

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## A Rage for Order: The Middle East in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Robert F. Worth, Roger Cohen, Joanne J. Myers**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good evening, everyone. I am Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and I'd like to thank you all for spending this part of your day with us.

Our speakers today are two outstanding *New York Times* journalists, Robert Worth and Roger Cohen. Together, their familiarity with the Middle East is unsurpassed.

You should have received a copy of their bios, but I will be brief. Robert was *The New York Times* Beirut bureau chief from 2007 until 2011. Prior to that, he reported from Baghdad. He is the author of the widely acclaimed *A Rage For Order: The Middle East in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS*—and yes, the book will be available for you to purchase at the end of the hour today.

Roger is an award-winning journalist and author. He is currently an op-ed and foreign affairs columnist for *The New York Times*. He will be engaging Robert in conversation about his book and the turbulent Middle East. As the interlocutor for this event, we couldn't ask for anyone more experienced.

It is sincerely a pleasure to welcome you both here today. Thank you for coming.

When discussing what makes a nonfiction book worth reading, it is often said that it is about having a good story, then verifying important or interesting information, and presenting it in a way that engages the audience while adding value to the topic. *A Rage for Order* is a perfect example of this. It is storytelling with a purpose.

While most of us know quite a bit about how the [Arab Spring](#) began—first in [Tunisia](#), then spreading to [Egypt](#), [Libya](#), [Yemen](#), [Syria](#), and beyond—generally speaking, the reporting has been described either as a religious war between Sunnis and Shiites, or as a confrontation between secular versus Islamists. But the approach in *A Rage for Order* is different, for it is not only Robert's firsthand account of those heady days of the Arab Spring, but it is his interviews with individuals whose lives intersected with those events and how they were personally affected, which makes this book so special. In reaching for the core of that tragic springtime more than five years ago, Robert has written an extraordinary tale that focuses our attention on the human side of war, the perspective that is too often forgotten. It is when dreams become nightmares and lives are unraveled, never to be the same.

In the next 30 minutes or so, Robert and Roger will have a conversation about the competing

perspectives in these countries, addressing such issues as what was at play; the daunting impediments to stability; and how the dream of a new Middle East gave way to discord. Then, in the time remaining, we will open the floor to discussion so that you can ask any questions that weren't addressed during their conversation.

So that we can begin, please join me in giving a very warm welcome once again to these two distinguished journalists, our guests today.

Robert and Roger, thank you so much for coming.

## Discussion

**ROGER COHEN:** Thank you very much, Joanne.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is a real personal pleasure for me to be here with Bobby. He has been a fantastic colleague and friend, sometimes in difficult circumstances—in [Baghdad](#); in Tehran, at the time of the [uprising](#) in 2009 after the [election](#); and, equally memorably, in Tahrir Square at the time of the [Egyptian Revolution](#) that unseated—was it a revolution?—[Hosni Mubarak](#).

*A Rage for Order* is a fabulous book. For any journalist it's inspiring. Bobby writes what he sees. It is not full of theories; it is not full of laborious analysis. He lets people's lives and how they unraveled speak for themselves. His is "the view from the ground," in the phrase of [Martha Gellhorn](#) in [World War II](#). The stories he tells are absolutely unforgettable. Bobby is a beautiful stylist. He writes with tremendous economy. Sometimes you re-read a sentence two or three times, because in 12 words he sums up what others might say in maybe 100. I couldn't recommend it more highly.

Before we get into the meat of this, I was struck by one passage in [Libya](#), where Bobby is talking to a young man who is expressing his feelings about [Qaddafi](#). I couldn't help being reminded of a certain presidential candidate, whose name I won't be the first to pronounce tonight. This man says to Bobby, "You watch TV and he talks for 75 minutes nonstop at the top of his lungs. He covers every subject—magic, health, religion, politics—and not a single sentence makes sense." So Bobby questions him a bit about, "So what's going on?" He says, "Stop trying to make sense of us. We don't even understand ourselves." Perhaps we should think about that in this [political season](#) here.

So there Bobby and I were in Tahrir Square. It was a quite magical moment. We were in this apartment belonging to [Pierre Sioufi](#), overlooking the square. Incredible things were happening before our eyes. Members of the [Brotherhood](#) were talking to and embracing newly returned secular Egyptians. Everybody was talking about unity, about the quest for dignity. People really believed they were building a different future for Egypt, in which they would become true citizens, they would have agency. Five years later here we are, with Egypt under a strongman again, General [Sisi](#).

Bobby, as you cast your mind back over this arc of the last five years, do you feel you have identified in your mind one particular thing that went wrong? Were we all just seduced by an impossible dream?

**ROBERT WORTH:** First of all, let me just say what a pleasure it is to have Roger here, who knows the story so well. I feel very lucky to have you, someone who was with me in those places.

It is easy to get very cynical about this region—and I was, certainly, before [2011](#), before this started—and I was reluctant when I was hearing about these mostly riots early on in [Tunisia](#), in December and early January, thinking that they wouldn't amount to anything. I think what was really

incredible at that moment was the sense, as things really got underway—first of all, [Zine El Abidine Ben Ali](#) being ousted very quickly, and then the revolts getting underway in Egypt—was a sense that aspirations were themselves having effect on the ground. There was all this rhetoric, and you couldn't dismiss the rhetoric anymore because it was spreading so quickly, and people were seeming to transform their reality in front of your eyes.

Of course it went both ways. Even then, there were people saying, "No, this is just opening a door to terrorists and Islamists, that's what it is." Of course, those people can look prescient in retrospect. But those were the same people who had been doing their utmost to make those things come true—not just then, but for years beforehand.

