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Robin Wright
Author and Journalist

Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World

Peggy Blumenthal: Let me briefly welcome you to IIE, I'm Peggy Blumenthal, I'm Senior Counselor to the President at the Institute of International Education. Many of you have been here before for these wonderful events, and we're always so pleased to host it in collaboration with the Women's Foreign Policy Group. The meetings are always fabulous, but this is a particularly fabulous and timely presentation because, as you know, reading today's *Times* or whatever it is you look at in the morning, so much is going on in the Middle East, particularly in the area of women's issues but also in the area of young leaders emerging—some for good, some for maybe not so good and we'll hear about the challenges there. The Institute, as many of you know, administers the Fulbright Program for the US government—and has ever since it started—and a number of other leadership development activities, particularly in the Middle East. I've talked about them before, so I won't go through all of them. Some of the alumni are around the walls. But I just wanted to also say that one area that we're very excited about working in—and we welcome help from any of you who are interested—is the area of helping Arab women connect with social media and using the internet as tools for their own professional development and their countries' development. We're working out of the San Francisco office with a lot of the Silicon Valley companies and bringing Arab women to the United States and also mentoring them online with many other leaders around the world. So I think this is going to be a fascinating area of—you may not be able to drive but they can't keep you from driving online.

Patricia Ellis: Thank you so much Peggy. We're so happy to be back here once again. We really appreciate the partnership, your warm hospitality, and it's a great turnout, which is a real tribute to Robin. You have a real treat in store for you, that's all I can say, and the interest in the issues that she covers in her book. So for those of you who don't know me, I'm Patricia Ellis. I'm President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We promote women's leadership and women's voices on pressing international issues of the day. We could not have a more timely topic—not only the whole concept of the Arab Spring—it's all playing out right now at the UN. And as someone just mentioned here, the announcement that the women in Saudi Arabia will get the vote in 2015, as someone said, why not earlier? But, anyway, it is quite something. And we couldn't have a better guide to navigate us through the changing landscape of everything that is going on in the Middle East today than Robin Wright. I want to welcome all of you back again—a lot of you have become regulars. And our most recent programs have been really exciting. We had a wonderful event with Michelle Bachelet—a luncheon over at the UN shortly after she took over as Executive Director of UN Women. And following that, we had Rosemary DiCarlo, who's the Deputy US Ambassador to the UN. These were really fantastic meetings. The demand has grown and so we will continue to have more and more programs. One, we don't have the date yet, but we will be having another author who is a former colleague of Robin's. Pam Constable just wrote a book on Pakistan, which is another hot issue that we're all focused on.

So, it's now my privilege and pleasure to introduce Robin Wright, who is an accomplished woman journalist, she's been a foreign correspondent, an author. I'm sure you all know that she's a regular TV commentator and we're just lucky to have her here because she travels all the time and has been traveling in conjunction with this book. She has covered the region for four decades, which is

extraordinary. She has witnessed all the changes, so she really has the historical perspective and can really help us understand what all the transformations mean in the short-term, her thoughts on the longer-term, and to basically really put things in perspective, because there have been monumental changes—and not just in the political arena but in the cultural arena. It's called *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World* and I highly recommend it. The book will be for sale, Robin will sign the books afterwards. After you hear her I'm sure you're all going to rush to get the book. Not only is Robin an author—she's done lots of work and written a number of books on Iran—but she also, and she did this while she was at the US Institute for Peace and the Woodrow Wilson Center, but she's been a fellow at many think-tanks, and so she's traversed both the journalism and author and think-tank world. She has been at Brookings, Carnegie. She's been at universities: Yale, Duke, Stanford—I can't even mention them all. In terms of her professional work, she has been a correspondent at *The Washington Post*, *The LA Times*, *The Sunday Times of London*, *CBS News*. She has lived in the Middle East—she's was there five years, she lived in Europe for two years, she covered Latin America and Asia. So she really is the quintessential foreign correspondent. She's also covered foreign policy from Washington as well. Please join me in welcoming Robin Wright. [Applause.]

Robin Wright: Since there are so many of you along the wall, I'll stand so you can see me. I landed in the Middle East on October 6, 1973, which was the day the fourth Middle East War broke out, and I have been addicted to the region ever since. I have seen some of the most extraordinary waves of change—I lived in Beirut through most of the 1980s and witnessed the very first suicide bomb against American Embassies, the rise of Hezbollah, the Israeli invasion, the Civil War, the Iranian Revolution, and the hostage ordeal. So I've kind of felt like I've tracked it. This is my seventh book on foreign affairs. What I set out to do two years ago was to look at what has happened in the Islamic world in the decade since 9/11 and the idea was for it to come out on the tenth anniversary. And what was so fascinating was as I began to feel that there was something bigger happening. Many of the kids that I had gone out to talk to started the uprisings and several of them would tweet me or text me from Tahrir Square, you know, "We have 10,000 today. We're going to start camping out tonight." And then I would go back and it was part of this extraordinary moment of change. I think what we're witnessing in the region is one of the four great turning points of the last century in the region—the first being the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the aftermath of World War I, which created the modern Arab states; the second was the creation of Israel after World War II, which redefined security issues and conflict; the third was the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which introduced Islam as an idiom of political opposition and expression; and the fourth, of course, is what we're beginning to see play out.

