

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Juan Cole on Europe's Muslims and More

U.S. Global Engagement, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

Juan Cole, David C. Speedie

Transcript

Introduction

DAVID SPEEDIE: Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the Carnegie Council. Delighted to see so many coming in from a beautiful spring day for a change, so you are not seeking refuge from the weather. You are clearly interested in our guest, as well we all should be.

I am really delighted to welcome Juan Cole. We have been negotiating this for some time. He is the Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan. For over three decades now, he has been one of the most sensible and dedicated voices in trying to put the relationship of the West and the Muslim world in some kind of historical context, so essential to understanding so much of what is going on in the extended region today.

His most recent book is *The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation Is Changing the Middle East*. He also authored *Engaging the Muslim World* and many other books. He has been a regular guest on all the serious news programs—PBS, the Lehrer *NewsHour*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *Nightline*, *The Today Show*, *Charlie Rose*, etc., etc. He has written widely about Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and South Asia, and has written especially about the upheavals in the Arab world since 2011.

He has a command of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, and reads Turkish, and has lived in various parts of the Muslim world for nearly 10 years and continues to travel widely there.

In other words, he is one of our leading U.S.-based experts in an extended and vital region—from North Africa to Pakistan, basically.

Discussion

DAVID SPEEDIE: Juan, you have written so prolifically and so expertly on a range of interconnected topics. We have put up here "The Crisis of Europe's Muslims" [as the title of the talk]. I do want to cover that in our opening 20 or 25 minutes before we go to the audience. But I also want to perhaps to start with the question of schisms within the Muslim world, which are, I think, imperfectly understood by an American audience, and especially with reference to the recent agreed framework with Iran and the P5 + 1 on April 2.

You wrote recently a thought-provokingly titled article, "Can the Arab World Live with the Iran Nuclear Deal?" I throw the question back to you in welcoming you. Can the Arab world live with the Iran nuclear deal?

JUAN COLE: I think the answer is that some parts of it can live with that deal very handily; others have some problems with it. When we think of the Arab world in the United States, we tend to think

of the Gulf Cooperation Council states, the Gulf oil monarchies, who are often neighbors of Iran or just across the Gulf from them, and who have been more cautious—sometimes vocal—in being critical of Iran's nuclear enrichment program. But if you take the 22 states of the Arab League, it becomes clear that the Arab world is quite divided on these issues.

First of all—we don't think of it this way—there are several countries in the Arab world that are allied with Iran. This is true of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, all of whom expressed delight at the program. I figure you are talking about on the order of 60 million people in the Arab world right there. Then the independent nationalist Arab states, ones who are not close to Saudi Arabia—sometimes they have a leftist Arab nationalist background—Algeria, for example, was optimistic, as was Tunisia, the only of the Arab Spring states that has had a relatively successful democratic [transition](#).

If one means, "Can Saudi Arabia live with this deal?"—that is a very different question than the Arab world in general.

So I think the attitudes are quite diverse, even within the Gulf Cooperation Council. One of the major members of the six is Oman, which has played a role in mediating between the United States and Iran, and which expressed itself very positively about this deal.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, some others issued communiqués saying that they welcomed that there was this framework and they are hopeful where it would go and so forth. They are obviously hedging their bets. But in the region in general—I think what Tunisia said was that any framework that allows for peace rather than war would be a great good thing for the Middle East.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Iran, of course, is the major Shia Muslim state in the extended region. Again, in terms of imperfect awareness of what exactly is going on, when one looks at what is happening in [Yemen](#) and with [ISIS](#) [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] and so on, there is this sense that we are in some sort of existential struggle between Shia and Sunni Islam—Iran's [Revolutionary Guard](#) on the one hand and the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Sunni coalition, on the other.

I think you have a somewhat more nuanced and qualified view of that as a defining theory.

JUAN COLE: I agree that from 30,000 feet, it looks as though Iran has put together a bloc of countries with significant Shiite populations and is using the Shiite form of Islam as a kind of soft-power wedge to establish a kind of bloc. But if you go down on the ground, then that way of looking at it becomes difficult to maintain.

Syria, for example, where Iran is supporting the government of [Bashar al-Assad](#), is a [Baathist](#) state, which is irreligious. They actually persecuted religion. It is true that the upper echelons of the [Baath Party](#) in Syria are staffed by members of the Alawite minority, who are technically—at least scholars would consider them a form of Shiite Islam. But Alawite Islam is barely Islam. They don't have mosques. They don't pray five times a day. They have [Neoplatonic](#) and [Gnostic](#) philosophies coming from the pre-Islamic Greek world. There is a kind of mythology there that is very important in their thinking.

I went to Antakya one time, which is an Alawite city, and I asked someone—I was eager to meet an Alawite—I asked someone local, "Are you an Alawite?" He said, "No. Praise be to God, I'm a Muslim."