So I think it was one of those incredible moments when everything that you think about the region is momentarily blown up. It was what many people said at the time, "It's like falling in love." Everything falls apart and you think, "Maybe I don't know this place. Maybe it's better than I thought."

**ROGER COHEN:** It was a poet who said that to you, that "the revolution is like falling in love."

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes.

**ROGER COHEN:** Suddenly seeing your life in an whole different way.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Exactly, yes. It was [Alaa Al-Aswany](#), the novelist. He was preaching out in the square in this wonderful way every day at the time. I think, in a way, you had to suspend your disbelief at that time.

**ROGER COHEN:** So we weren't wrong to suspend our disbelief?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I don't think so. I think you had to believe that something was possible.

It is easy to look back and say, "Well, the Islamists were just holding their fire, and it was all calculated, and everybody was pent up and ready to start this process of fragmentation."

I don't really think so. I think at that time they, themselves, underwent a kind of transformation. They heard this rhetoric of national unity and citizenship.

**ROGER COHEN:** Dignity.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes. I think, at least in that moment, they believed it.

I remember talking to members of the Brotherhood and thinking, "These guys—something's going on, and they're aware of it too, and they're rethinking stuff." I think, unfortunately, it didn't take that long for people to kind of settle back down into the patterns they had been in before. And then, of course, they began to talk about an Islamic state, and the secularists went back to thinking, "We've got to stomp on these people again"—all the polarization.

**ROGER COHEN:** I remember talking to Brotherhood members with you. They were all saying, "This is a revolution of the youth of Egypt. It is not about us. We're here to help, but our role is ancillary, it is secondary. If it comes to an election, when it comes to an election, we will not present a candidate in the first election because we don't want to be in the forefront of this." Then, of course, within a year, they went back on that.

Do you think that was a fundamental error and that history might have been quite different if they had

not reversed their initial position?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think the problem was that you had an element of the Brotherhood that was more flexible, more liberal, more open. As you said, it was the young people. Some of those people remain, some of the people I most admired in Egypt, because they had seen both sides. They had been in the Brotherhood. Many of them had left it or were on the verge of leaving it. They saw it as a force for openness and change. They didn't realize how hidebound that organization was, that it was run by these old men who could not change. I think, once it became clear that [Khairat el-Shater](#) and company were not going to relinquish anything, were not going to change the way they saw Egypt, it was hopeless. There was nothing you could do.

**ROGER COHEN:** There is a passage where you say that [Morsi](#), unbelievably, [elected](#) with 51.7 percent of the vote, a score that you never hear in the Middle East—you say he is the first democratically elected president in Egypt in 6,000 years. And then you say, "But nobody really knew him because he was thrust forward at the last minute."

Clearly, he made mistakes. But do you think there is anything he could have done that would have avoided the [coup](#) that the United States has never called a coup?

**ROBERT WORTH:** You know, it's funny. I know this sounds odd. For a time, I had daydreams in which I imagined his first speech as president. I thought, "What could he have said?" That's such a great question—what could he have said? Was it possible to bridge this gulf?

**ROGER COHEN:** The deep state was always working against him, obviously.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Absolutely.

**ROGER COHEN:** It hadn't been dislodged. One of the main characters in your book says at one point: "What could we do? We didn't control the intelligence services, we didn't control the military, we didn't control the judiciary. Many of the essential leaders of power were never in our hands, even if we had the presidency." So where does the blame lie?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think it would have taken a heroic act of openness and flexibility. He would have had to reach out to liberals—and not just to liberals, but to the big businessmen, [Sawiris](#) and people like that—and he would have had to persuade them that he was going to act purely as a patriot, not as someone who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood. He was incapable of that. I don't think, unfortunately, anybody in the Brotherhood was capable of doing that.

**ROGER COHEN:** You don't think some other personality might have—

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think [Rached Ghannouchi](#) is capable of that kind of thing. He recognized from the beginning that they had to fundamentally alter who they were. He now talks about that group, the [Tunisian Islamist group](#), as being Muslim democrats, not even Islamists.

The Brotherhood was totally incapable of that. So I just think, given what the Brotherhood was, as you say, they were heading for a collision with the military. There were people who from pretty early on in 2011 told me that: "There's two forces here; it's the Brotherhood and the military. They are going to clash and the military is going to win."

**ROGER COHEN:** But the great hope of the Arab Awakening was that we would get beyond this sterile confrontation between Islamists who were banned, who were pushed out, who were tortured,

and secular strongmen, for want of a better word. That's the hope that has been dashed everywhere outside Tunisia, right?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Absolutely, yes. I just think people didn't reckon with how hard those dictators would fight. Yemen is, strangely, kind of a good example of this. The dictator was, theoretically, [pushed aside](#). He is still there. Today [Ali Abdullah Saleh](#) was tweeting out pictures of himself standing next to a bombed-out home, saying, "We're going to have our revenge." He is the force behind a lot of what is [bad that is going on in Yemen](#). These people, as you said, they had not only their lieutenants, people who they had paid off and so forth, but armies of thugs and criminals. They weren't going to give anything up.

**ROGER COHEN:** You don't address this very much in the book, but I'm sure you've thought about it a lot. Could/should the United States have done more, particularly in Egypt, 25 percent of the Arab world, the pivotal nation? If there could have been a success story in Egypt, it might have changed so many things.

