

# The Future of American Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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Thank all of you for having me out here tonight. It's a real privilege to get out of Washington D.C., and to get away from the Middle East for a little bit is a real privilege for anybody these days. I'm especially grateful, ladies and gentleman, to be in the city of Angels, because to come out here and see that Pacific Ocean again and see the mountains and the diversity of this community; the way you all think; the way you enjoy life; it pumps some energy back into me. And I'll just tell you that there's another reason to be happy not to be in Washington as of yesterday, [a moderate earthquake had struck the eastern seaboard the previous day] obviously this earthquake thing. I hear that Washington D.C. actually buckled under the weight of its own, its own bureaucracy.

But as you know, your military always looks on the bright side and we were very happy to see that the Pentagon got more work done after the evacuation than it did before. So – and it's the way it goes – we should have expected the earthquake because frankly when energy stored in opposing memos is suddenly released, it can really create some havoc.

And by the way, there's some young folks over here that I got to meet before I came into the dinner; it's why I was a little late getting here, that and the traffic. And I'll tell you, if you're raising young people with the global

awareness like that this table has over here, any concern about America's future has dissipated as far as I'm concerned. They were asking me questions; General Soloman, you might understand this – they were asking me questions that far exceeded what I heard on Capitol Hill when I was being questioned. And this is why I asked ahead of time if you were going to be recording tonight sir, because I don't want to get in any more trouble.

But what I thought I would do is speak for a few minutes, and I mean that, few enough to break the ice, close the gap between us and prime the pump. Hopefully you'll get some nuggets that you can question me on or challenge me with. I will tell you, that since tonight as a Marine infantryman that I could be violating my own rule of never talk to a group that knows more about a subject than I do. Because, obviously, we've been in active operations, we've been doing what we think is the right thing, but it does not leave a lot of time for reflection, and so I also expect to do a lot of listening here tonight ladies and gentlemen.

I've spent a lot of time overseas these last ten years. Actually in September of 2001, right after 9/11, I was stationed in Camp Pendleton. I left in September and I spent an awful lot of the intervening years since then overseas. Nothing wrong with that – it's where you expect your naval officers, marines to be; army officers; air force, when there's trouble.

But at the same time, I am concerned that this very complex war has not been well explained. The nobility of our cause has not been articulated, and I'm also concerned that we in the military are growing somewhat out of touch with those of you who matter.

I'm not in the Marine Corps. I'm in the United States Marine Corps. We belong to you. We owe you an accounting for what we do, and part of that accounting is the ability to come in front of you and convince you that we

actually know what we're doing when we send you sons and daughters off to war. Not that we sent them, but we certainly lead them in this.

I'll tell you that I doubt that you'll be shy, but there may be a couple of things I cannot go into detail on, and I will be right upfront. I won't dance around it. If there's something I can't talk about, I'll just tell you I can't talk about it. I've served in Central Command for most – on and off again – but for most the past 30 years, I've been in this region. I just tell you that because it's an area that I answer to the Secretary of Defense for, and it's an area that is full of contradictions. And holding those contradictions in some kind of balance is one of my biggest challenges.

The region is quite large and diverse. It stretches from Kazakhstan up in central Siberia. It goes down to Yemen on the southern edge of the peninsula; the Arabian Peninsula. It obviously starts in the Mediterranean with Egypt and Lebanon, and wanders over to Pakistan on the Indian Ocean. And in over 30 years of service in and out of this region, I have never seen it so tumultuous. I've got friends – we were young officers together in various armed forces there. We've grown up together. We're now at the higher levels of organizations. We've been modestly successful in our jobs and it's very, very interesting to see almost the fear that is in some of them. And these include countries that would surprise you, that appear to be quite stable – at least from the outside.