The idea that Iran is supporting Syria because orthodox [Twelver Shiite Islam](#) feels any kind of kinship with the Alawites is crazy. The ayatollahs would issue *fatwas* of excommunication and heresy and so

forth against Alawites.

Then the Alawites are only one part of a coalition of Syrians that involves Christians, Druze, and very substantial numbers of Sunnis. The regime still has about two-thirds of the country, which it cannot have unless a large number of Sunnis in Damascus continue to support it, because the business class has benefited from that regime and so forth.

So, yes, Iran is supporting the Alawites of Syria, but you have to have an extremely narrow lens to make this look as though it's about Shias.

DAVID SPEEDIE: The other, perhaps even more contemporary context in which this being played out in the minds of some Western commentators, of course, is in Yemen, which is a very, very perilous situation, it seems to many of us. Obviously, [al-Qaeda in Yemen](#) claimed responsibility for many terror attacks, including [Charlie Hebdo](#) at one point. It is regarded as one of the most virulent and violent of the extremist movements. They, of course, are extremist Sunni. Then this dichotomy, Shia-Sunni, comes into play with, "Oh, Iran is supporting"—now, I read somewhere that they should not technically to be called [Houthi](#), but Ansarullah, the Shia insurgent forces in Yemen.

What's going on there? What should our response be, for example, to the [Saudi-led military action](#)? Is this offering comfort and succor to the extremist elements in Yemen? Or is that again too simplistic?

JUAN COLE: In my own view, Yemen is, of course, a complete mess. It is an ecological mess above all. It is running out of water. The capital may go dry within five years. We can expect vast displacement of people just on, surely, ecological grounds. For it to be bombed is the last thing that it needed. This is a humanitarian catastrophe.

The United States has joined in this effort and is giving logistical support, it says, to the Saudis and others who are engaged in this bombing campaign. The bombing campaign is being conducted against a grassroots tribal movement and seems very unsuited to produce a military victory of any sort. I think it can succeed in knocking out electricity and making it difficult to distribute petroleum and, again, making people's lives miserable. I'm not sure it can succeed in changing the politics simply by bombing from a distance.

I really think the United States is poorly advised to get involved in this thing. I don't think that the lines are at all clear. The Houthi movement is named for the [family](#) that led it. Of course, it is not what it calls itself. (The Quakers don't call themselves that either. It's the Society of Friends. People don't get to choose.) But they have become known as the Houthis.

They are a movement of the Zaidi Shiite community in Northern Yemen. The Zaidis are known as a form of Shi'ism, again, very unlike what is in Iran and Iraq what is in Iran and Iraq, what Americans are more used to, as being quite close to the Sunnis. They don't, for instance, curse the Sunni caliphs. They don't have that kind of animosity towards Sunnism. And they don't have ayatollahs. They shade over at some level into Sunnism. They are not that different. People in Yemen, anyway, make alliances by clan and tribe, and not so much by which sect the clan or tribe belongs to. There are substantial Sunni tribes that are allied with the Houthis.

Seeing this as Shiite or Iran—maybe it looks like that from a very great distance, but down on the ground, it is a real exaggeration.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Again, it is superficial to see this as strictly a religious divide. Many of the tribal

entities are probably not that religious at all.

JUAN COLE: Many of the tribal entities are not religious at all, and then the ones that are can be united. For instance, most Sunnis in Yemen, in North Yemen at least, are Shafi'i Sunnis, who differ dramatically with the Sunni Wahabi branch of Islam and might well make common cause with Zaidis against the Wahabis.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Thank you for clearing this up. [Laughter] It obviously is a fraught and complex thing.

Let's move to Europe, if we may, just a couple of questions there. On Europe, specifically in France, you use a very interesting term, a phenomenon you called "sharpening the contradictions," saying that attacks such as *Charlie Hebdo*—and presumably, later the incident in [Belgium](#) and then in [Copenhagen](#)—are actually contrived by [al-Qaeda](#) to create a backlash that will bring politically unengaged Muslims into the fold. Explain that a little bit.

JUAN COLE: I see evidence of al-Qaeda thinkers, like [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), who was the number-two man for a long time, before [bin Laden](#) was killed, being influenced by Marxist thought, and radical Marxism. This is very clear in the technical terms that the Muslim far-right uses. They talk about a vanguard. This was a [Leninist](#) term. In some radical forms of Marxism, activists were impatient with the working class, which seemed not to want to fulfill its historical duty by rising up against the business classes, and so it engaged in sabotage—not everywhere all the time, but there were some groups that did that kind of thing in hopes of provoking a class war, because they knew the business classes would call upon their agents, the police, to crack down hard on sabotage and workers' activism and so forth.

I think that al-Qaeda picked up this kind of thinking from the Marxist fringe in places like Egypt and so forth. I think that it is a deliberate strategy on their part, the sharpening of contradictions, or the heightening of contradictions, as it's called. I think it explains everything that happened in [Iraq](#).

