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## Keynote Address – Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad

By Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad

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**Wendy Chamberlin:** Thank you all very much for joining us here this evening. Good evening, and on behalf of the Board of Governors and the staff of the Middle East Institute, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all of our guests this evening, especially to the senior members of the diplomatic corps. We are joined this evening by Ambassador Shoukry from Egypt; Ambassador Al-Mughairy from Oman; Ambassador Mansour from Tunisia; Ambassador Al-Hajri from Yemen; Ambassador Kakouris from Cyprus; and His Excellency Areikat from the PLO Mission. To all members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished guests, members of the Middle East Institute, welcome to the 63rd Annual Conference and Dinner of the Middle East Institute.

We are very gratified this year at the Middle East Institute – in fact, a little bit overwhelmed. Tomorrow we expected about four hundred guests at our Annual Conference; over seven hundred have registered and we had to close the registration. This beats all records in the past sixty-three years for the Middle East Institute. I want to thank you for your enthusiasm but I really do think that in very large part the success of this dinner and the conference tomorrow owes to the staff of the Middle East Institute, particularly Kate Seelye, our new vice-president for programs and communications. Kate, will you stand up? And will Kelly Davies please stand up? Nazia Moqueet, Stephanie Swierczek – everybody from the Middle East Institute, please stand up, including the interns. You all have been absolutely terrific in setting up this dinner, in setting up the conference tomorrow, and throughout the entire year. You have been spectacular, thank you so much. There has been such synergy and dynamism this last year and it owes entirely to the staff, and I want to express my appreciation publicly.

Tonight we will be hearing from two extraordinary men. The Middle East Institute is very honored to be able to honor Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Gaza physician and peace activist. Our keynote speaker is one of America's most astute and experienced diplomats. Because he is very much in demand, he has a car waiting at the door to rush him to Dulles Airport and take him to the Middle East just as soon as he finishes his remarks. We have arranged a bit our schedule this evening so our keynote speaker will speak first. He is a very special fellow: The New York Times has called him a problem-solver; Reason magazine has called him a pragmatic ideologue; The New Republic has referred to him as the man who was almost king; and his nickname by President Bush was King Zal (I just learned that). This could be nobody else but Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. His skills as a diplomat earned him some of the most challenging jobs in the US government. He was ambassador to Afghanistan, ambassador to Iraq, and perhaps most challenging of all, ambassador to the United Nations – where he earned the respect and friendship of his UN colleagues. Ambassador Khalilzad might have even been president of Afghanistan had he not missed the filing date last spring for the presidential election. But we are delighted

because he is here this evening and he has now reestablished his offices here in Washington. He has opened a consulting firm and he is focusing his attentions on some of the issues that are most vexing and troublesome and of keen interest to the United States. We are very honored to welcome Zal. Thank you very much.

**Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad:** Thank you very much, President Chamberlin. It is a great honor and pleasure for me to be here. This is very special and unique: special because I see so many friends and colleagues, people that I worked for, people that I worked with, people that have been my friends and colleagues for a very long time in both good and difficult moments. I am particularly delighted to see Ambassador Sumaydi from Iraq here – it is good to see you. I see Ambassador Murphy, a gentleman I worked for many years ago when the bureau dealing with the region was called the Near East and South Asia and Arnie Rafael, God bless his soul, was the principal there. We worked on Afghanistan in those days. So it is a great pleasure to see so many friends – ambassadors, colleagues, analysts, and the Middle East Institute. It is not only the president who is a distinguished diplomat in her own right, who served our country tremendously in very difficult circumstances like in Pakistan after 9/11, but also others.

I said unique also because this is the only meeting I have attended where you have to pay for soft drinks. Three-seventy-five for a Diet Coke! But free wine, all you can drink. This is in a meeting that deals with the Middle East! I said I would contribute my honorarium for tonight, the handsome amount that I am getting for the speech, to cover all the soft drinks.