Now, I would like to talk first about the Arab Awakening. I'd love to be here to hear some of the speakers you have coming up soon, including Eric Schmitt, for sure. But, how do we craft a policy today? It's a really fundamental question. How do we craft a policy that adapts to these changing times; that's consistent with our values as Americans? We never want policies that are not consistent with our values. But they also have to be balanced with pragmatism – and I say this as a military officer, because

your military basically serves our foreign policy. And foreign policy has got to deal with reality in a world that does not always comport to our desires.

We have to play the ball where it lies, to put it in golfing terms. You can't imagine it somewhere else; you're going to have to deal with it. And once in awhile I will get berated when I'm talking – whether it be on Capitol Hill or elsewhere – because someone isolates some individual action and said it's inconsistent. Well at times the world is inconsistent and I hope our policy has some inconsistencies at times, because you can't deal with everyone in the same way.

When I meet with foreign leaders in the Middle East today, what I cite are four pillars, and those four pillars come from our State Department. They are the four pillars for the policies that we are implementing as we adapt to this changing time. And I will tell you, the Middle East is never going to go back to what it was before. There is no holding your breath and saying, "Well, it'll all settle out in the next year or so, and it's all going to go back into some stability." There may come stability. It's going to be more than a couple years, and it's not going to look like it did before.

Let me tell you what the four pillars are. First, we support each country's political reform efforts to adapt at its own pace. In other words, we don't look at the Middle East as one lump, where United Arab Emirates is the same as the Saudi Arabia, is the same as Lebanon, is the same as Egypt. Each country is going to have to have its own political reform process. We are going to be in a supportive role to that. It may not look like what we would do – it probably will not. There was an American a few years ago who said that, "it may surprise some people in America to know that other countries may want an imperfect government of their own choosing rather than a perfect one foisted on them by us." Will Rogers was a very bright man. But that's the first point: that we support political reform at their own pace.

Second, we support economic reforms that broaden the fruits of the economic boom, so that more people feel like they have ownership of what is going on in those countries, rather than just a few. So political reform; economic reform; third, we support a renewed pursuit of Middle East peace. The status quo, as we all know, is not sustainable in the long run. Israel will not be secure and it does not do anything to lower the heat that creates all these problems that we have in the Middle East. So we support, and you've heard the President say so, a revived Middle East peace process.

And the fourth point is: we support regional security, standing by our friends, ladies and gentlemen, standing by our friends against terrorism and countering Iran's reckless activities in league with the international community. We work together and we fight terrorists – and you know where that's going on – and we fight it in some places you don't hear about. And we also confront Iran with some of their activities and make it very clear what we will tolerate and what we will not.

Much of what we do in support of these pillars is done very, very quietly. You will not hear about it. I'll tell you one of the reasons that I can get with my counterparts any time is that they know I'll never talk to them through the press. I'll do it quietly in their offices and will try to persuasively and in a compelling way help them get to where they need to go. And by and large, we can find common ground with just about all these countries. It may not be a lot of common ground. It may be a little of what we call in the naval service "a little beachhead" that you work from. But you have to start somewhere, and we work off that.

My orchestration of military activities is firmly embedded inside American foreign policy. To this audience, that takes no explaining. Often times it takes a lot of explaining, by the way, as I'm out traveling around. The "mil-to-mil"

relationship should play a reinforcing role, and you have seen that happen in Egypt where we were able to help there in a very quiet, persuasive way.

But we do intend to reassure our friends and temper our adversary designs in this imperfect world. I don't think we have any option of disengaging from the world or from the region, and here probably in this room I will get less argument on that than I get in some places. But it is going to take our best diplomatic instincts to build common cause with old friends and, hopefully, with new friends as they come into their own.

In Egypt, for example, we've seen the people gain an elevation in how they are governed. You saw a military that shepherded its people through that process. It wasn't perfect, it wasn't perfect at all. But I leave perfection to God. That military stood by pretty well in a very, very difficult situation and did not do what's going on right next door in Libya, for example, or what's going on tonight in Syria.