**ROBERT WORTH:** I don't really see how it was possible. I just feel like there were too many structural challenges there. The challenge for a while, as you remember, for the United States was really just to keep up with what was happening. It was changing so fast. They sent [Frank Wisner](#). By the time he got there, pretty much, his brief had been overtaken. The notion of creating a structure and gradual transition from Mubarak to something else, that blew up. Frank Wisner is a smart and dedicated guy. I think it was impossible.

I think, generally, the United States—well, we'll get to Syria later. But I think the United States was taken so by surprise, we didn't have the flexibility, and I don't think we really had room. I think this was such an indigenous movement and there was so much momentum behind it, that it was very hard to alter anything.

**ROGER COHEN:** But here's the greatest wave of liberation movements since [1989](#), and it happened on President [Obama's](#) watch. At the end of his presidency, it is pretty much fallen ashes. Do you think history should judge him harshly for that?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I don't really. You need someone to put your trust in. There's that kind of wonderful, naïve-sounding quote from Obama: "I want the kids to win. I want [Wael Ghoneim](#) to be president"—he was the Google guy. That was just a wildly—I don't think he meant that in the sense that he was actively backing it. It was just a dream.

But these people were almost irrelevant, I think. They became momentarily famous and they seemed to embody a hope. But they weren't part of the power structure. There was no way they could be. It was just a world apart from what happened in Eastern Europe, where you had, especially in Poland, a deep and disciplined [movement](#) that had thought very seriously about what was going to come next and who was going to be in power. The Egyptians had none of that.

**ROGER COHEN:** So you're saying there were no building blocks in any of these societies? If you look in your book, you have somebody in Syria talking at the [beginning](#) of the uprising against [Bashar al-Assad](#), "We want dignity, we want law and civic institutions." It was pretty much echoed in Yemen. Somebody said to you, "In a sense, that was all the protestors of 2011 wanted, a state where citizenship meant something, where the rule of law was respected." These are clearly things the United States stands for. And here is this word "ethics." Shouldn't the United States have gotten behind that more, somehow?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think it was just so difficult, given the lack of a social contract in those countries, that the fabric you need—and this was at its worst, of course, where you had a sectarian split and foreign countries that are backing the powers there. Obviously, [Syria](#) is the worst of this. But it happened as well in [Libya](#). These conflicts got internationalized very quickly.

[Chris Stevens](#) is a good example of someone who—a wonderful guy.

**ROGER COHEN:** That's the U.S. Ambassador in Libya who was [killed](#).

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes. You know, he was the right person there at the right time. I didn't know him well, but I knew him a little bit. He knew the country really well.

**ROGER COHEN:** I knew him pretty well.

**ROBERT WORTH:** He spoke the language. He had thought very seriously about how much American presence was right on the ground. He was killed. I think there is a huge gap, let's say, between expressing aspirations and being able to make them come true.

Yemen is also a good example here. The United States, I think, did a very good thing and put a lot of diplomatic weight behind creating the National Bylaw Council, which was a group of people from every different Yemeni factions meeting in this hotel, a great big hotel, the Movenpick Hotel, up on a hill in Sana'a. That was a good idea. It was the right idea. The trouble was that—the United States played a leading role in making that happen. But there was a big difference between what was going on in that hotel and the rest of the country.

I think for the United States, as for all the other nations involved, the challenge wasn't just getting those actors on the same page. It was even finding out what they were doing. There was so much chaos and there were multiple insurgencies going on.

I do think that this is one of the great challenges, I think, for American diplomacy in the coming period, is to resist the urge to stay behind the walls of the fortress, to take risks. You know, people are going to die. But it's worth it. I worry that we're not doing that.

**ROGER COHEN:** Worth it if?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Well, that's the trouble. You can't always point to a big achievement. The victories, I think, are going to be small and local. I think it's worth being there, knowing what's going on, and you can't do that unless you really have people on the ground.

**ROGER COHEN:** Your Syria chapters are breathtaking, I think, even in the context of a book overall that I found absolutely riveting. But the way you portray this friendship that cannot withstand the forces around it between a Sunni woman and an Alawite woman and the way they love each other but that love cannot survive this whirl of sectarian hatred that breaks out after the initial uprising. Of course, it reminded me very much of [Bosnia](#).

Here we are five years on, with several hundred thousand dead. You just spoke about taking risks. Should the president have taken one or two more in Syria? Is that what you're thinking of?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I do think he could have taken more risks. It's funny. On the one hand, I suspect that, even if he had, the fundamental strategic situation on the ground would probably be about the same as it is now, just because I think Iran plays such a powerful undermining role there and probably could have countered anything we did. However, I think we could have done more to save

lives. I think that makes a big difference there.

I think we also possibly might have, if we had been prescient enough, prevented all these other countries in the region, notably Qatar and Kuwait, from essentially ushering all kinds of jihadists to filter across the border, especially from Turkey, and to make this thing a much more toxic war than it had to be.

**ROGER COHEN:** Should we have upheld the [red line](#)?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think so, yes. I think, despite the fact that yes, we got the [chemical weapons agreement](#) done, I think it undermines the way people view the country in the long term.

**ROGER COHEN:** Did you think right from the beginning that this would happen in Syria, that the country—a country drawn on a map by British diplomats a century plus ago—did you think it would disaggregate in the way it has?

**ROBERT WORTH:** No. I certainly from the beginning—many, many people did—said, "Syria is different, it's going to be worse, it's going to be more toxic." That, yes. But I didn't think that it was going to be this bad.