I'm not a great fan of the term "Arab Spring," even though that's the common usage now, because Arab Spring, first of all, is kind of based on the Prague Spring and that—I don't think—is a fair comparison. I also tend to think that it belittles the scope of what's happening. Finally, it actually all happened before spring. It began December 17th, and well it's still going, but all of the major uprisings that we saw today began by the middle of March before spring. There are lots of Arabs who are kind of upset about the usage too. Although Mahmoud Abbas yesterday said that we're in the middle of a Palestinian Spring so I kind of gave up [Laughter] making that case. I think we all ask, why now? What are the catalysts that have led to this extraordinary moment? And I think there are four. One is simple demographics—that you have two thirds of the 300 million people in the region who are under the age of 30. This is proportionately the largest baby boom in the world and it has changed the dynamics in extraordinary ways. Let me give you one example: in Saudi Arabia the average age today is 24–25. The average age of the Cabinet is today 65. The king is 87, his heir apparent is 83, and he's not well, and the third in line is 78. So we're talking about, not just a generation gap, but two or three generation gaps. And this is changing the politics and the dynamics on the ground. The second thing is literacy. This is the first time that you have the majority of people in the region who are literate, who have a sense of beyond their village. They have an interest in something more than just inheriting the trade of their fathers. And it is true among women as well, so that you have women looking for involvement in life—whether it's outside the home or not. They want a sense of being part of a broader community. The third thing is obviously the tools of technology which play into the literacy—the fact that they can connect, get a sense of what's happened elsewhere in the world. We can't isolate the

uprisings today from what's happened elsewhere in the last 30 years, with the end of apartheid and minority rule in Africa, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the demise of military dictatorships in Latin America. They are aware of change that's happened everywhere else. And this is the last block of countries to hold out against that tide, and they're beginning to catch up. That's what they believe as well. And the fourth thing, which may be the most interesting and the least obvious, is that they are all in the same boat today that we are in confronting extremism. When you look at a place like Iraq—we have lost just over 200 people to suicide bombs in Iraq. The Iraqis have lost over 12,000 to suicide bombs—over 30,000 to injuries. Across the region, the al-Qaeda and its affiliates have engaged in extraordinary waves of violence: in Saudi Arabia in 2003–2004—I actually was with Colin Powell in 2004 after the attacks against the residential compounds in Riyadh, in Casablanca the first suicide bomb began a wave of attacks. This has turned people in the region against extremism. They are paying a far greater price than we are.

And so when we ask: is this genuine? The reality is yes. They're tired of it too. One of my favorite Saudi editors said to me, it's across the board: people in the region now want their kids to have laptops, not rifles. When it comes to change, the vast majority—it's always been true the majority—but the vast, vast majority, and even those who are one point empathetic, intrigued by extremist ideology, have turned against it. And you see it reflected in a lot of different ways, whether it's among some of the Saudi clerics or Egyptian clerics who were once allied with al-Qaeda, mentors to bin Laden, and how they've turned around—beginning in 2007, some key figures turning against al-Qaeda, denouncing their tactics. One of the stories I write about in the book is about a Saudi cleric named Sheikh Salman al Oadah who was an early idol for bin Laden, and how he issued a fatwah during the Gulf War in 1990–91 both against the royal family for allowing infidel troops into the Kingdom and against the United States for deploying troops in the Kingdom. That was the moment in which bin Laden shifted course. He had been a de facto ally of the United States in Afghanistan and he turned against the United States during that Gulf War. When the Saudi's arrested Sheikh Salman, that was the moment that bin Laden started issuing fatwahs, calling himself an emir, and this was a very important turning point. Well Sheikh Salman came out of prison a few years ago and began writing, talking—in ways that are convincing—against al-Qaeda, condemning bin Laden, going on national television on the anniversary of 9/11 and talking against it. I'm sure that the screws were put on him by the Saudis but what's interesting is that there are so many of these clerics—Dr. Fadel, who Lawrence Wright has written a wonderful piece about in *The New Yorker*, who wrote the *Das Capital* of al-Qaeda, the tome that justified jihad against Muslims as well as Jews and Christians for even disagreeing with al-Qaeda, and how he's also turned against bin Laden. There are these moments, whether it's Iraqis in the Anbar Province in 2007: because a tribal elder—a tribal leader had paid a price in terms of losing his father and two brothers to al-Qaeda, losing the family business and how he helped mobilize not only the other tribal elders but 90,000 Iraqis during the Awakening to stand up to al-Qaeda and try to take back Anbar Province.

Pat asked me just to talk for fifteen minutes, so let me talk about the other half of my book, which I actually think is more interesting. And that is not just the politics of change, but the culture of change. This plays out on a lot of different levels. The most interesting to me is hip-hop. Rap has become the rhythm of resistance throughout the Middle East. It's an extraordinary phenomenon. When you look at Tunisia, which is the place we saw the first uprising in the middle of last December, when a young fruit vendor was pressed by an inspector to pay yet another bribe: seven bucks, but that's a whole day's wages, and so he began to protest. She took away his produce, his electronic scale. And he tried to seek redress to get back his goods, and he went from government office to government office, and in the end, ended up—because he couldn't get any help—at the governor's office where he covered himself in paint thinner and set himself on fire. He emerged in a climate where hip-hop in Tunisia had taken off and had been critical in giving voice to opposition in a way that no politician had during the 23 years of President Ben Ali's rule. A young, 21-year-old hip-hop rapper named El General—that's how he went—had put a song on Facebook because hip-hop was not allowed to be performed in the country, not allowed to be recorded at any studio, not allowed to be played on state-controlled media. So he used Facebook and he put a song on his page that was really, extraordinarily blunt, talking about how Tunisians—about the poverty, the unemployment, people eating off of garbage piles, the police corruption, the lack of constitutional rights. He went through the whole range of them. It was in that

context, as his song was taking off, that the young street vendor set himself on fire. What was interesting was, as Tunisians began—from this remote Tunisian town—marching on the capital, they were singing El General's song, which was also sung in Egypt as well as Bahrain. Across the board you see, just as folk music here during the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War often shaped public attitudes, gave voice to the opposition, so has hip-hop.

