S. has regulation, all of the democracies have regulation. Sure. Give me democracy and regulate me. But to deprive me of

democracy and you still want to regulate, that's a real overkill in --

MR. AMR: Thank you, Professor Saad. Your Excellency, Michael Ratney?

MR. RATNEY: Thanks very much. Hady, I'd like to think you invited me here today because I'm a really interesting person and a great analyst of regional politics but I have to accept that I think you invited me here because I'm a representative of the U.S. government. So I'm not of the region, I'm not a citizen of any of the countries that are seriously affected by this charter. I'm not the target audience for the satellite channels. I'm an official. I'm an American. And I'm an official from the United States government. So I thought what I'd do is just take a couple of minutes to talk about how I as an American and I as a U.S. official regard this charter. As I started thinking about that occurred to me is what drives those feelings is a very visceral reaction when the subject of freedom of the press comes up and it's something that I think is quite



widespread in the United States and is very much born of the American experience with the press.

I was looking around and I found a great quote. It's actually a quote within a quote. It appeared in a speech by a man named Jack Anderson who was a very renowned journalist in the United States. He was the original muckraking journalist. He saw it not only as his professional responsibility, but his moral responsibility to dig into what political leaders were doing and exposed that to the public. He died about 10 or 15 years ago. In the late 1990s he gave a speech in which he talked about Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson, obviously one of the founders of the United States of America, one of the drafters of the Bill of Rights which contains the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which talks about freedom of the press in 1791. So that feeling of a right to a free press and a right to free speech goes back a lot way in the United States. And if you'll indulge me, he spoke, this is the journalist Jack Anderson, spoke of Thomas Jefferson and he said,

"He advocated and supported a free press and yet Thomas Jefferson was savaged by the press. He was excoriated by the press. He was abused more by the press than Bill Clinton or Richard Nixon or anybody that we have had in recent times. Thomas Jefferson was savaged by the press. And he was human. He didn't like it. He went nose to nose with a couple of editors in Philadelphia and he said to one Philadelphia paper, Nothing in this paper is true with the possible exception of the advertising, and I question that. And yet," Jack Anderson goes on, "that wise Thomas Jefferson in a moment of truth said," and this is the one of the famous quotes from Thomas Jefferson, "If I had to choose between government without newspapers and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter." So that feeling I think really governs an American official's approach when subjects of freedom of the press comes up and when charters such as the one that was issued by the Arab League comes out.

I think it's true that we are uncomfortable with the idea of the government regulating the press. I think we are far more comfortable with the opposite idea, in fact, of the press playing a watchdog role against the government, for the press playing the role of holding the government to account, and that is why when any government seeks to impose laws which regulate the press at the whim of politicians we would get very uncomfortable.

The subject that Hady brought up is an interesting one, which is aren't there regulations? Isn't the press regulated in some way? And I think that's obviously true. It's obviously true in the United States. In our system, again I speak personally, I speak on the system that's in my own country, the press is really regulated in two ways. One is it's regulated by responsibility. We're obviously great proponents of enormous freedoms of the press, but we also recognize that journalists have to behave responsibly. It's an obligation of journalists and that obligation can be a personal one, it can be

one that's imposed by the particular media, the newspaper or the satellite station, or the radio station, or it could be one that is born of a professional association. But again, that individual and that collective responsibility is one of the main ways that the press is regulated in the United States.

The other way is, quite frankly, it's laws. It's laws and regulations that govern various aspects of the press. I should say though that in the United States those laws are born of elective legislatures, they're reviewed by independent courts, and they're often the subject of litigation. They're often the subject of legal challenges because there's a very lively debate about what constitutes some of the things that we seek to regulate, be they obscenity or divulging secrets or protecting privacy. We regulate those in a great variety of ways, but rather than seeking to regulate an entire segment, an entire media, we tend to try to use legislation and regulation to protect particular categories of people, and those can be children. We might seek to protect

the identity of children from being divulged in the media. We might seek to prevent or protect children from being exposed to obscene images or violent images. We might seek to protect national security secrets from being exposed in the press. But all of these things are individual protections that seek to legislate very precise areas. And in no case are there regulations that seek to protect politicians. In fact, even very traditional legal regimes that have laws against defamation, in the U.S. system it is very difficult to prove that a public figure was defamed, that a public figure was libeled. In fact, in the United States when you come a public figure you pretty much accept the idea that lies are going to be told against you, insulting things are going to be told against you, but I think the average American elected official would rather live in a system where the press tells lies and the press is insulting and the press is defaming to him as an elected official than to live in a system where there is no press or a system where the

press is restricted from doing that and restricted by the politicians themselves. Thanks.