I will tell you another thing. I don't think anybody had any notion that this wave of [migrants](#) was going to be unleashed. You even have to wonder—Obama really had made up his mind from the beginning that he didn't want any involvement here. But if you had told him, "This is going to happen, this is going to [fundamentally challenge the European Union](#)," maybe even he would have.

**ROGER COHEN:** For a long time, it was viewed as a horrible conflict but essentially parochial and it wouldn't affect the United States or its allies. Well, it certainly has.

Maybe we should turn to something a little more hopeful, Tunisia, the only place where there really has been a compromise, which you very eloquently describe, between the two forces we have been talking about, the Islamists—Ennahda, who initially won the first [election](#)—but then, at a critical moment, the leader of Ennahda, Ghannouchi, decided to compromise with the secular old guard and had a meeting at the Bristol Hotel in Paris where the outline of this compromise was worked out. Tunisia has suffered some for having done that. There have been [vicious terrorist attacks](#) too, notably over the last year and a half or so.

Why has Tunisia been different, do you think, and should we cling to that? Could it possibly offer some glimmerings elsewhere?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think there are a lot of reasons why Tunisia is different. But for me it is really a wonderful object lesson in the way that individual leadership makes such a difference. There is a media mogul in Tunisia who sees himself as—

**ROGER COHEN:** We haven't talked about leadership.

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think it makes so much difference.

There is a Tunisian who sees himself as kind of a Tunisian [Berlusconi](#), very secular, hates Islamists, hates Ennahda, hates Ghannouchi. I was in his office once. He was talking about how this rapprochement happened, where Ghannouchi and his counterpart, [Beji Caid Essebsi](#), began to meet and brought along their respective political groupings. This guy said, "I hate to say it, but it was really Ghannouchi who saved the country." For him to say that is really, really something.

I think it is, in a sense true. Despite the fact that Ghannouchi's movement, Ennahda, is more sophisticated, much more sophisticated, than the Brotherhood, it had to be pulled along by Ghannouchi. He was the one who recognized "We have to step down, we have to form a technocratic government," and he laid all of his political weight on the line. He said, "I'll step down."

**ROGER COHEN:** They gave up power. They didn't have to.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes. I think it's wonderful to compare that, for instance, with Syria. It's tempting at times, of course, to say, "Well, look, this ancient sectarian stuff in Syria was just bound to fall back into the kind of violence we've had." That's not true. It wasn't inevitable. It depends on how leaders act.

Bashar al-Assad decided to stoke the fires and behave in this horrible, irresponsible way. Tunisia is a place where—granted, the history was not as toxic—you had a leader who behaved in the most responsible way possible. It made such a difference.

**ROGER COHEN:** Do you think it will hold? Do you think the Tunisian compromise will withstand the pressure that is being placed upon it already?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think it's impossible to say. As you know, the economy is the worst thing.

**ROGER COHEN:** Tourism has been very hard hit.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes. And they don't have—it's a blessing and a curse—they don't have oil, they don't have a lot of these sources.

I think they may well suffer more terrorist attacks. I think we're going to have to see how they handle that. They need a lot of help both with the economy and with security.

I think the key, in a way, is going to be whether that movement succeeds in passing on the spirit of Ghannouchi, the leader, to the next generation. There are some real signs for hope there, because some of the younger people in Ennahda are a lot like Ghannouchi. They have the same kind of long-term vision for the country. They have the same kind of patience, a willingness to make—

**ROGER COHEN:** Ghannouchi is interesting. He's an Islamist who went to live in the West because he was exiled, lived in London for many years, and actually sat in London, which has just elected a Muslim mayor, and thought, "Hey, some of this liberal democracy is not so bad. Maybe there are some ideas there that we could use back home"—unlike a member of al-Qaeda, who comes to the United States and sees a bar and people dancing and decides, "This is the end of human dignity." That's an interesting contrast, isn't it?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes, absolutely. Ghannouchi is a fascinating guy. He was reading Marx and Freud in his twenties. That was actually before he became a kind of a political Islamist.

But then in the 1970s he really admired some of what the Tunisian left was doing. Well, if you look at other Islamist groups and their attitude, it was like "These people are the worst. We wouldn't go near the leftist movements because they are heretics." Ghannouchi was always open-minded.

**ROGER COHEN:** Did you think about calling the book "A Rage for Dignity?"

**ROBERT WORTH:** First of all, I stole the title from Wallace Stevens. But it's true—I know what you're getting at—"order" is a funny word there.



**ROGER COHEN:** It's kind of a little depressing. [Laughter]

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes.

**ROGER COHEN:** But maybe one can only be depressed.

**ROBERT WORTH:** I'm afraid so in the short term.

**ROGER COHEN:** In fact, the end of your book really made me weep. You describe this young man who had been very active in the uprising in Egypt. He ends up in ISIS-land (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

One of the wonderful things about Bobby as a writer is he really doesn't pass judgment. He just lets you read it and think about it. And he doesn't say anything about the murderous barbarians of ISIS, doesn't use words like that. He just says, "Well, that's where this young man ended up in his search for dignity. ISIS-land, and the adoption of these beliefs was, in the end—as it has been for many estranged Arabs over the last decades—the only refuge where he could find dignity." It's just a devastating and ominous conclusion.

Did you think about a more hopeful ending? [Laughter]

**ROBERT WORTH:** I should have ended with Tunisia.

No, absolutely. When you read the poetry written and posted online by members of ISIS, some it is quite moving. You feel that this was the only place that seemed to offer them some hope.

