

BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

THE 2012 U.S. ELECTIONS:
WHAT NEXT FOR U.S.-MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
RELATIONS?

Doha, Qatar

Wednesday, October 17, 2012

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
706 Duke Street, Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

PARTICIPANTS:

Moderator:

SALMAN SHAIKH
Director
Brookings Doha Center

Panelists:

DANIELLE PLETKA
Vice President for Foreign Defense Policy
Studies, American Enterprise Institute

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES
Senior Fellow
Director, Saban Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

GHADA OUEISS
Journalist, Al Jazeera Arabic

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. SHAIKH: I am the Director of the Brookings Doha Center. My apologies, first and foremost, for starting a little bit later than scheduled. As you know, this is a little bit of an early time, and particularly to you, Danielle and Tammy, it's wonderful to have you. And I'll introduce you more formally, and thank you for waiting so patiently while we just started to assemble here.

Let me say now thank you very much for attending what I think is a very interesting event on the next U.S. elections, what we've titled, "What Next for U.S.-Middle East and North Africa Relations?" -- particularly focused on the U.S. presidential election campaign and the positions of the two main candidates, of course, President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney.

Before I introduce our esteemed guests, let me just say in that respect, of course -- and what we will hear, I think, over the next hour-and-a-half or so, as well as the debate that we will have -- I think

it's extremely interesting for the state of what we've got right now in this presidential election. We just had -- and some of you may be bleary-eyed because you were watching here in Doha in the middle of the night, the second presidential debate. The third one is on next Tuesday the 22nd.

It seems, if you believe the polls -- and here, we'll hear directly from Washington, as well -- that things are very close, neck-and-neck, as some would say. And it seems, as we've heard in the runup to this third debate, whether you listen to Governor Romney's major foreign policy address on the 8th of October, or with regard to President Obama, and what we heard more recently from Secretary Clinton, the Middle East is one of the main focuses for that particular debate.

So, in that respect, I'm delighted to have with us four great panelists. I'll turn first to Washington, and it's my great pleasure to welcome for the first time Danielle Pletka, who's joining us. You've got the bios on your chairs, but just to say

briefly, she is the Vice President for Foreign Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a leading conservative-based think-tank in Washington. She was a longtime Senate Committee on Foreign Relations senior professional staff member, particularly focusing on the Near East and South Asia. And she was a point person, in particular, for issues related to the Middle East and South Asia.

She writes on national security matters, with a focus on Iran, and weapons proliferation in particular, and she's written a number of books which you see listed here. I think her most recent study, "Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan," which was published in May 2012, particular interesting for these times.

Then it's also my great pleasure to introduce you to Tamara Cofman Wittes, who is a senior fellow and a director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. Tammy is a colleague. She is, in fact, my boss. She was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs in November

2009 to January 2012 and, crucially, coordinated U.S. policy in democracy and human rights in the Middle East for the State Department. She also oversaw the Middle East Partnership Initiative. And, of course, before that, she was a senior Brookings fellow, as well. It's wonderful to have you on our platform.

And then, my great pleasure to have here in Doha, Ghada Oueiss who, of course, many of you know, who I probably don't need to introduce at length. She's a Lebanese journalist and has worked, since April 2006, as a senior presenter and anchor for Al Jazeera Arabic channel. She's presented all the main news programs, I'm sure some of which you've seen, including the talk shows and the one-on-one debates. She's also presented from the field, in places as diverse as Sudan, Gaza, and Yemen. And, very interesting for us, you'll be the main anchorwoman for the 2012 U.S. presidential elections, as well. Before that, you held a number of senior journalist positions in television in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Ghada, it's wonderful to have you here,
you're most welcome.

MS. OUEISS: Thank you very much.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you.

And, certainly, last not least, but our very own Shadi Hamid. He's, of course, as many of you know, the director of research at the Brookings Doha Center, and a fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy. His research focuses on Islamist political parties and democratic reform in the Arab world. Prior to joining us -- and I find it hard to believe he had a life before that -- he was director of research at the Project on Middle East Democracy in Washington, and a Hewlett Fellow at Sanford University Center on Democracy.

Shadi, it's great to have you on, as well.

Without further ado, I'll first turn to Tammy -- if you could help set the scene for us.
Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Happy to, Salman. And greetings to everyone in Doha. It's a delight to join you.

I'll try to make three quick points about the way in which foreign policy, and particularly American policy in the Middle East, is playing into this year's campaign.

And the first, and probably the most obvious thing to note, is that a campaign that was supposed to be all about the economy -- and, indeed, until about a month ago was all about the economy -- has become more about foreign policy. And the intensification of the discussion regarding foreign policy, and Middle East policy in particular, is really driven by opportunities that I think the Romney campaign, in particular, saw in the week of the events of September 11th in Benghazi, Tunis, and Cairo.

Now, of course, that's changed the narratives of the two campaigns. It's been the occasion for a great deal of media commentary and a quickly scheduled speech by Mitt Romney on foreign

policy. But I think it's important to note that the American public is still primarily interested in domestic issues -- domestic economic issues and domestic social issues. And if there was any doubt of that, I think that was very clear last night in the town hall debate, a debate in which undecided voters submitted questions on the issues that were most important to them. And in that whole 90-minute-plus exercise, we saw, essentially, one real foreign policy question, on Libya, and, you know, a question on energy, a question on immigration, which, of course, have important foreign policy dimensions -- but, really, an intense focus on jobs and the economy. And that is fundamentally what this election is about. That's what's going to determine, I think, the outcome.

It was also striking last night that there was no mention, either by the voters who were asking questions, the moderator, or either of the candidates, of Afghanistan. Once again, the fact that we have American troops in the field, facing risk every day,

abroad is a footnote, a minor footnote, in this presidential campaign, as though we'd already withdrawn.

And I think that this is reflective of the American public mood, that for the most part, in poll after poll, the U.S. public says clearly that it's tired of these intensive external engagements, and it wants to bring troops home, it wants to bring resources home. And, for the first time that I've really heard, President Obama actually tried to pick up on that theme in last night's discussion, talking about one of his achievements as President was ending the war in Iraq, working to end the conflict in Afghanistan, and invest those resources at home instead. I expect that you'll hear that theme more and more in the days to come.

The second point I think it's important to note is that on Middle East policy specifically, I actually don't think that the two candidates have presented radically different views. I think they've presented some differences around the margins -- with

the possible exceptions of Iran and the Middle East peace process. And I'll look forward to hearing from my colleague Danielle Pletka here on this.

But on Iran and the Middle East peace process, I think you do see some differences: greater impatience on Romney's part with the possibility of negotiations, or greater skepticism that the negotiations process might produce anything meaningful, a greater willingness to use the threat of military force to try and alter Iranian behavior. And, on the Middle East peace process, again, greater skepticism about the prospects for progress in negotiations, or for a new round of negotiations. And while reiterating a longstanding bipartisan American policy in support of a negotiated two-state solution, kind of saying this isn't a high priority right now unless something changes on the ground.

That said, I think each candidate is trying to create a narrative for voters about what's happening in the Middle East, about events in the

Middle East, the trajectory of events, in a way that is helpful to his case for election.

On Romney's part -- and his Middle East speech, I think, codified this, or his foreign policy speech, which was really a Middle East speech codified this -- his argument is that American weakness led to a period of chaos and uncertainty, to the strengthening of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and thereby to the attack on our consulate in Benghazi. Therefore, what U.S. policy needs is a strengthened resolve, and that will bring greater stability, greater security for American interests.