MR. AMR: Thanks, Michael. Before I turn to the audience I wanted to, since you're a public official I wanted to put you on the spot, and bearing in mind that this is on the record and broadcast, you talked about you'd rather live in a society where press regulates government. Saad talked about Al-Jazeera sort of being the elephant in the room on this charter. And without getting into specifics, I know that the U.S. has at times had a tough relationship with Al-Jazeera particularly during the war in Iraq, the early stages of the war in Iraq, the government of Israel right now is having a tough time with Al-Jazeera. How do you square the ideals that you talked about with Thomas Jefferson and that I think all of us share of the press being the guardian of information and then at times governments including, as a U.S. citizen our own government, refusing to deal with certain press agencies or even banning them from certain things.

MR. RATNEY: Sure. There's lots of times where we have objections as a government to what Al-Jazeera has said or what lots of media outlets have said, and Al-Jazeera is a good example. When you think about it, probably the most difficult point in the relationship between Al-Jazeera and the U.S. administration was toward the beginning of the Iraq war. It was the time when the famous scenes of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld criticizing Al-Jazeera during his press conferences, and it was a time where we had very serious differences that we've discussed quite openly with Al-Jazeera management about the coverage of U.S. policy and U.S. actions in the Middle East. The only thing I would add is that while all that was going on, Al-Jazeera was in the audience at those press conferences, Al-Jazeera was operating in Washington and New York, Al-Jazeera was embedded with U.S. military units in Iraq at that time. Al-Jazeera was a welcomed participant in that albeit it one where we often objected to their editorial slant.

MR. AMR: Thanks, Michael. I was about to turn it over to the audience, but I'll let Ibrahim go ahead and respond.

MR. HELAL: I was head of news at Al-Jazeera -- during the war in Iraq and we were not embedded properly. We were allowed very few places at the last moment without enough access to reach the places and we finally -- eventually after we made our way illegally into Kuwait which at that time Al-Jazeera was banned in Kuwait, we sent our correspondents, sneak them into Kuwait to go through Basra but not by American -- we were not embedded at all with American forces in Iraq actually. Our sole correspondent managed to be embedded with British troops in South Iraq was actually exposed to bad treatment when he was moved from a British battalion to an American battalion and we had to take him away because he was treated as a spy by the American battalion in South Iraq. And I don't want to talk more about history, about the bombarding of our bureau in Afghanistan and Baghdad later on. There are many justifications, none



of them are justified and reasonable. But we ended up by losing two bureaus and a correspondent was killed because of American bombarding actually. This should be loudly discussed. Now we are criticizing the Arab information ministers but America has played different rules since September 11th. I didn't want to go through that because I thought we are just discussing one angle, but now we should discuss loudly the American intervention in this and how much Washington helped indirectly -- the way of thinking in Washington helped indirectly, guided indirectly, Arab ministers of information to reach this conclusion because of the fact that either you are with me or you are with the enemy has actually come from Washington before it came from the Arab information ministers.

MR. RATNEY: I knew this was too good to be true. You get invited as an American official to a discussion on freedom of the press and you think it's easy, you can come up and give a reaction, freedom of the press is good, restrictions on the press, bad. I knew there was going to be a trap. I don't want this

to turn into an argument between the U.S. government and Al-Jazeera. (interruption) and lots of opportunities to do that, and it might be a great opportunity for Brookings to host something on that someday.

The truth of the matter is most of those arguments take place in public, and I don't think we're shy about talking to Al Jazeera about the differences we have with them, and I don't think Al Jazeera has ever been shy about sharing the differences we have with U.S. policy.