It's strange. I think one of the things that apocalyptic movements have in common is that they reassure people, oddly enough, because they tell them—in a world that seems completely unmoored from anything that makes sense, they say, "Okay, history is coming to an end. We can tell you where you fit in and what your role is and how you can help in this move towards this grand and wonderful conclusion." They tell you everything you need to know. That's what ISIS does.

**ROGER COHEN:** But if you think about citizenship and dignity, which is where we started in 2011, and then this apocalyptic vision of ISIS and that being the source of dignity, it's an almost terrifying transition in five years.

**ROBERT WORTH:** It certainly is, yes. I intended the word "order" to somehow convey both poles of this—it was a rage for order in the sense that the Tahrir Square protesters wanted a civic order, and the people in ISIS want this sort of terrifying, absolutist order where everything, all of your needs, are answered and everything is given to you on a plate.

**ROGER COHEN:** And Egyptians prostrate themselves at the feet of Sisi.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Absolutely.

**ROGER COHEN:** What should be done about ISIS?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Well, I think the United States is **doing** the right thing, to deny them that sanctuary.

**ROGER COHEN:** But it hasn't.

**ROBERT WORTH:** No. It is taking a long time, yes.

**ROGER COHEN:** Too long?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think one of the things that is really hurting there is that we can't—I don't think any American president, not just Obama, is going to go in there with a major military force. It generates more—

**ROGER COHEN:** Well, I am going to say that word. [Trump](#) is suggesting he would.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Frightening. Frightening to even contemplate.

But our two most important local partners on the ground, the Kurds and the Turks, are [at each other's throats](#). That makes it very difficult.

Obama is putting more special forces into that little pocket that's just above Raqqa and he wants to bring people down from there and power a force that would be ideally an Arab force that would go and take Raqqa.

**ROGER COHEN:** Do you think a year from now ISIS-land will be gone?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I hope so. But that still leaves the question for me of: Who is going to run that patch of ground? It's a vast area, Eastern Syria and Western Iraq. Bashar al-Assad can't rule it. I don't think [Abadi](#) can rule it. The people there really see themselves as fundamentally challenged by both what they would call Shiite regimes on either side of them and by the Kurds, an ethnically different group.

What's really shocking is to find people who were nationalist secularist rebels in 2011 in Syria who said they were looking for dignity and freedom and democracy, and some of those same people now say, "I would rather join ISIS than see the Kurds take over this Arab land."

**ROGER COHEN:** There have been these shifts—I remember all the liberals in Tahrir Square screaming for democracy and ousting Mubarak, and I went back a year later and they were saying, "We can't live with the Brotherhood." When Morsi was president, I said, "Wait three years; you can throw the bum out." "No, no, no, he's got to go right now." All these allegiances are very ephemeral and fragile.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes.

**ROGER COHEN:** How do you do it, Bobby? It is amazing in this book how you get people to delve very deeply into their feelings and their lives. I feel that you've spent not hours, but days, weeks, with these people, to really convey rounded human beings and all their inner conflicts to us. I think you have done such a service to everyone by doing that. But it is not easy. How do you do it?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Thank you very much. I think part of it is, as you know, being in the middle of a war or a revolution or a conflict like that sort of splits people's lives open. I think that's why we journalists love to report on things like that. You encounter people at a moment when you can really see into who they are and their histories. And they want to talk about it all.

The young guy you quoted from, the Libyan, who was talking about "don't try to understand us"—what was so amazing about that moment in Libya, to me, was that something they had sort of in some vague way hoped for all their lives, but never really expected to take place, was suddenly

happening. They couldn't stop talking. Many of those people were just in this incredible sort of manic phase.

**ROGER COHEN:** But they took you in.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes. I think part of it was luck.

**ROGER COHEN:** They showed you extraordinary things.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes.

**ROGER COHEN:** The Libya chapter is really also remarkable, because Bobby finds himself with a young Libyan whose brother or close relatives had been tortured to death and killed. They had captured the torturer. The question is what to do with him. It's moving the way they say, "Well, we want the rule of law, so we're not going to do what instinctively we would do, which is torture and kill him right here." You evoke that agonizing.

We haven't really talked about Libya, but it was a [mission](#) really without having been really thought through very much, right?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes, I think that's true. Sadly, for all of the self-control that was exercised by the people I spent time with, that is not the theme. For the most part, people did take revenge, and it is still happening now. The hope that those guys gave voice to has really been extinguished at this point.

**ROGER COHEN:** As have so many.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes.

**ROGER COHEN:** The forces spiraling around just proved greater than all those individual hopeful aspirations.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** James Starkman.

I think the United States might be more optimistic about the recent history—particularly in Egypt, let's say—if we reassessed the Mubarak years and try to determine what we could have done—a diplomatic mulligan, so to speak—what we could have done, whether it should not have been 100 percent military aid, maybe there should have been more aid directed toward education, hospital services, etc. What is your feeling about that and how would you reassess Mubarak himself? He was a sick man at the end, but how would you assess him? Was he amenable to solutions of that sort?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think it was such a dilemma for the United States, and all these countries, where you had—and Egypt wasn't as bad by any means as Iraq and Syria—where you have a dictatorship that is so good at stamping out dissent. In various ways, the United States was trying to empower independent political figures and things. But the regime was so good at stifling that.

It's one of the paradoxes, to me, that these regimes could be simultaneously so strong and so weak. The ultimate is probably Iraq, where they not just stamped out but preempted opposition. I mean almost as soon as you had a dissenting thought, they would come and throw you in prison or kill you. Everything was being recorded. Even the people who were most loyal to the regime knew that when

they stepped into their bathrooms at night they were being recorded.