I remember reading a *New York Times* piece in 2005 or so that [al-Qaeda in Iraq](#) had blown up a pet shop. There were pieces of rabbits and snakes wiggling on the ground. This author in *The New York Times* expressed himself with amazement. He said, "We should get out of Iraq now, because we can't understand why you would do that. And if you don't understand what your enemy is doing, then you should not be there."

I understood exactly what they were doing. They were hitting soft targets. They were hitting businesses. It was a Shiite-owned pet shop. What they were trying to do was to get the Shiites' goat in Iraq. They were trying to provoke a civil war, because they hoped that the Shiite clans who were being hit would go and attack Sunnis, and if they went and attacked the Sunnis, then al-Qaeda could go to the Sunnis and say, "Gee, you seem to be being attacked. We could protect you."

So by provoking attacks on their own community, they actually could parlay that into power.

At the time, I was skeptical that they could succeed in this, but you come to last June, and they [took over Mosul](#), the second-largest city in the country, in exactly this way—by continually provoking the Shia, getting reprisals going, and then going to the Sunnis against whom the reprisals were waged and saying, "You need protection." By that time, the Mosulites said, "Yes, we do. Would you please come in," even though Mosulites are cosmopolitan, secular-minded people. But they were willing to bring in this radical fundamentalist group just because they were tired of being targeted by the Shiite government.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Of course, in France it is a very interesting situation, in that France has—the approach to religions has been *laïcité* (separation of church and state). I remember reading a comment, probably a couple of years ago, from one of the arrondissements north of Paris, heavily Muslim, a young man quoted as saying, "I'm French, but the French don't know I'm French." In other words, there isn't necessarily this desperately close sense of being a Muslim. Most Muslims in France and other parts of Europe were born in Europe. They are not immigrants. This, I guess, also speaks to some of the tension of trying to create a religious wedge, as it were, to create something essentially artificial.

JUAN COLE: The interesting thing about the French Muslims is how French they are. We think there about 5 million of them, just from the immigration statistics. A French ministry conducted research—it's hard to research religion in France because of this separation of religion and state and so forth, but they got permission to do this. They did a large-scale poll of people they thought were French Muslims. There are 5 million, we think, just by ethnicity and immigration, but only 2 million—what would be projected to be 2 million, once you did the numbers—said they were interested in religion at all. The majority of French Muslims are *laïque* (secular) and they don't see religion as a primary marker of identity.

In fact, in the United States, when they do this large-scale polling about your religious beliefs, back in the 1990s, only 8 percent of Americans said they had no religion. Now it has gone up to 15 percent. A lot of the [Millennials](#) are less religious. But the French Muslims, people of Muslim heritage in France, are tremendously more secular than the ordinary American.

This is a problem for radical groups like al-Qaeda that want people to not only be religious, but to be extremely religious, to have religion as the organizing principle of their lives and to be willing to use violence to make it so, that so many French Muslims—they are into rap and [raï](#) and various forms of urban culture. Some of them are poets and writers in French and participate in French culture in very serious ways.

They don't want that. If they could just get the French right to be more powerful and more vicious, they might be able to herd the French Muslims into the arms of al-Qaeda. This is what I believe they are about.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Sharpening the contradictions, yes.

Last question before we go to the audience. It deals with ISIS, or *Daesh*, whatever the term of choice. There is always a reflex of an understandable horror at the atrocities that are carried out and filmed for the world to see. But there is also the fear that volunteers who go, for ISIS, to Syria and Iraq and so on and so forth from Western democracies come back hardened and seasoned in terror tactics that they will then employ on the host country, their country of origin. [*For more on foreign fighters in Syria, don't miss [Richard Barrett's September 2014 Carnegie talk](#).*] I believe you see this, too, as exaggerated.

JUAN COLE: I think it's greatly exaggerated. First of all, I remember British Prime Minister [Cameron](#) gave a [speech](#) in which he said 400 young men had gone from the United Kingdom to fight with *Daesh*, or ISIL, in Syria. What I thought to myself when he said that, with some alarm, "Gee, that's not very many. Four hundred? You can get 400 people to do anything."

There was a [cult](#) in California that believed you could catch a ride on a [meteor](#), back in the 1990s, if you only would commit suicide. They got 40 people to off themselves. If you can get 40 people to do that, you can get 400 people to join ISIL.

The Muslim British community has almost doubled in the last 15 years through immigration and natural increase. There are 3.7 million Muslims in the United Kingdom now, almost 4 million. So 400 would be a vanishingly small number.

If you look into their biographies, many of them are teenagers. This is a form of juvenile delinquency for many of them. Some of them have come back quite disillusioned. They said they were made to do kitchen police duty and wash dishes, and that wasn't what they went there for. They were horrified at the brutality and so forth.