For Obama's part, again, I think his emphasis is on ending the war in Iraq, focusing U.S. attention on fighting Al Qaeda, and the success of killing many of Al Qaeda's top leadership, including Osama bin Laden. So that his, you know, his narrative is, "I've managed to close the earlier chapter of U.S. policy in the Middle East, and we now have the opportunity to deal with things differently."

I don't know that either of those narratives, to be perfectly honest, is resonating greatly with the public.

The third point I'll make is that, you know, this notion of trying to use events in the Middle East to build a narrative that is helpful to your election campaign might well be dismaying to people living in the region, to see events on the ground that are of such magnitude for Arab citizens treated as, in essence, a political football in our election campaign. And I would certainly understand that sense of dismay. But I guess it's worth noting that this is very much a two-way street; that for Americans, it's been very dismaying, but equally inevitable, I think, to see U.S. politics and policy, and events in the United States, become a political football in domestic arguments in Tunis, in Egypt, in Libya.

And, you know, as political forces, especially sort of Salafi versus Muslim Brotherhood, argue out their positions on the ground in Cairo, what happens here in the U.S. -- even if to Americans it

might seem marginal or irrelevant, like the actions of a wacky guy on probation in Southern California -- that can become a political football in the new Arab politics, as well.

So, this may be the world that we're living in today, one of inter-penetration of our political system and those in the region, and that might be worth some discussion going forward.

So, with those three points, I will stop and turn it back to you, Salman. Thanks very much.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you, Tammy.

Let me also encourage you just to look at what was on your seats, a short paper done by Tammy for Brookings and the Presidential sort of season, which is called "Three Key Challenges in Confronting the Arab Awakening," which summarizes a lot of what Tammy was just saying there.

I'm glad that we're having this Washington-Middle East connection. Particularly as we're heading into this debate, it's very, very relevant. And you talked about narrative, Tammy. I think it's a great

cue, in terms of getting Ghada now to comment with regard to how Arabs are seeing this presidential election, and how they view, going forward, American foreign policy.

So, please --

MS. OUEISS: Allow me, first, to begin with this American proverb: Man has responsibility, not power. And allow me also to speak in Arabic. I am Arab. We live in an Arab country, and I am from Jazeera Arabic, so I speak in Arabic.

"Man has responsibility, not power" -- I think Salman translated this proverb -- the United States of America is facing a responsibility towards the (inaudible), and not a test to its power (inaudible).

INTERPRETER: Sorry, there's a problem with the sound.

SPEAKER: I change my mic?

(Discussion off the record.)

SPEAKER: Yes, yes.

INTERPRETER: Yes, yes, everything is fine now.

MS. OUEISS: Okay? The United States of America today, and the American administration, the current administration, is facing a challenge of seeing its responsibility towards the Middle East and the region. So there is no, there is no value for strength and power if there is no responsibility (inaudible). So, besides, the (inaudible) in Iraq, despite the occupation -- so the occupation has remained in Iraq, and the situation stayed deteriorate in Iraq. Perhaps one of the reasons of the hesitance of the United States in dealing with the crisis in Syria is because they fear that they are going to face what happened in Iraq (inaudible), that Obama is not responsible for the invasion of Iraq, but he faced the repercussions of the invasion of Iraq (inaudible) that has led to animosity from the Arabs towards any American (inaudible).

In addition, that there is no advancement in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian cause. And after also

four years of economic problems during the Obama administration, and now Obama is with his (inaudible) debate, and the deal between the United States and Israel was (inaudible) in terms of price, especially with regard to weapons. I know if you look into the Palestinian (inaudible) cause in the Middle East. And if you look how the Arab nations, the Islamic nations, they are so congested when they look that Iraq is not stabilized, they still really after the invasion of the United States of America. And the Palestinian people are still suffering for decades. And there is complete support from the part of the American administration toward Israel, without a (inaudible) more that things will explode into violence against the interests of the United States of America in countries like Libya. And Clinton, she wanted, she helped, and she said that they had a nation, in Libya, she was surprised, how did they help a nation to get rid of a dictator? And look what they did, they ended with the assassination of the ambassador.

If we go back in history, we're going to see a contradiction that leads, that the United States is not moving steadfast, and trying to look for its interests, and the interests of its ally Israel. When Hamas won the elections in 2006, I mean the United States of America did not like it, and they tried to put a siege on the movement, and the whole of Gaza. And now, with the Islamists coming to power after the Arab Spring, we see that the United States is applauding, and they are sending delegations, and welcoming, and saying that these are democratic elections that have led to the rule of the Islamists in these countries.

I do not know why these countries are allowed to have things that Hamas cannot have. So, once again, the secret is Israel. And there is no doubt (inaudible) many people were very, very sad because the ambassador was assassinated. So there are certain parts of the Arab world who are in support of these Islamic movements, and some of them fear these Islamic movements.

But the majority between these two parties is that they have negative feelings towards the United States of America.

So those who really liked what happened, because they were surprised that the United States is supporting the Islamists. And, I mean, even certain people in the region, they know what these Islamists have faced, and especially as a result of what they have suffered (inaudible). And in 2008 there was a book that was issued, *America and the World*, during the first term of Obama, the different think-tanks, and the different consultants, they all agreed that U.S. foreign policy needs to be reformed and developed. And what was applied during the Cold War cannot be applied anymore.

So, I mean, challenges like terrorism, and now Russia, and due to the, I mean, Syrian crisis, makes the United States that it has to cope with the new changes and the new valuables [sic] in the world. And this is very dangerous, indeed, in the region.

So it is not important who wins the elections in the United States. What is important is that the winner of the elections should do this reform in the foreign policy of the United States of America.

Who is the candidate who is more competent in this field? So, it is said that Obama has more experience in foreign policy, but his performance in Syria shows the opposite -- him, Obama, so he did not let Bushar al-Assad to stay in isolation. So you know better, of course, you know more than me. So Obama, on the contrary, has sent an ambassador, I mean a few months after his first term. And when the revolution started in Syria, the American administration thought that the United States can make a number of reforms. And they waited six months, Obama didn't do anything - - I mean, although the State Department, they said that there are going to be terrorism in Syria, and so on and so forth, and he referred to, or resorted to the United Nations. Maybe either he didn't understand, or he did not appreciate well the power of

Putin. And the failure of Obama in Syria is the worst in the Middle East.

So these repercussions of the failure in Iraq, and the failure in Syria, whoever comes to the White House next November is going to hold the burden of the repercussions of Syria once again.

As for Mitt Romney, who criticized Obama's policy in the Middle East, in Iran, Syria, and so on, so in his speech before the debates yesterday, he said that we have to redraft the policy towards Syria. And he chose his terms very meticulously. And in an article in *The Washington Post*, Mitt Romney he said the policy is moderate, and that it needs a kind of consensus between the conservatives in the Middle East,

In generally, so everything is now pending until we know who is going to be leader of the White House, so relying on the United States, and waiting for it, instead of taking initiatives, is what makes it strong on the contrary to the saying that I started with, that a person should be more responsible than

strong. And relying on the United States, on all these files, and relying on it makes her stronger rather than more responsible.

So, the revolution -- and on this, I mean, dependency is going to lead to all that.

MR. SHAIKH: (inaudible) -- Iraq, and what is unfolding in Syria, with regards to that, and also (inaudible).

Danielle Pletka, I'd love to turn to you now.

MS. PLETKA: Sure.

MR. SHAIKH: You've heard --

MS. PLETKA: I'm sorry, I was confused -- I thought I was lost. Can you hear me okay?

