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The Widening Perception Gap:
U.S. Policy and the Arab World

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C O N T E N T S

Welcome and introduction:

MARTIN S. INDYK, Senior Fellow
Director, Saban Center for Middle East
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Featured speaker:

SHIBLEY TELHAMI, Nonresident Senior Fellow
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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. For those of you who have joined us before, I hope you appreciate the upgrading of the facilities for which we have to thank Ray. I am not sure why we are convened in the boardroom, but perhaps it is a recognition of the importance of our speaker today who I guess is known to all of you, but let me just do the basics, and please start your meal.

Shibley Telhami is the Anwar Sadat Professor at the University of Maryland and a Senior Nonresident Fellow at the Saban Center at Brookings. He is somebody who has written and studies political dynamics in the Middle East and is I think generally acknowledged, and we certainly appreciate him highly for his understanding of those dynamics.

In recent years, Shibley has focused on public opinion in the Arab world and has done a number of quite original polling in of different

countries which he will tell you about, and some of you will have heard of this before. Today he is going to talk about the most recent polling numbers and analyze them for us based on a poll that he did just recently. Some of the results are predictable and some of them are surprising, but what is not surprising is that Shibley brings to this analysis a freshness and originality in point of view that I think will be of great interest. So, Shibley, welcome, and thank you for giving us the benefit of your results and analysis.

MR. TELHAMI: Thanks, Martin, and thank you all for coming. I just want to say that I liked particularly one thing about Martin's introduction, he said in recent years he has focused on public opinion, and a lot of people I think may think that that is my preoccupation in politics in the world, although I actually come at the study of the Middle East and my early writing was focused very much on power and the

distribution of military and economic power, it still is to a large extent, and I still think the states are the key players in the international system even if their power may have been reduced, and I do not think that public opinion is the only game in town, but I think a lot of people do not understand the complexity of politics in the region that involves public opinion and I would be happy to address the relevance of public opinion a little bit later on and why it matters for us to look at it even as we know that Arab governments have been able to withstand vast opposition on core issues by their public as witnessed in the Iraq war where you've got 90 percent opposition to the Iraq war and the government supports it tacitly anyway and they get away with it, and the question is so where is the cost, and I think it is a very simplistic analysis just to look at the fact that they can do it and not looking at where the costs are. The costs are somewhere in the system but you have to look at them, and they are

very important and they cannot be ignored and they effect behavior in ways that are not at once obvious but clearly have to be addressed and should be understood.

I also want to give you a little bit of perspective on this particular project. This particular project actually was not designed as a public opinion project as such. This is the fifth year of the project, the fifth annual public opinion poll. We have probably five more to do. This is the end of phase one, as I say, to close the book that I am doing on this issue.

It is really not intended to much to just look at public opinion in absolute terms. It is intended from the beginning to look at the changing dynamics of politics in the region particularly as a consequence of the change in the media. I started thinking about this back in the mid-1990s with the revolution in the media, the information revolution, and I hypothesized that these transnational media were going to have an

impact not so much necessarily on opinion, but more an impact on identity, how people see themselves who they are. Therefore, they were going to have an impact on the behavior of states as well as on regional politics. I designed this project from day one to examine that relationship. That is why in many of the questions that we ask in this poll we focus on the media, what people are watching on television, how many days a week, and then we run a statistical analysis to see whether there is any relationship between some of the questions and their media viewership, and to look at, more importantly, over time. Those of you who have done public opinion polls and have studied opinion polls know that one of the more important questions is to see how it is changing over time and what are the factors that explain that change. It is very important.

We have not had a good history of public opinion polls in the Arab world, and one of the important things about this particular project is

that we have a baseline. We started with repeating some of the very same questions every single so we could see how they are changing, as well as add new questions that are dependent on events. So this is the background. The background here is far more complex than it is just being about opinion as such, and some of the questions were designed with that kind of big theoretical question in mind that is really defining the project.

But what I am going to talk about today is only this poll with a little bit of addressing some of the change, but reporting in this particular poll on some of the important issues that are particularly facing American policy in the region and tie it to some of the recent political events particularly on the Arab-Israeli issue. I am going to focus quite a bit on the Arab-Israeli issue, but talk also about Iran and the so-called Sunni-Shia divide and Iraq, and also

notions of identity and what comes out of this poll.

But I want to say if you look at what is happening this week, the Arab summit meeting trying to revive the Arab peace plan of 2002 that was initiated by Saudi Arabia, you look at the secretary of state's visit and talking rather ambitiously about a revival of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, the policy of the National Unity Government, the Saudis in a way backing it and brokering it. It is kind of interesting that one of the things that is missed in all of this is that Hamas in essence has aligned it with the Saudis. This is kind of a dramatic shift here that people have not really witnessed much, and in that sense, also the Saudis have restored to Hamas a little more legitimacy as a mutual benefit.

But this is all happening with a background here. What is the background? You will see some of it in the polls, and in some ways you will see a little bit of an explanation as to

why the King of Jordan who comes to town and given the rare opportunity to address a joint session of Congress who could have chosen to speak about many issues including the dangers of Iraq and the spillover effect of Iraq and the fact that he has nearly a million refugees on his soil that he has to deal with, his desperate need for assistance domestically, his worries, and he chooses to make this on single issue, the entire speech on the urgent need for American diplomacy to resolve the Arab-Israeli issue. What explains that? Why would a king exploit this opportunity to do this in particular? Obviously here one of the reasons for it is that the speech was as much intended for home as it was intended for Washington. Clearly he is reading his public opinion and sees what the core issue is in his public opinion, and he clearly also is hoping that Secretary Rice is serious and wants to give a little bit of backing in Congress. As one of the officials accompanying the king told me, he hopes to protect her back in

Congress as she goes for diplomacy in the Middle East.

If you look at the polls and see what the maneuvering of Arab governments to relaunch this peace initiative, you will find the desperation because I think what you will discover in these polls are two really important trends. One is a widening gap between governments and their public on most of the core issues that they are addressing today. That includes the Shia-Sunni divide, their attitudes toward Iran, their attitudes toward the United States, their attitudes toward what the priority threats are in the Arab world, the public and the governments are talking on different planes.