I lived in the early years of the [civil war](#) in Lebanon. At that time, militias were rampant and a lot of killing was going on. People were saying, "What would the next generation be like? Won't they be so brutalized by all this and getting used to violence?" Actually, the Lebanese have been quite good about getting through this very fragile political period without picking up guns again, because I think the elders said, "No. We did that and it doesn't go anywhere good." So I think the opposite can also happen, which is that people can be repulsed by this kind of violence.

Questions

QUESTION: Yoram Kinberg.

Ten to 20 years from now, do you see Iran having nuclear weapons? Do you see ISIS as an episode of the last two years and part of history or would it be a big threat? Do you see a threat to Europe with almost majority—there was a [book](#) about a French president who is a Muslim [[Soumission](#)]. It's fiction. But how fictional is it 20 years from now?

JUAN COLE: Thank you for those good questions.

With regard to Iran and its nuclear enrichment program, I don't think there is any evidence that Iran has a weapons program as opposed to a civilian enrichment program. This is something that former Israeli defense minister [Ehud Barak](#) admitted as well. He said the Iranians don't appear to have made that decision to weaponize.

I think what's going on right now is that the [Obama administration](#) is attempting to draw Iran into an international framework which makes it impossible for them to make that decision to weaponize. Centrifuge technology as a way of producing enriched uranium for nuclear reactors—and Iran has a hot nuclear reactor at Bushehr that the Russians built for them—involves enriching to 5 percent. But if you keep running it back through the centrifuges and a few other things, you could theoretically enrich to 95 percent, which would be suitable for making a bomb.

What the Obama administration would like to do is to have the kind of inspection regime, the kind of Iranian transparency with regard to centrifuge technology, limits on numbers of centrifuges and so forth, so as to make it impossible for them to suddenly decide one day that "we're going to go for the 95 percent and make enough material for a bomb."

We have no guarantee that the framework agreement that was reached will result in an actual technical deal with the real details laid out. I think, if it does by this summer, what the White House has leaked with regard to its own specifications and talking points would be sufficient, I think, to prevent that. If this happens, then the likelihood is very low that Iran would break out and get a nuclear capability.

I would just like to point out that no country that has been under steady UN inspections has ever

broken out. North Korea threw the UN out before it went for broke—three years before. So if the Iranians ever throw the UN out, then we can be suspicious. But I think the evidence is that this kind of inspection regime can be successful in preventing a breakout towards nuclear weapons.

QUESTION: Are there countries that have had UN inspections where the inspection agreement has held firm?

JUAN COLE: All of the members of the [NPT](#), the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—Japan, South Korea, so forth. There are a lot of them that have very extensive nuclear power systems. Japan closed its down, maybe temporarily, after [Fukushima](#). But 30 percent of their electricity was coming from 30 nuclear plants in Japan. No bomb. There is an inspection regime in effect. The Japanese have tons of plutonium. If they ever wanted a bomb, they could theoretically make one very easily. But they are under the NPT and they don't.

India broke out. But it didn't sign the NPT.

South Korea is another example.

On ISIL, ISIL is a flash in the pan. All those guys will be dead within five years.

DAVID SPEEDIE: You heard it here first.

QUESTION: That's kind of relieving to know.

Thank you for your overview. I'm Carol Perlman.

My question is, the role of Russia in the Middle East. As I was leaving tonight—this is quite timely—it is my understanding that Russia is in discussions with Iran to sell them weapons. Selling them weapons, what could be the outcome of that? The feeling is that they could be using these weapons to protect their sites so that nuclear inspectors would have a difficult time, and then if there is any desire to take them out, they could have the right to defend themselves.

What is your comment on that?

JUAN COLE: There are some leaks—I don't know how reliable they are—that the Russians are planning to go ahead with the sale to Iran of anti-aircraft batteries.

First of all, the inspection regime has nothing to do with anti-aircraft—the inspectors would be allowed into the country by Iran, would land at Tehran Airport, and go out to Natanz and so forth. That really doesn't say anything about the deal that is envisaged. If it went through, it wouldn't matter whether Iran had anti-aircraft batteries.

If it doesn't go through and somebody wants to bomb Iran, then obviously it would be pertinent that they could potentially defend themselves. However, if the United States decided to bomb Iran, some Russian anti-aircraft batteries would not deter it. [Libya](#) had very good and very extensive Russian anti-aircraft batteries, and the first thing we did was take them out. So I don't think it matters very much.

DAVID SPEEDIE: The only thing I would add to that is, I think it is the case, Juan, that this was a deal that had been agreed upon and was frozen by the sanctions imposition on Iran. Now this is a response essentially to April 2 in lifting the prohibition on the sale.

QUESTION: My name is Nasir Alharmoosh. I'm Iraqi.

Who is ISIS and who created ISIS and who helps ISIS?

JUAN COLE: I can only answer your question as far as public sources are available. I don't have a security clearance. I'm not in the intelligence business and so forth.