The only thing I won't let go is this notion that U.S. policy directed that Al Jazeera correspondents or bureaus in Afghanistan and Iraq were targeted. I don't know how much detail you want to get into that other than to say that it's ludicrous. It's ludicrous to say that the U.S. Government would specifically, militarily target -- in fact, it's impossible to imagine it from my perspective, working inside the U.S. Government -- or would purposely try to murder a journalist because we disagreed with his

editorial line. It's ludicrous and it's offensive.

The fact of the matter is when a journalist wants to be close to the fight and cover a war zone, it's dangerous and dangerous things happen.

MR. AMR: Let's turn it to the audience now. We can get back. I think this is a good conversation, and we can get back to the American role in all of this as well, but we are in the Arab World and we should really focus on the process by which the ministers of information from the region took this and what the response is from the Arab World.

What I'd like to do is turn the conversation to the audience to ask a question. If you'd like to direct it to a specific panelist, that's fine. I'd like you to just, since we have such a wonderful audience here and you don't all know each other, state your name and your affiliation and keep your question, please, to one minute.

QUESTIONER: Hello. I'm Dr. Allen Fromherz. I'm in the International Affairs Department at Qatar University.

I was wondering if you think that freedom of the press, like democracy, whether it's a universal concept or culturally specific because freedom of the press means something different in the Arab context and should it mean something different in the Arab context?

Should the cultural perspective and context of the Arab World, in that sense, be respected or is there a universal ideal of freedom of press?

I guess I'm being platonic. Sorry about that.

MR. AMR: I don't know who would like to? Saad?

MR. IBRAHIM: (*Arabic*) I would say even if there is cultural specificity for every region, it should be people in the media who can deal with that, not government bureaucrats, not autocrats, and that's what I'm hoping that Al Jazeera would take the lead in getting some self-regulation charter.

I'm also reminded that only autocratic regimes would raise up questions, just like the

Chinese kept talking about Asian values. Every time somebody criticized them for human rights and lack of freedoms, they invoke this "Asian values."

The same thing with the ministers of information, the first part of the declaration is full of this kind of exultation about Arab identity, Arab values, Arab ethics, Arab morality, Islam and all of that. These are all to tune the Arab public to accept the poison that came in the last part of the declaration, and that is not to touch symbols of sovereignty, talking about sovereignty in the fourth part of the declaration, and the symbols of that sovereignty meaning the Arab kings and presidents. That really probably was the basic reason for the whole exercise.

So, yes, the cultural specificity to let the people in the culture, especially people in the field, decide that for themselves.

MR. HELAL: Can I just add one point to clarify that. Al Jazeera already started regulating itself four years. Actually in late 2003, early 2004,

we introduced our first code of ethics, and we made it public on our web site. We made it public to any, to all Arab audiences. But the fact is since we are too divided, we are competing with each other fiercely in the field, in the Arab media field. I don't think we can ever meet together.

Now, maybe after this charter, we should together to gain clarity, but Al Jazeera already had these things since the beginning, and we are accountable in front of our code of ethics.

MR. AMR: Thanks, Ibrahim.

QUESTIONER: My name is Nabeel El Masri, and I'm retired. I'm living in America, in Qatar now, from the States.

Regarding this meeting of the so-called information ministers, I don't know why everybody is worried about it. Okay?

You shouldn't worry at all about it. It's meaningless because we know as Arabs ourselves, they can shut you down. They give you a license, any government, any Arab government can turn you off, can

take your license, suspend it and you can go out and broadcast from somewhere else.

So I think the whole idea that was really putting it at Al Jazeera, as you said, and I resent putting Al Jazeera with everybody else. Al Jazeera is in a different class. It's by itself. That's my own opinion. Okay?

So you don't have to worry because Qatar did not sign on it, so you don't have to worry about that. Okay?

Number two, regarding the restrictions of governments, yes, there are restrictions. The States, there are restrictions, but it's only on the free airwaves, on the radio, and the free airwaves that you get a license for it. We know what happened to Don Imus. He got fired twice for speaking foul language and racial remarks. It was a radio announcement. Don Imus is a radio announcer, right. Those certain words were illegal to say on the radio.

o there are restrictions which I agree with. I have no problem with that at all. But, at the same

time, the satellites we have with the X channels and the Playboy channels and all this stuff, paid-for satellite should not be regulated by anyone because I can regulate it myself at home. It's freedom. Anyone can do anything he wants. Also, I can turn it off. I can change the channel. So this idea of sending regulations and controlling it is just for the birds, as far as I'm concerned.