MR. SHAIKH: Yes, now we can. Thank you.

MS. PLETKA: Good. Terrific.

I think it's quite natural that Tammy and I are actually a little bit focused on the debate that happened last night, in part because Washington is a town that is entirely obsessed by the elections. It happens every four years. It's not unnatural, and

everybody always tells us: This is the most important election of our lifetime. And we repeatedly have the most important elections of our lifetimes.

So, you know, just to sort of quickly address the question last night, I think Tammy is exactly right: Part of the problem is all of us care a great deal about foreign policy and about national security, and so we're always looking for it. If you look at the most recent CNN poll of priorities of Americans, you see national security/terrorism coming in, I think, at number nine, with 3 percent of the people putting it as their top priority.

Now, you know, for us, I think that's a sign not just of the weariness that Tammy has talked about, which is undeniably true. It's been 11 years since 9/11. We've had two wars. We continue to fight one of them. And there is no doubt that the American people are tired of the fight. This is what happens almost inevitably in every case.

But I think that part of the problem is that the President of the United States is also tired of

the fight. One of the most interesting things you can see here in the United States is that whenever the President, Obama, comes out and talks about why it is that we're fighting in Afghanistan, and what our goals are, and what our soldiers are doing, you see poll numbers in support for the war go up quite dramatically. And you can chart -- I'm sorry if you're seeing my hand gestures jerkily, I apologize -- but you can chart his speech and support for the war, and then it goes back down again.

And that's part of the challenge that we face. Yes, I think that Mitt Romney wants to talk about the economy. He is colluding, in many ways, with the President not to talk about national security, because there's really very little interest in it. So all of us are a little bit starved for information.

Another problem, you see all of us talking about President Obama's record on national security. Well, Mitt Romney has talked about national security but, of course, he's never been the commander-in-

chief, except of Massachusetts, and it's been a couple of hundred years since Massachusetts was involved in any meaningful way in a war. So that is another part of the problem in the debate that you see. And it's why it seems a little bit false. It seems a little bit accusatory on one side, and proclamatory on the other side.

So, I think, for outsiders who are trying to get a grip on either "What does the next four years mean for us if Barack Obama is reelected? What does the next four years mean for us if Mitt Romney is elected?" -- you're not quite sure where it's going.

One of the things that strikes me in the region is how much hunger there is for United States interest. And we can describe this any way you want. It can be the United States needs to have a clearer policy. It can be the United States needs to be doing more vis-a-vis the opponents of Assad, or even vis-a-vis the Muslim Brotherhood. We heard about the Israeli-Palestinian question. There's a desire for us to be involved, I would say, and in no place more than

among our allies in the Persian Gulf, who are looking less at the question of Syria, less at the question of the Palestinians in Egypt, much less at Libya -- and absolutely at Iran.

And there, what they see is a series of talks that seem to have petered out without anybody in Washington actually noticing. So they're asking -- and I hear these questions. I'm sure you all hear these questions more -- what are you going to do about Iran? How are we going to face up to this? Are we really going to let this unravel to the point that the Israelis are forced into a military strike, or that the United States is? Or are you going to keep talking about it, and just leave us to Iranian domination?

I don't think that -- I know that Barack Obama hasn't answered that question to anybody's satisfaction. I suspect that Mitt Romney hasn't really answered that question to anybody's satisfaction, either. He has hinted that he would support an Israeli strike. He's referred to the

unacceptable nature of an Iranian program. But, like the President, he really hasn't gone much further in specificity as to what it is that he would do.

And so, in some ways, you looking in at us are in much the same position, one versus the other.

I only want to touch on a couple of other questions.

You know, on the issue of Iraq, I think that there's a problem here. I can criticize Barack Obama. I thought that we did the wrong thing. I thought we should have negotiated a status-of-forces agreement with the Maliki government. I think that that would have stabilized the country in the long term. It was not a huge commitment of forces. But, let us say, if Mitt Romney is elected, he's not going to put troops back in Iraq. He's not going to go back in and renegotiate a status-of-forces agreement.

So, we're kind of in the position of criticizing the President, justly so -- and, you know, let me sort of underscore it, justly so -- without saying, "But here's what I'm going to do that will

make it better." And so that's a genuine challenge that I think we face.

The problem really is, from my standpoint, that when the President talks constantly about ending the war, it sends a message to the Middle East, and that message is, "Here is my back. Watch it as we walk into the distance."

That's another part, also, of his emphasis on the question of the pivot. This is our pivot to Asia, our focus after 10 years of looking at the Middle East and South Asia. We're now going to be looking at Asia.

That, of course, is absolutely necessary. China represents a significant challenge to us. We have real challenges in the Pacific. On the other hand, the notion that we're turning the front of our body to the Pacific, and our back to the Middle East is a bad one. We have priorities in the Middle East and in Asia. And I really object to, and I'm concerned about, the notion that somehow the Middle East is now a second-tier concern.

Even if we wanted to pay no attention, the transformation of the Arab world, the Arab Awakening, the Arab Spring, whatever it is that we want to call it, the revolution in Syria, the challenge in Egypt, the rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq again, and the appearance of these Al Qaeda-related groups in Sinai, the challenge from Yemen -- these are all things that are going to draw us back. And they are obviously of supreme concern to our friends in the region. They are enormously destabilizing.

So we need to have an active policy, not a policy of ignoring that part of the country.

I'm looking to see if there's anything sort of more important that I want to put out there. And, you know, I guess I would only say, I don't feel like the Arabs are a political football. I think that the real reason that they've suffered is because we haven't had a serious conversation.

Now, all of you get to spend another sleepless night next Tuesday, when we have the last debate before the presidential election, which is on

the topic of national security. I am desperately hopeful that it will be a serious debate, that the President is going to tell us about the future, and he's going to address some of the questions that are first and foremost in all of our minds.

The truth is that the debate about Libya and about what happened in Benghazi is focused rightly, for political reasons, on the unbelievably shoddy mishandling of the challenge there, but on the other hand, does very little service to us in terms of understanding where it is that both the candidates end up. And I think there are lots of legitimate and serious questions.

I want to say one last thing about both Tammy and me, I think, which is that neither of us speak for the campaign, and we should have said that at the outset. I don't work with the Romney campaign. I'm assuming you don't work with the Obama campaign. So, just so you know, we're speaking for nobody except ourselves.

Thank you.

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
706 Duke Street, Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you, Danielle. Yes, let me make that clear, as well. You're certainly not speaking for any of the campaigns. What we wanted to hear from you was sort of the view, being inside the fulcrum of Washington as we head towards this foreign policy debate.

Danielle, unusually, I'll ask you a question even at this point.

It would be really helpful to folks here if you could explain to us, just in a few short sentences, what distinguishes the two candidates on foreign policy? And I ask you that question because many in the Arab and Muslim world say, at the end of the day there's not really that much difference between these guys. And yet, what their stances are, what they do, even if the American public is looking, perhaps rightly, domestically, what they do does profoundly affect what goes on in the Middle East.

MS. PLETKA: Right. I think, you know -- again, as I said, you know, in my remarks, I think that part of the problem is that we haven't seen a lot

of flesh on the bones of a vision for foreign policy, frankly, from either of the candidates. The President of the United States has used the phrase "We need to nation-build here at home," repeatedly. You know, that's not foreign policy, that's a commercial.

The Romney campaign has referred to "weakness." You know, Tammy rightly identified that narrative. You know, one is the end of a chapter for Obama, and for Romney it is "weakness."