So I think that is part of what prevented genuine, effective opposition from growing in those places. How then does a country that wants to help—what do you do? And especially when you are being presented with a very effective scarecrow, which is: "Look, you touch us and here's this Islamist hobgoblin who wants to kill you and put bombs on planes bound for the United States. He's going to take over if we fall."

**ROGER COHEN:** And you have Bashar al-Assad releasing from prison all these Sunni criminals because he wants his prophecy to come true.

**ROBERT WORTH:** And he made it come true to a large extent, yes.

I'm not saying the United States did the perfect job. But I think it's awfully, awfully hard to—I just want to briefly mention in this context there was a Syrian intellectual in the 19th century, named [Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi](#), who wrote a book called *How to Fight Despotism*—really the same question—and he said: There are two fundamental conditions: number one, you must do it nonviolently; and number two, the replacement must be ready.

The second one is the big challenge. They were nonviolent, as Roger and I saw, and in a very brave, disciplined way for a long time. They didn't have a replacement. I think that's partly because these countries were—

**ROGER COHEN:** They didn't even have a leader.

**ROBERT WORTH:** They didn't have a leader. They didn't even have a [Khomeini](#). At least in [Iran](#), they had a Khomeini.

**ROGER COHEN:** For better or worse.

**ROBERT WORTH:** In fact, [Saddam Hussein](#) at one point offered the [shah of Iran](#)—before the 1979 revolution—"I could kill this guy. Would you like me to? I'll whack him for you." The shah said, "No, it's okay, I've got it under control." Of course it was his greatest regret. But if the shoe had been on the other foot, Saddam would never have allowed anything like that to live.

**QUESTION:** Susan Gitelson.

Since your title talks about "the Middle East in turmoil," would you comment on some of the other countries that are being very much affected by all these changes, especially [Lebanon](#)? You both spent time in Beirut. Here a small country in the middle of everything that has had to absorb so many refugees, and it's so unstable to begin with, all the ethnic conflicts that have gone on for so long. What is your assessment of Lebanon?

And then, if you have a moment, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries are also changing in their own way, and more conservatively, and so forth. But again, this has ramifications for the entire region.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Sure. Lebanon, in a strange way, went through its own [cataclysm](#)—not the same kind of cataclysm, but somewhat parallel—back in the 1970s and 1980s. So they reached this cold peace, where you have these different sectarian groups that have agreed to coexist, but at the price of any kind of functionality in the government. So it's just a horrible mess, and it gets worse all the time.

It was an odd kind of paradox for me that Lebanon, which people had often looked to as maybe the source of the next big conflagration—usually, people were thinking about a war between [Hezbollah](#) and Israel prior to 2011. And then, of course, the revolts happened, and Lebanon is the country that was spared. Nothing really happened there. Again, I think that's because people had seen so much violence and had decided that they were going to stick with a very imperfect solution.

**ROGER COHEN:** Is that a sign that 15 years from now, or 10, or when exhaustion is reached, Syria could reach a similar arrangement?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes, I think it could. It would probably be just kind of a division among enclaves.

But the real question there is—after all, they've got this essentially Sunni part of Syria in the East, where ISIS is now—who's going to run that? I mean a minimum condition for a Lebanon-like solution would be a quasi-responsible government for that part of Syria. We certainly don't have that now.

But I was just going to also say [Algeria](#), I think, is a somewhat similar situation, because they had this awful, awful [conflict](#) in the 1990s. Even though in the spring of 2011 there was talk—"maybe Algeria will blow up"—I think it didn't for somewhat similar reasons to Lebanon. People had been through so much and they kind of preferred to accept the very imperfect solution they had.

As far as the other countries, it is kind of an odd thing to me, but I think it's true, that the monarchies have fared much better than the republics. That's partly because many of them are so rich they can spray money at the problem and hose it down.

But it's not just that. I think there is a kind of legitimacy that they have that the republics lack. I think it's because if you declare yourself to be a democracy and then essentially you're just a very corrupt dictatorship, it breeds, I think, a readiness to be discontented. Whereas the monarchies have a historical depth and they've never pretended that they were going to be democratic. They are able, I think, to reassure their citizens in a way that these other countries have not been able to.

**ROGER COHEN:** So [Bahrain](#) was just a blip?

**ROBERT WORTH:** First of all, I should admit that I didn't include it in the book because I wasn't there. But I do think it's also fundamentally different. It was squashed so quickly. It also has a very different history. It has never had this kind of republican pseudo-democratic dictatorship that those other countries have.

**QUESTION:** My name is Stephen Hickey. I was a British diplomat serving in Damascus, then Benghazi, then Cairo over the last five years. So much of what you say is very familiar.

Firstly, thanks very much for your talk. I thought it was absolutely fascinating. For what it's worth, I think your analysis is absolutely spot on and I agree with it entirely.

I particularly agree with your point that there wasn't an inevitability to what happened and the leaders, particularly in the countries I know—Assad, el-Shater, el-Sisi, and Morsi—had they made different choices—and they definitely were close to making different choices in some cases—then we could have been in a very different place right now in both countries. I strongly agree with that.

I also agree, Roger, with the point I think you were getting at, that with hindsight—and it's always easy with hindsight—I think the West did make some mistakes. I think in Syria in 2011–2013, looking back, we could have done more and we could have done things differently. In Egypt and in Libya, we

perhaps took our eyes off the ball after the Qaddafi regime fell, and in the last six months of Morsi we could have sent some stronger messages to the key people.