MR. AMR: Thank you.

Mr. Ibrahim Helal: We need to clarify a technical issue here. Uplinking and downlinking the signals of satellite channels could be a good punishment for some governments. Of course, theoretically speaking, minds that are upset can stop the license for Al Jazeera, for Al Manar, for Al Arabiya and, in this case, you'd be only left with Orbit. It's not easy in 90 percent of the Arab World to run a satellite. It could be expensive. In some places, it is not feasible. So they are using it.

Actually, I need to update you, that they already started sending warning letters to some



channels -- minor, small channels. They start maybe to push their luck with some minor, small channels, telling them that your contracts of uplinking with Midsat is not going to be renewed. So it's serious.

Yes, we shouldn't be worried now because we have other alternatives, and we are popular enough, and maybe the mass will march in the streets, but we should be at least serious about studying it.

MR. AMR: Thank you.

QUESTIONER: This is probably a follow-on.

MR. AMR: Please identify yourself.

QUESTIONER: My name is Richard Wilkins.

I'm Managing Director of Belmont International Institute for Family Studies and Development.

My question is sort of a follow-on. Freedom of the press in America, I've been a law professor in the United States for nearly 30 years, and it's almost become freedom of smut rather than freedom of the press. You have to make yourself have a straight face when you read the Supreme Court's latest decisions on freedom of the press. Three years ago, they had a

learned discourse about so long as it was adults that looked like adolescents that were engaged in sexual acts, it was protected by the First Amendment. If they were really adolescents, however, then it could be prohibited.

Again, with due respect, I think Thomas Jefferson and all of the Founding Fathers would be appalled with any of that, whether they were adolescents or adults that looked like adolescents, that they could claim that that kind of activity was protected by freedom of the press.

To what extent is this regulation aimed, if at all, at an honest attempt to protect Middle Eastern society from the kinds of materials that really are inundating the West?

It's not a matter that's as simple as well, you can choose to turn it off. The problem is, in the West, you can try to turn it off. You cannot turn it off. Once you have the internet in your home in the West, you have thousands of channels. If you have children, good luck trying to keep it away from them.

Is this an attempt to try to regulate that? If so, is it in any sense a worthwhile effort or is there a better way to do it?

MR. RATNEY: I'd say one thing. Your first point is the sort of discussion people get into in the United States all the time -- the definition of pornography, how do you control it, how does a parent stop their child from seeing it -- and they are very fair questions. I think at the end of the day what's interesting, though, is there aren't discussions about whether or not a president or a governor or a senator can be insulted. Those are taken for granted, and that's the fundamental basis of freedom of speech that Thomas Jefferson was talking about.

You're certainly right. I don't think he ever could have foreseen what would happen in the media in the 21st Century. It's a strange time.

But I think at the end of the day, the fact that there are legal arguments about cutting very fine points about strange arguments on obscenity as what's out there is because the fundamental issues have

already been decided and the fundamental issues have already been accepted.

MR. AMR: Thanks, Michael.

Ibrahim or Saad, do you have a comment?

MR. IBRAHIM: No, I don't because none of these ministers of information or their governments have ever really cared about these issues until five, six years ago. What really gave them away is that last section of the declaration when they talk about sovereignty and they talk about symbols of the sovereignty and they listed heads of states and high officials who should be protected against attack or against a kind of belittling or insulting. That is really what gave them away.

The first part, I would live with and many of us as parents, as citizens of this area, of course, are horrified of obscenity as anyone else. But what worried and I'm sure worried people like Ibrahim and people working in the media is that last part which, in my opinion, is the real reason for the declaration.

MR. HELAL: The problem is that we mix good

cards with bad cards, and you cannot. Yes, you cannot accuse them directly of deliberate attack of freedom of speech although it is included in the charter that there was a deliberate attack on freedom of speech. This makes it, on one hand, smart and, on the other hand, not professional at all.

But if we are talking here collectively, as media, Arab media collectively, yes, we gave some ammunition for this attack by allowing such and such low standard channels to carry on. We should now separate ourselves from those channels and lead a collective effort to change and to regulate ourselves seriously.