I can only tell you what I would hope because, you know, I don't see into the mind of Mitt Romney, and I don't know for sure what he would do.

Let me give you one little vignette that I think is perhaps illuminating. And I hear it a lot from my friends in the Gulf.

The United States has a relationship with Israel which Ghada alluded to, and which I think everybody understands. Israel is one of our most important allies. Israel is, I would argue, our most important ally in the Middle East. And the President has said, "We have Israel's back." Okay?

Now, what people in the region have seen over the last few years is we don't really have Israel's back. To the contrary, we actually have put a lot of space between the United States and Israel. And it is an indication of how we treat our allies, and countries that are looking to up for leadership.

And what people have said to me -- obviously, behind closed doors, but, I think, people who represent, you know, a senior leadership view in the region -- is if this is how you're going to treat Israel, how are you going to treat us? That's a reasonable question.

So I think Romney's -- you know, in some ways, if you want to draw inferences from that, I think Romney is planning to, hopes to be, more engaged in the Middle East. I think he believes, at least, that he will take a tougher line on Iran. I can't tell you what that tougher line is, because better sanctions is not going to solve the problem. Even if we could have them, and I believe we could, I don't think that's going to end Iran's nuclear program.

So what is the answer to that question on Iran? Not one that's going to give a lot of people a lot of satisfaction.

The only thing that should be, I believe, heartening to our allies is an understanding that the United States is going to play a more active role, that this is not the close of a chapter, that we will be engaged, that we will be resourcing our military in a way that enables us to play the kind of a deterrent role that we need to in the region.

It's thin gruel, but there it is.

MR. SHAIKH: Well, I think the criticism is that President Obama has allowed daylight to grow between this American President and the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. And I guess what Romney is saying is that that should never happen.

Danielle?

MS. PLETKA: I don't want to -- you know, I think it's important that we not sort of devolve into, you know, into actual surrogates for the campaign, and start mouthing their talking points.

What I really want to underscore is the perception. I mean, I can talk to you for, you know, 20 boring minutes about why, you know, the United States-Israel relationship is not very good right now. But you don't need to hear that.

All I want to underscore is that, certainly, the perception on the part, I would say, of the Israelis, on the part of Israel's supporters in the United States, but also, I believe, on the part of many outside Israel in the region, is that the United States-Israel relationship is not as good as it once was. And that, really, is sort of the metric that I would suggest you use when you look at when people say we don't have Israel's back, rather than going at length into, you know, why, who, what, where.

MR. SHAIKH: Okay. Thank you very much.

We'll have plenty of time for Q&A afterwards, at least about 40 minutes.

But I'd like to come to Shadi. And just to say, on your chairs you've got a paper from him, as

well, on "Prioritized Democracy," a comment to the next U.S. President.

Shadi.

MR. HAMID: When Obama started his term, the Middle East was seen to be one of his strengths. And for those of us who watched the Cairo address, it was quite well received in the region, and there was a sense that there was something new going on here.

And it's ironic, and it's a bit weird for me to look back, because right now, I would say that Obama's Middle East policy is actually a major liability for him. And it's not -- he's not coming at it from a position of strength. And, actually, according to some polls, at least in several Arab countries, U.S. favorability ratings are lower under Obama than they were in the final years of the Bush administration.

So I think there's a really big question here: What went wrong? And this question of what went wrong provides an opening for criticism. And I think

Mitt Romney has taken advantage of that to some extent.

So I'm going to talk a little bit now about some of the contrasting issues between the candidates, and what the larger implications are for that.

After Romney gave his October 8th speech, those on the left, Democrats, Obama supporters, were uniformly negative about Romney's speech. For example, James Lindsay of the Council on Foreign Relations said, "There is absolutely nothing in this speech." Madeleine Albright called it "very shallow."

I was actually surprised at this, because I thought, in Romney's speech, for all the disagreements I have personally with his policies, I thought it was a somewhat compelling speech -- in certain areas, at least. And I think he was able to offer a distinct and somewhat coherent foreign policy message.

And, I think, as Danielle pointed out, there is a common narrative that Mitt Romney is really pushing right now. And he used three words to describe this in his speech -- "confidence, clarity,

and resolve" -- implying that Obama doesn't have much of those three things, and he will have a lot more of them if he becomes president.

Now, it's easy to kind of dismiss those words, because it's sort of a neo-conservative cliché, "confidence, clarity, resolve." What does it really mean? It's very intangible.

But I don't think this is a Republican fiction. And to go again, to kind of focus a little bit on the Middle East here, I think this is something you hear in the region, that Obama is a weak, somewhat feckless president, that he's someone you can push around. So I do agree with Danielle on that particular point, but perhaps for different reasons.

Now, I want to talk about why is Obama perceived as weak? And I think there's a bigger question here about what is the role of U.S. leadership post-Arab Spring? And how do others in the region perceive that leadership? For me, that's the bigger question. If we take a step back from all the

specific policy discussions, that's where you do see a big difference between Romney and Obama.

And I think if we're talking about Obama for a second, its, I think, in his desire to reduce America's footprint in the Middle East, to end two wars, to kind of take a step back and focus more on Asia, there's a sense -- both among Republicans in the U.S., and many in the Middle East -- that the U.S. has given up its leadership role. So that's the criticism. So you'll hear it from Syrian opposition figures that the U.S. could have done more to put pressure on Assad early on, and now to arm the Syrian opposition, which it's not doing in any kind of serious way -- so there's a list of things there, and we can point to different situations.

Now, where has this specific sense of American weakness come from? I want to just cite two important examples that I think contributed to this perception.

First is Israel, the obvious one, of course. Obama started off, he made settlements a big issue.

He did actually put more pressure on the Israeli government than most presidents had done before. But when Netanyahu failed to heed Obama's calls to free settlements in a serious way, what did the U.S. do? The U.S. backed down.

So I think there was a very important lesson there that a lot of people in the region saw, that when you stand up to the U.S., the U.S. will probably back down.

A second important example of this: Egypt, earlier this year, in March, there was the big NGO crisis that some of you might remember, where, essentially, the military government in Egypt, which was a close U.S. ally, waged war on Egyptian NGOs -- and, not only that, shut down American NGOs, and threatened many about seven or eight American citizens with jail time, to the extent that there were American citizens who had to hide in the U.S. Embassy, otherwise they might be imprisoned.

Now, the U.S. threatened to freeze aid, but it didn't follow up on its threat. The Egyptian

government did the bare minimum. They let the U.S. citizens go, but they continued their war on NGOs. And not only that, after that, they disbanded the democratically elected parliament, they reinstated martial law, they stripped the presidency of many of its powers. But through all these specific moments, the U.S. did not suspend military aid.

So, again, what lesson? If you're an Egyptian official, what do you learn from that? You learn that if you stand up to the U.S., the U.S. is going to back down.

So, I think those are a couple examples. There are actually many more.

Another issue is incoherence. Is there a consistent U.S. policy post Arab Spring? And I think this is more relevant for people on the ground who are trying to get a sense of what does the U.S. actually stand for in the Middle East? And if you look at the whole region, on Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, the U.S. has done some positive things, and has been supportive

of the transitions -- not as much as I would like, but at least it's not a negative impact.

But if you look at other countries -- Jordan and the Gulf countries -- it's business as usual. There are no shifts in policy. So when Obama says this is a new era in the Middle East, the U.S. isn't acting like it's a new era in the Gulf, Jordan, and with other autocratic regimes.