One of the other trends I write about is the new Muslim comedians and how they are giving voice to—challenging extremists. And I want to read one joke. I can't tell it as well as this comedian but it's an Iranian-born comedian named Maz Jobrani, who tells the following joke:

You know, one guy can really mess it up for the rest of us. Look at the Christmas Day Bomber—the guy who tried to blow up the plane from Amsterdam to Detroit. This Abu Abu Mustafah Bubu, whatever his name is. I say this guy was crazy. Come on, any man would back me up. After all, where was the bomb? Yeah, right, in his underwear! I mean really, any normal terrorist would have surely questioned that instruction. [Switching to a Middle East accent, Jobrani assumes the role of a normal terrorist in a final discussion with his terror masters]. “Uh, excuse me, I have one last question for you. You say my reward in heaven is going to be 72 virgins. So do you think maybe we could put the bomb someplace else?” [Laughter.] I mean, I think I'm really going to need my penis. [Laughter.]

Which is not the kind of thing we expect in challenging extremism. And there are so many of them. I went to a show Saturday night in Washington called *Arabs Gone Wild* and the lead comedian, whose name is Dean Obeidallah—Obeidallah means little servant of God—organized a series of shows in honor of 9/11 in the American South in the red states, where he gave free shows, had a group of Muslim comedians try to reach out and say, we're not about terrorism, we reject violence. He's actually putting together a documentary about it.

Another one of the aspects is the playwrights, who all have the word jihad in their titles. One of my favorite plays is written by an Egyptian. It's called *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*. [Laughter.] It's a kind of parody about stereotypes of Muslims. Another one of my favorite plays is called *Til Jihad Do Us Part*—a play on the marital vows—and it's a romantic comedy. It's about what it takes to be a good spouse, a trusted partner. Again, trying to take the idea of jihad away from the extremists and put it back to what it originally meant, which was to be a good Muslim. I'll end with some stories about some of my favorite female characters in the book because it's clear that, along with you, the other engine of change in the region is the women. My favorite story is about an Egyptian called Dalia Ziada, who became an activist at the age of eight. And a lot of people are saying this is all a surprise, the Arab Spring, when in fact, this has been coming for quite a while. Dalia was told by her mother at the age of eight to put on her best party dress. They were going for a special commemoration. And she was taken to be circumcised. This was such a traumatic moment in her life that she began arguing with her father and her uncles not to do this to her sister and cousins. She failed time after time after time. The last cousin, she stayed up with her uncle all night, arguing. And she said to him, “If you do this to her, I will cut off her finger.” And he said, “that will maim her, affect her for the rest of her life.” And she said, “duh.” She thought she'd failed again and the next day he called her and said, “I won't do it. I won't insist that she have this.” So Dalia decided at the age of eight that if she could have an impact on one person that maybe she could do more. And she became very involved as a teenager in issues of female genital mutilation.

In Egypt over 80% of women—Christians and Muslims, it is an African custom, not something that is Muslim—have this, even though it has been outlawed by the state, condemned by the top Muslim cleric, and condemned by the Coptic Pope. Then she became involved in human rights issues. And as she went to college she heard about a comic book about Martin Luther King called *The Montgomery*

Story that talks about the walk to freedom and has instructions on civil disobedience in the back. She decided that she would translate this. She would become a blogger and she translated it and distributed 2,000 copies to other bloggers from Morocco to Yemen. And then she decided that Arabs really didn't fully understand what human rights are. So she organized the first Arab human rights film festival in Cairo. The government tried to stop her all along the process. The censorship board said you can't have permission to show these films even though none of them were Egyptian, none of them they had rights over. So she went to the censorship board, waited for the director to come. When he showed up at the elevator she went up and argued her case and he finally said okay, okay, you can show your films. And then the theater where she was supposed to show the films, of course, mysteriously had its permit revoked—some technical issue. So she and her friends mobilized what resources they could and they hired a Nile riverboat cruiser, and they got all their friends and human rights activists and people interested in the film festival to go down to the pier and, once the boat took off, they began to show the first film.

She has encouraged, in the process, young filmmakers in Egypt. One of the films that she showed at the second human rights festival was a one-minute film that just shows flowers budding very quickly, one after another after another. Each one is snipped off, and as it's snipped, you hear a young girl screaming, and of course it is about female genital mutilation. And in one minute, you get it. She also encouraged another young filmmaker—never made a film, but was inspired by the idea—and he did a film called *N70*, which is a model of a Nokia cell phone. It's based on a true story about a young minivan driver who got caught up in, again, another bribery issue. He was at a parking lot and the cops came, demanded a bribe from his cousin. He tried to intervene and in the process both he and his cousin were arrested. He was taken back to police headquarters where he was not only brutally beaten and interrogated, he was sodomized with the end of a broomstick. The police actually filmed this on an N70 Nokia phone and they distributed it because they wanted to send a message to other minivan drivers: you pay a price if you don't pay up. The cell phone video ended up—a young Egyptian blogger got a hold of it, put it on his page, then on YouTube, and both the domestic and international outcry lead the Egyptian government to have to prosecute the two policemen. So again, this was captured in this wonderful film that Dalia sponsored for her second film festival. She's now had three. She was at Tahrir Square every night during the 18 days that it took to oust Hosni Mubarak. We skyped every week or so, and she came through to me last week and she's decided—she's now 29 years old—and she's decided that she's going to run for Parliament. Again, when we look at how long this process has been coming, how people have been gradually but steadily mobilized—and she also pronounced that she's going to be the first female president of Egypt. She is lower-middle class, she wears hejab, she's a traditional woman, she's not the westernized elite. The bottom line for almost all the characters that I selected for my book is that they are people who were absolute nobodies and who are not elites, not the kind of people that are on the American Embassy rolodex, which is one of the reasons that we missed it. Now I'm happy to talk about anything. I've talked longer than 15 minutes.

Ms. Ellis: We'll open it up to questions. I'm going to lead off with some. And I'm going to get to everyone by taking a few questions together. So I want to go back and lead with the news since you're such an expert on the Middle East. I'd like to start with, we're right across the street from the UN, so if you could just briefly talk about the implications of the Palestinian bid for statehood, not only on the Palestinians, the Israelis, the US, and for really getting something going. That's number one.