As you all know – I don't have to tell this crowd, which knows the Middle East very well – the Middle East is the most important, the most difficult, the most challenging region of the world right now in terms of US foreign policy. For a long time, as you all know, it was managing the European balance of power that was the most difficult challenge facing the United States and indeed the world. That was succeeded by the challenge of containing the Soviet Union, the American-Soviet rivalry that was the dominant issue focusing a lot of our energy and attention. A lot of other problems were seen in terms of impact and influence on that principal rivalry, the Soviet-American competition. In my judgment, geopolitically – although there are a lot of issues that are important – but among them, particularly since the end of the Cold War and the attacks of 9/11, for US diplomacy, for US energy and attention, for US security policy, the future of the broader Middle East (from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Morocco) is the most important and the most difficult.

In the effort to help America understand the region and how to pursue our interests and how to define even our interests with regard to that region, the Middle East Institute plays an important role. As a citizen, as a former official in the US government, I appreciate the Institute's work.

Although we talk about the broader Middle East as a region, there are a number of very distinct issues that shape and affect it. These issues also interact with each other; the developments in one area of the Middle East, in terms of either functional issues or regional issues, affect others. Tonight I am going to speak not about all of them but about three particular issues, as you discuss in the course of the coming period the future of this region and the work of the Institute in relation to this region.

One, broadly speaking, is the issue of extremism and terror. That remains a key problem not only for the people of the area but for the world. This is particularly important when one thinks about the problem of Afghanistan. The United States is in the process of recalibrating its policy in Afghanistan. In my judgment, success in Afghanistan (as I define success) means an Afghanistan that can stand on its own feet ultimately; an Afghanistan that does not allow Al Qaeda to come back; an Afghanistan that has a successful reconciliation policy with those who are not reconciled to the new order in Afghanistan; an Afghanistan that has good relations with its neighbors, that is at peace with its neighbors.

In order to achieve success there I believe that three things are going to be of great importance in the coming period. One is its regional relations. As long as Afghanistan and Pakistan do not have relations that are constructive, as long as each territory (in particular, in this case, Pakistani territory) is used as a sanctuary by forces that want to destabilize Afghanistan (whether it is the Taliban or the Haqqani network or the Hizb-i-Islami of Hekmatyar, not to mention Al Qaeda) it will take more time and be more difficult and it will be a huge challenge for both Afghanistan and the Coalition to succeed in any feasible timeframe. Therefore I believe it is a challenge for our diplomacy in the coming period – not only ours – more broadly to fashion an approach that brings Afghanistan and Pakistan together so that there is no sanctuary allowed for military use against Afghanistan or against our forces there.

I think there is an issue that a lot of people in the Institute know, and that is that Afghanistan and Pakistan have had a territorial dispute dating back to the creation of Pakistan. The issue of “Pashtunistan” has been an Achilles heel of Afghanistan since at least the end of the Second World War and the creation of India and Pakistan as two separate sovereign states. As long as that border issue remains unresolved, as long as Pakistan fears that Afghanistan could become a place from which it could be destabilized, Pakistan’s interest has been either to dominate Afghanistan or to keep it internally focused (at least some institutions or elements in Pakistani society and government).

We know that from other experiences where our friends have sometimes not gotten along with each other. We know that from the experiences of the Cold War – think of Greece and Turkey. I have a personal example that my mother-in-law, who is an Austrian lady, in the 1970s and 1980s she used to complain a lot about Trieste. This is an Austrian city, she argued; why does she need to have a passport to go to visit Trieste? Why does she have to change currency, and so on? But now that complaint is no longer applicable because she goes to Trieste without needing a passport, there is no need to change currency.