Yet there is the other trend which is the public still looks at the U.S. and the world largely through the prism of the Arab-Israeli issue, and remarkably, a large number of the public is prepared for a comprehensive peace with Israel based on full Israeli withdrawal from the

1967 borders. That is, there does not appear to be at least a principal opposition to an issue like the Saudi peace plan which is really interesting and that this is one of the areas where actually there is a coincidence of public and governments, one of the rare issues where there is a coincidence, and I would like to go through some of the attitudes here just to make the point starting with the Arab-Israeli issue specifically.

This question I asked for the very first time, What step by the United States would improve your views of the U.S. most? I gave them all these options. This was not an open question, and I did not give them in this particular order, withdrawal of the U.S. from Iraq, withdrawal from the entire Arabian Peninsula, stopping aid to Israel, pushing for democracy more effectively in the Middle East, providing more economic aid to the region. You can see that by far the number-one answer is brokering Arab-Israeli peace based

on the 1967 borders. By far that is the issue that they see as most important.

I want to say that there are some interesting variations here, notable variations, particularly Saudi Arabia. I put this in country by country, and you see that in every country the number-one answer is brokering Arab-Israeli peace by far. In Saudi Arabia, while that gets a good minority, the number-one answer and the number-two answer are pulling out of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. It is very interesting because I think that bin Laden was onto something in Saudi Arabia when he initially championed essentially withdrawal of American troops, that what you are looking at is maybe Saudi Arabia on this regard, the Saudis are focused on the American presence in the peninsula even more than they are focused on the Arab-Israeli issue, and I think that is really interesting.

When you consider the outcome of the Lebanon-Israel war, who do you think emerged as

the bigger winner? Here I think, too, this is intended to measure in some ways the read of Israeli power and you will see later on also attitudes toward Hizballah, how they deal with it. These, by the way, are the weighted totals and I will give you the breakdown by country because there are variations from country to country.

You can see that 60 percent of Arabs think that Hizballah won the war. That is the perception. But if you look at the country by country while I think in every place the number-one answer is that Hizballah won, look at Saudi Arabia. The number-one answer is that Israel won which is interesting, and I think in some ways that is the one case where the kind of Saudi official line about the Hizballah war having brought nothing but disaster to Lebanon may have had some resonance, although you will see with Hizballah it had no impact. It had kind of an impact about Israel maybe prevailing here, but it

really did not have all that much impact on all the other issues related to the war.

For example, when you consider the outcome of the Lebanon war, who do you think the biggest loser was? You can see that 50 percent of people say Israel, and then the number-two answer is the Lebanese people. When I presented the Lebanon results earlier this year, you could even see the sectarian divide within Lebanon itself, but in this particular case it is clear that people see that Israel was the biggest loser.

After the Lebanon war, describe your attitudes toward Hizballah. That is important because Arab governments have been taking the line against Hizballah as a consequence of the war saying that Hizballah did the wrong thing. What you find is contrary to the views of governments, the views of most people in the Arab world have improved of Hizballah. I think that only 8 percent had more negative views of Hizballah and that is really interesting I think. And that is

true even in Saudi Arabia. That is the point here. Look at the numbers. If you look at this country by country, certainly in Jordan, in Egypt, in Morocco, even in the United Arab Emirates, a large number of people say their views improved of Hizballah. Even in Saudi Arabia you have 58 percent having more favorable views of Hizballah as a consequence of the war despite the fact they think Israel won. So the attitudes are not here obviously aligned with those of the government, and clearly not along the Shia-Sunni divide as one might expect.

How important is the Palestine in your priorities? That is a question we ask every year, and these are roughly in harmony. They vary a little bit. The variation tends to be only between answer number 1 and answer number 3, and the vast majority consistently have been saying either it is the single most important issue or it is in the top three issues. Do not take these to be absolute because it is an open question. It

does not mean that they really think it is more important than having bread on the table. That is not the read to read this. It is to read it as a measure of importance psychologically and to look at how it is shifting over time, and it remains very highly important. Seventy-seven percent say it is in the top three issues to them.

Again, if you look at the breakdown country by country, that is certainly true in the United Arab Emirates, in Jordan, and in Egypt, but interestingly, in Saudi Arabia it is in the top three more than the single most important issue because that was obviously reflective in some ways to the answer about attitudes toward the U.S.

Looking at the recent violence in Lebanon and Gaza, describe your attitude toward Israel's power. These, by the way, are all new questions, obviously they are related to the Lebanon war, but I have to tell you that I have asked more intrusive questions about Israel this time than I have ever asked, and I was a little

bit uncomfortable in some ways asking some of these questions because we have pushed the envelope every time in these polls. In fact, it was kind of interesting, and I don't know, we have not done an analysis of it yet, but typically you get a very good rate of return in the Middle East when you approach people to do a poll, much better than we get here in the U.S. People agreeing to do it is a very large percentage of people who agree to do it, face-to-face interviews.

This year it was one of the lower returns, and we do not know whether it was the intrusiveness of the questions or whether it was something else. We have not analyzed it yet, but there was something interesting about the dynamics of that.

This question was designed in essence to look at the public perception of Israeli deterrence. I say public and really that these are public opinion polls and I have already said that governments see it differently. I do not

think that governments today think Israeli deterrence is less effective because of the failure in Lebanon. No one is going to attack Israel because they think Israel is not going to hurt them even more. I do not think that is true. But at the public level, and in that sense to which the people will support nonstate actors and the empowerment of nonstate actors, I think these questions matter a lot.

This question about Israeli power gave them three options, that Israel remains powerful and will continue to use its position and to consolidate its position even more, that Israel is now weaker and it is a matter of time before it is defeated, or no one can tell whether Israel will get stronger or weaker. Those are the three questions about their assessment of Israeli power after the war. You can see a plurality of 46 percent say Israel is weaker, only 13 percent say Israel remains strong and will consolidate its power, with 36 percent saying that no one can tell

whether Israel will be stronger or weaker, more realism. But clearly, more people think Israel is weaker. There is no question that it was an undermining of Israeli deterrence. That is true in most countries, but again look at Saudi Arabia, to some extent Jordan, too, but in Saudi Arabia, people who say no one can tell, I did not have that in there country by country. I want to go to a different question, but let me just see one more thing here. Here it is.