My own understanding just as a close observer of this phenomenon is that it goes back to the organization of [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#), a Jordanian Muslim extremist, who was originally a car thief. He ran off to Afghanistan just as the [Soviets](#) were leaving and was in those circles of the mujahideen in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and then, around 2000, came to Iraq, to Iraqi Kurdistan, where there was a group of former mujahideen, both Arabs and Kurds, who had been in Afghanistan.

He doesn't seem, Zarqawi, to have had good relations with the bin Laden group, with al-Qaeda per se. It was a different group of mujahideen that he was hanging around with.

The United States released a document from the Baath archives when they captured it which shows that the [Baath regime](#) in Iraq was extremely alarmed when Zarqawi came in. They said he was a terrorist; he was associated with the terrorist bin Laden. There was a kind of all-points bulletin that the Iraqi secret police should find him and arrest him. They said to go to the Jordanian expatriate community in Iraq, and maybe they know where he is and so forth.

By the way, this document is the opposite of what the U.S. government was maintaining at the time. [Colin Powell](#) and a lot of [Bush administration](#) officials were telling the story that Zarqawi was only in Iraq because he had been invited by [Saddam](#). Then there was a story that he was wounded and he went to a hospital in Baghdad, and he got the luxury room and Saddam came and brought him flowers.

None of it was true. The Saddam Hussein regime was extremely alarmed by this man and by his small organization.

After the Americans [invaded](#), Zarqawi recruited among Iraqis and made up with bin Laden. It became [al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#), became an al-Qaeda affiliate.

Zarqawi was killed by an airstrike in 2006. The U.S. military overestimates the effect of what they call decapitation. Killing the leader of a small terrorist group doesn't really have a big effect. Usually he has friends and cousins, and other people will take over. Leadership of this kind of group doesn't require a lot of skill. So Zarqawi was just replaced by an Iraqi who went by a *nom de guerre* (war name) of [Abu Omar al-Baghdadi](#), who was then killed, in turn, in 2010 and was replaced by another Iraqi, [Ibrahim al-Sammari](#) [*Editor's note: Al-Sammari is more commonly known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.*]. Ibrahim al-Sammari was a graduate of Baghdad University. He had a degree in Islamic studies. Under the Baath regime in Iraq, that wouldn't have been a prestigious degree. The department wouldn't have been well-supported. So it is not a high-powered Ph.D.

He has parlayed his background and his own terrorist activities into this position where he has declared himself caliph, which in most of the Muslim world is greeted with some hilarity, I have to tell you. When he gave his first speech, his [Rolex was dangling from his wrist](#). People were laughing and falling in the aisles about this Rolex caliph.

In any case, over time, as I suggested, this group, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and then, when the [Syrian Civil War](#) began, went to Syria and

became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Iraq and Syria—hence ISIL or ISIS.

This group differs from the original al-Qaeda in that they want to take and hold territory. The original al-Qaeda was about demonstration projects, basically—blowing stuff up in a horrible way. But these guys have territorial ambitions. They have all along held some neighborhoods, some villages in Iraq. Then they [took the province of Raqqa](#) in Syria. Then they came back from Syria and made deals with Iraqi Sunni populations in places like Mosul and [Tikrit](#), who felt disadvantaged in the new Shiite-dominated Iraq that the Americans had set up.

Where does it get its money? I think there is some clear evidence that billionaires in the Gulf give it money. In fact, the United States has indicted three Kuwaiti businessmen for sending it money. There are a lot of people in the Gulf with way too much money and way too much time on their hands. They often are unhappy with their society, and they can't change it very easily, because these are absolute monarchies and so forth. I think they were making a kind of fundamentalist paradise in places like Syria and Northern Iraq. So some of their money comes from that.

Once they took Raqqa—the Turks had built 12 small oil refineries in Raqqa, and they captured them. Crude oil is no good. If I brought you a bucket of crude oil, you wouldn't want it. But if I brought you a bucket of gasoline and I offered to sell it to you for only a dollar, you would buy it from me. This is what ISIL does. It refines the crude oil and then smuggles it off to Turkey or elsewhere and sells it cheaply, but still it's a big income. This is why just this week they are again [attacking Baiji](#), which is the major refinery city in Northern Iraq.

I don't think it is probably supported by governments. There are allegations that it is. But I think a lot of the governments are afraid of it. The Saudis are now building a wall between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. They have been watching too much American television. They are always talking about building a wall with Mexico. I think they are afraid of it.

But I think there are businessmen and courtiers and maybe even minor members of royal families that do admire its ideology and who have a lot of oil money to give out. So between what they have captured and what is given to them, they have a lot of resources to play with.

QUESTION: Good evening. I'm Youssef Bahammi, from the Halsten Enterprise. I'm also from the Democratic Party.

You have talked about the crisis that is involving the Muslims in Europe today. It is a fact. I would concur with the fact that the Muslim religion has unfortunately had a less easy time to settle in Western European countries and into the Judeo-Christian world in general.