Now, I just want to close up on a couple final points that I want to get into. And that is, you know, so on the incoherent side -- let me just add something to that -- so there's a perception that I've heard from revolutionaries and opposition figures on the ground in a number of countries, and that is that the U.S. still supports autocratic regimes, as I just mentioned, right? But if we talk about Gulf allies in the region, they have the opposite perception: that the U.S. is naively pro-revolution. So this kind of - - this is the incoherence problem. Both sides of the Arab divide think that the U.S. is against them. And that's a very dangerous position to be in.

Now, so I think, from an American perspective, and speaking as an American, we have to take a step back and try to understand how we got to this point where, number one, there's a perception of weakness but, number two, there's a perception of incoherence, where does the U.S. stand? Is it on the side of revolution and democracy, or is it still siding with the old autocratic regimes and the status quo writ large?

Now, I think there's another issues -- and this will be my final point here -- is the issue of trust. And Ghada mentioned that the Obama administration claims that it's done more for Israeli security than any other president. And you know what? They're right. But it's odd, then, that Israelis still don't like Obama, especially the Israeli government, here, I'm referring to.

So how do you explain that? The policy seems to be very pro-Israel, but that's not the way Israelis perceive it. And this is where I think the

issue of trust comes. For whatever reason, Israeli leaders don't trust Obama.

On Iran, it's a similar thing. Israeli leaders, and also Gulf leaders -- even though Obama has done more to sanction the Iranian regime, again, more than any other president, Gulf leaders and Israeli leaders still don't think Obama is serious about confronting Iran's nuclear ambitions.

So what explains this gap between policy, what the Obama administration is doing, and how others perceive it? And I would say that there's a kind of intangible thing here, the issue of trust. And for whatever reason, Obama has not been able to build relationships of trust with key actors in the Middle East.

And I think part of it has to do with the distinct way that politics is done in the region. It's much more personalistic. It's about your preexisting relationships. It's about how you relate one-on-one with your counterpart.

And I was just in Turkey a few days ago, and we listened to Erdogan give a talk, a very angry speech, about his disappointment with the U.S. and the U.N. Security Council for not doing more on Syria. What was really interesting to me, though, was the way he talked about it. It sounded like it was personal to him. There was a sense of betrayal, that the U.S. and the international community, not only did they choose the wrong policy, but they betrayed him personally.

And I think it's this kind of intangible personalistic aspect of Middle East policy that Obama hasn't been very good on. And he hasn't been as personally engaged in that regard.

And, you know, I'll just end with a more optimistic comment about where we go from here, and the bigger picture.

As much as people hate U.S. policy in the region -- and there's no doubt that they do and, you know, we have to be honest with ourselves, a lot of it has to do with Israel-Palestine and, unfortunately,

the U.S. is not going to be able to help resolve that anytime soon. But even with all that anti-American sentiment -- as Danielle, I think, rightly pointed out -- there's still, in my view, is a desire for U.S. leadership.

And, again, if you look at what the Libyans were saying when they were facing massacres from the Qaddafi regime, what the Syrians are saying now, in their time of need they don't look to China or Russia. They still look to the U.S. And there's always this question: Why aren't you, the U.S., doing more to support our struggle? There's almost this expectation that the U.S. should be better, the U.S. should lead by moral example. And there's still this sense that the U.S. has the potential to meet its own lofty expectations, with all of its pro-democracy rhetoric, and so on.

So when I kind of look at the very pessimistic picture, for me, that's the one area of optimism, that the U.S., if it fundamentally reorients its Middle East policy, Arabs are likely to respond

positively. But that would take real, structural, major changes in the way the U.S. does business in the Arab world. And it would have to include Israel-Palestine.

So that's obviously a very challenging thing, and could take a very long time. But I still think there is the potential for the U.S. to really rethink what it's been doing, and what it will do as the Arab Spring proceeds.

Thanks.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you, Shadi. You talked about Prime Minister Erdogan being angry. I've heard him a few times being angry. But, certainly, your point on leadership, which I think has come out throughout all four of these great inventions, is something that we can explore a little bit further.

I would like us to focus as much as we can, and literally, not just on U.S. foreign policy and what we should do in that context, but with regard to the candidates themselves, and how -- perhaps even how

they should orient themselves looking forward. It's something that I look forward to us getting into.

Before we do that, and with all of your permission, I'd like to welcome, in particular, Dr. Abdulbaset Sieda, the president of the Syrian National Council. It's a pleasure to have you here, sir. And if you'd like to say a few words before I open the floor, I think we would welcome that.

MR. SIEDA: In fact, I will try to be as brief as possible because, in fact, I did not come, I did not follow up all the discussions right from the beginning.

Briefly speaking, as far as this regime is concerned, it has been living a real isolation, especially after the killing of Al-Hariri in Lebanon. But with the advent of Sarkozy, there was some attempts for a containment policy to open up to this regime. And then with the arrival of Obama to power, also there were some attempts to distinguish between the Iranian axis and the Syrian axis, if one can say so, although we all think that this is something very

difficult in practice, because the coalition between the two regimes, Iranian and Syrian, is a coalition that is organic and strategic, no matter how much we try to separate or distinguish between them.

What's happening now, through the insistence of the Iranian officials to provide this regime with all kinds of weapons, finance, and even men and political coverage, and there are more than one statements from Iranian officials that what's happening in Syria is part of the national Iranian security.

As for the American position, we think that the position of the Obama administration so far has not been to the required and, as a whole, the level we hoped for, because USA is a leader in the world. And what's happening in the Middle East region is something that will have its repercussions on the security and stability of the region, or even worldwide.

Syria is a key country. We all know this. And we all know that what happens in Syria will have

its effects on neighboring countries, and in the region, and even on the security and stability equations worldwide -- not only regional.

Briefly speaking, I say that when the crisis began, there were some statements made that were not really at the level that we hoped for. And with the acceleration of the crisis, we thought that the position will be better. But a few days ago I was in New York, and I met Mr. Jeffrey Feltman, and I reminded him of what we said last year, at the beginning of the revolution. What he said to me at that time, that he know, he knows well the nature of this criminal regime, that the number of killed people will go by hundreds in the future. At that time, the number was about 20 or 30.

I told him, "Do you remember when I asked you a question, a direct question, that when the number reaches 200, what would you do? Will you intervene?" You said to me, "Yes, we will do that."

"Now, the number of killed people is more than 400, and nevertheless, you have done nothing."

He has now another post, he works now in the United Nations. He said, "I really feel ashamed."

The Syrian people is witnessing now, there is death by all kinds of weapons, barrels of TNT, and highly explosive material that we call them the "barrels of hatred," because they are thrown on the people in a random way, on the civilian people, and destroy buildings. And the cluster bombs are being thrown, and the vacuum bombs are used. Nevertheless, the administration of Obama says that if the regime uses chemical weapons, America will intervene.

My question is, that is killing the Syrians by all the other kinds of weapons, is something acceptable? This is the question I wanted to discuss.

What's going on in Syria, we have drawn the attention of the Arab League and the United Nations that if violence continues at this rhythm, and if the Syrian people live so much frustrated every day, this will eventually lead to the increase and spread of fanaticism and extremism. Syria has different and multi- and a variety of ethnicities, and religions,

and faiths, and religious and nationalistic extremism could take place with the continuation of this killing of people, massacring of people all around Syria, with the silence of (inaudible 00:58:36) -- this, I think, that will increase and encourage extremism in the country.