That will be ambitious obviously in relation to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the near term, but we have to find a way, working together. I think President Obama is particularly well suited, given his perspective to deal with big issues multilaterally and given the goodwill that exists toward him in the international system, to mobilize and use that goodwill and perspective to mobilize a multilateral effort to make the border issue between Afghanistan and Pakistan less a source of concern, and therefore to remove the incentive based on fear that exists – the fear of a two-front war, the possibility of a two-front war – and bring Pakistan to a state where it can support politically a reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The Taliban and others who want to politically participate in Afghanistan, it would be appropriate for Pakistani territory to be used for political activity. But for it to be used for military purposes, to use violence against its neighbor Afghanistan and the Coalition forces – to evolve that

policy toward a political role for these opposition forces or not allow them to use Pakistani territory otherwise, would be a significant contribution. This issue in our current debate has not received as much attention and the magnitude of the effort that will be required diplomatically to succeed in this regard is vitally important.

Certainly the issue of the Afghans doing their part is the other important element. I believe there is a consensus, that I support, that the Afghan forces need to be strengthened. Ultimately that is the answer. For a long time we assumed that since the Afghans could not afford to sustain a big force, they should have a force they can afford – a very small force. I see David there, who was my colleague in Kabul when I had the honor of serving there. I believe it serves the global interest, given the issues involved in Afghanistan – the issue of terror and extremism – that we generate and have resources to sustain a big Afghan force. I have been a supporter of letting some countries provide financial support rather than forcing them or coercing them into sending troops that will not follow the same rules of engagement, command structures, subordination to decisions of the command, because they essentially do not want to do combat. Training is a good function; sometimes being present is stabilizing itself. I think sponsoring Afghan forces is a legitimate need that can be and should be multilaterally supported.

I also think the issue of how to engage President Karzai now that he is re-elected is very important. There is no question that the Afghan government has not done as well as it should have. I think President Karzai would admit to that, because I have had recent conversations with him. But in my judgment, as we move forward, one of the challenges that we face with friends is how to use our relationship with them to incentivize them to do what is in their best interest. That is not always easy. The best of plans you have – we would like a friendly government to do X, Y and Z – actually delivering on that is not always easy. But I do not think the best way to do that is to hector publicly the target country's leader and to indicate you are out to get him. That is not the most effective way to get a leader of a country to cooperate.

I believe the time has come with new leadership in Afghanistan – the same leader who has been re-elected and with us – to come to a new understanding on what each of us expects from the others. There are issues that the Afghans have and there are issues that we have. I think this is a significant challenge for our diplomacy: how to fashion a new arrangement as Afghan capabilities grow, as we plan to support the growth of Afghan capabilities. The requirement for sustaining our role, I anticipate the review will ultimately produce – I am not part of the process but my sense is it is going to reinforce our engagement and strengthen it.

Another key element of moving forward in relation to Afghanistan is the issue of strengthening the positive forces besides the armed forces of the country. We tend to pay a lot of attention and effort to weakening our adversaries, whether it is the Taliban or Al Qaeda. We are not as effective – and we need to do better, and this is an issue for institutes such as the Middle East Institute – on how we can strengthen the forces that want to get their country to stand on its own feet, to produce reform; to strengthen them without undermining them by making them look like they are our agents. This is a significant challenge for our diplomacy.

Equally important is how to bring about economic progress. Afghanistan forever would be a burden on the international community unless its economy develops to a degree where it can sustain a much larger force than it needs to. That too is a challenge that the policy review will have to deal with.

I favor, lastly on Afghanistan, a policy that increases the force for the short term but only if it is part of an effort that deals with the broader regional approach that is required as well as a new engagement with regard to the Afghan government, both on the security track of expanding the Afghan forces and the political and economic steps that I mentioned. If we do not do the regional part and the Afghan government part, the force alone will not be able to solve ultimately the challenges that we face. But as part of a comprehensive approach that deals with those other issues, an increase in the force that tries to prevent the situation from getting worse and improve security in some key areas, I think that would be wise. This is essentially what happened in Iraq. I think that approach can work in Afghanistan as well.

