

# ‘Speak Out’ and Restore Life to Our Democracy

*On Sept. 12, extraordinary commentary was given by two of Washington's most accomplished diplomats in the Arab and Islamic world, Hon. Charles Freeman, the former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and Dr. John Duke Anthony, president and CEO of the National Council of U.S.-Arab Relations, who spoke at the closing panel of 14th annual conference of the Council, entitled "Restoring Arab-U.S. Trust in a Time of Turbulence and Reforms." Both speakers spelled out a time of tragedy for the United States, in which the present Adminis-*

tration has failed the American people abroad, with its adventurous policies, and at home, as demonstrated by the devastation of the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina.

The day also saw, for once, the link between foreign policy and domestic concerns made vividly, as Dr. Anthony took note of the increase of poverty in America since last year, of the rise in homelessness, and in the neglect of the elderly poor. He asked if it is not indeed arrogant, for the United States to demand “democracy” from Arab states, while demonstrating a neglect of its own people that is rarely seen in Arab family culture.

We excerpt below the speech by Ambassador Freeman, and will be covering more of the important speeches from the conference, when transcripts become available.

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## Chas Freeman

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Once again, I have been honored by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and stand before you to offer a few thoughts on where we—Americans and Arabs—are, and where we may go from here. I speak for myself alone, not for any organization with which I am affiliated. I speak because I believe U.S.-Arab relations matter greatly to my country and because, unlike many in Washington, I do not believe in diplomacy-free foreign policy and have a healthy regard for what is now derided as “reality-based analysis.”

Our relations with the Arabs and with Muslims generally are at a historic nadir. All of us, Americans or Arabs, who are present want to do something about this. But what? We must start with an honest appraisal of where we are.

My country’s tragically misguided lurch into militarism after 9/11 has already cost us more on the broader international stage than anyone could have imagined. In the span of a single Presidential term of office, four years, we have forfeited the international esteem that once undergirded our global influence. We have lost the admiring deference to our leadership of allies and friends alike, without gaining the respect of our enemies and adversaries. Once seen as the reliable champion of a generous and just international order based on the rule of law, the United States is now widely viewed as an inveterately selfish spoiler in international organizations and a scofflaw in international affairs. Once seen as the last, best hope of humankind, the United States is now, according to many polls, more feared than admired in a lengthening list of countries. We are much the weaker for all of this.

Nowhere is this dismaying reversal in foreign views of my country more advanced than in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The mutual estrangement of Arabs and Americans is driven by the consequences of ill-considered U.S. policies in Iraq, the Holy Land, Afghanistan, and at home. It is exacerbated by hypocrisy, irresponsible passivity, and an absence of forceful leadership on the Arab side. Adverse trends in



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American-Arab relations in turn poison American relationships with the broader world of Islam. Different policies and approaches on both sides will be needed to regain the enormous amount of common ground we have lost. More artful and articulate explanations for policies that are fundamentally mistaken will not do the trick.

## The Occupation of Iraq

The Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq has cost my country its international reputation, many lives, and hundreds of billions of borrowed dollars. It is severely eroding both the structure and the professional competence of our army. It has destroyed the Iraqi state and destabilized and desecularized Iraqi politics, while expanding the regional power and influence of Iran. It has catalyzed violent struggles, verging on civil war, between Iraqi Arabs and Kurds, between Arab Sunnis and Shi’as, and among Shi’i factions. It has generated at least three separate but loosely coordinated insurgencies in Iraq. The occupation, which seemed like the solution, has become the problem.

Our occupation in Iraq is drawing youth from throughout the Islamic world into attacks on Americans, by some estimates multiplying our enemies ten-fold. By a process of Darwinian natural selection administered by the very competent officers and men of the U.S. Army and Marines, we are creating an ever fitter cadre of enemies, expert in urban warfare, bomb building, and the military choreography of the ambush. We have transformed Iraq from a reliable supplier of oil to the U.S. and other markets, into an unreliable one. The Iraq conflict and its side effects have contributed to raising energy prices to levels that are beginning to take a serious toll on our economy.

Our inability to prevail on the battlefield in Iraq has underscored the limits of our military power and emboldened our enemies. Now Hurricane Katrina has shown how little we have learned about how to deal with the consequences of

large-scale traumatic events. The suffering of New Orleans has earned us the pity of the world and the scorn of our enemies. It invites renewed attempts by extremists to mount spectacularly deadly attacks on our homeland.