MR. AMR: Thanks, Ibrahim.

Did I see another hand over there, sir?

QUESTIONER: Thank you. My name is Nicholas Wilson. I'm a recent political economy graduate from the (inaudible) College.

I would like to respond to my fellow American here but, of course, hear from any of you.

MR. AMR: Questions, questions, we're here

for questions.

QUESTIONER: If the political situation in America is encouraged by media to inform the public who are ultimately the deciders of the politicians who impose policy, where does the impetus among the Middle Eastern World come to allow for the freedom of the press, given that citizens in the Middle East are not provided with similar political rights?

Would not a less informed populace be easier or better for the overall stability of Middle Eastern countries rather than a well-informed, yet politically impotent, majority?

MR. AMR: Who would like to answer that?

MR. RATNEY: You're from the Middle East, and I'm not.

MR. IBRAHIM: No. Go ahead. Give it a try.

MR. RATNEY: I'm not exactly 100 percent sure I understood the question.

QUESTIONER: Isn't it in the best interest of the stability of the region if the population is not as informed?

MR. AMR: Please hold the microphone closer.

QUESTIONER: Isn't it in the best interest of the region if the population isn't as informed or given censorship rather than being exposed to all these ideas?

MR. AMR: I see. The best interest of the U.S. or the best interest of the Arab World?

QUESTIONER: The best interest of the stability of the region.

MR. AMR: Does lack of information encourage stability in the Arab World?

MR. RATNEY: Or, more to the point, is it easier to govern stupid people?

I think our point is that the sorts of regulations that we're talking about governing the press, restrictions on the press have to come from an informed people, and they have to be the result of democratic processes. They can't be imposed from above.

MR. AMR: Saad? Ibrahim?

MR. IBRAHIM: Well, basically, I think that

I have repeated myself now. Of course, our rulers prefer to keep people uninformed and to keep people following like sheep. Mobilize but follow the leaders. Anybody who breaks that pattern is perceived as a threat to stability. The word, stability, has become a code name for stagnation and the continuation of despotism, and we challenge that. Some of us challenge that.

Now, sometimes, we see American administrations, who were big advocates of democracy promotion a few years ago, now have decided to go with stability even if it means stagnation.

I must say that although I don't have any direct evidence, but there are two corroborating grounds on which I can construe that the Arab ministers of information are acting in concert with Washington and with Tel Aviv. I want to say, without being conspiratorial, this is based on reports, one, that the U.S. has denied Al Jazeera a license to broadcast in America until today. They have not. Even though Al Jazeera has requested a license like so



many others, they have utterly been denied.

MR. AMR: Is that true, Ibrahim?

MR. HELAL: Yes. Al Jazeera English, talking about cable, yes. We are allowed to have just one contract maybe. Very oddly, we signed one contract.

MR. AMR: Who is permitting that or not permitting that?

MR. HELAL: Who is permitting that? There are many factors, yes, many factors.

MR. AMR: Just as a point of fact, I do get, at my home that I maintain in Washington, I do have Al Jazeera English by satellite.

MR. IBRAHIM: Yes, many people in America used to get satellite.

MR. AMR: But to follow up on Michael's point, though, it hasn't clearly been banned by the U.S. Government because I do see it on my satellite which is through U.S. licensing.

MR. HELAL: There are limits.

MR. RATNEY: May I, please?

First of all, let's just state the facts. Al Jazeera has not been banned in the United States. It has never been banned in the United States. Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English are available on my desk at the State Department when I work in Washington. It's available at the desk of anybody that works in the Pentagon, and it's available to any cable subscriber in any state or city in the United States where there is a cable subscriber that has chosen to carry it, and they choose to carry cable channels based on economic reasons and not on political reasons, unless for some reason they personally dislike Al Jazeera for personal reasons.

The fact of the matter is Al Jazeera English is a pretty new station, and I'm not sure they've done the greatest job of marketing themselves to cable providers in the United States.

The notion that it's been banned is not true. The notion that some political fix is in to keep it out of U.S. households is not true.

MR. AMR: Thank you, Michael.

I don't know if Mr. Attaf has a comment on that or if you would rather.