This is a question that is intended to assess how they view the Israeli-American relationship in the context of politics in the Middle East. What do you believe Israeli policies in the region and U.S. support for these policies? I gave them three options, that Israel influences the U.S. support through domestic politics, that Israel is a tool of American foreign policy, a Chomsky-like argument which was, by the way, popularized in the Middle East especially by Nasrallah himself who kind of made that argument

in one of his speeches during the way, and that Israel and the U.S. have more mutual interests, that that drives it more.

I was actually surprised by the answers. It is not what I expected. I did not know what to expect, I guess. But I thought that they would buy into the Israel lobby argument more. Elites mostly talk about it more than any other, and the Chomsky argument, I knew it was gaining, I did not know how well it was gaining, but you can see actually a 42 percent plurality things overlapping interests. In some ways one can see this as kind of more and more people thinking the two are linked in their minds and they see it in a variety of ways. You will see particularly on notions of threat how they equate Israel and the U.S. And in some ways, they are looking at American interests as being somewhat more overlapping with Israeli interests. There are some variations across the board, interestingly in a country that is very

friendly to the U.S., the UAE, a plurality sees Israel as a tool of American foreign policy.

Here is an optimistic finding, which is which of the following statements is closer to your view, that I am prepared for a comprehensive peace with Israel based on the 1967 borders, and I think that Arab governments should do more to attain it, I am prepared for a comprehensive peace with Israel, but I do not think the Israelis will accept it peacefully, and even if the Israelis pull out of all the occupied territories, Arabs should not have peace with Israel.

This is not, by the way, a question that is worded to test what terms they will accept. This is only a question designed to find out whether there is a principled opposition to a peace deal or not because I am giving maximal terms here is full withdrawal from 1967, and I think that is all you could do. You cannot test the broader Arab public about what terms they will accept, that is ridiculous, so the main thing here

is to test the principle, are they prepared for the notion of peace with Israel.

I think it is rather interesting to look at because you have essentially over 60 percent prepared for a comprehensive peace, you have 29 percent not prepared for a comprehensive peace, and of those who are prepared for a comprehensive peace, a good number think Arab governments are not doing enough, while, of course, more think that Israel will not accept it peacefully. But again, there is variation country by country, and here you have the Saudis stand out a little bit more because I think they have the largest number of people who are opposed in principle, 42 percent who say they are opposed in principle to peace with Israel, so they have a little bit more harder views in Saudi Arabia. But interestingly, look at the second-largest segment of the Arab public that is principally opposed to peace with Israel, Jordan, the country that already has peace with

Israel, so that puts maybe the Saudi reaction into some perspective here.

I have already said in my introductory remarks that there is a widening gap between the public and governments on many of the other key issues and that includes Iran and the Shia-Sunni divide and you have already seen a flavor of that Shia-Sunni divide with attitudes toward Hizballah, that that is not a driving issue. But you will see it even more in attitudes toward Iran and Iraq that that is not the prism through which Arabs are actually looking at the world, that the Shia-Sunni divide is not the lens through which they are making an evaluation, and I will come back to this in terms of final assessment.

Here is a question I asked broadly, name the two countries that you think pose the biggest threat to you. I ask this every year, and they can name two countries. You can see that 72 percent mention the U.S., 85 percent mention Israel, and only 11 percent mention Iran.

Clearly, when you go country by country that changes a little bit, although Iran is actually not on the bar here because in some countries it did not even make it, but the trend is the same even in the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, that is, that most Saudis see the U.S. and Israel as the bigger threat to them above any other, and certainly above Iran, and there is not much variation. And that is even true with the United Arab Emirates where even 56 percent see the U.S. as more threatening than Iran.

This is really striking because I needn't tell you how governments view this. Clearly, the UAE government views Iran as the number-one threat to it, the UAE government sees the U.S. as its primary ally in confronting Iran with this, and the Saudis to a lesser degree, but certainly they see that differently. So the views of the governments on this are really not in harmony with the views of the public on this. And the UAE, by the way, are aware of the public's

views on this and they are concerned about the public's views on this and they are defining the issues publicly a little bit different because they are aware that the public has a different view on this. So it is rather interesting, I think, particularly since one of the big arguments against the Iraq war that you heard among Arab elites and certainly governments, but generally across the board, was that Iran was going to be empowered by the dismantling of Iraq, that the balance of power will disappear and it will lead to an Iranian power. This is not the main worry here for these people.

Do you believe Iran is conducting research for peaceful purposes or is actually developing nuclear weapons? Fifty-one percent think it is actually developing nuclear weapons, so a slight majority think that Iran is actually developing nuclear weapons. That varies a little bit from country to country, but maybe it is explained in the UAE, some of the attitudes may be

explained, by the fact that the majority do not actually believe that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, but there is variation.

What about putting pressure on Iran to stop its nuclear program? There is international pressure on Iran to curtail its nuclear program. What is your opinion? Iran has the right to its nuclear program, Iran should be pressured to stop its nuclear program. Sixty-one people think Iran has the right to its nuclear program, and that tells you something again about the attitudes, how they see the threat, how they make this evaluation, and I think it is more a defiance attitude than it has to do with liking Iran or trusting Iran. I do not think it is that. We have to look at it that way because I think that these do not translate into an expression of liking Iran. It does not mean that people like Iran or does not mean that people do not see Iran necessarily as a threat, it means that they do not see it as the priority threat. It means that it

is not the issue, there are issues that are coloring their views that are trumping the Iran question.

The same thing with nuclear weapons. If I were to ask people do you want a Middle East that is free of nuclear weapons, I would get a vast majority of people saying yes. It is not that people want to see nuclear weapons, they are just measuring it in terms of how they see the threat, and the Israel comes into play in their thinking, double-standards issues, all of that, so it is not about an endorsement of nuclear weapons, but that tells you again about their priorities. The same thing country by country. The trends really hold pretty much across the board including in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and that is remarkable when you get 66 percent of the citizens of the UAE saying they have the right to their program and 54 percent of Saudis say they have the right of their program, it tells you something.

Which of the following is your biggest concern about the consequences of the Iraq war? I gave them these options to choose from to rank them, which one is bigger, and one is Iraq may be divided, the other is Iraq will remain unstable and instability will spread in the region, the third is the U.S. will continue to dominate Iraq even after the transfer of power to the Iraqis, the continuing trouble in Iraq will divert attention from the Palestinian, and finally, that Iran is now more powerful.

