

Philip Zelikow
Islamic-US World Forum, Doha
February 17, 2007

I was asked to address the overall theme of the conflicts that divide us, and whether we can find a productive way forward.

My answer is yes, we can find a productive way forward.

Because America is so singular and visible, the world focuses on American choices. As an American, this can be flattering. Americans like to think their country is very important. And so it is. So Americans half-expect this attention. They even half-welcome it, even though the commentary is usually critical and negative!

But all this attention on American choices is misleading. The main story now is not about us. It is about you.

The main issue facing leaders of the Arab and Muslim world is to decide how their societies should adapt to the modern, globalized planet in which they live. In other words, what kind of country do you want your children to inherit?

The United States indeed played a central, leading role in shaping the modern, globalized world we all live in today. As that great twentieth century struggle came to an end in 1990 and 1991, global forces accelerated to create the era of world politics we live in today, an era in which problems and conflicts tend to be transnational in character, defined less by borders and alliances and more by the fault lines running across societies.

Compared to what had gone before, the security challenges of this new era did not seem to be so serious, at least at first. Even though these challenges were smaller, the international system was too weak to handle them. So the United States had to step in, again and again. These are usually painful stories when one looks back on them, not because America did too much, but because American intervention came too late, or was ineffective. And it was always reluctant.

After 9/11, the United States changed. The country mobilized for a new kind of war. It began changing or rebuilding every major national security institution in the government – a process that is still underway. America led an international campaign to liberate and stabilize Afghanistan. That campaign continues today in partnership with the Afghan government. Around the world the fight continues against an ultra-violent cult of Islamist extremists. And the United States led an invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Iraq. Looking back on it now, with the advantage of the information now available about the former Iraqi regime, it certainly seems that Saddam Hussein was on a path that was bound to come to a bad end. The questions were how, and when, and how high a price Iraqis, Americans, and others would have to pay when that end came.

For a generation to come, historians will debate the motives and causes for the decisions surrounding that invasion. I was not part of that administration. But I expect the historians will not end up finding much evidence of a deliberate strategic campaign to remake the Middle East. They are likely to find an exceptional confluence of historical circumstances that came together in a unique way, not the unfolding of a grand design or master plan for the Middle East.

Today, America and other leading countries do not have a blueprint for the international system that can manage the problems of this new era. They do not even have the architectural drawings of such a system. Some think this is bad and that we should do more; others believe the role of governments and international institutions should remain limited. I believe we should build the capabilities needed to solve practical problems, and then see how these specific solutions accumulate and interact to produce a system that no one country will have designed.

In this stage of historical development, a few ideas should stand out.

-- Nations and peoples must decide whether they will finally reject the belief, rooted in a kind of social Darwinism, that international life is a struggle of all, a zero-sum game in which one's gain is always another's loss. Most of the twentieth century was a struggle to build, with some success, a globalized system in which most nations attained unprecedented prosperity and freedom.

-- A sensitive and sensible balance of freedom and public order, along with respect for human dignity and the rule of law, seem to help societies manage change, and change is one of the few constants in the modern world.

-- Globalization has not overwhelmed the nation state. States remain essential in at least two ways:

- first, they provide most of the infrastructure and law enforcement that allows a globalized system to function; and
- second, they shape – and should be accountable -- for the way their own societies adapt to the global system.

You may know Tolstoy's famous line, in *Anna Karenina*, that "all happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." For nations, I think the description can be reversed. In international life it seems more that each successful adaptation to the global system is successful in its own way; all failed states resemble one another.

So I say again that the key issue of conflict for the Arab and Muslim world does come back to how they will answer the questions of: What do you want for your people? How do you want your societies to adapt to the modern, globalized planet you inhabit today?

Only Arabs and Muslims can finally answer these questions.

Many of you are very accustomed to an interdependent world and ready to accept interdependence. Your countries must then find your own workable, cooperative ways to adapt. You face choices about this every day.

Yet some reject this reliance on the outside world. They reject the materialism that globalization seems to represent and beckon to older ideals of religion, sect, or nation. They insist on the self-sufficiency and independence so that the nation, however they define it, can fulfill its destiny without outside restraint.

It is not hard for calls like these to find an audience, especially if people feel that they are not likely to be able to find a sense of identity, or participation, or profit, in this modern, interdependent world.

It is hard to predict the future. That is why I am so glad to be back at the university, teaching history. In my history classes, I know what will happen next.

But let me ask each of you to try a little experiment with me. Imagine that you are an investor with ten million dollars to invest. You have opportunities in four countries: Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. You must pick one of them. You can buy an option that will tie up your money for ten years. Each of the options are connected to construction, so you will make a lot of money if the country is experiencing strong, wide economic growth ten years from now, in 2017.

That is the bet: Knowing what you know today, which of these countries – Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan -- would you bet on for strong, general economic growth ten years from now? Think about the factors you would want to look at and think about in each of these countries.

You can see again why I'm glad to be a historian. But it is an interesting experiment. Reflect on the questions you would ask yourself in deciding about this investment. It may illustrate some choices leaders must face very soon.

Now let me apply some of these very broad ideas to some specific policy problems today.

Let's start with Iraq. The leaders of Iraq now face decisions about how the Iraqi people will live and work together. The initiative for making those decisions now rests with them, not with the United States.

I am not smart enough to predict with confidence what the Iraqi leaders will choose. What I can do is keep an eye on American interests. We have some vital interests in Iraq, interests that can command wide support.

