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Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

Jim, we now need a viewpoint from the US. Is American public opinion satisfied with Obama's strategies in the Middle East, if the word 'strategic' can be used at all?

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Public opinion in the U.S. largely supports the President's policies in the Middle East. That has a lot to do with the fact that he has great power to shape opinion on foreign affairs in the American system. But people are war-weary and eager not to get more deeply involved, and the President for his own reasons has augmented that support.

We have just heard from my co-panellists an impressive list of the difficulties facing the Middle East right now, and it falls to me to tell you that it is even worse, or at least that it is even broader than what you have heard so far.

We are witnessing the beginning of an era of very violent backlash, and primarily backlash against globalisation. We saw this amazing flow of goods, people, ideas and business across borders that we call globalisation at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. What it has begun to do, particularly in the Middle East and particularly in the Arab world, is to begin to exert enormous pressure, not simply on national borders and nation states, but on the fundamental elements and units of society, the family system, the clan system, the tribal system that exists in different parts and different ways in the Middle East. We have to recognise that this is a cultural problem which is extremely deep and difficult, in the Arab world most of all, that has to be at least recognised if we are to make any progress.

Obama has taken a certain attitude that the White House deigns to call strategic retrenchment from the Middle East, and it generally fits American public opinion and the general mood. Nelson Cunningham went over the domestic political pressures this morning. I would simply like to list what I see as three or four major changes happening in the US that have direct effect on the Middle East today and on the future.

The first two have been the primary interest in the Middle East for the US for a long time, the first being oil, and it is an objective fact today that the US is much less reliant on Middle Eastern oil than it has been at any time in the past half-century. That is likely to continue. We have seen a significant change in the technology of the oil business in the US because of the development of shale oil and gas, and it has recently been proven that oil companies today, even the small ones who have been doing fracking in North Dakota and elsewhere, have the ability to drill more cheaply and quickly than ever before in American history, and can put the oil on the market very rapidly at prices that would have made absolutely no sense. The Saudis in particular have responded by saying that they want to maintain market share and therefore are willing to accept the prices. That will not change in the next six months, or perhaps even in the next six years, if you look at the forecast of where oil prices are likely to be. Therefore, that is a significant change for the US.

There is an embryonic but ongoing change in American relations with Israel. This administration has a particular view, but again the President is both sensing and leading public opinion on this. You have seen, in his eagerness to have a deal with Iran on the nuclear question, that he has been willing to take on the Israeli political leadership in ways that very few American governments have. He has rushed to compensate Israel for that, because he is no fool, looking at the realities of American politics today, and he is very eager to be able to tell everybody that he has provided Israel with more security assistance than anybody else ever has, and that he will continue to do so.

A change that I feel very strongly and relates to some things that Vitaly was just saying is the absence of superpower conflict in the Middle East. We do not agree on Assad for sure, but there is no fundamental reason why the US and Russia have to be in conflict on Syria or over the Middle East at large. That is quite a change from the days when I



worked in the Middle East, and it is something that we should be able to build on, perhaps through the Vienna Process, as Thierry has mentioned.

Those are the three changes I will throw out for discussion.