I think the real problem—and the question implicitly will be if you concur with it—is the lack of understanding and the big disambiguation of the topic of Islam.

First of all, in the Arab world there are personalities and figures that people laud for Arabism, like Assad, like Saddam Hussein. These people have nothing to do with religion. They have been representing the Baath Party, which [inaudible] communist parties of the Arab world.

Then you have another dimension of differences between Turkey, the Persian world, Iran, and between the Arab countries. Even inside of the Arab countries, there are 22 ways to speak Arabic. From Morocco to Iraq, it's very different.

I think also that people have to understand that the external factors of the [Cold War](#) have affected

many countries. You talked about Yemen earlier. We have Southern Yemen and Northern Yemen. The differences between Aden and Sanaa were quite present with an indirect impact of the Cold War between the United States and the USSR.

Then there are internal factors—

DAVID SPEEDIE: Do you have a question? You have given us a lot to respond to.

QUESTIONER: The internal factor regards the fact that many Arab countries' leaders use Islam to dictate to their population.

Do you concur on the fact that people understand less Islam and criticize it above all?

JUAN COLE: This comes back—I didn't get to the question that Yoram asked about European Muslims. No, there is no prospect of Muslims becoming majority in Europe. In fact, demographically speaking, it is very unlikely. It is possible for them to become 5 percent of the population, 10 percent of the population. But there are limitations. Even the recent [economic crisis](#) after 2008 has cut down on pull factors in immigration.

As the questioner pointed out, the European Muslim population is largely ethnically Muslim, and it is very diverse. Each country is diverse with regard to the origins of its community. In Germany, there are roughly 4 million Muslims. It's a country of 82 million. Of the 4 million, 3 million are Turks, ethnically Turkish. But about half of those are from the Alevi minority in Turkey, which, broadly speaking, is classed as Shiite, but it is a kind of folk Shi'ism that doesn't have ayatollahs or anything like that.

In the Cold War period, many Alevis in Turkey became Marxists and adopted a very secular point of view. They are very disproportionately present among the so-called Muslims of Germany. I can't tell you how unlikely an Alevi leftist is to be at all attracted by ISIL, which, I think, has departed from the Sunni tradition, but comes out of it.

If you know something about the specificities of these communities, some of the hysteria about them is not well-placed.

I think the big problem for Muslims in Europe is economic. In France, for instance, a lot of Algerians and Moroccans and others who came and settled in urban areas and were trying to get factory labor have been left high and dry. In France they put the slums on the outside of the city rather than the inside, the way we do. But the difficulty here is that very often you have large youth populations among Muslim third-generation immigrants now, or fourth-generation, who are not near jobs and there is no particular prospect of them being near a job where they live. Nobody is rushing to put factories into the 23rd arrondissement.

Actually, there are some French government officials who have suggested that maybe that is exactly what should be done. France has a fairly strong central government that could maybe address some of these problems.

I would just like to say that the Muslims of France, generally speaking, are facing some of the problems that the African American community in Detroit—and I am from the Detroit area—are facing, in that there is a mismatch between skill sets and where the jobs are, populations and where the jobs are, what kinds of jobs are available, and so forth. As the Detroit auto industry has increasingly robotized or moved elsewhere or whatever, a lot of people have been left without

good-paying jobs. There is a kind of downward spiral. When there are fewer good jobs there, people are forced into the lower-middle class and then into slums. Then who wants, exactly, to invest in a slum? The business community isn't attracted to that. We have had all kinds of schemes—enterprise zones and all these kinds of things—to try to fix it.

I think the French are in the same kind of situation. I wouldn't really look at the situation of the Muslims of France and the first thing that comes to my mind is the religion. The question is, how could you employ these youth? A lot of them are literate and have skills that could be employed.

QUESTION: Thank you, Professor Cole.

My question is a really great segue from the point that you just made. You have written extensively on Millennials in the Arab world. One theme that comes up very commonly in coverage on Millennials is the idea of that being a demographic time bomb in the region. I'm curious about what your take is on that framing, and also what your take is on the steps that would be necessary for this demographic time bomb to be less of a time bomb and more of an asset for the region.

JUAN COLE: Something like nearly a third of the Arab world is Millennials, people born in roughly the 1980s and 1990s and very early 2000s. The time bomb has already gone off. Some of what we are seeing in the region is at least implicated in this phenomenon.

In Syria, 180,000 youth were coming online every year that needed a job, and the Syrian Baath Party was not notably good at providing them with jobs. Some of the [protests](#) that you saw in 2011 by youth against the Baath regime were job protests, and very explicitly so. Then when the regime pulled up tanks and started firing at them—these were peaceful demonstrations they were firing at—the youth picked up guns and it went to civil war. But a lot of the discontent was over jobs.