A few days ago I met with Brahimi, he told me there is some extremist groups in Syria. I told him, "You are speaking about the result, and not the reason, not the causes." There are some causes that led to the situation. The real dealing with it should be with dealing with the causes, not the results. And if we stop the killing of the people, and we make the regime understand that its time is over -- because what the people is calling for is dignity, freedom, justice, which are basic values in our modern world.

I don't want to be too long, but I think that the required position, or the historical responsibility of the United States requires its intervention. We take the pretext above the Security Council, while we all know that the Security Council

works by some rules that are not applicable or good for this world, that one country can control the destiny of all the world. And the meetings of the friends of Syria, I say there are very few friends of Syria, nevertheless there are really the friends of the regime, give them all kinds of weapons, all kinds of finance, whereas the friends of the people of Syria are doing nothing.

In fact, these are things that we no longer accept, and we want a serious stand, especially that we are getting into Eid, and getting into winter season, and there are more than three million displaced Syrians in the country, and half a million refugees in the neighboring countries. Women, children, elderly are suffering.

I was on a visit to the camps, our refugee camps in Turkey. I met a young man who embraced me and asked me, "Is it possible they should burn a man of 85 years old, burn him alive?" This is what's happening.

I met some children in a hospital, children whose houses had been destroyed by vacuum bombs. This is happening in Syria

And thus we say that if we do not, if you do not intervene, Syria, as a key country, will affect definitely, negatively or positively, on the neighboring countries in the region.

And we in the National Syrian Council, we say we are endeavoring for a civil, democratic, modern state for all the Syrians, they are at least the future for all of the Syrians, and will be a bridge for cultural exchange with all the nations of the region.

Thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. Thank you, Dr. Abdulbaset. Clearly calling for U.S. leadership.

Tammy and Danielle, I'd like to come back to you, before we open up the floor, just for one question.

As you've heard, and as we've been discussing, there's call for greater U.S. leadership,

whilst at the same time some criticism of the U.S. role in the region. Before we discuss that even further, just with regard to both the candidates, experience in foreign policy, I'd like to talk to you about when President Obama was still on the campaigning trail when he was trying to get elected as president, of course one of the charges there was he lacked experience. Now we have the situation somewhat reversed, in that we have a Republican candidate in Governor Romney.

Could either of you just quickly speak to that, in terms of, you know, the experience, and their ability to deal with what is an increasingly complex world, not least the Middle East?

MS. PLETKA: We've agreed that I'll answer first.

I think this is a really stupid theme, because that's not what American elections are about. You know, it's a talking point. It's true, Barack Obama had very little experience. Barack Obama had only been a senator for a brief period. But, you

know, gosh, he lived in Indonesia. You know, that's not a foreign policy experience. The same can be said for Mitt Romney.

I think these sorts of things are nothing more than cheap throwaway lines. There is -- you know, Barack Obama has a vision for American foreign policy. I don't agree with his vision for American foreign policy. I don't like it.

If he had had more experience, would he have had a different vision? I don't think so. And I would say, you know, we can probably say exactly the opposite things.

I just don't think that this is -- I don't think that it is the most important criterion.

MS. WITTES: Yes, I think when it comes to how voters in the U.S. make decisions, there is sort of a basic credibility bar: Does he look presidential? Does he seem presidential? Do we think he make tough decisions? And once you clear that bar, then it gets to a lot of other things. But I think that's as true

on foreign policy as it is in general, and it's not a particularly high bar.

But in the previous discussion, and in Dani's remark's just now, I think we've gotten to something that is very important, and that is, I think, the main way in which foreign policy is, in fact, playing out in this campaign, and the main implication that this campaign will have for U.S. policy in the region.

And it's not about specific issues. It's about tone, it's about a vision of the U.S. role in the world. Shadi spoke about this. He asked the question, "What is the role of U.S. leadership post Arab Spring?" And I think a lot of the interventions that we heard, from Ghada and from Abdulbaset Sieda and others, get to the same question: What should the U.S. role be in the region, given where the region is today, given where the United States is today?

The challenge is that I don't think there's a clear partisan division between Republicans and Democrats on that question. I think the region is

divided on what role they want the U.S. to play. And, indeed, the way that the Arab Awakening has evolved, from revolutions that were truly and wholly indigenous, to the Libya intervention, and now the debate in the region about the possibility of American, or Western, or U.N. intervention in Syrian, that has changed the conversation about what the U.S. role in the Arab Awakening should be, from one which was about "Let us do this ourselves, it's important that this is self-determination," to actually, "External intervention can be really crucial."

Similarly, I think there are divisions within the Republican Party, and within the Democratic Party here in the U.S., about these questions of America's role in the world, and American intervention in crises abroad. Within the Republican Party, and within the Democratic Party, you have debates between those who are more focused on domestic issues, more concerned about reducing spending, including defense spending, cutting foreign aid, and focusing on the domestic economy, focusing on increasing exports, a

sort of economic nationalism on the one side. And then, I think, within each party you also have those on the other side, who are internationalists, who say the U.S. economy is integrated with the global economy; American politics and American security are interdependent with international security; we can't escape from the world nor should we want to; we need to lead.

But I think that's not, again, a Republican-Democrat division. I think that's a debate that exists within each party.

And when you line that up along with the exhaustion from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the state of the American economy, it makes it very difficult for a leader of either party who wants to make a case for robust American engagements abroad, it's a very tough hill to climb.

And, you know, I found it quite interesting, actually, that Romney, in his foreign policy speech, the most specific policy agenda he had related to defense spending, increasing it, building a couple

dozen new ships for the U.S. Navy, and making sure that the U.S. military could deploy anywhere, anytime, for any purpose.

And I don't know if that was a philosophical judgment or a political judgment, but I found it very interesting that that was essentially the most concrete foreign policy agenda item in that speech.

And so let me -- I'll just stop by saying I think that for those in the region who are seized with the question of possible U.S. intervention, some form of U.S. intervention in the Syrian crisis, I think it's important to understand just how complex the debate is here in the U.S. over questions of intervention in general. And I think it is paralleled by a very complex debate in the Arab world, itself.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you.

I want to throw the floor open now for questions. If you could just tell us your name and any affiliation. And if you could keep your questions -- I want to get as many of you as possible over the next 20, 25 minutes.

So, the lady at the back there, first.

SPEAKER: (inaudible) I'm a producer of (inaudible). I just have a question (inaudible) to discuss party divisions, but what I don't understand is every four years we expect (inaudible) the ability of the presidential candidate to address foreign policy. A lot of us forget how U.S. involvement in the Middle East largely depends on Congress.

And I just feel like very little (inaudible) will actually have occurred on the foreign policy front by reaching across the aisle. And both candidates talk about how badly we need more bipartisanship.

What do you actually see -- and this question is for Dani, also -- what do you actually see changing after this election, as far as reaching across the aisle, (inaudible) more bipartisanship, and (inaudible)?

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you.

Another question? Sir? If you could stand up, as well, please, so that they can see you.

SPEAKER: (inaudible) from (inaudible) University, also.

I'm just wondering if there's any sense within the foreign policy and national security groups that you're affiliated with, about the impact of continuity of leadership in the United States? And by that, I mean, if Romney comes into office, if he should be elected, there will probably a six-month or so lag, in terms of pinpointing your policies, and just (inaudible) all the levers of government, essentially.

With Obama, if he were to be reelected, first of all, he's not going to be running for reelection in four years, and he has all the existing levers already known. So his ability to actually make change, or take a risky course of action (inaudible) Mr. Romney is much different.