We can look at all the other issues, but notice that Iran is the lowest on this list, only 15 percent, and clearly the biggest three answers are the division, the instability, and American domination, and then comes diverting attention from the Palestinian, but Iran is not the top. Again, when you think about the discourse, this is what is going to happen, this is not the thing that is the burning issue of the day for them, the empowerment of Iran. It is for governments. I

keep repeating that because I remind people this is not a judgment about where governments are, it is a judgment where the public is, why they are so concerned, while at the same time that they feel they have to contain Iran, while they are worried about they cannot do it unless they have something else they can gain the public on, and they are doing it on this Arab-Israeli issue.

Please tell me which world leader outside your own country you admire most. This is a question I ask every year, and again remember, this is really not about an endorsement of leaders. It is trying to figure out what is the prism through which they are looking at the world. It is an evaluation question to see what is driving their perceptions, so I would not take each one of these to be set in concrete that they like these individuals.

Hassan Nasrallah is number one for the first time in the Arab world, Jacques Chirac is number. That might sound good, but he has

actually dropped big time since the Iraq war. Every year he has slipped. He started off with 20 percent of support, being number one, and his role in Lebanon has actually brought his number down because he is not on Hassan Nasrallah's side so his numbers declined and his support has been primarily based on opposition to the Iraq war and that is slipping as we get further away from the Iraq war and that is clear.

Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chavez, not large numbers because these are open questions. I get more than a hundred names and I have to tabulate them and you get something from Mother Teresa to Princess Di to anybody you can imagine appearing on that list. Arafat appears on that list, too. People remember him, in Morocco particularly.

MR. INDYK: They think he is still alive. Maybe he is.

MR. TELHAMI: Maybe they do. Maybe they do. But one of the things though that I would like you to look at, the reason I mentioned this

in the attitudes here rather than in global attitudes, I just wanted to mention something here, again, the Shia-Sunni divide. If you are looking at this list, obviously the one thing in common is that these are all leaders that are seen to have stood up to the U.S. some point. This is an American anger statement. It is obvious. But what is interesting is that there is not a single Sunni Arab leader on this list, the only two Middle Easterners are Shia, and these are mostly Sunni Arab countries that includes obviously Egypt, and that tells you something again about this is not the prism through which they are making an evaluation. I am not suggesting there is no Shia-Sunni divide at the public level, we know it is there in Lebanon, we see the sectarianism, we know it is there in Iraq, we know sociologically it is in various parts of the Arab world. It is an issue. It is not a nonissue. But it not the burning issue. It is not the priority issue. It is not the prism through which

they are making an evaluation. That is what to conclude from this. Something else is driving their attitudes. They have other priorities, and we often forget that these priorities matter a lot.

What do you believe would happen in Iraq if the U.S. quickly withdrew its forces? Arab governments I needn't tell you are worried about rapid American withdrawal, particularly the ones in the Gulf, the Saudis, Jordanians, they are worried particularly because they think civil war will expand or at minimum the Iranians would fill in the vacuum of American withdrawal.

The public is far more optimistic about the consequences of withdrawal. Forty-four percent think the Iraqis will find a way together, and another 23 percent say the situation would not change. So the only people who think it will get worse is about 24 percent of the public. Clearly they have a different interpretation of what is happening in Iraq.

I want to move to another set of questions on the issue of democracy in part because that is an issue that has been very high on the discourse, particularly in the American agenda, and how people see it, what is their assessment not only about the American role but where they are on the issue of democracy and then make some concluding comments on that.

The U.S. has been actively advocating the spread of democracy in the Middle East especially since the Iraq war. Do you believe, number one, that this is an important objective and will likely make a difference? Number two, it is an important objective but the U.S. is going about it the wrong way? And number three, I do not believe democracy is an American objective. Look at the numbers. Two-thirds think this is not an American objective, only 5 percent think this is an objective that is likely to make a difference, and even of those who think it is an important objective, 60 percent think the U.S. is

going about it the wrong way. There is some variation country to country, the trends remain the same, except for the UAE where a plurality think it is an important objective but the U.S. is going about it the wrong way, but the rest it is roughly the same trends from country to country.

When you consider American objectives in the Middle East broadly, how important do you think are the following factors? I am putting that in because that includes democracy, how they rank democracy as an objective in American priorities in the region, controlling oil, protecting Israel, weakening the Muslim world, desire to dominate the region. Those are the kinds of things that we get out of their discourse. Preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, promoting peace and stability, spreading human rights, spreading democracy.

You can see that oil, Israel, and domination of the region are the biggest issues. Thirty-nine percent think the spread of weapons of

mass destruction. But the at the bottom of this list is 9 percent who think that democracy is a priority for the United States, 10 percent the spread of human rights, and 10 percent the spread of peace. So those good values that have been articulated as objectives are at the very bottom of people's assessment of what the U.S. has been doing.

Name two countries where you think there is most freedom and democracy for their people. That is an open question. I do not name any country. They can name any countries they want, France, Germany, the U.S., and Britain. By the way, France is number one and has been number one on this question for the past few years, but again, its support is slipping, and I still see it as distance from the Iraq war and policy shifts, but it is still there. The important thing here is every country that people mention on this list is a Western country. It is not like they are making an evaluation about a different kind of

democracy or freedom. They may not know exactly how democracies work, but they know what the basic value is and they see this in the answers. By the way, of the Middle Eastern countries that get any numbers at all that are recorded, the UAE gets positive marks in Saudi Arabia. We have seen that over the last 2 years. Many Saudis envision the UAE as a good place. That is true, by the way that I did not do, but surveys that Zogby did in Iraq, and that the Iraqis initially were envisioning the UAE as a model more than other countries from the region. So to the extent that there was anything from the region, that was about what people could -- remember that it is mostly Western countries, and this is to the extent that anybody shows up it is around the UAE.

If you had to live in one of the following countries, which would you prefer most? This question, by the way, these are countries I gave them, seven countries I name for strategic reasons. The context of this question is that I

ask a prior question, which one of these same countries would you prefer as a superpower if you had to live in a world where there is only one superpower? In that question, China and Pakistan are only topped by France. People prefer China as superpower and they prefer Pakistan as a superpower. But when you ask the question about where would you prefer to live, there is no question as to where the preference is, and the same thing about democracy, France, Germany, Britain, the U.S., and then at the bottom comes China, Pakistan, and Russia. The question about their notions is very clear I think in terms of how they view the world.