My question to you really is, turning to Syria—and you touched on this a bit so far—given that there has been so much sectarian violence over the last five years, do you think that in the future Syrians will be able to live together, Sunni and Alawi and Christian? Do you think Syria can be put back together as one; and, if not, what do you think is the best alternative?

**ROBERT WORTH:** No is the answer. I don't think that's possible. I think it's already essentially—you have something like what I think is likely to remain—you have a Kurdish statelet in the Northeast, as you know; and what they used to call "*la Syrie Utile*" in the West is going to be kind of a collection of minorities—not that different from Lebanon, but under the rule of someone—

**ROGER COHEN:** "Useful Syria?"

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes.

—if not Bashar himself, someone like him—because I just think there is really going to be no way to make that place maintain even a semblance of order unless Iran is satisfied with whoever is running the place.

The big question to my mind then is, what's going to happen in the East? I just don't know. It's so hard to run that area. All this drought has made it economically so untenable, and there are so many radicalized people there.

**ROGER COHEN:** Is it time for borders to change and time for a Kurdistan?

**ROBERT WORTH:** Well, I think that may well happen, an Iraqi Kurdistan. But when people talk about a new [Sykes-Picot](#) and so forth, I just think, "It's one thing for borders to kind of fray and dissolve; to create new ones takes an awful lot of work." I don't see the political will for that. Who is going to lead that? Even a new president with a more aggressive notion about these things than Obama is going to be hard put to get all those players together to do new borders. You put yourself in the position of being the imperial chess master who can be blamed for everything, and nobody wants that kind of responsibility.

**QUESTION:** My name is Kayvon Afshari. I'm the director of communications for the American Iranian Council. I have two questions.

First, one of the great debates that has taken place over the past year or so has been over the extent to which ISIS is a truly Islamic entity. On the one hand, you've had the [Obama administration](#) pretty deliberately emphasizing that they are not religiously motivated. This sentiment was perhaps best encapsulated by [Howard Dean](#), who said, ISIS is "[about as Islamic as I am](#)." [*Editor's note: Dean actually said "Muslim," not Islamic.*] On the other hand, you have some writers like [Sam Harris](#) emphasizing that they are strictly interpreting Islamic doctrine and that their actions are motivated directly by that doctrine. I wanted to see where you fall on that debate.

The other question—I want to shift a little geographically east and ask about U.S.–Iran relations. I want to know, how do you assess the vibrancy of the nuclear accord today, and do you think that overall it has contributed to regional stability or instability?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think it's going too far to say that ISIS is as Islamic as Howard Dean. It clearly is

an Islamist movement. You can understand why people want to deny it legitimacy by downplaying that. But I think it's a very tendentious view of Islam. It's a very minority view.

But it evolves. There have been jihadi movements going back centuries and they are part of the larger picture of Islamic and Arab history. It's not some totally new creation. The fact that a lot of the people who run ISIS also were secular [Baathists](#) previously doesn't change that. Many of them, in fact, were people who fought for Saddam Hussein and then became jihadi Salafis, even before the American [invasion](#), during Saddam Hussein's [Faith Campaign](#) in the 1990s.

I think it is an Islamist group. It's got a certain grounding in history. But it is, again, a very minoritarian and tendentious view of Islam that most Muslims would feel nothing in common with.

**ROGER COHEN:** On Iran, the first thing I'd say is that I don't know how many of you read the [profile](#) of [Ben Rhodes](#) in the magazine, but there was a long and thoroughly bizarre passage on Iran where the [writer](#) seemed to be using Rhodes's words to say, in effect, "there are no moderates in Iran; it was an invention of the Obama administration in order to get the [deal](#) through." That's nonsense.

There is a real power struggle in Iran between President [Rouhani](#) and Foreign Minister [Zarif](#) [*Editor's note: and [Khamenei](#)*], who have broadly a vision, I think, of bringing Iran out from its pariah status. It's the 18th economy in the world. It's the only top-20 economy that's not integrated with the global economy. They clearly have China in mind in some way, that the model broadly can be preserved, but underneath that the country can join the world. They are reformists. They weren't invented by Ben Rhodes or by anybody else. They are reformists. And tens of millions of Iranians, many of them young, support them. They also exist. They weren't invented in the White House.

Against that you have the Supreme Leader, [Ali Khamenei](#), now 76—so he would be 91 at the end of the 15-year accord, but he may not, of course, last that long. How the succession is handled in Iran will be a huge question and a huge dilemma.

But the one pillar of the revolution that still exists, I think, for him is "*Marg bar Âmrikâ*" ("Death to America") chanted every Friday, with no real feeling, I think, of any kind behind it, at least in the mouths of most people. But he remains terrified that some kind of colored revolution—obviously, there was the [Green Movement](#) of 2009—that somehow this will be infiltrated into Iran and the Islamic Republic will be undone.

Behind him, of course, he has the [Revolutionary Guards](#), who are very present, as Bobby has been saying, in Iraq. It is that tension between the two, which I think is roughly evenly balanced right now, that produced the nuclear accord. That's why it happened, because each needed the other sufficiently for that deal to go through. I won't go into why.

So I think now it's still early days. The hardliners in Iran are leaping on the fact that Iran has fulfilled its side of the bargain—the number of centrifuges has been slashed from 20,000 to 5,000; all the enriched uranium has left the country; there is no more 3 percent enriched uranium, no more 20 percent enriched uranium; the Iraq route to a bomb has been cut off; there are very intense inspections from the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). "We've done our bit. But where's the beef, where's the beef?"—that's what the hardliners are saying, and they are saying that because European banks, which need to provide the financing for a lot of the deals that would fulfill the ambitions of Rouhani and Zarif are terrified because they have already been slapped with huge fines in the United States.