I think that, as we look at this region, what I will do is just give you a snapshot of a couple of the countries, and it will give you a pretty good flavor for how we actually do what we do. In Lebanon, you know about that unfortunate little country that's had so much trouble. They are putting together a new government. It's home to one of the most well-armed, non-state organizations in the world, and that's Lebanese Hezbollah. They're dangerous, they have more rockets than most countries and they are someone we keep a very close eye on.

We do work very closely with the Lebanese armed forces and we're not naïve about this. I'll tell you, too, that the Israeli defense force knows what we do, and quietly we talk about it – all three of the militaries do – and we make very certain that we are working for stability and not for some kind of an advantage of one over the other. We are trying to maintain a stability there,

and it works pretty well actually because the Lebanese military is the only what we call multi-confessional organization in the country. So if you don't deal with them, if you don't work with them, you create a vacuum. And into that vacuum, Lebanese Hezbollah and many of these, what I call the mumbo jumbo men who are trying to turn people in a certain direction towards terrorism, whatever, they will fill that vacuum.

So we do work with them pretty closely, because Iran's backing of Lebanese Hezbollah is what makes it so dangerous. Lebanese Hezbollah, backed by Iran, fulminated the fall of the former prime minister. Lebanese Hezbollah was then implicated by the UN Special Tribunal for the assassination of Rafik Hariri when he was Prime Minister. Lebanese Hezbollah is armed, trained and equipped by Kud's force out of Iran.

Let me switch over to Egypt for a moment. Egypt, the most critical country for the Arab Spring; for setting it on a proper path; on the right path, is Egypt. It is historically, traditionally, the heart of the Arab world. I'd say between 25-30% of all Arab people living there. And we are going to maintain very close mil-to-mil relations there. We fly in and out quietly. I meet with Field Marshal Tantawi. I'll tell you that they will conduct the elections this fall – the Egyptian military leadership. They are eager to turn this over, this governing over, to a citizen government.

They realize they cannot do it on their own. And it's going to be a long road, a very long road, as they build democratic political progress. The reason I say this is because many people in that part of the world think, "well it's going to happen right away. Once we vote people in, everything is going to go better for us; there's going to be jobs." There are a lot of disappointments ahead out there and it's going to take friendships and it's going to take trust to help them get through this period without it going in the wrong direction.

We do anticipate that Cairo will return to its historic role in the Middle East. But that's in education, commerce, religious thought; the arts. But it's going to be awhile. Right now they are totally focused internally. They're not focused externally. The two points that concern me most: Will they sustain their moderate Sufi tradition, or will they go into some Islamic terrorist direction – and the jury is out.

The other point I would make is the Muslim Brotherhood. I'll just tell you, I'm paid to be your sentinel. I'm not paid to be overly trusting. We keep a very close eye on the Muslim Brotherhood and what they're up to. Here – and since there's no media folks here – I'll just tell you the only difference I can determine between a Muslim Brother extremist and a Muslim Brother moderate is their timeline. It's not the difference in dogma. The only difference is: how soon? The extremist is very impatient, the moderate is willing to take his time and watch it unfold.

Let me talk about two countries where we have a lot of military, because you probably have some questions about them. First on Iraq: One thing that is very instructive for me as I fly around the region every month is, here's one country that in the midst of the Arab Awakening, you don't see any mobs in the street demanding a voice in their government in Baghdad. Kind of interesting isn't it? I mean, why is that? I don't claim to have the answer. But it's the silence in the terms that we're seeing in Cairo, or in Damascus, or Libya, and in so many other places – you don't see that aggravation there.