There is an ecological crisis in some of the region as well. There has been a drought in that part of the world since the late 1990s, which has gotten worse since 2004 and which is very long-lived. It is still there. It has made it very hard for farmers to make a living. A lot of farmers have lost their farms because of lack of water resources. The drought—there are cyclical droughts in the Middle East; it is an arid zone—cannot be proven to have been caused by climate change. The one thing we do know is that the effects of drought on agriculture are exacerbated by high temperatures. We know that the world is a degree centigrade hotter now than it was 100 years ago. So it is certainly the case that the drought is being exacerbated by climate change.

So a lot of the young farmers from that millennial generation could no longer make it, were forced to go to cities to look for day work, for construction work and so forth, and especially with the downturn worldwide from 2008 forward, there weren't a lot of big buildings being built in Damascus and Homs and Hama. So there wasn't a lot of work around.

The demographic crisis—it wouldn't be a crisis if you had growing economies. If the economy is growing 3 or 4 percent a year and the population is as well, then that is not a great situation because per capita increase is not going on, but at least it's not going backwards. But in some of these countries it's going backwards. There are more people wanting jobs than can be provided.

In many of the countries of the region, however, it should be underlined that there has already been a demographic transition. Tunisia had its transition in the 1970s. It is the most successful of the revolutions. Iran and Turkey both have had their demographic transitions. Now, there is a pig in the python belly. The populations of these countries will go on growing for a couple decades. But by mid-century, they are all going to level off. There are some exceptions.

Egypt we thought underwent its demographic transition around 2007, but the [uncertainties](#) of the last few years are such that the Egyptians are back to having kids. Kids are a kind of social security in a place like Egypt. So it is actually growing again, which is not desirable, I think—or at least not desirable if they can't get their economy together.

I think, in a way, we in the next decade or so are living through the effects of the big demographic changes that were important in the 1980s and after. Actually, now, gradually, we are going towards a leveling off of population in that part of the world. That will bring other challenges in its wake, like who is going to support the old people.

QUESTION: Hello. Sondra Stein.

Could you say something about Syria and our approach to ISIS? What do you think our approach should be to Assad? I have trouble figuring out who it is we actually support in Syria, where they are.

JUAN COLE: Syria is not a place with any heroes. I think President [Obama](#)'s instinct was not to get involved in it. He tried very hard to avoid being involved in it. I think he was forced to get [involved](#) in it by the rise of ISIL, and especially when it [took over Northern Iraq](#). Something had to be done, especially since it seemed like it was going to go on to the Kurdish areas of Iraq.

My view is that the Obama administration still doesn't want very much to do with Syria and that all that they agreed to do is to contain ISIL. They are bombing it. They didn't let it take that little Kurdish enclave, [Kobani](#), up near Turkey, which is in northern Raqqa. They let the Kurds [take back Mount Sinjar](#), where the Yazidis are that were being [persecuted](#) by ISIL. But they haven't really done very much. That is to say, they have done some bombing raids, and apparently not that many per day.

It looks to me like containment, like they want to see if they can't degrade ISIL's military capabilities. ISIL has captured our tanks and armored convoys and things and artillery pieces from the Iraqi army when the Iraqi army collapsed and ran away. A lot of what is going on is that the U.S. Air Force can actually target individual pieces of equipment like that. It's called "plinking." They are plinking ISIL's assets gradually. Over time, that does make a difference. The Kurdish [Peshmerga](#) have made some progress against them and so forth.

But it looks to me like containment. President Obama was constrained by politics last fall to talk about rolling it back and annihilating it and so forth. But I don't see that.

Then the Obama administration—now, who likes the al-Assad regime? It's virtually genocidal. Pictures came out last summer from dissidents of 10,000 bodies of prisoners that had been tortured to death in Syrian jails. These were disarmed people, people who were not a threat—there was no fighting going on—who were tortured to death, presumably to get information out of them. Then their bodies were photographed very carefully. There is a kind of archive of torture in the Baath administration. The bodies were identified and photographed. What kind of damage had been done to them was written down. Then dissidents inside the regime who were appalled—as who wouldn't be?—released this kind of material.

So it is a horrible regime. One of the ways that they are dealing with the rebellion against the Baath Party is to drop what are called barrel bombs on civilian non-combatant neighborhoods. These are barrels full of petroleum. They are a very cheap form of bomb. They are indiscriminate in their effect, and, of course, when they land, they are killing little children and women and non-combatant men and so forth. Every day the Syrian regime is flying these planes and dropping barrel bombs on civilian neighborhoods.

It would be better for the world if that regime wasn't there, and everybody would say so, I think—not everybody. The Iranians and Russians are supporting them. But most people would.

But the problem is this. The Obama administration has to play a very complicated game between Iraq and Syria. In order to defeat ISIL, or *Daesh*, in Northern Iraq, the Obama administration very clearly—they may not want to say so, but it's obvious—needs Iran. Tikrit was captured with Iranian help. Since Iran is supporting the al-Assad regime, the Obama administration can't bomb Damascus and try to take out the al-Assad regime because it would alienate the Iranians and make it impossible to get their help against ISIL in Iraq.