Let me say a word or two about Iraq and Iran. I think in the case of Iraq, the risk that we face there is the risk of neglect. After a period of substantial, huge and daily focus, there is a danger that with Afghanistan becoming so difficult (and Pakistan associated with it) that we might do less than what is warranted to assist Iraq in moving on the right track. Certainly our military posture will decline but I believe that we need to enhance our economic engagement with Iraq and keep politically engaged and assist Iraq in resolving the political issues that still remain and can affect its future evolution.

I am optimistic about Iraq. I believe the growth in the security forces of Iraq and the performance of the security forces has been very positive. I believe the effort going toward the election, although the election law was nerve-racking – I am used to Iraqis negotiating five minutes past the deadline – but it is very positive that an agreement was made. I am also encouraged that there are discussions of cross-sectarian coalitions going forward toward the election. I hope that is a step toward cross-sectarian parties – we have some of them, I do not want to say there are not cross-sectarian parties in Iraq already. I think there will be fewer purely sectarian parties and more cross-sectarian parties. I believe the economic opportunities of Iraq are enormous for the international community, including for the United States. We have not been as active in focusing on that and facilitating more economic engagement between the United States and Iraq. I believe that Iraq's future will have a tremendous impact on the future of this region as a whole because of its importance, its location, its resources, its population, its history. I believe that while challenges remain between various communities in Iraq, it is heading on the right track.

One area where in particular US effort and multilateral efforts, in fact, would be even more effective, with US involvement, is to improve relations between Iraq and the region. I think there is room for substantial progress on relations particularly between Iraq and some of the Arab countries. There the work of the Institute and the work of many people in this room can be influential. As I said before, I believe very strongly that Iraq's impact on the region will be very substantial over the coming period.

The last issue, Iran. One of the defining issues which about a year or so ago not many people would have thought would be the issue we would be facing on Iran – and that should be humbling to all analysts and policy types – that the domestic situation in Iran would be so important and would evolve in the way it has. Of course we have concerns about the role that Iran seeks for itself in the region, and the issue of Iran's nuclear capabilities. But I believe that the regime has been so weakened by the crisis that came after the election that I do not know whether if on many of these key issues, including the nuclear issue, they are able to make decisions and deliver on them – or if they deliver on them, they can stick to it by delivering over time. There is the near-term delivery

of signing an agreement but also delivering it over time. Therefore, in my judgment, the most fundamental issue with regard to Iran is its domestic struggle. It is a weakened government that has been produced by the election and what happened after the election.

I think here the most important issue for us, that I have been in favor of engagement of Iran when I was in Afghanistan and in Iraq – in both cases I asked for the authority to engage the Iranians and I was granted that authority, because I thought it was important to talk to the neighbors of the country that we were so heavily involved in. I have not changed my position fundamentally but I think now it is much more important where Iran goes, how the internal situation in Iran evolves. It is very important that as we deliberate and evolve our policy toward Iran that we are not on the wrong side of history in relation to Iran, in terms of the evolution of the situation and where the Iranian people are heading. Of course we have near-term concerns that we must deal with; I am not saying anything with regard to that. The nuclear issue and Iran's regional role is very important. But I think the strategic issue now, more than any other issue, is what will happen to Iran itself.

I think the agenda for the Middle East for the near term – which of course you are all familiar with – geopolitically, for the whole world, stabilizing the Middle East is the most demanding and the most important issue facing the world. That is a very laudable goal. It will be difficult, it will take time and we have to adjust as the circumstances adjust. But I believe that given the stakes involved in the Middle East and the challenges coming from it, leading the world and the key powers of the world to work cooperatively in stabilizing this region remains a defining issue of our time. The work of the Institute will be important in forming our approach as we move forward.

Thank you very much, President Chamberlin. It is great to be with you tonight. Thank you.

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*Assertions and opinions in this Transcript are solely those of the above-mentioned author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Middle East Institute, which expressly does not take positions on Middle East policy.*

*Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Ph.D., served as US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and most recently the United Nations. He served as Special Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan (2001-2003) and at the National Security Council as Special Assistant to the President for Islamic Outreach and Southwest Asia Initiatives.*