The violence there has been reduced significantly – [pauses to drink water] if that was vodka this would be a much better speech – the violence has been reduced significantly there, and one point I make is that here are two basic reasons for the violence. One is Al Qaeda in Iraq, and they have been hammered to their knees. They are still capable of spectacular attacks. On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Ramadan you saw them murder for no reason Shias – on the

15<sup>th</sup> day of their holy month – with seven, eight, nine bomb attacks in one day. They're a bunch of sickos, and I'm on record, as some of you know, with the pleasure it is to fight those kinds of guys. And I'll just tell you I haven't changed my mind one bit. But at this point right now they are beaten down significantly. They're dangerous. They're capable of murder of innocent people and spectacular attacks, and that's just something that goes with the times we live in.

The bigger threat right now – the single largest threat to Iraq today – are the Iranian-backed militias that are operating with Iranian money, explosives, training and support. The Kuds force – again, the Iranian Kuds force – is providing direct support to those militias, and Iran is trying to influence the decision in Baghdad about whether or not to ask for American troops to stay.

Our current plan, ladies and gentlemen, is we're on our way down to zero – that's our plan. Iraq may very well ask for American troops to stay as a training mission. And if they do, it will be up to our Commander in Chief President Obama whether or not we do that. There's no decision yet. I can't tell you where that's going to come down. But remember where Iraq is and think of the countries around it. To the north lies Turkey; to the west, Syria; to the south, Jordan and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. To the southeast is Kuwait, and to the East is Iran. It sits right in the heart of the Middle East, and I think we have to consider that in any strategic decision we make about the future.

Afghanistan: On the security side in Afghanistan, ladies and gentlemen, our strategy is working, and I am delighted to defend it in the q&a if you want to discuss it in more detail. We have only fully resourced this strategy in the last year-and-a-half; two years. That's when we finally had everything we needed there to actually start making this work. It's a civilian-military plan.

It's not just a military plan, although we are focused on the security aspects, as we should be.

Another point is... It's sometimes interesting to me, when I'm up on Capitol Hill, how people want to know why *we're* doing all the work. Forty-three thousand troops are from 49 other nations. Now some of those nations are very small and provide only a few troops. But some of those nations – Canada for example, our neighbor – have lost more troops per capita in Afghanistan than the United States has. We are not in there alone. We are fighting with the largest wartime coalition in recent history right now.

Why do I say the strategy is working? Number one, whose side do I want to be on? The insurgents are losing territory. They're losing their leadership at the cyclical rate. They're losing their weapons and supplies. But most important, they're losing public support where NATO goes and the Afghan troops go, and they stay put. They get very, very angry when we move in and move out of an area, and that's why you see some of the tension on the military side as we try to keep as many troops there as long as we can so we can beat this enemy down and not be uncovering areas that we've moved into and leaving them to the tender mercies of the Taliban coming back in.

But enemy-initiated attacks – and this is how in the military we look if we're winning or not – who's initiating the attack? You're going to have fights when you're in a war. Who starts them? The enemy-initiated attacks are 25% lower this year than they were a year ago. Now, you say, "How can that be? We have more NATO troops there. Why isn't the enemy attacking more?" Because they've been beaten down in a lot of areas. They've lost their safe havens in Afghanistan. Many of their leaders are hiding out in Pakistan and choosing not to return. How do we know? We read their mail; real simple.

Here's the challenge, and there's nobody in the media saying, "I'm going to cook up a negative story here." But what happens is, chaos, violence on one hand and progress can coexist. But when the violence is so heartbreaking, when innocent people are literally being blown to bits, that's what makes the news. It's not what UNICEF has done. It's not what the enemy forces look like. The level of violence is not even a good indicator. If you were to say the level of violence indicates if we're winning or not, then I can prove to you by March of 1945 the Allies were about ready to lose WWII, because the violence had never been higher. So it's that sort of grim reality that I deal with in my job that also makes it very difficult for people for whom war is not the answer to understand why I can stand here and say our strategy is, in fact, working.

Because President Obama has said, ladies and gentlemen, this is a war we Americans did not seek. We didn't seek this war. At the same time, your military was ready. I still remember going to the fighting hole of a young Marine – this is about November of 2001 – it was very cold in Afghanistan. One side of our perimeter was being hit. I went down to the other side, 'cause the reason they keep generals – a few of us grey-haired guys still around is – it's not our first war.