Is there any sense within the community that this kind of a difference between the two candidates, (inaudible) between the two candidates?

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. Okay.

Another question? Sir? If you could stand up, as well, please.

SPEAKER: Thank you. I actually see a very big difference (inaudible), in terms of a foreign policy.

I think Romney's policies are extremely dangerous. What I have noticed is that Romney speaks about the Syrian crisis from the perspective of strategic confrontation with Iran, as opposed to helping the Syrian people towards democracy.

There's very big difference. There is an extremely big difference between (inaudible) an internal conflict that (inaudible), and actually not worrying about causing a major disaster in the region, just to help the Israeli agenda of making a big confrontation with Iran. That is one (inaudible).

The other thing is, it's not just for me. If people are (inaudible). You know, Romney will get us commitments through his money. So (inaudible), I don't know how close it will be, but (inaudible) if you listen to some of their statements made by

Gingrich, justifying (inaudible) Afghanistan. Just because the Palestinians are also Arabs, it's okay to (inaudible) and replace them with (inaudible), because they are Arabs.

I don't understand, you know, if this (inaudible) was spread in the Romney camp, or if that was like an odd thing. But this is very dangerous reasoning.

And the focus on the defense spending, and trying to give an impression of being a strong and decisive leader, this could lead to a huge disaster in the region, in my opinion.

So, Obama, on the other hand, is free from that pressure.

So the other point is, if we are actually serious about improving the relationship, the long-term relationship with the Arab world, I believe that it is also in the best interest of the Jews, the Jewish community in the world -- not just, you know, the current government in Israel.

So when people confuse the relationship with Israel, you know, with the current government in Israel, with the best interests of the Jewish people in the world, that is another very dangerous argument, I think.

There are many issues, but I'll leave the microphone for other people to contribute. Thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you very much. I'd just point out that most American Jewish voters vote Democrat, and probably will continue to do so.

Yes -- the lady at the back.

MS. AGUSHANI: Yes, hi. Good evening. I'm Sarah Agushani, and I'm a doctoral student.

And I'd like to ask, on this last point, actually, I wonder if there is any statistics or information that you may have about the Arab-American vote, and which way do they usually vote? We often hear of the Latino, and the African-American. But, of course, Arab-American may be substantially smaller, but that's of interest.

And one more thing -- I mean, I do have some reservations about perceiving Obama's latest, well, his first term, as perhaps "feckless," as you mentioned, or kind of, you know, moving away from the Middle East, considering, you know, yes, he did make a comment about the settlements but did back down. He increased military aid to Israel. They jumped into Libya.

And I wonder if the reluctance about Syria is a matter of timing, simply because it's, you know, very close in the runup to the elections, and we often know that in the first term the president tends to focus on, the American president tends to focus on the, you know, internal crises. And they did have a crisis, actually.

Yes -- so that's all. Thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you.

Okay, I'll take one more.

SPEAKER: (inaudible) Georgetown.

(Continues in Arabic 01:16:26 to 01:16:48.)

MR. SHAIKH: Okay. Well, we have a number of questions, a lot of them directed to you two ladies in Washington: the role of Congress, any hope of reaching across the aisle? The question of a continuity of leadership. Romney's "extremely dangerous policies," and the team around him -- maybe you could say a little bit about the team around him, in particular. And the Arab-American vote.

Let's start with those, as well as the last question, Ghada, you'll take it.

MS. OUEISS: The last question?

MR. SHAIKH: The last question, in terms of U.S.-Israel. But if we get the ladies, if you want to --

MS. WITTES: Okay. So, I think we can, we'll try and divide the labor here a bit, and I'll talk a little bit about Congress, and what we might expect in Congress' role in foreign policy, and just a bit about the American-Jewish vote.

And then, I think Dani wanted to talk a bit about the Arab-American vote because she's got some

data on that, and maybe address some of these issues about Romney's advisors, and so on.

But I think what you see in Congress is a reflection of the broader debate I was talking about a few minutes ago, regarding America's role in the world, the emergence of this more, you know -- this caucus, which is largely represented in the House by Tea Party Republicans, but there are certainly Democrats in this camp, as well, who are primarily concerned about the American economy, about our fiscal situation and cutting the budget deficit, and are therefore very skeptical or expensive foreign entanglements.

And so there's been a lot of skepticism about foreign aid in general, and even some pressure, I think, from hard-core Tea Party-ers on defense spending, as part of the focus on cutting the deficit.

I think that's going to continue. This is a very deep-seated trend in U.S. politics, and the problem of the national debt, and this sort of fiscal cliff that we're facing, is a real problem. And it

forces real tradeoffs -- although the bulk of our budget problem comes from domestic social welfare programs, and that's just a fact.

So, I wouldn't necessarily say it's a question of partisan polarization. I think that if Romney is elected and the Republicans hold the majority in the House again, he will face some of the same constraints getting support for foreign assistance, and other types of international engagement that President Obama faced.

Just a note on the American-Jewish community and its political preferences, in response to the comment that was made about the interests of Jews. I think it's important to note, as Salman said, that American Jews, by and large, tend to vote for Democrats in the 70 to 80 percent range. That's been true for many, many, many years. But, increasingly, as you look at the poll data, and the demographic data, the American Jewish community, in terms of its political preferences, isn't really that much

distinguishable anymore from the rest of White America.

MS. PLETKA: From the rest of the left.

MS. WITTES: So that urban, upper class, and upper middle-class White voters, whether they're Jewish or non-Jewish, tend to vote more or less the same way. And so -- and that, again, as I said at the very beginning of our session, tends to be about domestic politics, domestic economic and social policies.

So, while Israel, and the question of who's better for Israel has been a rhetorical theme for the candidates in this campaign, I really don't think it has moved more than a handful of American voters, Jewish or otherwise.

Let me turn it over to Dani to tackle the others.

MS. PLETKA: You know, I mean, the interesting fact, of course, about voting is that there are three groups that vote overwhelmingly Democratic. They are Jews, Muslims, and Blacks. And

that's just a fact. I just did a CNN with Jim Zogby. He has just finished a very interesting -- and I commend it to all of you -- survey of American-Arab voters. And what it shows is that the numbers of Arab-American Muslims that vote Democratic are overwhelming.

Interestingly, Arab-American Christians, of which there are not an insignificant number, vote slightly more Republican. And we could have an entire separate panel talking about that.

But the shibboleth that somehow, yes, the Jews are in control of everything, is one that honestly doesn't deserve a serious hearing anywhere.

On the question of Congress -- you know, I spent 10 years on Capitol Hill, so I have a very clear viewpoint about that. There is no substitute for Presidential leadership. The President of the United States is the commander-in-chief. He sets the tone. He has the pulpit. He has the ability to rally the nation. And when he does it, Congress is very limited in its ability to go the other way.

When he fails to do it, that is when Congress does nothing. And as Tammy rightly said, on national security matters, the center of gravity of American politics has absolutely shifted, and more and more people, in both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, would like to spend less, do less, go fewer places. And that's part of the challenge that not just we, but all of us who believe in American internationalism, for whatever purpose, have to face. It's a big educational challenge.

And so if Romney is elected, one of his biggest challenges is going to be to actually stand up to the American people and explain why we should spend more on defense -- not just that we should, not just American greatness, why we should spend more, why we need to play a role in the Middle East, what our role should be, and why it serves our larger interests.

And I think that's going to be a very, very important component for him if he's elected. Let's see him do it.