MR. HELAL: To put some context to this piece.

MR. ATTAF: Actually, my last trip to Washington.

MR. AMR: You're currently with Al Jazeera?

MR. ATTAF: Yes. I'm a consultant with Al Jazeera English. I do agree with Mike, that the U.S. Government has nothing to do with it at all. Actually, the cable companies are sometimes afraid to carry Al Jazeera because of the backlash of the subscribers. It's not because of the government. I agree with him.

MR. RATNEY: I personally think eventually demand will drive it, and Al Jazeera English will start showing up on more cable providers in the United States. But, at this point, if a station comes out with an entertainment program that makes the cable provider a lot of money and the choice is between that or another English language news station to compete

with CNN and FOX and BBC, I think the answer is pretty easy for a cable provider in the United States. It's going to take time.

MR. AMR: Thanks.

Sir? Okay, we've got one, two, three over here. So let's do them in that order.

QUESTIONER: Hi. I'm Wusaf Aburka, Al Jazeera English.

We have to admit that history, that philosophers and thinkers have always been targeted and hunted down. Mine is a comment rather than a question, and I need the panelists to comment back if I'm mistaken.

I believe the charter was not a spur of the moment. It was built on two grounds. The first is that the media, including Al Jazeera, have succeeded in reaching out and illuminating the public. The second ground is that the symbols or figures of sovereignty, what Mr. Saad said, are meant, the charter is meant to curb the media from targeting the authority or the authoritarian figures in the society

including Egypt, my homeland.

It also a living example that these media have reached out based on the accountability within. In other words, these media already have their well-established regulations, regulations from which they were long operating on.

MR. AMR: Thank you.

Who would like to respond? I guess, who doesn't work for Al Jazeera?

MR. RATNEY: Saad, that leaves you.

MR. IBRAHIM: Well, they indicated Al Jazeera seems to have been the big elephant in the room of the ministers of information, and a great deal of what happened was really basically meant to encircle and to hem down Al Jazeera.

But I was going to say beside the American attitude toward Al Jazeera, and I choose my words very carefully, I did not use the word, ban. I said it was not given a license. There's a big difference between given a license and being banned.

Two, just 10 days ago, if you read the

Israeli press review, Israel has decided to declare war against Al Jazeera. The minister, the dignity minister of foreign affairs, confirmed that yes, they have a plan to boycott Al Jazeera and to discredit Al Jazeera wherever they can.

So, here, you have denying a license, the Israeli attempt to cut down Al Jazeera as much as it could and then the Arab ministers of information. All of this shows that whether it is a conspiracy or a concerted action, there is something fishy and that's why I say we, all of the democracy advocates in this part of the world, have to stand alert and to mobilize as many or as much of the public opinion to protect those few windows that we still have, the few ones we get a breeze from, like Al Jazeera.

MR. RATNEY: Sorry. For the record, Al Jazeera doesn't need a license to broadcast in the United States.

MR. HELAL: On cable, not satellite. Satellite is for free (inaudible).

MR. RATNEY: They don't need a license.

They need acceptance by the local cable provider to buy the service. There's no license that the United States Government grants or denies for Al Jazeera to appear in the United States.

The only restriction might be -- there is no restriction on Al Jazeera. There are journalists freely covering events. All they need is a visa, and this U.S. Embassy constantly gives visas to Al Jazeera correspondents to go cover events in the United States, frankly, even though we know that in many cases they may cover it from a negative angle.

MR. AMR: Ibrahim or Saad?

I think it's an important point of clarification.

MR. HELAL: I don't want to go into this rhetorical negative angle because I don't think we should think like that about Al Jazeera. We're talking now about how Arab information ministers are looking at Al Jazeera, and you are copying them by saying we are covering things by negative angles.

We don't intentionally -- intentionally --

do anything negative or positive. We try our best to be objective and accurate and, to do that, we should be given enough room to cover and enough access to get accurate information. This is one side.

The other side, I need to comment on how it is easy or difficult to govern the illiterate or ignorant. I think it's more difficult to govern the ignorant because once you have lack of information by these normal ways -- satellite channels or internet or press -- you will get the same nature of information by illegal ways, by different underground sources. The sources will go underground and that will destabilize the scene. That's what I mean by my second guideline, that any official or external intervention will fire back. It will mean automatically you'll have more of Al-Qaeda style of propaganda against any obvious legal way of transmitting information.