Did the Iraq war bring more democracy in the Middle East or less democracy in the Middle East? Sixty-nine percent think there is less democracy in the Middle East than before the Iraq war. This is not about Iraq, but it is about the Middle East itself. I just want to say here one thing which questions how are percent making this

assessment. Is this just a defiance mood? Nothing good has come out of the war, not even democracy. Or are they making a much more realistic assessment of what is happening? I actually to think it is the latter because even aside from the issue of Iraq and what happened in the Palestinian areas, I think one of the things that we missed here particularly in the optimistic focus on the elections, obviously elections are one indicator, but we should have had some indication early on when the Egyptians were held and 21 percent of the people participated tells you what happened to the 80 percent who did not participate how seriously people were taking it, but people are making an assessment on what is happening to their lives.

If you look at the logic of this in terms of what actually transpired, you have 90 percent of the Arab public essentially going passionately against the war, we have our government going to them and saying we would like

you to support us for the war, and they are saying what about my public, we say will take care of your public, we want your support. So they do not say no to America, they say no to their public. What do they do in the meanwhile if you are the Jordanian king or the Saudi king and you are worried about all of the consequences of what might happen, what are your security services doing to make sure that this anger is not reflected in some way against you? So in fact what happened on the ground is very different in that it led people to a different assessment.

I think here I just want to conclude with a thing about democracy. What is obvious actually is that people do not trust that the U.S. is seeking it, they do not think democracy has taken hold in the Middle East over the last few years, and they do not have a vastly different notion of what is democracy or freedom from the ones that are held in the West. But I think something else we did not take into account when

we said do they want democracy and freedom in the Middle East. Of course they do. Nobody likes dictatorship. But nobody also wants anarchy and nobody wants occupation, and those things I think are more important to them than democracy. And that is why I think the Iraq model has become a frightening model to them, anarchy, if I am the King of Jordan I would look at my people as he does and says do you want Baghdad or do you want Amman, if I am the president of Egypt and says do you want Baghdad or do you want Cairo, and I think the answer is very clear.

I was reflecting on this. I was teaching my undergraduate seminar yesterday talking about pan-Arabism over the 1950s and 1960s and many of you know that the pan-Arabists highlighted Arab unity, of course, number one, but freedom was the number-two most important slogan of Arab national movements in the 1950s and 1960s. But if you look at the discourse of what they meant by freedom, above all it was freedom from

foreign control, it was anti-imperialism. Of course they talked about internal freedom, but the primary notion of freedom was tied to anti-imperialism and foreign domination which is the first thing that people think about when they envision that. They knew what the priorities were and I think we certainly did not.

I want to conclude just with some remarks about notions of identity and how these have changed. This is a question that I asked and it has been interesting how it has shifted over the past 5 years. I think most people have complex identities. Most people see themselves as Egyptian, Muslim, Arab (Christian if you are a Christian), at the same time, and we see that that complexity is there in all the polls. The question is which one do they highlight more at any given period of time, which one they give more importance to at any given period of time, and that is something that I have been testing over time.

What comes out over the past 5 year is that identity is in flux in the region. It is really in flux. People are uncertain about which one is more important. They are uncertain. They do not have heroes in any one of these dimensions that come up that appeals to their Arabism, that appeals to their status, and that appeals to their Islamism. Because when you look at the people I mentioned, the top four people, they do not appeal to any one of those identities because the Shia to the extent that they are Islamic, they cannot be appealing to their Islamic notion, there are no Arab leaders on that list, and there are no sitting leaders of any state in the Arab world on that list. So there are no heroes in a way that reflect any of those idea, so it has been in flux. What you saw immediately after the 2003 was is a surge in Islamic identity largely a function I think of a sense that American is out there to get Muslims, we had that kind of reaction.

In 2004-2005 there was a surge in status identity where people identified themselves more as citizens of their states in a number of countries, and we saw that, and I interpreted that at the time, I even wrote an article called "The Return of the State" and that was I believed that it was a short-term reaction to the anarchy in Iraq. They were terrified by the dismantlement of states. They rallied behind the state, and state and government are tied together. They responded to the do you want Baghdad or do you want Amman kind of question, that it was kind of a rallying behind the state emanating from the fear of anarchy in the region.

This year we have a resurgence of Islamic identity. If you look at the numbers, a plurality identify themselves as Muslim first, although again there are various from country to country. And the most striking shift happened in Egypt where 47 percent now identify themselves as Muslim first. Egypt has had one of the strongest

status identities throughout. Lebanon is striking, too, because Lebanon, even despite the sectarianism and everything else that is going on, the Lebanese identify themselves as Lebanese first by far, and that is true of every single sect including the Shia who identify themselves by far as Lebanese first, and the UAE is striking in that regard as well.

But Morocco historically has had a strong Islamic identity. It is one of the countries that have consistently had a strong Islamic identity to some extent through Saudi Arabia. Egypt and to some extent Jordan, but Egypt particularly is striking. My hypothesis about this is this is a function of the Lebanon war and the Palestinian elections, the empowerment of nonstate actors, and people's frustration with governments, that this is a rallying behind those groups.

I think I have one more point to make and then I will end on the issue of identity.

While I asked the question about whether people think they are Muslim first, I did not want people to think that this is necessarily a transnational Islamic identity because you can be a Muslim brother and be and be an Egyptian nationalist at the same time but rally behind your Islamism, but you do not necessarily want to see a transnational Islamic state.

So one of the questions I asked is, Do you believe that your government should serve the interests of Muslims, the interests of Arabs, or the interests of its citizens? Here there is no question that the number-one answer is the interest of what is best for the country, not the best interests of Muslims or Arabs, that it remains more sort of more statecentric, this is not a transnational identity necessarily, it is about being kind of a counter to the existing regimes. So I will end with that and then open it up for questions.