Ms. Wright: I'm at that stage of life and I want to do one at a time. One of the things that worries me the most about what's transpired over the last few days is that the last nine months—rocking the casbah—has been really about the internal political dynamics. And it has not been—for the first time in six years—about Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the United States, or any of the traditional issues that have been playing passions in the region. My concern is that we're now going to get diverted and that the Arab Spring—I mean they're all going to get intertwined and as we get into the process of the first round of elections in these places, new parties writing their platforms, that they will have to define not only their domestic agenda and goals, but they will also have to have their foreign policy, and that in the middle of this climate—with so much uncertainty—what looks like a US veto, that what they write in

their foreign policy platform will be much tougher than they may really intend, and what's as down in black and white as we found with the PLO and all those years it took to roll back their position on Israel, that it may take a lot longer to undo the damage, that the intersection in the timing of this is tough. I also think—I'm not terribly optimistic that we're not going to get very much happening in part because we're into election season. We're into election season not only for us, but also the Palestinians are way overdue for an election. There are moments that things happen in the region because of a confluence of factors and that confluence is not headed toward peace. I do think this changes some of the dynamics on the ground. Mahmoud Abbas, who has lived for a long time in the shadow of Yassir Arafat—never been considered a very strong leader—is now being greeted, as we all know, as kind of a hero. And this may help him in the rivalry with Hamas. I was in the Palestinian territories for the election in 2006, and this is again—the United States had to have been crazy to press for this election when it was clear that people were tired of Fatah. We look at the vote in terms of Hamas winning, when in fact, it really was in many ways a rejection of the PLO. Same thing that happened in Iran with the election of Ahmadinejad—we tend to look at him as the bad guy, when in fact, it was a rejection of the clerics. For the first time you had someone elected, little known mayor of Tehran, who was seen as Mr. Clean. Who knew what he thought about Israel or the nuclear program? And so you saw these two dynamics. Anyway, Mahmoud Abbas is arguably strengthened but is this going to lead to something? No, and I suspect that there will be an attempt to delay it, to diffuse the kind of enthusiasm, the momentum that's been created. The US is still trying to get to the point, Warren being the expert on UN issues—you know, where they don't get the nine votes at the Security Council so a US veto becomes a moot point. I wish I were more enthusiastic.

Ms. Ellis: Just following up on the US, regardless of what happens, the US has announced its position and I'm just wondering what that combined with the US response to what has gone on in the various countries—which, in your book, you characterized as reactive and sometimes inconsistent—what that means in terms of what role the US can play in the future in a variety of ways, not just in these negotiations but vis-à-vis all the changes in the region.

Ms. Wright: In one of the chapters at the end I look at US policy and particularly an 11 day period in February when the United States changed its position on the region more dramatically than in any time in 60 years. At the beginning of the 11 days we backed a transition in Egypt but one that was gradual, allow Hosni Mubarak a graceful exit, let him stay in power until the elections that were scheduled for this month. By the end of the 11 days, the streets forced us to change our position and basically walk away from a stalwart ally dating back 30 years who was pivotal to our broader regional goals, the Arab-Israeli peace process, counter-terrorism campaign, and this is where the United States, again has—whether it's across North Africa into the Levant and including Yemen—the United States has been clearly much more dynamic in—and much more true to our values—in backing political change. The problem is we've been incredibly inconsistent, and when it comes to Bahrain particularly, but Saudi Arabia as well, we're back to that old argument about stability. And if you help me remember I'll tell you a really interesting set of factoids. So we're seen as inconsistent when it comes to the political transition in the region. And now on the peace process, when President Obama, like President Bush, said we're going to help create a Palestinian state, we're going to move on the peace process and we haven't. So I think we're headed for some tough times after being kind of better—not great but better.

Ms. Ellis: So you also said there is going to be a bumpy road ahead, following on what you just said. I'm wondering if you could address the issue of the raised expectations of the youth and women and other groups who so actively participated in these rebellions. What kind of window—usually the honeymoon is pretty short—what happens if people get really frustrated? How do you see that playing out?

Ms. Wright: The morning after. Yeah, the raw realities have begun hitting a lot of these countries. There was a very interesting poll IPI put out, Craig Charney, it's really interesting. I may even have some of the numbers. Warren Hoge sponsored this poll and it showed that the majority of people now feel that they are worse-off on economic issues and security than they were under Mubarak. Two-thirds

cite the economy as their biggest problem, which is twice as high as it was a month after the uprising. In March, 82% of the country felt that Egypt was headed in the right direction, today that's only 50%. One of the most interesting things is that in March, 34% said they were uncertain who they were going to vote for, today it's 67%, which shows you that the political environment is far more open. No party got more than 3%, which again puts into question how much the Muslim Brotherhood may be able to kind of take a lot of the vote, or the reconstituted ruling party of Hosni Mubarak. But on the peace process, 71% of Egyptians want to keep the peace treaty with Israel. I think one of the things that is profound about this moment, when we stand back and look at the broader trend, is just the tactics. This is the world's most volatile region. I've covered all six wars since '73, the two intifadas, and a host of intense political crises and I am struck by the fact that, in all the countries, be they monarchies or military dictatorships, oil-rich sheikhdoms or dirt-poor countries like Yemen, that everyone has launched their uprising with peaceful civil disobedience. I call it the counter-jihad, it is a rejection of violence as the most effective way to bring about change. That, to me, is really important. I've forgotten what the other question was.

Ms. Ellis: Don't worry, the last question just about that and we're going to open it up and we'll get to everybody. You are somewhat optimistic in your book—along the lines of what you mention, the anti-jihad and the desire of people to have more stability and be less interested in extremism but at the same time we keep hearing about this increase in bombings in Afghanistan, Yemen, and also at the same time there is support—based on more than just extremism—for Hamas and Hezbollah because they are doing other things for the population. So how does that jibe with the growth of a sense that people are tired of all this extremism?