- (1) Iraq should not become a base for global terror. It should not become another Afghanistan.
- (2) Iraq should remain independent. It should not collapse into being a proxy battlefield for regional rivalries.

(3) The UN-mandated coalition should try to keep Iraq from sliding back into tyranny. The last one caused a generation of war. We should try to prevent another.

In this vital place, with so much uncertainty, America needs to step back, but not step out. We should act like a foreign government. We should not be a central player in their domestic politics.

But America needs a flexible, diversified, and decentralized presence. I think most Iraqi leaders will want our help for a long time to come. We should be willing to provide help, understanding that this is a country going through revolutionary change. Lasting improvements will take some time. We might be able to sustain a long-term commitment in Iraq if we are prepared to back, decisively back, people and policies that show promise. And our government should be prepared to step away from people and policies that are not likely to advance American interests or Iraqi renewal.

In the American political debate, the polemics on each side tend to leave the Iraqis out of the equation. Some argue we should escalate regardless of what the Iraqis do. Some argue that we should withdraw regardless of what the Iraqis do. Both positions seem to be more about people looking inward, than looking at how to protect enduring American interests in the future of Iraq.

I will comment only briefly on the Israeli-Palestinian question, since we will be having a full panel discussion just on that in a few minutes.

I have said before, and repeat now, that I think an active policy to address the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is an essential part of any American foreign policy for this region. Secretary Rice is working very hard on this problem. She is traveling to the region again right now. Her commitment to the peace process, and President Bush's commitment, is strong and it is sincere.

I was disappointed that, in the Mecca agreement, Palestinians found it so hard to recognize Israel's right to exist. Return to my point earlier about the fundamental choice: Do you adapt to interdependence, or reject it? Here there is truly interdependence. No Palestinian state can be viable unless it has some basic economic understanding with Israel. And you can't get much of an economic understanding with a state you are trying to destroy.

Finally, I want to speak briefly about Iran's choices.

The recent discussion about Iran's support for people killing Americans in Iraq is a good illustration.

Start with what we know. The latest official intelligence community view is as follows:

"The Qods Force -- a special element of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard -- is involved in providing lethal support to select groups of Shia militants in Iraq. Based on our understanding of the Iranian system and the history of IRGC operations, the IC [intelligence community] assesses that activity this extensive on the part of the Qods Force would not be conducted without approval from top leaders in Iran."

This is a rather restrained summary of the available evidence.

The alternative hypothesis, of course, is that Iran's top leaders did not approve of such a large-scale Qods Force effort.

Some of you know more about Iran than I do. You can judge which hypothesis you consider most likely.

But we have some other important evidence. The U.S. and Britain privately and publicly asked the Iranian government to explain this behavior in 2005. The communications were significant, and included a public statement from Prime Minister Blair himself. The diplomatic replies were dismissive. And the Iranian-supported violence actually escalated in 2006.

There are some ironies here.

- Many in Iraq and in the region actually think the Iranians are doing much more than this. As some of you may have experienced personally, the American government has actually, and rightly, spent quite a bit of time trying to convince Arab leaders that their fears of Iranian mischief were exaggerated.
- A further irony lies in the long delay before America began talking about this problem and acting on it. For many months American

officials were torn between a desire to do something and a wish to avoid confrontation. When a government is conflicted about what to do, the usual result is inaction. So the delay was precisely because America did not want a confrontation. But, over time, it became more and more obvious that Iran mistook American forbearance for American weakness.

- The world, as usual, focuses on American debates and American choices. But by far the more interesting question is why the Iranian government and its various agents decided to engage in such risky actions in the first place, and stand by the actions – even escalate them – after hearing America’s and Britain’s concerns for more than a year.

One hypothesis is that at least part of the Iranian government actively seeks conflict, perhaps believing this will help their revolutionary agenda both at home and in the region.

If so, the United States will not be drawn so easily. U.S. forces will defend themselves in Iraq. There are, and should be, severe costs paid by those who come to kill our soldiers. But, from everything I know, the United States does not want a war with Iran.

Again the world is not trying to tell Iran what to do. It is really asking a question, a question that only Iranians can answer. What kind of nation are you trying to build? One that works with the modern, globalized world? Or a nation devoted to attacking it? President Ahmadinejad proudly defies the world and says Iran does not need any help.

Iran’s leaders can, of course, cite the examples of countries like North Korea. No country in the world has worked harder to be self-sufficient. But do the proud inheritors of a magnificent Persian civilization really want to have all the stature, all the prosperity, all the influence, and all the security that North Korea now enjoys today?

If Iran will comply with the UN Security Council resolutions, all of its concerns can be discussed with every country of interest, including the United States. The cooperative path is there, if Iran wants it.

Right now Iran stands for and with those who want to reject and attack the globalized system of cooperation. Perhaps this will change. I hope so. For

now, though, the best response is patient, unified determination. It is good to keep the Iranian challenge in perspective. This is, after all, a country that is deeply divided at home between different visions of the future. Its economy is struggling and is quite dependent on the outside world and outside investment just to retain its current performance. Iranian policies have won few, if any, real friends in the world, aside from Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea. This does not look like the wave of the future.

My hope is that, if Iran can see and must face the real costs of its own policies, then, over time, the Iranian people will make good decisions about the future they want for their children.

You have been very patient with an ex-government official. I have discovered an amazing thing, though. With every week that I am out of the government, the problems get easier to solve.

Thank you.