MR. INDYK: Thank you, Shibley. That was fascinating. Given the fact that as you pointed out that the secretary of state out in the region, there is a new effort to try to get Saudi Arabia in particular, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in particular, to be more active in trying to promote the Arab League initiative which is in fact the Saudi initiative, his people are not with him according to your results. If he were Hosni Mubarak or King Abdullah of Jordan, he would be more in tune with his people. What does this tell you? Does it suggest that he is out ahead of his people or that he can continue with the traditional Saudi policy which is put out a plan but not do anything about it, that that would satisfy both Saudi Arabia's state interests and his people's interests as opposed to getting out and getting engaged with the Israelis and trying to make peace?

MR. TELHAMI: I actually do not see it that way. I do not think that people are not with

him. On the contrary, I think the gap between him and his people on this issue is the narrowest of all other issues, because you see only a minority, a larger minority, but a minority opposed to peace with Israel in principle, about 40 percent or so. That is important, obviously, but still he has got a majority who is open to it, and that is not true on Iran, it is not true on American presence in the Gulf, it is not true on how they deal with the Iraq issue, it is not true on their attitudes toward Hizballah. So in fact, this actually is the most hopeful issue for him. And to the extent that he may think he has any option, this is actually one of the areas where he can win and particularly by taking the Arab leadership position because the Arab public opinion broadly is more in harmony with supporting a comprehensive peace.

And importantly, there are no voices against it today. In the rejection days you would have had some voices against it, but there really

is no voice against it in the Arab world as such. You do not really have an effective voice, I am talking among governments, there are no effective voices against it. So I think they are prepared to do it, I think they could do it. I think I would even go a little bit further. I would say that outside the immediate Israeli-Palestinian arena, I have never seen a better Arab opportunity for peace both in terms of Arab governments concluding that this is something they need to do more than ever before and being able to step in in a bold way, and public opinion being relatively open to it.

My worry about the effectiveness of diplomacy is not about what might come or might not come out of the Saudi plan. My worry is the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves and the extent to which this administration really intends to make this a priority issue. Those are the bigger I think obstacles. I am not sure when you talk to Arab elites and governments in the region,

I have been there several times in the past 3 months and you talk to people about how they see American diplomacy and the opportunities for peace, they are divided between two camps, they really are.

There is the one camp which is highly skeptical that anything at all is going to happen in this administration, and they tell you bluntly that this is all an exercise or at least it is a crisis management until this administration is out. Then there is a camp which says, no, they really think there is an opportunity and they think that the secretary of state has made up her mind to push forward. They are not sure about the extent to which the White House will support her, but they are hoping that support will be forthcoming, and they really want to exploit that possibility and that is why there are contacts with the Israelis.

I who is someone who is a political scientist grounded in realism, if you had to ask

me about the prospects, I would certainly be skeptical, I could tell you many reasons why it could fail and certainly that is the probable outcome, but I also could tell you as a student of this conflict or any other conflict that when breakthroughs happen we do not expect them and the day before we give all the same reasons I can give now about why they are not going to happen and that when the Oslo agreements happened we were skeptical including your administration which when it initially heard about the Oslo agreements was not particularly hopeful that a breakthrough was going to come out of it, and I think even Sadat's visit to Jerusalem certainly was a surprise and the analysis just months before was not very positive. I do not think is anything is written, and I think a lot of these things to be explored. So even with the skepticism, I say there is an opportunity and to encourage rather than hold back.

MR. INDYK: Let's go to questions.

Paul, then Tammy, then David.

QUESTION: Shibley, thank you for a very interesting and useful set of results. You mentioned a couple of times that your respondents' conceptions of democracy must be not unlike those in the West and you were referring particularly to the result on the question about which countries have the most democracy and it was Germany and France. But of course that did not really ask directly what is your concept of democracy.

MR. TELHAMI: Yes.

QUESTION: Is it possible, is it not, that most of your respondents have both a different conception of democracy and a faulty perception of how it works in France, Germany, and the U.S. And you look at something like Iraq today and one can find evidence for the idea that a lot of the people practicing democracy there have a different view, that it simply majority rules and forget the rest.

I wonder if not in this round of polling but perhaps in others you have tried to tap directly into what is your idea of the content, is it just majority rule or is it minority rights and representation and political logrolling and civil society or whatever?

MR. TELHAMI: No, what I meant, by the way, is not that they have a particular notion of how democracy works. I do not think they do. I think that if you give them two places and say is this democracy or is this democracy, they can pretty much tell you which one looks like a democracy to them, where there is more freedom, where maybe using the term freedom is a little bit better, because I think people want their voices to count. Whatever system you have, they want their voices to count and the question is if you tell them you have Jordan and you have Germany, where is more democracy, they could tell you. You have Saudi Arabia and you have Sweden, where is there more freedom, they can tell you.

More importantly, you ask them would you rather live here or would you rather live here, they know where they want to live. So this is not really about can they implement democracy, can it really happen there, are there barriers to it structurally to make it, to enable it, it is a question only about aspirations. And I have my own views about whether democracy can be produced, let's put it that way, in the Middle East because that is a different question. That is, the practicality of moving from authoritarianism to democracy, we have a literature in political science that is very skeptical about a particular effective method to get you there, very determined in its assessment that it is a destabilizing process, and very much of the conclusion that when you start the process, the outcome is unpredictable, and that is a completely different question about what people aspire to.

QUESTION: Thanks, Shibley. There is one slide you put up there that I really do not

what to think of. It seems me there are two different ways to interpret it, and that is the slide about the relationship between the U.S. and Israel.

MR. TELHAMI: Which one was that?

QUESTION: The one with the lobby view, the Chomsky view, or the mutual interest view. While you are finding it, it seems to me on the one hand you can be relieved that conspiracy theories in one direction or the other about one country being a tool of the other, that those are being rejected in favor of an understanding that the U.S. and Israel have mutual interests. One can be pleased with that news and look at it as a more rational understanding of U.S.-Israeli relations in the Arab world. On the other hand, one can look at that and find it very troubling because if it is true that the Arab public understands that the U.S. and Israel have mutual interests and if they also define the U.S. and Israel as the greatest threats to them personally,

then those mutual interests that the U.S. and Israel share must be fundamentally maligned from this public's perspective.

I do not know if you asked this question before, but has there been any change over time, and can you give me any guidance as to how am I supposed to interpret this?