So I go to the other side of my perimeter to see if they were just tricking us with one side. I was in a fighting hole with a young Marine who, his next stop was a Jesuit novitiate outside Denver – he's going off to be a priest. I jumped in his hole for a minute – dark out there – and he said, "Boy do you think they're going to hit our side?" I said, "Oh you wait son. You'll find plenty of fighting. You just hang on here." And he said, "Well, I sure hope so General. We've got the perfect war here. They want to die; we want to kill them."

I bring that up, ladies and gentleman, not to make light of what war is, but to remind you that you have people – young people in this country – who

have the spiritual strength to go into the grimmest circumstance, keep their sense of humor, keep their balance, keep their ethics, but at the same time make very clear that they picked a war with the wrong country. Just because we don't like war, we still have people who can put up with the danger and discomfort and go fight.

In security terms, I would say we're winning because of young people like that and our job, as the President said, is to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda – and that remains our goal – and prevent Al Qaeda from returning to Pakistan or Afghanistan. Some people don't listen to the President's whole statement. They just hear the first part. We have Al Qaeda on the ropes right now. Working alongside Pakistan – and I'll talk about Pakistan in a minute – we have taken out over half of Al Qaeda's senior leadership. A couple of the big names you are fully aware of.

I will tell you right now that, militarily, we're going to have to defeat the Taliban's and Al Qaeda's hope for victory, because that's the only way they're going to back off and negotiate. We have to set those conditions because all wars eventually come to an end. We're going to have to force them to the negotiating table. Break the reconcilable ones who are willing to negotiate from the irreconcilable. We treat the irreconcilable very, very rough – as you know – and using reintegration, we get the young guys to come back over to the fold of their country.

Here's the three conditions Secretary Clinton has put out:

- You've gotta be willing to live by the constitution.
- You've gotta be willing to renounce violence, and...
- You've got to break with Al Qaeda.

That's all. Those are pretty simple. Quit shooting people, live by the law, don't link up with Al Qaeda and support them, and we will re-integrate you.

Already over 1,700 of these lads have come over to our side. I realize some folks aren't really convinced we're winning. But sometimes it's good to see what the enemy's doing and take their pulse. They don't give up and surrender to the losing side. That's not the way wars work. I think right now, I'll just tell you, that we are going to beat the insurgent networks. We're going to build up the Afghan forces so they can do it on their own. We're going to try and get it done in the next two years; we think we can do it. And then we're going to leave some level of advisors there and keep them in a position alongside the UN, the World Bank and NATO to keep that place from becoming a safe haven again for what it cost us on 9/11.

Pakistan: Difficult relationship there, but it is one of paramount importance. We cannot turn our back on Pakistan. We have no choice, I believe, but to maintain a relationship with them. And sometimes, again, a little-known fact here in America, Pakistan has lost more troops fighting the enemy in this war than NATO combined. All NATO nations combined have not lost as many troops fighting this enemy as Pakistan has. It's something that's part of this, sometimes you have to carry two opposite ideas and try to balance them a little bit, and I'll get into that, but they've had over 30,000 civilian casualties, besides their military casualties. We do continue to work with Pakistan to reduce safe havens. It is, I will tell you ladies and gentlemen, the most rugged landscape I have ever fought in without a doubt. It is the borderlands there that are just very, very difficult to move in.

And you also have to recognize, when you talk about Pakistan, their fear of India. And yet, for all that fear of India, they moved 140,000 troops – a quarter of their army – off the Indian border and moved it over where we want them to be on the Afghan border. That's real. That's not politics. That's arithmetic when you see that. And so I'll tell you that, both sides there's a lot of reason for distrust. When I went in there, in November of 2001, I'd gone into Islamabad and I said what I was going to do. We had a rather

contentious meeting together. They eventually gave me what I needed and they knew each hour and due date and the objective three weeks in advance, and they never revealed it. And we landed, and we moved against Kandahar.