They are terrified that if they do provide that kind of financing, because that financing is often in

dollars and so the money does circuit through the United States—as you know, U.S. sanctions that prevent any U.S. company or individual from doing business with Iran remain in place. So once those dollars circle through the United States, or if there is a U.S. citizen at one of these banks involved—plus ownership structures in Iran are very opaque, so you are never quite sure if you might be dealing with a company or a corporation in which the Revolutionary Guards have some ownership—again, that would cross a U.S. red line.

So the money hasn't really been forthcoming. I think that's the fundamental issue right now with the deal. Overall, I would say if that can be resolved, at least to some degree, before the [Iranian presidential election in 2017](#), next year in June, that is clearly very important. If Rouhani and Zarif cannot say, "You see, it's beginning to work," then there will be a lot of pressure on the deal.

Who knows what the outcome will be here in the United States of the presidential election?

If I were betting, I think the accord is resilient. I think there will be a lot of ups and downs, as there were in the negotiation. But I think it was the best outcome in the real world, and I think any leader on either side looking at the alternative will conclude: "This is not perfect, it's not great, there are big problems with implementing it, but it's the best thing we've got."

**QUESTION:** I'm Helen Thurston.

I notice that you didn't mention Russia. I'm wondering, what is the influence of Russia in the United States' forbearance on Syria? And also perhaps, the personal relationship between [Putin](#) and Obama, which is reputed not to be good, to what extent did that influence all the effects in the Middle East?

**ROBERT WORTH:** I think that's one of the miscalculations of the Obama administration. I know people who actually went to the administration a year ago and said, "The Russians might well get more involved." They were rebuffed and told, "No way. Putin won't do that."

We have seen that Bashar desperately needed that bulking up, and he [got it](#). I don't think the Russians will allow Bashar to fall. That is one of the reasons why I'm skeptical that the United States could have done anything to change the fundamental equation there.

And again, I'm not saying we couldn't have done better things—I think we could have; I think we could have saved lives, which is always worth doing. But I think Putin was committed to that, and so were the Iranians—much more actually the Iranians than the Russians.

I think more broadly, the Russians are a problem because I think what Putin wants most of all is to give Obama, and his successors, a black eye—any chance he has to do that he will take.

I'm less worried about—people talk about the Russians establishing a beachhead and expanding their influence in the Middle East. Well, to do what? What's there to be gained for them now?

**QUESTIONER:** They learned their lesson in Afghanistan.

**ROBERT WORTH:** Yes. I think at a certain point—he has claimed that he's pulling out, but he's not really pulling out—but at a certain point he will, I think. He doesn't want to lose any more soldiers than he has to.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Before we adjourn, I have one last question. Do you think the zeal for the Arab Spring has dissipated? Do you think we'll see a revival at all of what happened?



**ROGER COHEN:** I think, as with the dream of many in Iran in 2009, these feelings and sentiments don't vaporize, they don't disappear. They exist inside these brave individuals that Bobby and I met both in Iran and in Egypt and elsewhere.

One of the devastating things for me about reading Bobby's book was—I don't know—it feels like these days huge things happen and then they're just gone. It's like there's such a constant eddying back and forth of so many things in our minds, in the media, in our lives.

This was a huge, huge, huge historical event, and five years on who is really thinking about it? I think we owe a huge debt to Bobby for setting this down for all time. There it is, in black and white, what these individuals were battling for, what they really believed in.

It wasn't so much. I read that little passage. It wasn't so much. They just wanted decency and they wanted dignity, and it was denied them. So it was devastating to think that was just five years ago. Even in my own life—and I was there; I witnessed a lot of it in Libya and in Tunisia—I don't think about it that much anymore. That's terrible.

**ROBERT WORTH:** I would say it's true that people are discouraged and I think much of that hope has collapsed. But if you look in particular places, there are still things to be hopeful about. I think there still is a generation many of whose members would like to make a difference. I will just point to one that I find particularly inspiring. In Tunisia there are young people working in journalism, and also in election monitoring and other areas, doing NGO work, that has just been really inspiring.

I love mentioning this one group. They're called [Inkyfada](#)—like as in intifada but with "ink". They have done some of the most impressive journalism I've seen anywhere in the Arab world. It is sort of investigative civic journalism, looking in detail not just at the big issues—they cover those, terrorism, the economy, stuff like that—but even on a local level. They did this wonderful big takeout on garbage collection. It actually mattered, because a lot of people in the immediate aftermath of the revolution in Tunisia—all of a sudden, there was more garbage on the streets. So people thought, "Gosh, what does this mean about our revolution that everything looks awful now?"

These guys looked in detail. What were the laws about garbage collection and how was it enforced under Ben Ali; what changed; and what's going on now; and what needs doing to fix that, what particular laws should be fixed and how would you enforce that?

They don't have a lot of money and they're just a website. But when they do a story like that it's picked up and carried in the rest of the Tunisian media. That kind of work, to me, is the best of what's left of the Arab Spring.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Thank you both so much.

### Audio

In this memorable conversation, "New York Times" journalists Robert Worth and Roger Cohen discuss Worth's latest book about the Arab Spring and its aftermath. Was its collapse inevitable? Could/should the U.S. have done more, especially regarding Syria? Despite all, Worth concludes the talk on a hopeful note.

### Video Clips

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## **TV Show**

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