MR. TELHAMI: This is the first time I asked this question, but actually my interpretation is more closer to your third interpretation. I will tell you why. This is sort of my argument that if you project that there is absolutely no space between Israel and the U.S., that is actually somehow is going to be good for Israel or the U.S. This is a question and argument that can talk about, and I think not just in the notion of peacemaking, but in the notion of deterrence. If you look, for example, at what happened as a consequence of the Iraq war and the Lebanon war, I think the fact that Israel is in principle good for deterrence, that is, if you are

considering attacking Israel if you think you are basically attacking America, in principle that is a good thing, it gives strategic depth of deterrence.

When there is an outcome like what we had in Iraq and Lebanon, it becomes trouble even on the deterrence issue, let alone the peacemaking issue, but on the deterrence issue. The U.S. is seen to have been defeated in Iraq, so even the U.S. is defeatable. Then in Lebanon, the fact that the war seemed to be almost a U.S. war, not just an Israel war, and yet despite what was seen in Arab world as unlimited American support, Israel is seen to have been defeated in Lebanon, what does that do to your deterrence? The closeness was the strategic depth that comes with that.

So I actually think this is not a very good outcome, and I think from the point of view of effectiveness, whether it is in deterrence terms or peacemaking terms, and I think that when

you see that, you find it in some ways separate from the issue of Israel about what calculations people make about the government. A lot of people in the Middle East say it is the bad American government, I like the American people or I like the States, there is some evidence that that kind of gap is kind of reduced. I asked the question about Bush specifically and I say, What do you think of his foreign policy? Is it motivated by his personal belief in democracy, his Christian faith, or that he is acting in the American national interest or American domestic politics, I gave them all these options, and a majority say actually it is he is acting in the American national interests which on the one hand is a good thing I suppose, but on the other hand it is a bad thing. On the domestic politics argument, I do not think it is bad for people to think that domestic politics influences American foreign policy as a democracy and people have come to figure out a way to deal with that over the years,

about there is a notion that in American democracy, domestic politics matter and it explains it, but I do not think America is a bad country, and you can figure out a way to deal with it. It would be troubling if you think of it in principle that America's policies are really intended to hurt you, and so in some ways I do not look at this as a good result, I look at this as more of a negative result.

MR. INDYK: David Pollack?

MR. TELHAMI: And I know I said things that Martin certainly has an opinion about on this issue.

MR. INDYK: But you are not polling me.

(Laughter.)

MR. POLLACK: Thank you very much, Shibley, for really as usual a very interesting presentation. I just want to comment very quickly about one thing and then my main comment, and that is about the UAE as a paragon of freedom and democracy for some people in Saudi Arabia and

Iran. I think what they are reacting to there, and maybe this is obvious to everybody, is not democracy which has nothing to do with anything in the UAE, but the freedom. Obviously, the UAE is a much freer place than Saudi Arabia or Iran. You can drink, you can gamble, you can do all kinds of things that you cannot do in the other countries, so that is probably why people like it.

MR. INDYK: And they go there on weekends just for that reason.

MR. POLLACK: Right. This is completely understandable from the point of view of good old-fashioned human nature.

On a more serious note, I am really struck by the result that you get about the Saudi peace plan or something like it, the acceptance in principle of peace with Israel based on withdrawal to the 1967 lines. You have emphasized it enough, but to me this is a startling result, that you have a 2 to 1 majority across these five fairly representative Arab countries, I do not want to

overgeneralize to the whole region accepting that in principle, and that is in spite of the great admiration for Nasrallah, the fear of American and Israeli intentions, the unimportance, which is also very striking, of this supposed Sunni versus Shia groundswell of opinion in the Arab world. So my question to you is, why? Hamas won an election. The Muslim Brotherhood won 70 percent of every seat that it contested in Egypt. Nasrallah has been able to bring out millions or something like that, hundreds of thousands anyway, into the streets in Lebanon. These are not symbols or spokesmen for peace with Israel and yet you get this really, really to me dramatic result. Why do so many Arabs now say it is time for peace with Israel?

And one just last point is I think these results are fascinating, but I do not think they justify the title of your talk. I do not know who gave it that title, but you have not demonstrated a widening perception gap. You have given us a

really interesting and important snapshot of how things are today, but I do not think you have shown, and I do think perhaps you would even argue, that this gap is getting wider either between governments and the public or between Arabs and the United States. Thank you.

MR. TELHAMI: The last one is easy. It was a title, I guess we negotiated a title, but that is not the point. I do think actually there is a widening gap on many issues, not on the Arab-Israeli issue, but the widening gap is on Lebanon, on Iran, that is where it is really widening. Because as I said in my remarks earlier, it is widening on many issues, but not on the Arab-Israeli issue.

The Arab-Israeli issue is actually not as surprising as you might think when you look at the plurality of people who say they are prepared for a comprehensive peace but the Israelis will not agree to it peacefully. If you look at the Israeli-Palestinian data that we have over the

years, consistently most Israelis say they are prepared for a two-state solution, the Palestinians say the same thing, and then they go around and the Palestinians elect Hamas and the Israelis elect Sharon. That is not surprising because the other thing is when you ask them do you think the other side is ready to do it peacefully, they say, no, the majority say the other side is not ready to do it, and that usually explains why they mobilize behind tough leaders who think that they are better negotiators. When Hamas talks, when they go to meet in Saudi Arabia and they make statements or when they go to Egypt and they are under pressure saying why didn't you accept the Quartet's conditions, they do not say because they will never accept Israel, they might say that to some small core constituency internally, but their rationalization is the Israelis have not done this and that, why should we give up these cards that we have is kind of their public core argument which is the one that

resonates with a large number of people. So I am not really totally surprised by it. I think it is in harmony in a way with Israel.

I was surprised I have to admit because I have never asked this question before, I frankly expected maybe a slight majority would actually in principle reject Israel, and I was reading something like the Jordan kind of finding where the plurality still rejects Israel at 36 percent, and I was expecting something roughly the same, so I was surprised by it I have to say. But it is the juxtaposition of what is happening in their support for radical leaders and their support for peace is not actually a contradiction because we see that as natural in this business.