I think Michael has mentioned that we are being watched in the States and they would be affected immediately by any of blockage of information by Al



Jazeera because it is a free source of information about the Arab society for American officials to get information. For the first time in the States, now we can listen. You can watch the thousands of programs and minutes on air from different satellite channels. You know more about Arab society than before.

MR. AMR: Please, and I think we're going to go about another 12 minutes.

QUESTIONER: *(Arabic)*

MR. IBRAHIM: Did you all the get the question, the comments in English?

MR. AMR: No, we didn't.

MR. IBRAHIM: She is a journalist, a very able and beautiful journalist here in Qatar, saying that we seem to be overreacting the ministers' decision. The fact that many of the satellites are state-owned in many of the countries or by big business really makes the kind of field very narrow.

What really we are talking about is these few states or few big businessmen who are controlling all of these satellites are doing whatever they're

doing very knowingly. So why are we overreacting?

Well, my overreaction is because of the few. Even if the majority are controlled by the states, even if they are controlled by business that in turn has connection with governments, yet I found that there is a margin of freedom that I am worried that this margin is diminishing with this declaration by the ministers of information. As Ibrahim said, they've already revoked at least one or two contracts for minor satellite television, and this may be just a dress rehearsal of things to come.

With the servers, Midsat and Arabsat, being controlled by the two conveners of the emergency meeting of the ministers, meaning Egypt and Saudi Arabia, makes me worried. I know my country well, and I can decode the messages that come from the Egyptian government. Having learned that the very hard way makes me truly worried. So, take my word for it, I worry.

MR. AMR: Thank you, Saad.

Okay, we had a few more questions here, one,

two, any order. Go ahead.

QUESTIONER: Hi. I'm Wayne Schleidel from Qatar Foundation, and I'm very interested in how this self-regulation is going to work.

I see some difficulties. One difficulty, if indeed Al Jazeera is the 700-pound gorilla in the room or the ghost in the room, how will a code of ethics or self-regulation protect it if indeed the ministers of information do indeed want to silence organizations like Al Jazeera? That's on one hand.

On the other hand, is there a danger with the self-regulation of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, to self-regulate political expression to protect oneself that one winds up being perhaps self-defeating? What criteria will you regulate yourself with?

MR. AMR: Thank you.

Did you get the question?

MR. HELAL: Yes. The first question was clearer than the second one. The second one, actually, I doubt I understood it.

But the first question, I think we, by having our own code of ethics, by making it available for all our correspondents and journalists and editors, reading it and maybe changing it from time to time -- we have done one change over the last four years and it's available on the internet -- I think this is the vital step for us to protect ourselves. At least, we have done our best. This is the least we can do to protect ourselves against any external intervention. No one can come and claim that we are not regulating ourselves and we don't have any reference when we cover children's stories or any ethical issues.

The second question, actually I don't know what exactly did you mean.

MR. IBRAHIM: The criteria. Yes, I heard your point. I will comment.

I think courts should be the final arbiter, not ministers, not bureaucrats -- courts. So if you have codes or guidelines by the profession, whenever an aggrieved party is offended by a given satellite

broadcasting, he can take the station or that satellite to court. The court will first resort to the law on the books and next will resort to the code that the profession has chosen. That happens with all professional syndicates, at least in the Arab World, that they know.

Whenever there is even no law, then the court will say what do people in the profession say, and the court will use that as the functional equivalent of a law and will rule on that basis. So the criteria is an independent judiciary. That would be the road.

QUESTIONER: Thank you.

MR. AMR: Before concluding, we're going to take two questions now and then concluding remarks from the panel, and then we'll wrap in under seven or eight minutes.

So, sir?

QUESTIONER: Mike Connell, CNA Corporation.  
I have a question.

Say these guidelines are actually adopted by

the member states of the Arab League and they're imposed rather harshly. Say Al Jazeera is not allowed to operate in most of the Arab countries. What do you think the reaction of the Arab public will be?

MR. AMR: That's one question. Let's take the other question over here at the same time and then responses and concluding remarks from each of the panelists.