Ms. Wright: Al Qaeda is not dead. Its affiliates—particularly in Yemen and North Africa—are going to be very active. I'm also worried about the Salafis.

Ms. Ellis: And the Hakanis.

Ms. Wright: Well the Hakani network, which *The New York Times* did a great piece about yesterday—I think you have to separate out Afghanistan and Pakistan. I mean, South Asia has its own dynamics. The book is predominantly about the Arab world, although I strayed into South Asia a bit, even parts of Africa. You know, it's not over. If you want to have a conversation about Afghanistan that's a whole other issue. The bottom line is the next decade is going to be more turbulent than the last one was. It's going to be turbulent because, as extremists are marginalized in some places, they will fight back ever harder, they will be ever bolder. It will be turbulent because of the question you asked—the last one—the economic realities. There is not a single country, except maybe Libya, in the Middle East that can afford the transition—Libya only because it has a very small population, 6.5 million people and a lot of oil wealth. But look at Egypt with 85 million people, a limited amount of natural gas which it sells to Israel and Jordan, but not real resources. One of the most poignant stories I heard was about a camel driver—he's a tourist guide down at the pyramids—you get on your camel and have your picture taken and so forth, and he complained recently that he couldn't feed his family and he couldn't feed his camel, and so he was probably going to have to feed his camel to his family and that eliminates his job. That's the reality that an awful lot of people are facing. It's scary to me, and I think the process of change can be derailed, diverted, exploited by—whether it's illiberal leaders or Islamists—particularly the Salafis who will have a sense of order and less corruption, that they could end up playing a bigger role than we think. There is an Islamic spectrum that has emerged: the Muslim Brotherhood and one end, and it's many factions—there are now four factions of the Brotherhood—and then on the other end the Salafis who are Wahabis, who follow the ideology of Saudi Arabia and I think they're pretty nasty people.

Ms. Ellis: Okay, well let's open it up.

Question: Judith O'Neill, thank you so much for that. It was just fantastic. I look forward to reading the book. I have a question with regard to your four parameters of change that is going on right now in the

Middle East, particularly with regard to elevated literacy and a general sense of maturity in these countries that is leading to this dynamic. Could you address those parameters with regard to Palestine? Is there elevated literacy in Palestine? Is there this sense of maturity? Because it simply doesn't appear from all the texts that are not just the standard texts that I've been involved in reading with regard to Palestine. It doesn't appear that the same dynamics may be occurring there and that's totally apart from Abbas' reelection speech at the United Nations.

Ms. Wright: I don't have off the top of my head every single country—I wish I did. UNDP has probably the most current figures. The Palestinians, I mean look, they've faced a lot of setbacks, particularly in Gaza, but the Palestinians have, historically—in terms of modern history anyway—been among the best educated. I remember when I went to Kuwait for the first time in 1980, and it took me four days to meet a Kuwaiti but the Palestinians were running everything. I'm sorry that I can't answer specifically but my sense is that the Palestinians are probably way up there comparatively. If you give me your email, I'll actually look.

Question: Aviva Budd, Could you comment on the political situation in Egypt with the military now basically in control. To what extent and how long do you think that will be acceptable because we hear a lot of conversation and threats that they are going back to the streets and back to fighting because the military is really just trying to hold things in the status quo.

Ms. Wright: Absolutely, the military is one of the big problems. You'll find those who will argue now that what happened in both Egypt and Tunisia were more military coups than uprisings. I don't use the term revolution yet because I don't think they are formal revolutions, may become that. I would beg to differ on whether it's a military coup because I think the military understood a couple things. First of all, the rank and file in the military sympathized with the protesters and actually ordering them to open fire might have been a problem. But I also think that, at the end of the day, it's kind of like the revolutionary guards in Iran, that for the military, it was less about politics than it was keeping a hold on their business interests, whether it's tourism, hotel construction, that they were protecting their own economic interests as well as the military's standing historically in the country. But they have clearly failed the population. They have declared that martial law will be in place until the middle of next year. There is talk of an election scheduled maybe at the beginning of at the end of January running until early February but nothing formal. It's the end of September and there is no election law. People don't know how to run and this is a tremendous disadvantage for a lot of the new parties that have emerged. My friend Dalia is the leader of the women's branch of the Justice Party and they are trying to figure out how they run candidates—they don't know.

So the military has betrayed the uprising and you see a growing amount of anger about that, but you also see—according to the poll that IPI sponsored—that there is not as much interest in going back to Tahrir Square, some yes, but not to the degree. People are a little weary of the instability, the uncertainty, and so that's created a kind of, what do you do now to challenge the military? The answer is not clear. I have arguments with one of my colleagues a lot about whether this is becoming a military junta. I don't think we're there yet. I don't think the military really wants to keep power but I also think that they have not figured out among themselves what's next. And of course there's also the issue that's playing out simultaneously which is really interesting, and that's the trial of Hosni Mubarak. Because for the first time you have a sense of accountability in the region, that people feel that this is a really important step because it signals to leaders throughout the region: you will be held to account for your crimes. The military is a part of that trial and I think that they are struggling in the middle of this figuring out the election schedule, trying to make sure that they are not implicated in the deaths of over 800 people during the uprising. General Tantawi, who is now head of the Supreme Council, the armed forces, has been called to testify in the last few days and clearly trying to wiggle out of any accountability by the military for that.

Ms. Ellis: Yes, back there. Are you willing to take a couple of questions together?

Question: Jenna Lenhardt, Tompkins Cortland Community College, you speak of the demographic shift and a couple generational issues, that's happening internationally. So what do you see as sort of some of the steps we're seeing happen really training the younger generation to kind of fill in the shoes of people that are two generations above them?