So imperfect, yes, but there's a saying in the military – comes from a British prime minister who said, "The only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without allies. And at times, I'll tell you if I get asked tonight, why do we stand with Pakistan? I'm just reminded that my counterpart tonight in Islamabad – if he's giving a talk like this – he's being asked, "Why do we stand with the United States?" The answer in both places: We have interests that require us to do so. We don't see the world the same in everything. We see the world a lot the same. We wouldn't have taken down Al Qaeda half so quickly up there in the high country had it not been for their help. But we can get into more detail on this in the question and answer.

Just two other countries, very quickly: Syria, again, lies in the geo-political center of the Middle East. They've begun a very bloody transition because they didn't have a military like in Egypt. It's clearly time for Assad to go. I'll tell you this, if Assad goes, it will be the biggest blow to Iran – strategic blow to Iran – that they've suffered yet. Iran supports the bloody repression that's going on there. They provide equipment. They provide officers and advisors. They provide information technology, so they can spy on the Syrian; Alawite can spy on the people there. The Syrian people, I think, should be allowed to determine their own leadership; they don't need Iran's help.

As for Iran, throughout my review of the region you may have picked up Iran this, Iran that. Coming back to the region, I had been working with NATO for a couple years. I came back to region after three years gone and I was surprised at just how much more I found Iran's fingerprints everywhere. For example, if it was five years, you never would have heard me say that Hamas down in Gaza Strip has got a connection with Iran. Hamas is a Sunni

organization. Iran, of course, is very much Shia. And yet we've now found they've jumped the air gap and their support is going to some people I never would have anticipated a few years ago. But from Cairo to Baghdad; from Lebanon to Iraq; to Afghanistan, in Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Bahrain, Africa, Latin America, you'll find Iran up to what its malign, destabilizing influence wherever they can spread it. And meanwhile the centrifuge continues to spin.

There's been Democrat, Republican and Democrat administrations who have said it is unacceptable for Iran to have nuclear weapons. Tehran's policies have isolated their country, and they're ignoring the UN Security Council resolutions to suspend enrichment. I find it very interesting to find that on the UN Security Council resolution that was passed sanctioning Iran – the last one – China, Russia, France, UK, Japan, the United States, Austria, I can go on, all voted in favor. How many issues can the World Affairs Council research lab determine those nations all voted the same way on? I don't think there's very many. So it gives you an idea of just how severe this is pressing the international community's patience when you see those nations with very different interests; international interests, voting together.

In closing, the Middle East is in a widely turbulent time right now. There's a lot of promise there. I'm paid to watch for the dangers, and we do that. I'll just tell you that your military is ready. I think that we should be able to play a positive role diplomatically; economically, those kinds of things. But at the same time, we have to make certain that pragmatic idealism will make foreign policy that will actually help build the peace and build a stronger Middle East in terms of democratic countries.

The military itself that I'm part of – that I am privileged to be part of – I think it's a national treasure. I've got, believe it or not, more than 40 years of service, and I'll just tell you that I've never seen the military so strong in spirit and experience. I read about the military breaking. It is not close to



breaking. It is ready. If we have challenges, it's our families – and anything you can do to help our families is necessary. The families are frayed. They have been through repeated deployments and it is very, very tough on them.

And yet we are filled with volunteers – young patriots who look beyond the hot political rhetoric that swirls around in Washington D.C. and have answered their country's call. We've taken some hits recently. We've lost some wonderful lads. But it only makes us more determined to carry out the mission. It doesn't set us back one bit. And I think that our devotion to this experiment that you and I call America is pretty well demonstrated, so I won't go into the superlatives I feel in my heart for every one of these young people. I hope that gives you something to chew on. Thank you.

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