I suspect that many, if not most leaders in the Arab world would privately agree with the very negative assessment of American intervention in Iraq that I have just given. Some, I know, have spoken candidly to our President about Iraq, Israel, and the parlous state of American relations with the broader Islamic world. Candor, not fawning evasion and the hypocritical concealment of sincere differences of opinion, is the mark of true friendship. And it is in that spirit that I say to our Arab friends here today, if you do not express your views and advocate your own interests, do not be surprised if they are insouciantly ignored and trampled upon. . . .

It is particularly important that our Arab friends speak candidly to us about Iraq and Iran. The best outcome still possible in Iraq, it now seems, is a Shi'a-dominated state with a largely autonomous southern region heavily influenced by Iran, and a Kurdish region independent in all but name. Such an Iraq may or may not contain U.S. garrisons and bases. The United States has not clarified its intentions. No one has demanded that it do so.

Some of the same people who neo-conned the United States into invading Iraq are now arguing for an attack on Iran as a means of ensuring that it does not eventually acquire nuclear weapons. If these outcomes in Iraq and courses of action against Iran would serve the interests of the Arabs, then Arabs need only remain silent. If they would not serve Arab interests, as I believe they would not serve the interests of the United States, then Arabs must speak out to help the United States and the international community come up with alternatives to them that would better serve our interests, or suffer the consequences.

In Iraq, the problem is not now—if it ever was—weapons of mass destruction, bad government, or even terrorism; it is the occupation. The occupation generates the very phenomena it was intended to cure. In that respect, the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq has come to have much in common with the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. In Iraq, as in Palestine, ending the occupation is the prerequisite for reversing the growth of terrorism and restoring peace.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Not long ago, many Arabs took obvious pleasure in seeing a few thousand Israeli settlers in Gaza suffer the same sense of powerlessness and dispossession that hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have experienced over the years. It is all too easy to forget that the Israeli withdrawal was unilaterally imposed by the Israeli military on Israelis and Palestinians alike. It was not agreed with the Palestinians as part of a peace process and it has no clear implications for any other part of the occupied territories. It seems likely, in fact, that the people of Gaza have exchanged occupation by Israeli colonists and

soldiers not for freedom, but for a state of siege, in which their access to the outside world will continue to be controlled and perhaps severely restricted by their Israeli neighbors. . . .

As long as the United States continues unconditionally to provide the subsidies and political protection that make the Israeli occupation and the high-handed and self-defeating policies it engenders possible . . . neither Palestinians nor Israelis will have personal security . . . [and] Israel will not find the acceptance by its Arab neighbors that was offered at Beirut in 2002. Moreover, the violent confrontation could at any moment, as it did in the past, spread its murder and mayhem well beyond the region. . . .

The extremism and terrorism bred by the continuing injustices and crimes against humanity in the Holy Land thus continue to take their toll in places as remote from the Holy Land as Britain, Thailand, Nigeria, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, an American-led military operation to apprehend the perpetrators of 9/11 and to punish those Afghan Salafis who had given them shelter, has now taken on a seemingly eternal life of its own. No one can now say when or what might allow the United States to disengage from combat against the once discredited but now resurgent Taliban. As in Iraq and Israel, the occupation is becoming the cause of the very problems it was meant to resolve. If one recalls that the objective of al-Qaeda and its extremist ilk has been to drive the United States and the West from the Dar al-Islam so that they can seize control of it, the growing antipathy to the American presence is sobering.

### **Systemic Breakdown in American Democracy**

Finally, a couple of necessary observations about the American home front. I have recited a daunting list of policy challenges. . . . We have a political system premised on the notion of competition between two parties an adversary process in which one party criticizes and proposes alternatives to the policies of the other. This system has clearly broken down. Patriotism is confused with silent acquiescence in the policies proposed by our leaders. Policies that should be the subject of active debate are accepted without a word of protest by a gullible public. Those who know better say nothing, even when they can see the country being led into disaster. The opposition party not only does not oppose, it does not propose alternatives, either because it has no ideas or because it lacks confidence in those it has been too timid to advance. This is not just a political problem; it is a systemic breakdown in American democracy.

What can and must be done in these circumstances? None of you would be here at this late hour of the day if you did not care deeply about the issues I have been discussing. I appeal to you. Those of you who are Arabs, lend us your ideas for how to lead ourselves out of the dilemmas we now face. Those of you who are American, speak out. Reaffirm your patriotism by restoring life to our democracy!