Question: Kim Snyder, I'm a documentary filmmaker. I'm curious about your polls on the way that expression of culture right now is taking place and if you think that will shift if things start to get dragged into a more international context with all these other things you spoke about, with what's happening in Palestine? Or do you think that that focus will remain more internal and self-identity focused?

Question: Warren Hoge, International Peace Institute—Robin, first of all thank you for the plugs for the idea that I polled. I'm so enthusiastic about this book that I've invited Robin to come speak at IPI in ten days time. And we're looking forward to it. One more thing about that poll that's sort of interesting in light of what happened here last week—the 71% number, that was the number of Egyptians who said they wanted to keep the agreement with Israel intact. That caught us by surprise, we thought that that was pretty positive. I wonder if we did the polling now, after what happened here last week, if that number would be so high—I believe it would not be. The burning of the [Israeli] Embassy is an interesting story because it gave Obama to involve himself extremely personally. I mean he called Tantawi and basically saved six Israeli security guards. Imagine if they had been killed, if those had been six body bags rather than six Israelis returning home. It would have been the end of everything. But the main thing I think that happened is what is perceived as the intransigence of the Netanyahu government to proposal for continuing talks. And we saw that here last week and you see the reception that Mahmoud Abbas got when he went back to Ramallah yesterday. Anyway, that aside, I wanted to ask you a question, and that is—it's appropriate for this particular group Robin—and that is about what happened in Saudi Arabia yesterday, where you know the king has granted women the right to run for office. Of course it's four years away, and of course women who run for office, unless there is another change in the law, will not be able to drive cars to their campaigning sites—in other words, by our lights a pretty minor reform. It's the second thing the king has done in response to the Arab Spring, the first thing has been billions and billions of dollars trying to give opportunities to all those young Saudis who are out of work. My question is, do you see the Arab Spring—I also hate that phrase but just for the moment we'll use it—going to Riyadh, and do you think that the Saudis will be able to stop it with what I think of as relatively minor moves like this one?

Ms. Wright: All great questions. In terms of training youth, I'm not sure exactly what the question was but one of the challenges for the United States in looking at what we can do to help the movement is figure out how we use our resources and the problem is in Egypt we still give 1.3 billion dollars to the Egyptian military and we are siding with the wrong folks. We do that—when I talk to my State Department friends—they say, oh well we want the army to be loyal to us, well, you know they need us more than we need them. And we don't have to turn around and say we're not going to give you 1.3, we can do a little bit, or certain types of weapons, or do something to signal: wait a minute, this is not a done deal. The problem is in a climate like we see in the world, whether it's in Europe or the United States with the debt crisis, that this is not a time that anybody has a lot of extra resources to pour into this part of the world, which needs it more than ever. In terms of the culture shifting, you know one of the things that's interesting among the hip-hoppers—one of my favorite groups is a group of Palestinians called DAM—and if you haven't seen *Slingshot Hip Hop* I strongly recommend it, it's a wonderful movie and it's all about the Palestinians and I actually saw the premier when it came to the US and then the group came with it and then performed afterwards at the Hard Rock Café in Washington. It was wonderful, but what's so interesting about them is, they actually live in Israel, and the words of their songs are just as angry on the issues but they are also against violence. And in many ways hip-hop emerged for the same reasons it did in the South Bronx in the 1970s as a rejection of gang violence and just violence in general but was still the anger. And the message, again of the group, is: we don't want to lob Molotov cocktails, we don't want another intifada, but we are still committed to our issues. And the interesting thing is they have performed with pro-peace Israeli hip-hop groups and even and even in Israeli clubs.

Warren's question: I agree with you about the poll—I suspect it wouldn't be as enthusiastic, but at the same time I think the majority of Egyptians, whatever the number, really don't want another war. I think this is where, across the region, people are really tired and they know what the cost is and that this fuels the military—and a lot of them are not happy about the military—so it may go down, but I still think they majority would want to keep some form of—not advocate war with Israel. In terms of the women, obviously I agree with you as well, that this is token, and it's a little bit like the 136 billion dollars that the Saudi king injected into the economy this year, to preempt an uprising. This in a population of about 30 million people—a little bit less—136 billion because they have an unemployment problem in Saudi Arabia, in part because they hire foreigners, but the youth's unemployment—it's 10–12% across the population in the Middle East, double that among the young. And the king injected this money for housing credits, creating jobs, debt relief, building sport and literacy clubs to give young people something to do, and I think what he's done on the women's vote is again a reflection. What nobody's focusing on is the fact that, by allowing them to be members of the Shurah, which is a consultative council, or to run in local elections, that in local elections, it's for councils where the king actually appoints the majority of them, so they're irrelevant anyway. It's like, excuse me, it's the system and so everyone is heralding the Saudis for, oh they've given women the vote—for what? This is the core problem, and I don't think the Saudis have gotten around this. And of course the king, at 87, the chances that he's around in four years are pretty minimal, or that he's actually the effective ruler are probably minimal too.

The one set of factoids that I want to give you, which I think is really interesting—the International Finance Institute in Washington came up with these and they reflect the money that Warren mentioned having been injected into the economy. Ten years ago, Saudi Arabia broke even, when the price of oil was \$23. No profit but broke even. Last year, they broke even—ten years later—when the price of oil was \$68. In one year, because of this new infusion of money into the economy, the price of oil, just to break even, has to be \$86 a barrel. If this continues with no new money committed, the current increase, the price of oil by 2015—four years from now, to break even, no profit, has to be \$110 a barrel. And who's going to be paying for that? We are. So the dynamics of what is happening in Saudi Arabia are actually really important for our economic needs as well. It's something that we're not looking at enough.

Question: Ellen Gorman, I'm from the Women's City Club of New York and I had heard someone from UN Women speak—it was not Michelle Bachelet—but she spoke extensively about how UN Women had gone into Egypt and was helping the women there organize for the election. They had a large convention. They had stipulated that 30% of parliament and of the ministry should be women, and I was wondering what your observations were about how UN Women was impacting the women's groups in Egypt.