Does somebody -- do I need to talk about his advisors? You know, knock yourself out. That sort of Kremlinology about advisors is about as silly for the Democrats as it is for the Republicans.

People who rise to the level of being a candidate for president of the United States may be many, many things, but stupid is not one of them. They can think for themselves, they can listen to their advisors and choose for themselves.

I don't think that Obama is X because he has an Arab near him, or because he has a Jew near him. I think Obama has a view about American policy, and he executes it. I think the same will be true for Mitt Romney.

MR. SHAIKH: Okay.

Ghada, again you're asked to sort of focus on the U.S.-Israel relationship. You heard the view from Washington, and yet you have every American president speaking a lot about Israel, as well as Congress.

If you want to just address that, and what you heard.

MS. OUEISS: It was talking about using Israel to support the point of view of Iran and Syria -- Syria, the regime, you mean. (Speaking Arabic)

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. Very interesting, you put Israel and Iran as defective partners in the new Middle East.

Shadi, you wanted to say something?

MR. HAMID: Yeah, yeah. I want to make just --

MS. OUEISS: It's not me. I'm just --

MR. HAMID: Sure.

MS. OUEISS: I'm just transferring other, how others think about this.

MR. HAMID: Okay, so I'll make two comments.

On the "extremely dangerous," is Romney "extremely dangerous" comment, I think even if Romney did some positive things, it would likely be overshadowed by a strike against Iran. So I think, you know, even if there -- you know, that's something

we have to take very seriously. And even if the U.S. did everything on my wish-list for the Arab world -- I mean, just imagine how any good will would be undone by a strike against Iran. You can just imagine, you know, people protesting in front of U.S. embassies across the region, and the second- and third-order effects of an Iran strike. So, that's definitely one thing.

And on Palestine, you know, I do think there is a big difference. Even though Obama has done a lot to support Israel militarily, Obama at least understands intuitively the Palestinian side of it. He did grow -- you know, he did spend a lot of time hearing the other side of a debate, when he was a professor in Chicago. And when he was a candidate, he did make some sympathetic comments towards the Palestinian cause. So I think he's at least aware of Arab grievances around Palestine.

Romney has shown no sign that he is.

And the second comment I wanted to make is on your comment, where you, you know, you pointed out

that, you know, is it fair to say the Obama administration has been weak? It has been involved, I think you said, on Libya and so on.

Even on Libya, that, I think, is a more qualified issue, because Obama was dragging his feet until the very end. I mean, if you recall, the last week before NATO intervention, the U.S. was still on the fence. So the U.S. went in very reluctantly. And even after it did, it "led from behind," in its own words, and actually let France and Britain play a greater leadership role, to the extent where the French and British were frustrated that the U.S. wasn't doing more. And it took six months to displace Qaddafi.

But there are other examples, too. If you look at the amount of aid that the U.S. has given, the U.S. could have been doing that a year-and-a-half ago. So even though there's an election now, why not, you know, a year-and-a-half ago putting more assistance to support the Arab transitions? And the amount of new aid the U.S. has put in is actually very small.

And this is where I think Obama could have played more of a leadership role in telling Congress that there has to be more of a U.S. commitment. But he didn't give his first major Middle East speech until four or five months after the Arab uprisings began, and that was on May 19, 2011.

So why wasn't Obama taking advantage of the American interest in the Arab revolts, and telling the American people that we have a real opportunity to commit more resources, more funding, and more support to the Arab Spring. I think a major opportunity was missed there.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you.

Ghada, I just want to come back to you for a second, and that is just give me two -- let's say you are briefing President Obama, or President Romney, in January 2013. What would you give them as advice that they should focus on, two things that they should focus on when it comes to the Middle East?

MS. OUEISS: They should focus on understand how people think here.

MR. SHAIKH: Okay, but two policies?

MS. OUEISS: Two specific policies, you mean.

MR. SHAIKH: Yes. Yes.

MS. OUEISS: They should seek for -- they shouldn't search only for their own interests. It's their right, and everybody does that. But if you focus only on your own interests, it will fire back on you.

MR. SHAIKH: But countries focus on their interests, and not least American country, particularly with their own electorate which is focusing on its own issues.

MS. OUEISS: No, I mean, with their foreign policy, when they come and they want to interfere in the Middle East. When they search for their own interests in this country, it will fire back on them, because it will be too much selfish, and that will fire back on them, because people here are already hate the United States -- either liberals or

Islamists, or anybody here in the Arab world, they hate the United States.

MR. SHAIKH: I'll stop you there. And yet, and yet we talk about American leadership, still.

I actually want to do something very unscientific. And I know, Tammy, that you have to go, and Danielle, too, in terms of we're running out of time.

But if we could put the camera on the audience just for a second, I'd like to just ask the question: who would like more American leadership? Who would like the next president to show more American leadership in this part of the world? Could I just see a show of hands?

Okay. And does that presume -- who would like the Americans to withdraw further, which is perhaps what the American public are weary of, as well, in terms of its entanglements in the Middle East.

Can I have a show of hands of who would like the U.S. -- sorry, the next U.S. president to back off?

Okay. Just one caveat to that. Let's ask you, with regard to Syria, who would like more American leadership when it comes to Syria?

Okay.

So, we've got a mixed bag here. And I guess that is the part of the conundrum that a U.S. president will face with regard to.

MS. OUEISS: But didn't you notice that what I was saying was right, about the hate of the United States, that hate --

MR. SHAIKH: Yes. No, you're right. It's undeniable that in all the polling that you see --

MS. OUEISS: I mean, you have to come with values, not just with interests, so that you can convince people that you are here for them, not for your own interests, or for Israel's interests. The main issue, Israel is the main issue. It's because we deal everyday with news about the Middle East, and the

bulletins, and the news, and Al Jazeera channel. And the main audience is talking about this issue of -- and the election (inaudible), Israel, Israel, Israel. This is the main issue for them.

MR. SHAIKH: Sure. Sure. Thank you very much. And you reflected very well.

I don't know if either of you want to come back on this final point, in terms of U.S. leadership?

(No response.)

Okay. But I guess we haven't answered all the questions. We probably ask more questions at this stage. But I think what you've heard, in Washington, is how they're feverishly focusing on an election which is perhaps more domestically focused than at any time, where we have a public which is war-weary, particularly with regard to its entanglements in the Middle East.

And in the Middle East, as particularly expressed by Ghada -- I think, very accurately -- about a United States whose actions have actually not

been given the benefit of the doubt, which have actually sowed more mistrust and disgruntlement.

It's in that context that a U.S. president, I guess, will be coming and taking over, whether it's President Obama continuing, or a new president, Romney.

MS. OUEISS: Can I add something? Because if they don't understand, that will make more violence against them. More violence against them will cost them a lot at the economical --

MR. SHAIKH: Sure. Sure. No --

MS. OUEISS: -- standard.

MR. SHAIKH: No, but let me say, as I wrap up, of course many Americans would point to the blood and treasure that they've spent over the last decade or so, with regard to this part of the world. And getting it right, I guess, is something which will require much more of a dialogue in the weeks and months and years ahead -- I think as you are pointing out.

Let me thank you for coming. Thank you, Tammy, and thank you, Danielle, if you're still there. We very much appreciate your joining us, as well.

And, again, thank you for coming. I hope we'll soon be having another debate, which we'll contact you with.

I'd like to thank, again, Dr. Abdulbaset Sieda, and ambassadors who were here, as well as the rest of you. Thank you for coming. (Applause.)

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2012

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
706 Duke Street, Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190