MR. INDYK: Hassan, and maybe you want to say something about public opinion in Jordan.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. I think Shibley has covered things in a beautiful way. My question is not on the poll, actually a more strategic issue from my own point of view which is

the peace with Israel. I do think that the Arabs are really interested this time in having peace with Israel also for their own interests being confronting Iran in the future, and I think the divide and the Sunnis and Iran is serious and it transferred in Lebanon and Iraq now. There is a school of thought that it is not that strong, but it has taken root among Arab intellectuals. I was Jordan and I was talking to people and they talk about it takes an alliance with the Israelis in order to confront the new threat coming from Iran.

But at the same time, I would say in the public opinion that sometimes the making of the regime themselves because they raise the expectations of the people and they know that they can deliver. If you take the peace initiative now, they insist on the refugees' right of return and they know it is impractical, it would never happen, Israel would never agree to any peace treaty that talks about refugees to go back

because this would put an end to the Jewishness of the state.

But also there are some studies in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, that less than 8 percent of the refugees express interest in going back to what they consider their homeland. So how do you see the rationality of Arab leaders? I don't think there is anything we can talk about they keep shooting themselves in the foot. Do you agree with that? Thank you.

MR. TELHAMI: No, I do not actually agree. On that issue, no serious person thinks there can be an agreement with a large number of Palestinian refugees returning to Israel. I think everybody knows that in the end who are serious about this.

I think the question is whether they have to do it as part of a peace plan or not, they would gain at some level and they would lose a lot at another level. More importantly, they would lose the National Unity government of the

Palestinians. This isn't just even public opinion. I cannot imagine that if you look at the Saudi strategy that you are right in part it is oriented toward Iran, in part they have used this issue to mobilize Sunni Arab support, it has not worked as well at the level of the public, but it has at some organizational level because the fact that they invited Hamas to Mecca to do this deal was not just about getting harmony within the Palestinian camp, but luring a significant Sunni Islamic group into their camp. Within the Saban Center, the U.S.-Islamic Forum with Doha we were to have members of the Muslim Brother in Jordan attend, prominent members. They cancelled at the last minute because they were invited to go to Saudi Arabia for meetings. It was clear that there was an effort to bring the Sunni Islamists into this dialogue in the context of maybe focused on the Arab-Israeli issue, but in part it is creating this coalition. They are worried when they read the public opinion that many of the

Islamists went against Hizballah in the Lebanon war and so that it changed. So I see a coalition that is emerging along these lines. I do not know that they can afford to jeopardize it, and I do not think in the end whether that is part of the Arab peace plan or not is going to be the make break on the Israel-Palestinian deal. I think in the end, many of these things are going to have to be done privately. For the Israelis to be responsive, it is not only going to look at a plan, they are going to want private assurance, there has to be more context, I think that if there is going to be a possible deal, yes, the prime minister of Israel is going to need political cover from some public statement, but more importantly, they have to have some more private assurances about what might transpire.

MR. INDYK: We are rapidly running out of time. I am going to take just two questions together, and you will have to answer them

quickly, if you would, Shibley. First of all, Gary, and then Samir.

QUESTION: Shibley, it is going to quickly become apparent that I am not quite sure how to frame this question, but I think I will try it this way. I am interested in the overwhelming response about the primacy of solving the Israeli-Palestinian issue as the single most important issue as far as the people in your poll are concerned. The question I have is do you ask, have you ever asked, and does this methodology that you have used allow you to do it, can you drill down on that and ask them why that is so important? I am looking for something other than the obvious answer, but I will leave it at that.

QUESTION: Thank you, Shibley. I wanted to ask about the timing. When was all of this happened? In Jordan, I do not think Hizballah or Nasrallah is that high after Saddam's killing and after some of the opposition in Lebanon. He has gone down. I totally agree on the King's -- stand

for the Palestinians, and he came here just to do some polishing for his things back in Jordan, and this is what is happening even with the Mubarak thing in the past 2 years through (inaudible)

QUESTION: Thank you very much for your presentation. It is very, very interesting. My question is very simple. Could you give us the kind of answer to the title of your speech that means can the U.S. win -- public opinion? Can you give us any answer to this title? I mean, this title is a question. Can the U.S. win over Middle East public opinion. Can you give us like a summary?

MR. INDYK: That was the original title (inaudible) negotiation.

MR. TELHAMI: There is answer is there is no way we can do it in the short-term, and that was not really the title of this. But on the timing of the timing of the poll, it was in November and December. It was after the sentence to death but before the actual execution of

Saddam. It may have changed in Jordan, but a lot of that is also being fabricated. This is part of the top-down interpretation to sell a Shia-Sunni divide, and we see a lot of that happening. I do not know the extent to which it is resonating. It is working a little bit because you have heard some of the Muslim Brotherhood make statements related to that. We do not know how much it is resonating at the public level, we will see, but I am not persuaded that it has shifted it dramatically. I hear these arguments, the same points that you make, because you hear them and the government makes them. There are all these things that are kind of part of the construction of public opinion. The extent to which it is working is really hard to know.

On the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, I do not know that you can ask people, they will say it is the source of problems or whatever, you might get that, but I do not think it is really all that hard to understand

why. It is not because people have a particularly clear idea about what might happen if there is peace. I call it the prism of pain through which people look at the world. I think that every people have a painful collective experience that helps define their identity over time and that does not shift very often, and I think that collective identities in the Arab world across the spectrum has been defined in part in relation to this issue that has galvanized political movements over time, defined losing wars and humiliation over time, it remains an open wound, and it has become part of the notion of identity that people have in the same way that I think, not on the same scale, but in the same sense that you might understand why Jews would look at the world through either the prism of the Holocaust or the Israelis would look at it in part through the prism of suicide bombings, or the Americans would look at the Arab and Muslim world in part through the collective pain of 9/11, that that is the

prism that defines the perspectives. So I think it is a collective experience of pain that is associated with notions of identity, but it is not so much something that is rationally calculating a particular impact or making a rational assessment of a particular Palestinian leader, it is broader than that. In the same way, I think we in America often forget that our public opinion on most issues is really kind of identity based far more than it is information based, and the striking example of the 2004 election results that very much were almost identical to the 2000 election results despite 4 years of immense change in discourse and ups and downs, and in the end, red was red and blue was blue because people had identities. So I think it is part of the collective identity in the region.

MR. INDYK: Shibley, thank you for a fascination exposition. I think you have educated all of us and I am very grateful again for you

sharing your wisdom with us today. Thank you all
very much for coming.

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