Question: Linda Kamm, Senator Bob Graham of Florida—ex-senator, was chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee at the time they did the 9/11 study. He's been suggesting that the Saudi government had a lot more to do with the payments to some of the pilots and the other people in training for 9/11 and that, in fact, the US government has been reluctant to make any of that information public. I wanted to ask if you have any information that suggests that there really was that close connection. He alluded to the fact that the wife of the Saudi ambassador was making payments to some of these pilots and that there is a continuing effort by our government not to have all those facts come out. Do you think that that is, in fact, the case and what does that reflect about our continuing relationship with the Saudis?

Question: Charles Weiss, I used to be a correspondent in the Middle East in the 70s and 80s. I wanted to ask—the al-Qaeda offers a very tangible reward for engaging in its terrorism, and that appeals to people with no hope for anything else. What do the anti-jihadists offer comparable to people desperate for something, for hope?

Ms. Wright: Okay. Sorry I can't help on the UN Women because I actually don't know what they are doing. I think the women are trying very hard to organize and are having a lot of problems. They tried to organize the Million Women's March in March and found that they were blocked by men. I think it's going to be a real challenge. But I think one of the interesting things is a lot of the candidates who are emerging—the people willing to run are not the traditional elites again. We're getting into people who may actually attract normal voters. The fact that so many people are still interested in voting is quite interesting to me, given all of the problems that have emerged. On Senator Graham, I don't have any insight. I wish I did, but that story about Prince Bandar's wife is an old one. One of the things I did for the book was I went to Saudi Arabia and talked to several of the former Gitmo detainees, including one who had been with Osama bin Laden for 27 days at Tora Bora. I wanted to understand who these guys were. And I spend seven years in Africa as well doing assorted wars. One of the ones I did was I went in with the mercenaries in Angola. And many of the Gitmo detainees reminded me of the mercenaries. They were misfits, people who—it's not like they were really ideologues. And they told me stories of how they became disillusioned. One of them did because bin Laden had come to them when they were in Tora Bora and said, "You're going to have to fight hand-to-hand against the Americans. It's going to be a noble victory over the world's super power," and so forth. And they were all annoyed because he abandoned them. He left them. They were forced to make their own way into Pakistan and virtually all of them were sold by the Pakistanis to the Americans at \$5,000 a head. Another one had become disillusioned because he ended up having to do kind of grunt work—grocery shopping and cleaning lavatories and this was not his idea of jihad. [*Laughter.*]

The rehabilitation program that the Saudis have instituted, again, out of self-interest because they also became victims, they didn't really start cooperating, whether it was on the financial crackdown, or on trying to deal with these guys until after Riyadh was hit and then Jeddah and assorted bombs. Their rehabilitation program is actually pretty effective. 20% have gone back to extremism. They've gone across the border to Yemen or to other places. But 80% haven't, and that's actually a very good recidivist rate. We, in the United States, our recidivist rate within three years is 50–60%. And when you consider that these are hard-core extremists, and Saudis—lots of reasons they might be attracted to going back to the old way. Now the Saudis do a lot in terms of giving them, whether it's a dowry, a job, a car, whatever. But when you talk about the question of what is there in it—what are the incentives, there are actually far more reasons for a lot of these guys not to go back to jihad, especially when they're not particularly enamored of the kinds of things they are doing. And that gets to your question about, what does the counter-jihad offer? The last year, I think you've seen a sense that there is something else to believe in, to put your neck on the line for. I mean I am staggered every week that more Syrians still turn out when they know what the regime is doing to quash the rebellion. So I think that there are an awful lot of people who are committed to something bigger. My concern is that when there aren't the tangible rewards, and this is not just about being able to vote or to—accountability in government, end of corruption and so forth, this is as much about getting a job and having a sense of a future. And that's what concerns me the most, it's the economy stupid, it's the same message we're facing in other parts of the world. That's where I think we're most vulnerable because there aren't going to be—it's not whether they can vote for a party they like, it's whether they get something, that they feel they share the political and economic spoils.

Ms. Ellis: So we have time for a few more questions and they we're going to have to wrap up so that Robin can sign her books. Okay, yes.

Question: Joanne Fox-Przeworski, you referred to the US Senate's relations with a number of these countries and I'm wondering what about other cross-border influences, particularly we've been hearing recently about Turkey getting involved in the region, France which was involved in the region. What do you feel on the ground, what do you hear on the ground, and what do you think the impacts will be?

Question: Lisa Spiro, President of the Women's Network for a Sustainable Future, Joanne is on the Board. I'm interested in two things. I have two quick questions. One is: you talked about the hip-hop

group that are Palestinians living inside Israel, and I think one of the things that I'm really curious about is how strong that beginning movement of the sort of Israel Spring is. I've worked with some Palestinians in the classical music field who are doing the same. And the second question I had is what—you know, we've gone around even this table—a huge amount of power, of people who know a great deal about how to capacity build with women—what is the most useful intervention that people like us can be making at a time like this, so below federal government level, out of the policy field, what can we do?

Question: Amanda Bernard, I'm a writer. I was just wondering, could you just give an opinion on why you think Algeria let Gaddafi in the country? Why would they do that?

Ms. Wright: Unless you know some headline that I don't know. His family is in Niger, but Gaddafi, most people believe, is still in Libya.

Question: Jacqueline Albert-Simon from *Politique Internationale*. My question is about Iran. For example there's such a conflict right now, we know, in leadership. And how does that effect Ahmadinejad's judgment about Syria—all of a sudden coming out and yelling at the Syrian president? How much nerve could he have to do that and what could be the motivation?