Basically, as far as I can tell, we are talking dirty about al-Assad and promising to train up a free Syrian army of secular, moderate people who would be against al-Assad and against ISIL. Typically training up such an army would take 15 years. I think President Obama will be retired in Hawaii a long time by then.

DAVID SPEEDIE: New York.

JUAN COLE: Or New York.

QUESTION: Hi. I'm Bill McGowan. I'm a journalist and author.

I want to ask a question about the rising tide of anti-Semitism in the European Muslim community. We saw an *Atlantic* magazine [story](#) recently about whether it's time for European Jews to leave. I'm just wondering, in your estimation, how much is that anti-Semitism tied to the unresolved [Israel-Palestine issue](#), how much is cultural, how much it varies country to country. We seem not to really have a good read on that, and there seems to be an awful lot of projection of our own dysfunctional American discourse on Israel into that question. I would like to get your sense of that.

JUAN COLE: With regard to Muslim anti-Semitism in Europe, certainly the phenomenon exists. In the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, as part of that complex of attacks, Jews were also targeted by the extremists. But as far as you can trust opinion polling, French Muslims have a high opinion of French Jews. I think it's over a 70 percent favorability rating.

It should be remembered that there were Moroccan Jews in large numbers, and there still is a small Moroccan Jewish community, and that in Paris they lived side by side. So there is a long history of cooperation between the two, if we take France as an example, North African Muslims and North African Jews.

I think it's a really mixed picture. To the extent that there is a rise of dislike of Jews per se among Muslims, say, in France, I think it is certainly almost entirely driven by the Palestine issue. It's not so hard to understand that young Muslims in France would sympathize with the people in Gaza during the [war](#) last summer. To the extent that the French Jewish establishment supported that war very vocally, there would be tension and conflict.

But at the moment, I don't think the situation is dire. The social science on it doesn't show that it is. And talking about the Jews leaving Europe is crazy. The French Jews are like the French Muslims, very French and let Prime Minister [Netanyahu](#) know when he suggested such a thing—they [sang](#) "*La Marseillaise*" to him, so I think we have their answer to the *Atlantic* magazine.

QUESTION: A couple of months back, the Obama Administration absorbed a lot of criticism for using the term "countering violent extremism" as opposed to anything related to Islamism or terrorism.

There seems to be a lot of confusion about that. I saw a CARE announcement criticizing the administration for not including domestic violent incidents against Muslims in America as part of that countering extremism conference.

What are your thoughts on this? Is Obama being excessively PC [politically correct]? Is this diverting the issue from the true roots of everything going on with ISIS, or *Daesh*, as many senior administration officials seem to be calling it?

JUAN COLE: No. I think Americans just are not necessarily very good at diction, especially some of our cable news networks. We have a center at Michigan, the Center for Judaic Studies. "Judaic" as an adjective refers to things having to do with the Jewish religion and people—especially religion, I think. Then we have Islamic studies, which has to do with Islam. Both "Judaic" and "Islamic" connotationally have to do with positive things. You talked about Judaic aesthetics, Judaic art, Islamic art, Islamic ethics.

There are no Judaic criminals. There are some Jewish criminals, but they are not being Judaic when they are being criminal. They would be breaking the [Ten Commandments](#), which is part of the Judaic part.

In the same way, there are no Islamic criminals. There are Muslim criminals. There are no Islamic criminals. If you can't have Islamic criminals, then you can't have Islamic terrorists either, because it's against the tradition. I have a [piece](#) about the top 10 ways in which the Muslim scriptural tradition tells against terrorism.

I think the demand to talk about Islamic terrorism is itself a form of bigotry. At the fundament, it's a misunderstanding of how language works in English. I think it would be quite wrong to talk about Islamic terrorism, and Mr. Obama is wise to avoid that diction.

I don't think Islam is the only example we can give of where there is a distinction between what adherents do—and there are certainly Muslim terrorists—and what the ideals of the tradition are, and it would be a form of bigotry to imply that the tradition itself is encouraging this kind of criminal activity.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Juan, in looking, as I always do, for a takeaway, I really do believe that you have answered very forcefully the notion that it is insufficient to think in broad, as you put it, 35,000-foot categories of how things look. It is reported all too often that way. Even in some of our more responsible media, things are reduced to an essence that may or may not be valid.

I think you have provided much more nuance, both as a historian and as a contemporary observer. For that, I and our audience thank you very much.

Audio

In this enlightening conversation, Professor Cole, an expert in relations between the Muslim world and the West, gives an on-the-ground perspective on the Iran nuclear talks and the reaction to them in the Arab world, Muslims in Europe, Yemen, ISIS, and much more.

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