QUESTIONER: Good evening. I'm Abbas Masud from (inaudible) of Qatar.

I don't know why you are focusing too much about Al Jazeera. What about Lebanon? Lebanon has an objection also. Why do you think that Lebanon has an objection for this?

Thank you.

MR. AMR: Michael, why don't we start with you and then work this way on the answers and concluding remarks.

MR. RATNEY: What was the first question?

MR. AMR: The first question was --

QUESTIONER: The reaction of the Arab

public, say these guidelines were actually adopted, what do you think the public reaction will be?

MR. RATNEY: That's, honestly, a question you'd have to ask an Arab public and not a U.S. official.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible.)

MR. AMR: Okay. Why don't you just give you concluding remarks on the overall?

MR. RATNEY: Yes. My only concluding remarks would be obviously I didn't get into this to turn into an argument with Al Jazeera.

I think, honestly, on this issue or on the right side of this issue in a lot of ways, the objective is a free media and the value that a free media creates for a democratic society. It's very important. I think it's something that Al Jazeera obviously values, and it's a basic value of most free media in the world.

I would only add my point about the idea of Al Jazeera having negative coverage of the United States wasn't meant to complain about negative

coverage of the United States. It was only meant to say that whether or not the coverage is negative is not a criteria for whether or not a station can broadcast or a journalist can report from the United States. That, to me, is a fundamental test that I think any country's legal system and any media should rule by.

MR. AMR: Saad?

MR. IBRAHIM: Well, my concluding remark is that what the Arab ministers have tried to do and they'll continue to try to do in June is not regulation but strangulation of free media, to put it very bluntly. And, therefore, we have to stand vigilant and we have precedence not in all Arab countries but in a country that they know well, and that's Egypt. When the government tried to silence the judiciary and to punish judges, crowds in Cairo marched on the court when a trial was being taken place or certainly hearings were taking place, and they paralyzed the city of Cairo two days in a row. It made the government of Egypt back down.



Therefore, I am calling in this concluding remark, and I hope this will be taken seriously, on the Arab public that has enjoyed the margin of freedom that the Arab satellites have given us in the last 10 years, to stand vigilant, to defend it, to protect it. There are two or three ways of doing so including putting flags, black flags out, including turning the lights off, including writing to the presidents. People would react if they are not afraid. What I'm suggesting here is something that they can do without certainly taking unnecessary risks.

So that's my concluding remark. It is an outcry to defend our few free satellites in the Arab World.

MR. AMR: Ibrahim?

MR. HELAL: Yes, I think Arab reaction hasn't yet come to terms with what exactly happened. It takes time for Arab mass to understand and it needs one or two examples for them to understand what kind of impact. It goes beyond any comprehension that Al Jazeera or any other main satellite channel will be

banned from any satellite.

For many years, for 10 years now or 11 years, the only barrier between any Arab viewer and watching the truth or different opinions was just to buy the satellite receiver and tune it. Now, it goes beyond their comprehension that there would be another barrier. They will tune the receiver. They will not find Al Jazeera. It's not easy for them, and I think it will be a very tough reaction if it happens, even for one satellite company. It will not be easy for them to perceive.

What I'm really worried of is the self-censorship from some maybe junior or less experienced journalists in the Arab media profession, that they will feel with this charter, that they will need to really restrict themselves. They will think twice before moving ahead.

Actually, we were in a bottleneck before this charter. We already suffer from this self-censorship after September 11th, after the comments on how to define resistance, how to define terrorism.

Because of this emergency environment we are living in, we are already passing through very difficult and sensitive period for journalists. With this charter, it's becoming more difficult for journalists to shine or to grow up.

This is my main worry, and that's why we should think collectively of self-regulations but to think loudly as media about what can we do in the future. Collective effort is what we need now.

MR. AMR: Michael Ratney, Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Ibrahim Hallel, thank you all for spending the evening with us.

I'd also, before we break up, like to thank the staff of Brookings Doha which worked so hard on this: Hiba Zeino, Diana Jalloul and Kais Sharif.

Lastly, I'd like to really thank this distinguished audience for sharing their evening with us and invite you for tea and snacks in the adjacent room.

So, thank you all for coming.

(Applause)

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