Ms. Ellis: And Robin we can't close without hearing something about your sense of Libya and what you see unfolding chaos. There was a big *New York Times* article about fear of the Islamists taking over but—

Ms. Wright: First question, about the cross-border influences. Look, Turkey is the most important country in the Islamic world today. And it's very interesting to see Prime Minister Erdogan do his revolution tour through Egypt, Libya, Tunisia at the same time as the Prime Minister of Britain, the President of France. You can sense this rivalry developing for influence. And it is clear to me that after almost a century of the Arabs hating the Turks, that they are now looking at the Turks—especially the Justice and Development Party. I think when you look at Turkey, and this is kind of important to understand, how legitimate is it, that Ataturk, at the beginning of modern Turkey, empowered about 15% of the population. And Erdogan's genius is bringing the other 85% of the Anatolians into the political system, creating them as entrepreneurs, bringing them into the economy. Turkey's economy is doing better than Europe's. I was talking to a Saudi cabinet minister and on his cell phone the ringtone was the theme of a Turkish soap opera. [*Laughter.*] And that's how fundamental the change is. And I think that Turkey—and Erdogan is becoming increasingly head-strong—third round of elections and he's being reelected overwhelmingly, there's no party that is likely to challenge him anytime soon—that Turkey is going to be a really important one to watch, and how that plays out on Israel and a lot of other questions.

In terms of Palestinian hip-hop, one of the beauties of this film that I was talking about, *Slingshot Hip Hop*, is that it is the story of Palestinians in Israel trying to connect with the Palestinian hip-hop groups in the territories. And it's wonderful because there is this commonality, they bridge—in a way that politics often doesn't—between the two sides among Palestinians. So NGOs, the most useful intervention—I assume you mean for women. The NGOs can do good in training, in helping women develop platforms, learning some of the basics—the kind of thing that NGOs have been doing in places in Kuwait once women got the vote and elsewhere, traditional stuff. I think one of the messages about outside intervention generally, is that—in part because of the Iraq War—we are often going to have to stand back, take a deep breath, and let them learn themselves, and make their own mistakes and not try to rush in and say, oh we know how to do that. Or try to ensure that our candidates, people who are friendly to the West, win—that this is one time that it will be so hard for any administration to do that. That's why it's going to be so turbulent, because to be credible, legitimate, it has to be their experience. And so the NGOs can play a role, but I'm not sure—particularly in the sense governments will kind of have to stand back—it's not clear to me what something new, or different than what we have done in the past.

On Iran—Iran is, again I've been covering since 1973 and I've been there almost every year since then, and I've interviewed the last four presidents, even the Supreme Leader and seen Ahmadinejad three times and, you know, goofball. [Laughter.] *The New York Times* had a great quote from a very good friend of mine who said, Ahmadinejad lecturing Syria is the equivalent of Berlusconi lecturing Charlie Sheen about womanizing. [Laughter.] And it's so true. 2009 was a pivotal year in Iran in the reaction, again, just like the uprisings in the Arab world, that we all knew that there was a strong reform movement. But what no one knew is how many people were willing to turn out in how many cities to make a statement that the Islamic Republic of Iran needed to become more of a republic and less Islamic. Again, lots of different opinions on the range of what it should be, but [people] were willing to challenge the Supreme Leader and often put their lives on the line. What's fascinating to me, even more, is the way that the revolution is eating itself up, that the conservatives, hard-liners are going after each other. This is in a run up to two elections: parliamentary next year, president the year after. And it's going to be fascinating to see how it plays out. When you see the conservatives criticizing Ahmadinejad and his chief of staff for being a deviant current and for links to sorcery and so forth, this is again a place that I hope we kind of let unravel on its own because it will, revolutions do. It's going to take more time than we wish—and Iranians don't want a counter-revolution, they don't want violence, but this is not going to be an upheaval. Look, the regime had to put under house arrest a man who had been prime minister for eight years, had been one of the original revolutionaries and a speaker of Parliament for four years—that it's had to take steps to quash reform from within.

And finally on the past question about Libya. There are 140 tribes or clans in Libya, 30 of which are important. This is a country that has been historically divided between Benghazi in the east and Tripoli in the west. And they face enormous problems. One of the things that surprise me, however, is that even in a place like Iraq—it's held together when we were talking—even Vice President Biden—about dividing, that Iraq would have to fall into its natural three parts. I'm surprised, given the number of borders decided by Europeans since 1884 in Africa and in the Middle East that so many of them, with the exception of Sudan, have actually held together. I've covered wars Zaire, or Congo now, which is not a place that made much sense, too big to manage. So I'm surprised that enough countries have held together. I don't think, because of resources, that Libyans, at the end of the day, want to break up. You haven't seen that mood yet. I've always said from the beginning that you had so many different militias involved in challenging Gaddafi's army and they were fighting their own campaigns and they all want their percentage of the spoils, and that's going to be a problem and that's what we see playing out. Today I think the Transitional National Council—and I've met with Jalil as well as Jabril and the finance minister. They're decent guys but they're transition figures, and it's clear that other people are going to emerge—the question is from where? They have not been very good about moving the power base from Benghazi, doing enough to make Tripoli feel like it's part of the process, and those who have lead the campaign against Gaddafi, that they are part of the new system. I think they've been really way too slow. But I'm not willing to say that Libya is going to break up yet.

Question: Gillian Sorensen, Last question, staying in Libya. Gaddafi clearly is finished politically, but we don't know where he is. If and when we find him, and if he survives, do you support trying him before the International Criminal Court?

Ms. Wright: That's a good question and that's something that I defer to the Libyans on. You have those who that think that that's a good place, there are others that want to try him at home. Let's see if he survives the onslaught first and what happens to him. But it's clearly one, again, that is wonderfully important because of the sense of justice—and this is something that the Middle East is not all that familiar with. I think everyone wants to ensure that, whether it's any of these guys including Bashar al-Assad, down the road what happens to them.

Ms. Ellis: Well I told you how lucky you were to be here today to hear this incredible woman. Thank you so much. So Robin will be signing her books so just come up to this table. Thank you so much.